



Lights Out

By Halffast

Chapter 11 – Duties and DGI's

The trip home was uneventful. On the way, Mark told Jess about what all Mr. Davis had said. Jess was still very skeptical. Mark knew that she would be a hard sell, and he would have to be at the top of his game if he was going to have any chance of convincing her. Mark wondered why his wife and friends couldn't see that the ranch was their best chance to make it through this mess. It seemed like politics was more important to them than survival. The only legitimate reason he could see for not going to the ranch was the fact that they could not bring their extended families. Mark felt that the obligation to his immediate family outweighed his responsibilities to his extended family. He owed it to his children to see that they got the best chance to not only survive, but to prosper after this crisis had passed.

When they got to the 'Silver Hills' entrance, one of the men on guard duty, Mark couldn't remember his name, waved them down.

"Hi, Mark. How was your trip?" The man asked.

"Pretty good." Mark answered wondering how he knew they were on a trip. "How did things go around here?"

"It's been quiet. Listen, Jon wanted to know if you could go see him as soon as you got home?"

"Sure thing."

"OK. Thanks."

When the families got back to the Turner house, Mark told the Davises what the guard had asked. Lisa and Jess told Mark and Jim to go see what he wanted while they got unloaded and started supper. When the men got to Jon's house, they knocked on the door. Jon answered wearing his Baretta on his hip. A few days ago, Mark would have thought that it was ridiculous to wear a pistol around the house. Now he thought it might be a good idea.

"Hi guys." Jon greeted them. "I was hoping you would be back today." Jon invited them inside. The house was hot, but with all the windows open it was bearable. The three men sat down in the living room."

"There are a couple of things that I want to talk to you about, Mark." Jon started. "First of all, we picked up on the fact that you and Jim were going to look at a place to move to until things settled down."

“Where did you hear that?” Mark wanted to know.

“Your wives mentioned it to my wife the night that you didn’t come to the meeting.”

Mark started getting red in the face. Why couldn’t women keep their mouths shut?

“Please don’t be mad. I’m glad we found out. It made me look at how much we need you around here. I know that you and I are two ends of the spectrum, and that we rarely agree. But, you are respected by a lot of people in the neighborhood, me included. I need you to help balance me out. You make me look at the other side of the problem. If you move off, we lose that. Plus, if you move, a lot of other people are going to start feeling insecure around here. I guess what I am saying is that I don’t want you to leave. We talked about it some at the meeting last night and just about everyone else feels the same way.”

“That’s nice to hear, Jon. To be honest with you, we haven’t decided what we’re going to do. But, it’s mostly going to come down to what is best for our families.”

“I understand. Just please give a little thought to what is best for your neighbors too.”

“We will.” Mark promised. “What was the other thing that you wanted me for?”

“Some of us are getting a little low on groceries. We were wondering if you would run us to the store to get our \$50 worth since no one else has a running car?”

Mark couldn’t help but wonder if this was the real reason that they didn’t want him to leave. He and Jim did have the only running vehicles in Silver Hills and he was the only one that had a generator to pump water as far as he knew. “Sure, Jon, we would be happy to. How many people want to go?”

“Everybody.” Jon said sheepishly.

“Oh. I see.” Mark was a little overwhelmed. Did they really expect him to take everyone to the store?

“We know we can’t all go in one trip. We made a list of who needs to go the most and they can go first. The rest can go as you can take us.” Jon explained.

“When did the first ones want to go?” Mark asked.

“About ten families are real short on food. Do you think there is anyway you could go today?”

“Sure.” Mark answered cheerfully. He wasn’t so cheerful on the inside though. “Why don’t you get them over to my house as soon as possible. As long as some don’t mind riding in the back of my truck, we can take 10 people easily.”

“Thanks, Mark. I’ll have them over to your place within 30 minutes.”

While Jim and Mark were walking back to the house, Jim suggested that they run by the office and get more gas for the generator as long as they were making a trip to town. Mark thought that was a good idea. They could go get the gas while the others were waiting to get into the store. When they got home they told the women what Jon had said and about the request he had made.

“Why do you have to take them?” Jess questioned.

“Who else can?” Mark answered seeing an opportunity to make a point. “It must be 30 miles round trip and nobody else has any running vehicles. If we stay here, we are going to have to be doing this kind of thing all the time.”

Jess didn't say anything. Mark and Jim went to the shed to get the jerry cans. Two were completely empty and the third was only about half full. They poured the two and a half cans of gas into Jim's truck and then loaded all five cans into the bed of Mark's truck. While they were doing this, they talked about what they might need in case they got attacked again. Mark and Jim then went back into the house and opened the gun safe. Mark got his FAL out and put it into a soft case that had 5 pockets on one side. He then took five 20 round magazines out of the closet and loaded them with South African surplus ammo and put one in each pocket on the gun case. Jim got his Mossberg 590 out of the safe and found a box of 25 rounds of 12 gauge three inch magnum triple ought buckshot to go with it. The shotgun went into a soft case. He then got his Glock 34 out of its box and loaded three magazines with 9mm hollow points. One magazine was inserted into the pistol and the other two were out in a mag holder on his left hip. He then put the Glock in a paddle holster and put it on his right hip. Since the Glock magazines were all pre-ban full capacity, they held 17 rounds each. This gave Jim a total of 52 rounds of ammo including the one in the chamber. Mark checked his .45 and the magazines for it. Since the 1911 magazines only held 8 rounds each, Mark had a total of 25 rounds including the one in the pipe of his Colt. Both men had on T-shirts with unbuttoned and untucked denim shirts over them to hide the pistols. They carried the cases out to the truck and put them behind the back seat. About that time, the first of Jon's shoppers showed up. Within 5 minutes, all ten had arrived at Mark's. Eight were men and only two were women. They were thanking Mark incessantly. The two women and one of the men climbed into the back seat of the big Ford. The other men got into the bed and sat down. Mark and Jim sat in the front seat and Mark started the truck. On the way to the store, Mark, Jim, and the three in the back seat chatted. Mark told them that he and Jim were going to drop them off and go get some fuel for the generator. Hopefully they would be back about the time they were through shopping. If not, Mark advised, just stay close to the store and wait until they got back. The two friends dropped off the shoppers and headed to the office. When they got there, Jim opened the gate and Mark pulled through. Jim locked the gate behind them and walked over to where the fuel tanks were. Mark filled the truck with diesel while Jim filled the jerry cans with gas.

“Do you think we could get these tanks to your place?” Jim asked.

“If we had a trailer, I guess we could move them. But, I think we would have to empty them first, otherwise they would be too heavy.”

“If we decide to stay at your house, that's something that maybe we should think about.”

“I reckon.” Was all Mark had to say.

“Anything else we could use from here?” Jim asked looking around.

“Probably.” Mark answered seeming to warm up a little. “We have to bring another group to the store tomorrow. Whatcha say we swing by here again and see what we can find?”

“Sounds good to me.”

With the gas in the back and Ford’s two tanks full, the men headed back to the store. When they got there, their passengers were still in the store. After about 5 minutes the first came out and got into the truck. Ten minutes after that the last was loaded up and ready to go. On the way home, the main topic of conversation was what the store was out of.

“They were out of canned meat, beef stew, and candles.” Sherri Henderson reported.

“I couldn’t get any canned meat either. I never thought that Kroger would run out of Spam. They were out of some canned fruits and vegetables as well and they didn’t have any matches.” The other woman said. Mark didn’t know her name.

Scott Simmons was sitting inside for the trip home. “They were also out of AA, C, and D batteries. All they had were AAA, 9-volt, and those big 6-volt lantern batteries. I noticed that they were pretty low on Coleman lantern fuel too. I guess some people don’t know that you can use unleaded gas in the lanterns and stoves.”

“The man at the table said that they were supposed to get resupplied sometime the middle of next week even if the power was still off. He said they would allow every family another \$50 worth if that was the case.” Sherri informed Mark and Jim.

“That’s encouraging.” Jim said.

“Sure is.” Mark agreed.

By the time they got home, the president’s speech was over. Mark had forgotten to take the portable with him. Jess and Lisa filled the men in on what the president had said as they walked to Jon’s for the daily gathering.

“Mostly he just said that they had run into a few ‘unexpected snags’ on the power but that it shouldn’t take more than another two or three days to get it back on.” Jess said.

“I’m starting to agree with everyone that thinks it’s going to be a while before we have power. It’s been what? Five days. They said two or three days when the Burst hit on Tuesday. Now it’s still going to be ‘two or three days’. It’s just starting to sound like a broken record.” Lisa admitted.

Mark thought that might be a sign that the women were softening their position. Maybe he did have a chance to convince them to move. When they got to Jon’s, Mark noticed that just about everyone

from the neighborhood was at the meeting. He also noticed that the mood was a little gloomy. The shoppers filled everyone in about what they were and were not able to buy at Kroger. Mark and Jim announced that they would make two trips to Kroger the next day. They would take both trucks so they could handle 20 shoppers per trip as long as some didn't mind sitting in the back again. They said they would make the first trip about 8 and the second probably around 2 in the afternoon. The list of shoppers was brought out and the next twenty were told to be at Marks by 7:45. Jon asked Mark and Jim if they would mind filling in on guard duty from Midnight to four o'clock. He said that he hated to ask since they were taking everyone to the store tomorrow, but one of the men who was scheduled for the shift was sick and the other had filled in the night before for someone else. The men agreed to do it since everyone else had taken their turn. Mark really wanted to talk over going to the ranch with Jim and the women, but if he was going to be on guard duty for four hours he had better get some sleep. Maybe this was good, he thought. He and Jim would have plenty of time to talk alone this way. If he could convince Jim, then he would have an ally in trying to convince the women. The old divide and conquer might just work. When the meeting was winding down, Jon asked if anyone had anything else to bring up. Abigail Petersen raised her hand.

“Yes, Mrs. Petersen?”

“I was thinking that we might have a street dance one of these nights. It would help to take everyone's minds off of their problems at least for a little while.”

A murmur of approval when through the crowd.

“I have a big Boombox with fresh batteries that will play CD's and cassettes.” Someone volunteered.

“What about lights?” Someone else shouted.

“We could push a couple of cars over and use the headlights.” A third person suggested. “At least we could get some use from the worthless pieces of junk that way.”

“It sounds like a good idea to me.” Jon said. “Does anyone see a problem with it?”

Everyone just shook their heads.

“OK, Abigail, you thought of it, so I guess you're in charge. If you want to help, see Mrs. Petersen. When you have everything set just let us know.”

Everyone left Jon's house in a pretty good mood. Mark was surprised how quickly everyone's spirit picked up at the mention of a dance. It was funny how little things could make a big difference in people's attitudes. Jess and Lisa were talking about how they could make some cake or cookies to take to the dance. Mark just shook his head. If they didn't go to the ranch, he had no idea how they were going to eat next month, and the girls are talking about baking cookies. They just didn't get it.

Chapter 12 – Paradigm Shift

When the alarm went off at 11:30, Mark got out of bed. He pulled on his clothes, put his Colt on his hip, and grabbed the day pack he had loaded before he went to bed. It contained a big flashlight, his camouflaged rain jacket, a couple of bags of peanuts, a canteen of water, and the magazines for his Marlin Camp .45. He had chosen the .45 carbine for night time guard duty mostly because it had a Leupold red dot scope on it. It was not a night vision scope, but if you could make out the silhouette of the target, you could put the lighted dot on it and shoot. Mark had killed a couple of feral hogs in the dark on his deer lease with it and he had a lot of confidence in this carbine. It had an effective range of only about 75 yards, but it made a big hole and was light and handy. When he stepped out of the camper, he noticed the cool front that the weather man had predicted had arrived. It was in the low 70's and a light wind was blowing out of the north. It might be in the upper 60's by dawn. What a welcome change that would be. Jim stepped out of his pop up with his Glock on his hip. He was carrying his Mossberg shotgun and a day pack similar to Marks. The two men walked down to the entrance of the subdivision. They chatted with the two men that they were relieving for a couple of minutes and then took their post by the 'Silver Hills' sign. Jim loaded the magazine on his shotgun and Mark inserted a magazine into the Camp .45. Neither man chambered a round. Someone had left a couple of lawn chairs and the two men put their packs on the ground and then sat holding their long guns across their laps.

"I guess this makes everyone feel better, but I still think it's a waste of time." Mark said.

"Why do you say that?" Jim asked.

"Because just the two of us alone probably couldn't stop a few mutant zombie bikers from just driving into the subdivision. We might slow them down a little or give them something to think about, but we couldn't stop them from driving through the field or even just running over us. If we had security like they have at the ranch, we could do some good, but not like this."

"You think the ranch security was good?"

"Heck, yeah." 'Heck' wasn't a dollar word. "Didn't you?"

"Well, the gate and fence were impressive." Jim admitted.

"Impressive, hell!" 'Hell' was a dollar word. "Nothing less than a tank is going to get through that gate."

I'm not sure they are any better off in some respects than we are. I was thinking that maybe we should run by Gunny's house tomorrow and see what he thinks about the ranch's security."

"They have those guys at the gate in that good camo that you can't see, two roving guards, and two guards in the complex after dark. Plus they have real weapons, not Grandpa's old deer rifle. How could you not think that they are light years ahead of us here?" Mark asked.

"In some ways, they are. But I think they may have some holes too. If we talk to Gunny, we'll know for sure. What could that hurt?"

“It won’t hurt anything. But I think he’ll be pretty impressed when we tell him about their setup.”

“Maybe so. What do you think about the rest of the setup they have?” Jim asked his friend.

“I thought it was great, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but Lisa pointed out a couple of things that concern me some.”

“You mean the women and minority issue?”

“Well, that too. But some other things as well.”

“Like what?”

“Like some of the seeds they had for the garden were hybrids.” Jim said.

“So?”

“You see, hybrid seeds are engineered to produce better fruit, but they cannot produce viable seed to replant. So after you run out of store bought seeds, you’re out of luck.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Neither did I. And, that’s not all she pointed out to me.”

“What else?” Mark asked.

“Well she noticed that they had a lot of hay in the barn, but they didn’t have any equipment to cut or bail their own once they run out. She said that if it didn’t rain for several months, the cattle could go through all of their hay pretty quickly.”

“Maybe they have the equipment and we just didn’t see it.”

“That’s what I said, but she asked around while we were touring the ranch. Some of the men told her that all of the equipment was in the barn.”

“Hmmm.”

“Another thing she asked about was canning equipment. There isn’t any, so they don’t have anyway to store what they get from the garden except to freeze it. That’s OK, but what about if they run out of fuel for the generator and can’t use the freezer?”

“I guess that could be a problem down the road.” Mark admitted.

“I noticed a couple of things too. You saw all the reloading equipment, right?”

“Yes. It all looked like top of the line stuff.”

“It is. But it was all brand new.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing in and of itself. It’s just that I don’t think they know how to use it. They have bought a lot of the things that they need, but if you don’t know how to use it, what good is it?” Jim asked rhetorically. “It’s like those Barrett’s they have. They look impressive, but if you don’t have someone who really knows how to use one, they aren’t any better than grandpa’s old deer rifle.”

“At least they have the stuff.” Mark said emphatically. “And, they can learn to use it can’t they?”

“Maybe so, but what if their survival depends on something they haven’t figured out yet. There is little room for error in a survival situation. If this thing goes for a long time and gets as bad as they think it might, they can’t afford many mistakes. If the cattle die because they can’t make hay, where will they get more? If they can’t grow food next year because they grew hybrid strains of vegetables, who is going to give them more seeds? If they need to reload ammo for the fifty calibers and no one in the group knew that they needed a particular powder, where are they going to buy it? Knowledge is the one thing that you can’t just go out and buy. We say all the time that the mind is your best weapon. Well, in a survival situation, knowledge and experience are your best tools. Plus, what if they did get attacked by a gang of mutant zombie bikers? Do they have enough manpower to really defend against a large group? I just don’t know...that’s why I want to talk to Gunny. The other thing that really concerns me about the ranch is Mr. Davis.”

“How so?” Mark asked.

“It’s his attitude. How did Jess put it? ‘My way or the highway.’ It just rubs me the wrong way that he just stays in his cabin while everyone else carries out his wishes. It’s his ranch so he can do what he wants, but I would like to have some say in things that effect me and mine.”

The two men just sat quietly for a while.

“Well then, if we decide not to go to the ranch, what are we going to do?” Mark asked his friend.

“I think we have several options. We could haul the campers down to the deer lease and stay there. It is far enough from any large city and far enough off of the paved road that we should be safe there, but we would also be isolated from help if we needed it. We could go to Lisa’s parents in Uvalde. Her dad stopped farming after his stroke and he sold off most of his land. He still has about ten acres, though. There is plenty of room for all of us, but it’s pretty close to town. Uvalde is fairly small, but if there was rioting there, I don’t know how safe it would be. But, I think you’re sitting against the best answer.”

Mark looked over his shoulder at the sign. “What? Plywood?”

“No, Mr. Literal. Silver Hills.”

“How do you figure that? It’s still just our two families.”

“It’s not just us. You have good neighbors. That is obvious from the meetings at Jon’s house. With a little leadership, this subdivision could evolve into a real community. There is room for gardening and we could raise some small animals here. We have room here for all of our families too. There are enough people here to do a lot of work and you have a pretty diverse group. I don’t know if we could hold off a big group of mutant zombie bikers any better than they could at the ranch, but we have a lot more man power. Jon should be able to come up with some kind of defense plan since he was in the Marines.”

“I guess if everyone worked together, it could be a viable option.” Mark admitted. “So you’ve made up your mind to not go the ranch?”

“No. I still think that the ranch has a lot going for it and it might be our best option despite all of the negatives. But, I think that we really need to look close at all of our options. Once we choose, we might not be in a position to change our minds.”

“I guess I’ve been really narrow minded the last few days.” Mark said apologetically.

“As a matter of fact, you have. But we all knew that you were just overreacting to what happened at Kroger. And, we also knew that you would calm down eventually. You always do.”

“Am I that easy to read?”

“Mark, why do you think the guys at work always invite you to play poker?”

“Maybe it’s because of my sparkling personality.” He said with a big grin.

“Yeah, that’s it.” Jim said rolling his eyes.

The two friends spent most of the remainder of their time on guard duty talking about what might happen in San Antonio if the power didn’t come back on. They also spent some time just looking at the stars. The lights from town usually blocked out all but the brightest stars. But with all of the lights out and the clear sky that the cool front had brought, you couldn’t have counted all of them in a lifetime. When their shift was over, their relief had not arrived. They showed up about 10 minutes later. The two friends walked back up the hill and went back to bed.

Chapter 13 – A Talk with Gunny

Mark had set his alarm for 7:00. When it went off, it seemed like he had just fallen asleep. He had spent a good amount of time just laying in bed and thinking about what he and Jim had talked about on guard duty. Maybe staying here was not such a bad idea. They didn't have everything they needed, but between what the neighbors might have and what they could buy, beg, or borrow, perhaps it could work. He got out of bed and got redressed into the clothes that he had worn last night. It was almost cold in the camper. He looked at the thermometer and it read 67 degrees. It hadn't been this cool since early May. It felt good. Everyone else in the camper was still asleep. Mark made sure they were all covered up good and he exited the camper as quietly as possible.

Jim was already out side and was loading his shotgun into his truck.

“Care for a continental breakfast?” Jim asked his friend.

“Huh?”

Jim threw a mylar package at his friend. Mark caught it and immediately knew what it was.

“Poptarts. My favorite.”

Jim almost always brought these on their fishing trips. They ate them cold usually. Like Jim said, they tasted like shit, but you could live on them. Mark ripped open the package and pulled one out. It took about 3 bites to finish the first and then he started on the second. When the men were finished with their ‘breakfast of champions’, they pulled out the jerry can that they had emptied into the generator last night and put it in the back of Mark's truck. Mark also remembered to put the portable radio in the truck this time. The early shoppers had started arriving at 7:30 and by 7:40 all 20 were present and accounted for. They climbed into the trucks and headed to town.

When they dropped the shoppers off, the line was longer than Mark had seen it on the two previous times he had been here. Mark told them that they would be back in about an hour and a half and if they got done before he and Jim were back to stick close to the store and wait. The two trucks then headed out of the parking lot and toward the office. Once there, they filled the jerry can and then topped off the trucks' tanks. They started looking around for anything that might be useful. The first thing they found was a large 60 amp battery charger. The next item they found on their treasure hunt was several gallon jugs of Delo oil. This was oil designed for diesel engines, but it would work fine in gas engines as well. The last thing that they found in the garage that might be useful was a siphon hose that could be hooked to a drill for pumping gas. Next they went into the carpenters shop. While they didn't take anything from inside, they noticed that there were quite a few power tools and a large supply of lumber that the company used to build shelves and counters for their stores. They looked for the generator that Billy had used to build the benches for the trucks with, but apparently, someone had taken it. When they were done, they locked the gate behind them and headed back to Kroger.

Once they picked up the shoppers, they headed home. Jon was sitting in the front seat with Mark for the ride home.

“Man, my wife made a list of what we needed but I was only able to get a little over half of it before I was at my \$50 limit.” Jon explained.

“I know what you mean.” Manny Hernandez said. “My list only had very basic items on it but I couldn’t get to the bottom of it. I hope they get a truck in so that we can buy another \$50 worth.”

“Little good it would do me.” The man that was standing guard duty with Manny the other day said. “We only have another \$13 in cash at home. If the banks don’t open, we won’t be able to buy any more anyway.”

“I’m sure that we could lend you some cash.” Manny offered.

“I appreciate that, Manny. Hopefully, this will all blow over quickly and things will get back to normal.” The man replied.

“Did you all see the fight?” Jon asked.

“No. I just heard about it.” Manny answered.

“What happened?” Mark wanted to know.

“Some guy tried to keep putting items in his basket after the clerk told him that he was at his limit. The clerk tried to take one of the items out of the basket and the guy decked him. Then he tried to run out of the store with the basket. He got to the parking lot, but the policeman ran him down and arrested him.” Jon explained.

“How bad did the clerk get hurt?” Mark asked.

“It was mostly just his pride, but he’ll probably still have a nice shiner to show for it. Who ever thought that you ought to get combat pay for working at Kroger?”

“Hey, Jon. Speaking of combat pay, do you think we should upgrade the security for the neighborhood?” Mark inquired.

“I don’t know. What did you have in mind?”

“I didn’t have anything in mind. I was just wondering if we need more guards or something.”

“I don’t understand, Mark. You don’t think we need the guards we have now and you’re asking me about more?”

“I didn’t think we needed them, but that was when I thought the power would be back on in a couple of days. I think it’s going to be considerably longer than that now, and I was just thinking that we might need more security.”

“Well, I’ll look at it and let you know.”

On the way home, not far from the subdivision, they passed a small Baptist church with its doors open. Mark noticed that there were several bicycles parked in front of the church and a few people were walking down the road towards it as well. Mark looked at his watch. It was almost 10:00. Time for Sunday school, Mark thought. Maybe next week, he and his family would go. They were Methodist, but Baptist was close enough. Besides, Jim was Baptist and they could go together. When they got back to the house, several of the men offered Jim and Mark a can of this or that for taking them to the store. They politely refused. When the shoppers had all left, the two men unloaded what they had brought home from work and put it in the shed.

When they walked into the house, a big late breakfast was cooking and everybody was up. It was comfortable in the house for a change. Sam was reading a book to the twins and David was working on a big 500 piece puzzle. The men went into the kitchen and got out the dishes and silverware to set the table. They told the girls about the fight at Kroger and about what they had found at work. Mark mentioned the church down the road and they agreed that it was a good idea. When they sat down to eat, Mark found that he was as relaxed as he had been since the burst. He knew they still needed to make a decision, but he was comfortable that they would make the right one. After breakfast, Jim and Mark worked on a map of the ranch to show Gunny. David walked by and pointed out a couple of things that they had missed. Mark thought that a teenager’s memory was a strange thing. They could remember the most minor detail of some place they had been to once, but they couldn’t remember that you told them to clean their room or if they had homework over the weekend they never remembered until late Sunday night. When they were through with the map, Mark got out his list of the things they would need if they stayed at home. As he reviewed it he found some things that he no longer thought were absolute necessities and others that he added or changed. He went down the list and prioritized the items into three categories. He put the number one next to anything that they absolutely had to have, twos went next to the items that would be difficult to live without, and anything that would be nice to have received a three. As he looked at his list he felt like that they could achieve most of the ones and many of the twos. The biggest problem he felt they faced was how to pump water if and when there was no fuel for the generator. Hopefully, they could sit down this afternoon or tonight and make a master list from their four separate lists. Mark’s thoughts drifted off to other things. He was sitting in his favorite chair in front of the TV. It was Sunday afternoon and if things were normal, he might be watching a football game right now. The next thing he knew, Jim was shaking his shoulder and telling him to wake up. Jim told him that it was almost 2 o’clock and some of the second group of shoppers were starting to arrive. Mark asked how long he had been asleep and Jim told that he had started snoring about 45 minutes ago.

When they got to Kroger, the line was even longer than it had been in the morning. Mark figured that it would take at least 2 hours to just get into the store. The shoppers delivered, Mark and Jim headed for Gunny’s. They parked their trucks in Jim’s driveway and Gunny was outside before they could get out.

“Hey, Jimbo, I was wonderin’ when you was gonna come by and check on your stuff.”

“Hi, Gunny. How are you doing?” Jim answered.

“Cept for this damn knee, I’m doing fine. This change in the weather’s got it achin’ like a sumbitch...Say, how are my favorite girls doin’?”

“They’re fine, Gunny. But they sure do miss you.”

“You’re prob’ly jus’ sayin’ that to make me feel good, but damn if it don’t.”

“Listen, Gunny.” Jim explained. “We didn’t come here to check on the house. We came to see you. We need your expertise.”

“Expertise on what? How to stay regular?”

“No, Gunny. We want you to look at the security arrangements at this place we are thinking about moving to.”

“OK, let’s go inside.” Gunny invited.

When they went in Gunny’s house, Mark noticed that it was pretty warm inside. Since Gunny had boarded up the windows on the front of the house, there was not much air movement. The men sat at the kitchen table and Jim pulled out the map they had drawn. Mark and Jim filled him in on the gate, the fences, and how the guards were deployed. Gunny looked the map over and asked a few questions.

“Do the guards check in with someone on a regular basis?”

“Not that we saw.” Jim answered as Mark shrugged his shoulders.

“Do they have any hidden guard posts or lookouts that can see someone coming from a ways off?”

“If they did, they didn’t tell us, and at meals I only noticed 4 families each time that didn’t have the husband at the table. I don’t think that there are more than 4 guards during the day and 6 at night.”

“Do the men in the compound carry their weapons on them?” Gunny inquired.

“Not unless they are carrying concealed.” Mark answered this time. “They have all of the weapons stored in the armory.”

“Well, if there’s nothing else that ya’ll don’t know about, I could take the whole place with about a half a troop of drunken girl scouts.”

“How are you going to do that, Gunny? How are you even going to get through that gate?” Mark asked incredulously.

“Ahh, Karate Man.” Gunny said with a fake Chinese accent and a huge smile. “Ancient Chinese proverb say you no attack a man’s strength, but where he is weakest.”

“OK, I hear what you’re saying, and I see how that applies to the gate, but how are you going to take the ranch with just a few attackers? I though the defender’s advantage was 1 to 3. Even if you just count the 25 men at the ranch, you would need 75 to defeat them. Right?”

“The defender’s advantage only applies when the defenders are dug in and expecting an attack. This is how I would attack. I wouldn’t try to crash that gate. It sounds pretty bulletproof. I reckon I’d cut a hole in the fence before daylight and then sneak up behind the guards at the gate. I’d wait until the shift change at 6 AM and take all four out at one time with sub-sonic ammo. Since the compound is about a mile away, they shouldn’t be able to hear the shot as long as there ain’t no sonic crack. The rovers won’t hear it over those fancy four wheelers they ride. I’d then move back to where I came through the fence and set up on the rovers ‘fore they found the hole I made and take them out the same way as the other four. Then I would march me and my girl scouts into the compound after daybreak when the night guards are off duty. Secure the armory and all they got left to shoot at you is the finger.”

“Damn.” Mark owed another dollar now. “I had no idea that it would be that easy.”

“Well, we do have inside info and that helps a lot. A random attack without any intel might or mightn’t work. That gate and fence would prob’ly intimidate most civilians, but it presents almost as many problems as it solves. There is just too much of it to watch to catch a half way motivated and organized force before they breach it. They need to put a standing guard of at least 5 or 6 men in the compound twenty-four/seven. And they need a look out that can see the shit before it hits the fan and some kind of early warning system. They need some fox holes just inside the compound fence here, here, here, and here,” Gunny said as he pointed at the map. “and I would teach the women to shoot, twenty-five men is not a lot. Plus they all should at least wear a pistol when their not on guard duty and keep rifles in their cabins. I could prob’ly suggest some other stuff if’n I saw the place, but just those things would make it a lot more secure.”

“Thanks, Gunny.” Mark said. “Say, would you be willing to come out to my place and tell me what you think me and the neighbors could do to secure our places?”

“Sure thing, Karate man. That’s the least I could do for you for fixin’ my truck. When do you want me to come?”

“Say day after tomorrow about lunch time? I can come pick you up if you want?”

“Naw. Just draw me another map and I’ll drive myself.”

“OK, Gunny. By the way, how are you set for groceries?”

“Don’t worry ‘bout that, Karate Man. I got lots, plus I went to the Kroger yesterday and bought some more.”

“Thanks for your help, Gunny. We’ll see you on Tuesday.” Mark said.

“Yes. Thanks, Gunny. The girls will be excited to see you.” Jim said as he and Mark went out the door.

The two friends checked Jim’s house quickly and then headed back to Kroger. The shoppers were waiting by the front of the store. They all loaded up and headed home. When they got back to Mark’s house, some of the riders offered to pay Mark and Jim in cash or goods. They declined again and went into the house. It was a little after 5 and dinner was ready. They ate and then listened to the President. He had nothing different to say than yesterday. They headed down to Jon’s to visit with everyone. Mark saw his neighbors a little differently than he had before. If they decided to stay here, he would be depending on these people as they depended on him. Mrs. Petersen reported that they had planned the dance for Tuesday night, after the meeting was over. She said that they had everything they needed, except for ice. Jess suggested that everyone bring their ice trays to Mark when they came to get water and that they would fill them and put them in the deep freeze. When the meeting was over, the four friends went home and after the guys had pumped water for the neighbors and put about a hundred ice trays in the deep freeze, they pulled out their lists. All four were remarkably similar. Sometimes one would have something that the others missed, but for the most part, they all had the same items. Once they had the master list complete, they split the list into categories. Each item was placed under food, water, shelter, clothing, security, power, or transportation. Everyone liked Mark’s idea of prioritizing the items and how he had done it. They prioritized the list and started discussing where they could buy the things on it and how much they would cost. When it started getting late, they decided to work on it some more tomorrow. Mark went into his bedroom and put two dollars in his black box. Then he and Jess went to the camper and went to bed.

Chapter 14 – Deal of the Century

Mark woke up a little later than usual. Jess was already up, and so was David. Sam was still asleep, so Mark got dressed quietly and went outside to run. He had a lot that he wanted to do today, so he only ran a mile and knocked out a few pushups and sit-ups and then hit the shower. By the time he got out everyone was awake and breakfast was almost ready. They all sat down and ate. Everyone discussed what they wanted to get done for the day. Lisa and Jess wanted to go back to the hardware store and look at some of the things that they needed. Mark wanted to go pay the man at the auto parts store and go check on Jerry Drew and his family. Jim wanted to get all of his reloading equipment and supplies from his house. Sam wanted to go with Jess and Lisa, and David wanted to go over to his friend's house and play football.

They decided that David would go with Mark and that Jim would escort all of the girls. Since there were 6 in Jim's group he would take the Ford and Mark and David would take the Jeep. They all left at the same time and Mark headed for Jerry's house. Jerry lived closer to town than Mark did, but it was still fairly rural. He and his brother next door had 20 acres each, and his father, who lived across the road and down just a little, had almost 30. When Mark pulled up to Jerry's, the gate was locked. Mark honked the horn and Jerry looked out the door and after a second or two waved at Mark. He pulled his head back inside and then a minute later came back out carrying what looked like an AK. He jogged the 100 yards or so down to the gate and opened it. Mark pulled through while Jerry relocked the gate. Jerry jump on the back bumper of the Jeep and Mark drove up to the house.

“Hey, Mark. Hi, David. What are you two doing here?” Jerry asked.

“Hi, Jerry.” David said.

“We just came by to check on you all. I was a little worried when the store was all locked up the other day. I didn't think that you guys would close just for the power being out.” Mark said.

“That's nice of you to think of us. We're all doing OK. We normally wouldn't close, but none of our trucks are running and even if they were, we wouldn't be able to sell any guns since we can't call them in to NICS. The only people that can buy guns right now are ones like you with a CHL. By the way, how did you get the Jeep to run?”

“I just had to change out the parts that the burst fried. Since it's a '78 it doesn't have a computer.”

“Man, I wish we could get one of our vehicles to run. Dale and I had to hike into town the other day to buy groceries and check on the store. You take for granted how far something is when you're used to driving.”

“We might be able to get one of your trucks running. What is the oldest vehicle you have?”

“Dad's truck is a '98. Everything else is a 2000 or newer.” Jerry reported.

“Hmm, I don't think we could get any of those running. Jim got his '91 to run by replacing a lot of parts, but anything newer than '92 or '93 is probably not going to be fixed without a new computer.”

“We have an old Jeep, I think it’s a ’74...Dad would know for sure...that stays down at our ranch. Do you think it would run? It’s not much, but it would sure beat nothing.”

“Yes, I think it could be fixed. I’m going to a parts store after this, if you want to go we can see if he has the parts.” Mark offered.

“That sounds good.”

“You said that you and Dale went to the grocery store. Did your folks get some groceries?”

“No. It’s just too far for Dad to walk. We took Dad’s driver’s license with us but they wouldn’t let us buy his groceries. They didn’t need much, Mom buys food like Dale and I still live there so they can get by for a while. We actually were going to use his \$50 worth to buy more for Dale’s family.”

“Well, if you get the Jeep running, then you can take him. Say, is that an AK you had when you opened the gate?”

“Almost.” Jerry replied. “It’s a Galil. It’s an Israeli built .308 on the Kalashnikov design. They are a great weapon. I had this one in the store for \$3000, but when the burst hit, I decided to bring it home for safekeeping.”

“You keeping it safe, or it keeping you safe?” Mark asked with a grin.

“Both!”

“That’s cool. How many magazines do you have for it?” David asked.

“I only have three. I wish I had more, but that was all the guy that traded it to me had.”

“Dad’s been carrying his FAL and 5 mags with him since those guys tried to steal his truck.” David said.

“What happened?” Jerry asked.

Mark was not pleased that David had spilled the beans about the Kroger incident, but he was not mad. It was hard for a 13 year old to keep anything to themselves. He told Jerry about what had happened in as little detail as possible.

“The fortunate thing about it was that, other than dislocating one of their elbows, no one really got hurt.” Mark finished.

“You left out the best part, Dad.”

Jerry was amused as he could see that Mark was embarrassed to talk about his heroics. “And what part was that, David?”

“When Dad pulled his Kel-Tec out, one of the guys peed his pants!” David exclaimed.

“You’re right David, that is the best part.” Jerry said laughing.

“Are you ready to go?” Mark asked, trying to change the subject.

“Sure.”

Jerry told his wife, Leslie, that he was going to go with Mark to the auto parts store. Then they loaded up into the Jeep and drove down to Mr. Drew’s house. Jerry asked his dad exactly what year, model, and engine size the Jeep was. The older man was excited to learn that they might get a vehicle to run. Mark offered to drop him off at Kroger if he wanted to buy some groceries. He accepted and they all left in the Jeep. Jerry told his Dad the story of Marks encounter at Kroger, and they all had a little fun with Mark about it. Mark still felt a little bad about hurting the guy, but he was starting to get over it some. He couldn’t imagine how he would have felt if he had been forced to have shot one of them. He prayed that he would never have to find out. When they got to Kroger the line was about the same as it had been the day before. Mark figured they had about 3 hours. When they got to the auto parts the two men and David went inside.

“Hello, Mr. Turner. How are you today?”

“I’m fine. Thanks. And you?” Mark was embarrassed that he couldn’t remember the man’s name.

“I’m doing OK. Man, I like your Jeep...what is it a ’77?”

“Almost. It’s a ’78 and thanks to you it runs. I want to introduce you to my friend, Jerry. Jerry this is...I’m sorry, I’m horrible with names.”

“Rodney.” The man stuck out his hand. “Rodney Roberts.”

“Nice to meet you, Rodney.” Jerry shook Rodney’s hand. “Jerry Drew.”

“Mr. Turner, did that glow plug controller work?” Rodney asked turning to look at Mark.

“When you call me ‘Mr. Turner’ I look over my shoulder to see if my dad is standing behind me. Please call me Mark. The controller worked perfectly. That’s why I’m here, to pay you for it.” Mark said as he pulled out his wallet.

“OK, Mark, I’m glad it worked.” Rodney said as he took Mark’s money and made change.

“Rodney, is there any way to get a ’98 Chevy truck running?” Mark asked.

“Not without replacing the computer and a lot of the electronics. I don’t carry but a few of the parts you would need. I know a couple of guys that went to the dealer, but every new computer they checked was fried. They were just too sensitive to the EMP.”

“How about parts for a ’74 Jeep?” Jerry asked.

“There I can help you.” Rodney smiled.

Rodney asked Jerry for the particulars on the Jeep and then went in the back and brought out the parts. Jerry paid for the parts as Mark was looking at the battery rack where he had found batteries for his radio almost a week ago. The rack was empty. Mark asked Rodney if he had any more and was disappointed to learn that he was sold out. Mark then asked if he had any 12 volt deep cycle batteries. Rodney replied that he only had few car and truck starting batteries. He suggested that Mark try to find some 6 volt golf cart batteries. He could wire two of the up in a series to make 12 volts. Rodney said that he had all of the cables that Mark would need to wire up a bunch if he wanted to. The golf cart batteries were some of the best deep cycle batteries made, he explained, and they would last a long time and take more charging and discharging cycles than a standard boat or RV 12 volt would. He told mark that the secret to making a deep cycle last was to discharge it no more than 25% before fully recharging it. If they are discharged all the way it would severely shorten the life of the battery. Mark thanked him for his suggestion and said that he may be back to buy some cables. Rodney replied that he did not know how much longer he would be keeping the store open. The first couple of days he had been pretty busy, but it was slowing down and he was out of a lot of the parts that people wanted. He wrote his home address on the back of a business card and gave it to Mark.

“If I’m not here just come by the house and I’ll open up for you.”

Mark and Jerry thanked him and left. Jerry asked Mark if he would mind taking him by the gun store so he could check on it. Mark replied that he didn’t mind at all since he wanted to buy some ammo. When they got to the store, Jerry had Mark park in the back. He then unlocked the back door and the trio walked in. Jerry grabbed a flashlight and then locked the door behind them. The store was dark as there were heavy curtains over the front windows that the Drews closed at night to keep people from seeing in when the store was closed.

“Do you want me to open the curtains?” Mark asked.

“No. I’d just as soon no one knows we’re here.” Jerry replied.

“I see what you mean.”

Jerry looked around the store. Satisfied that everything was OK he turned to Mark. “What do you need?”

“It’s a pretty big list.” Mark told him.

“Let’s see it.”

Mark handed the list to Jerry.

“Lt’s see....45 auto, 5 boxes...9 millimeter, 10 boxes....30-06 soft points, 5 boxes...” Jerry read down the list and pulled double what the list said and set it on the counter.

“Jerry, I only have half that much on my list.”

“I know, but don’t worry; I’m going to make you a good deal.” He continued down the list pulling double. “.243, 5 boxes....22 magnums, 10 boxes....22 long rifles, 5 bricks...AR-15 mags... You don’t have an AR do you?”

“No, but Jim has couple that he shoots in matches. He has 10 or 12 magazines, but he said that if you had some to buy them for him.”

“Let me go look in the back and see what I have.”

A couple of minutes later, Jerry came back out with a box of magazines and two pre-ban AR-15’s. One was an SP-1 with the old triangle hand guards and the second was a collapsible stock CAR-15.

“Man, those are neat.” David said. “Are you taking those home?”

“No.” Jerry replied. “You and your dad are.”

“What do you mean?” Mark asked.

“I mean that you are taking these home for safekeeping like I did the Galil.”

“I can’t do that. I can’t afford those.”

“Listen to what I have to say before you say no.” Jerry started. “I bought these a while back knowing that one day they would be worth a bunch if the Assault Weapon ban didn’t sunset or if the stuff hit the fan. Well, the stuff definitely has hit the fan, but I can’t sell them now because I can’t call into NICS for a background check on anyone. I can let you take them though since you have a CHL and are exempt from the NICS check. I will put them on an invoice to you and when the lights come back on, you can bring them back or you can come pay me for them. Now start filling out the yellow form while David helps me with something in the back.”

“I don’t know how to thank you, Jerry.”

“We’ll talk about that in a minute.” Jerry said as he and David disappeared into the back of the store. A minute later they walked out carrying a case of .223 ammo each. Jerry got out an invoice book and wrote the two rifles, the box of 27 magazines, and the two cases of ammo on it while Mark finished up the yellow form. “OK, here’s the deal. The ammo on the counter is two for one today. So you owe me...” Jerry did some quick figuring on a calculator. “...\$514.63 including tax. If you want you can charge it too, but you know I don’t take ammo back. The cases of .223 can be brought back if the seals

are not broken. If you open them, they're \$150 each. I am going to give you a 300 round battle pack to use for practice and sighting in. The SP-1 is \$800 and the CAR is \$1200 if you decide to keep them. Now, I am doing this because you are a good customer and a friend. There are no strings attached to this deal. I need a favor, but if you can't do it, I understand, and it does not affect this deal at all."

"Just name it and if there is any way I can do it, I will." Mark promised.

"Our Jeep is at our ranch in Cotulla. It is almost 100 miles from here. I need a ride and some help to fix the Jeep."

"I couldn't go until Wednesday. Is that OK?"

"That's more than OK, it's wonderful. Thank you."

"No. Thank you!"

"Is there anything else you need?"

"Well...no, never mind, you've already done too much."

"What were you going to say?" Jerry asked.

"I was just thinking that I might like to have a defensive handgun for David and Samantha to use."

"Really, Dad! My own pistol." David was really excited.

"No. Yours and Sam's to share. But I can't ask Jerry to do any more. You guys can use one of the .22 pistols."

"A .22 is no good for defense. It won't stop someone quick enough to keep them from hurting you. How about a factory reconditioned Glock 17?" Jerry asked.

"How much?"

"\$400. I'll make you the same deal as the AR's. You can bring it back or buy it later." Jerry offered.

"That would be great."

Jerry disappeared into the back once more and returned with two Glock boxes and a case of 9 millimeter ammo.

"I just need one, Jerry." Mark exclaimed.

“I would feel better if you took one for each of them. They will be more responsible and take better care of their own gun. David, go over to the wall and get two of those Bianchi holsters for the Glocks and two double magazine pouches too. I can’t give this ammo to the kids, but I’m giving it to you for them to use.”

“I don’t know what to say, Jerry. Thanks.”

“That’s all you need to say.”

Mark paid cash for the ammo and they loaded everything into the Jeep. Jerry locked the store and they drove back to Kroger. When they got there, Mr. Drew was still in line. He was very close to the front, so it should not be too long, Mark figured. The line behind Mr. Drew had grown to what looked like a four or five hour wait. It also looked like the natives were growing restless. As they were waiting, Mark noticed a city bus pull up and drop two city police officers off and pick up the two that they were replacing. Mark and Jerry commented that since the patrol cars were all fairly new and probably not running, the PD was using some of the city busses to transport officers. They discussed how long it would be before San Antonio would see riots if the power didn’t come back on. Mark thought that it would take a while before any riots happened here, and that they would probably be small. Jerry was not so optimistic. He felt they had a week or maybe two at the most and that when the riots started, they would be bad. Hopefully not as bad as the Cincinnati riots had been, but still pretty severe. Mark thanked Jerry again for the loan of the guns, and Jerry said that they were probably safer with Mark than at the shop. He mentioned that one of the things they wanted a vehicle for was to transfer as much of their stock as possible to Mr. Drew’s place. They would have to make lots of trips in the Jeep, but that it was better than nothing. Mark offered Jerry the use of his truck and Jerry said that he would probably take Mark up on the offer. About that time, Mr. Drew walked out of the store with his groceries. They put them in the Jeep which was loaded to the gills now.

“I never thought it would take over three hours to buy \$50 worth of food.” Mr. Drew said as he climbed into the back of the Jeep with David. “I’m glad we came when we did. Look at how long the line is now. The man that signs you in and gives you your number said that they are supposed to get a couple of trucks in tomorrow. If that happens, they will let everyone have another \$50 worth.”

“That’s good news.” Mark stated.

“I ask the man what would keep someone from going to the other Krogers in town and buying another \$50 worth there if they didn’t get the trucks in. He said they had no way to control that for cash customers...they are keeping the Lone Star food cards of the people on public assistance to control them...and that he was sure that some people had gone to more than one store. However, he thought the fact that most people were walking was keeping them from doing that too much.” Mr. Drew explained.

“I know when Dale and I came we wouldn’t have wanted to walk any further to go to a second Kroger.” Jerry said. “But, if we were hungry enough, I guess we would have walked as far as we needed to.”

“I’m just thankful we have a vehicle.” Mark added as he started the Jeep. “It is at least 30 miles, round trip, from our house.”

“Well, Mark, I want to thank you for bringing me. I couldn’t have made the walk.” Mr. Drew exclaimed.

“That’s not all we need to thank him for, Dad. Mark is going to take us to the ranch on Wednesday and help us fix the Jeep. And, he has offered us use of his pickup if we want to move some stuff out of the shop.” Jerry informed his father.

“Well, then, double...no, triple thanks.”

“Jerry has thanked me enough that it is I who owe you my thanks.” Mark said.

Mr. Drew looked at his son with a quizzical expression.

“I just made him a good deal on some ammo and a couple of rifles.” Jerry explained.

“I hope you made him a real good deal, seeing everything that he’s doing for us.” Mr. Drew said.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Drew. It was the deal of the century.” Mark said with a gigantic smile.

When he dropped the Drews off, he made arrangements to pick them up at 7:00 AM on Wednesday. David climbed into the front seat next to his father and they headed for home. Jim and the girls were already there and they filled Mark and David in on their day.

“When we got to the store, they were out of a lot of the stuff that we went to look at. The kerosene lamps that you looked at the other day were all gone. We asked if they had any more and they said no and that they didn’t know how or when they would get any more. We decided that we better go ahead and buy some of the stuff that we would need if we stayed here. I hope you’re not upset.” Jess said.

“Of course not. The auto parts was already out of batteries. Some things are going to get harder and harder to find.” Mark answered. “What all did you buy?”

“The most important things we bought are the seeds. They had a lot of them and we bought what we figured were two years worth of the non-hybrid seeds. Some of the vegetables were only available as hybrids, so we bought 4 years worth of those. Hopefully they will stay good for that long. If not, they were only about a dollar a pack so we didn’t waste much. We’ll have to keep our eyes out for some non-hybrids.” Lisa informed him.

“We also bought a bunch of gardening tools. Spades, rakes, and hoes. Hopefully we can find a garden tiller to buy or borrow, but we bought the hand tools just in case. I hate to think about doing it all by hand, but if we have to, we have to.” Jim added.

“We got a bunch of galvanized buckets and tubs. And, Mom bought two washboards. I hope we never need them. Washing clothes by hand is gonna bite.” Sam actually smiled as she told her dad about it.

“We bought several rolls of chicken wire. Also, some hardware cloth and wire that we can make rabbit cages with. We were just afraid that we might not be able to find any of this stuff if we waited too long. Jim paid so we owe him half.” Jess said.

“You don’t owe me anything. It wasn’t that much and it’s the least I can do for you guys letting us stay here. Anyway, after we left the hardware store, we went by the house and pick up my reloading equipment. I had it all packed up and stored in the attic so it was already in boxes. Tomorrow I want to inventory my supplies and see if we think we need any. Gunny was happy to see the girls. He said he’d rather come early in the morning, so I told him we’d meet him about 8. I hope that’s OK. Hey, did you find Jerry?” Jim asked.

“Yes, we did.” Mark answered looking at David with a huge grin.

“Yes, we did indeed.” David said smiling back at his father.

“What?” The other group asked in unison.

“Come help us unload the Jeep.” Mark said.

“When Mark opened the back of the Jeep and handed the two AR’s to Jim and David, Jess turned red in the face.

“Mark Allen Turner.” She said through clenched teeth. “We talked about buying a little bit of ammo. We don’t have enough money to buy anymore guns.”

“Dad didn’t buy them, Mom. Jerry gave them to us.” David blurted.

“Well, he didn’t give them to us, exactly.” Mark went on to explain about the guns and how Jerry had sold him the ammo two for one. He also told them that he need to take the Drew’s to Cotulla on Wednesday. Everyone was impressed with Jerry’s generosity. Jim was very impressed with the rifles. Sam was not so impressed with her Glock. “It’s ugly!” Was all she had to say about it.

After they had put away the guns and ammo, they started fixing dinner. They had to take two more long guns out of the safe to be able to fit the AR’s into it. Mark certainly didn’t want anything to happen to them. While they were eating, they discussed the decision they had to make about where to stay. They quickly came to the conclusion that the only two viable options were the ranch or staying where they were. They discussed the pros and cons objectively. Even Mark was leaning toward staying in Silver Hills. Gunny’s assessment of the ranches security coupled with the addition of a little firepower to his battery made him feel that they stood just as good of a chance here as there. In the end they decided to wait until Thursday to make a final decision, but in the mean time, to proceed and prepare as if they would stay here. If they decided to go to the ranch, some of the things they bought

might be for nothing, but that might not be as bad as if they couldn't get something later that they would need to stay here.

After dinner, they listened to the news and the President's speech. The news reported massive rioting in Los Angeles. Mark and Jim were both surprised that LA had held out this long. New riots were also reported in Atlanta, Miami, and Cleveland. The world market had taken another bad loss, and there was more talk of shutting them down until the American markets were back online. The local news reported that the San Antonio city council had passed an ordinance making all outdoor water use illegal until the power came back on. The news that most surprised everyone was the radio station announcing that they would cut back their broadcasts to three two hour blocks per day to make the fuel for their backup generator last a little longer. When the President came on, he said basically the same things that he had said for the last several nights. Lisa was right about it sounding like a broken record, Mark thought.

Both families, kids and all, headed down to Jon's for what was becoming the social highlight of their day. There was more talk of the dance than there was of the bad news they had all heard. Mark started thinking that maybe the dance wasn't such a bad idea after all. At least it took people's minds off of things a little. He mentioned to Jon that he had invited Gunny to look around tomorrow and ask if he would like to join them. Jon didn't seem to think that they needed any outside advice on security, but he agreed to see what Gunny had to say. When the "meeting" was over they went back home, pumped water, played a few games with the kids, and got ready for bed. It was the first day since the burst that Mark did not have to put money into his black box. Maybe that was a good sign.

Chapter 15 – Defense Plans and Dances

Gunny showed up at the house at 7:30. Mark had already run, and was knocking out the rest of his PT when he heard the knock on the door.

“Hey, Gunny. I wasn’t expecting you until 8:00. Did you have any trouble finding the place?”

“Twasn’t no trouble at all, Karate Man. I jus’ didn’t know fer sure how long it would take to get here, so I lef’ early.”

“Let me see if Jim is up. I want to take a quick shower and then we can get started.”

Mark finished his shower, got dressed and was back outside with Jim and Gunny in less than 5 minutes. They rode in the Jeep to Jon’s house. They would have walked except for Gunny’s bad knees. Mark introduced the two ex-marines to each other. The two men talked a little and found that they had served on some of the same bases, although at different times and in different capacities. Gunny had always been a combat Marine and Jon had spent his four-year enlistment in supply. The four men got back into the Jeep to look over the subdivision. Gunny had them go back down to the road first. He told them that the first thing they needed to work on was some training for the guards.

“Hell.” He said. “I jus’ drove up here and told them boys that I had me an appointment with the Karate Man. They jus’ waved me through and they didn’t know me from Adam. They didn’t even get out of the chairs that they had on the shady side of the sign. I know I’m jus’ a broken down old man, but no strangers should get in without someone who knows ‘em comes to the gate and gets ‘em.”

“Excuse me, Sargent Pickwell, but we don’t have a gate.” Jon pointed out.

“Then you damn well better get one! I coulda jus’ run them boys over, sittin’ in them lawn chairs like they was on a picnic or somethin’. By the time they woulda figured out that they was in deep shit, I’da been in and they’da been dead. Pickets should be where they can see threats from all directions, not sittin’ on their ass in the shade shootin’ tha shit. You shoulda known that, Marine, jus’ from basic training.”

“But these men are not Marines, Gunny.” Jon said in a voice that bordered on whining.

Mark could see that Jon was getting a little ruffled by Gunny’s candor. He suggested that they look at everything and then sit down and talk about what they could do to fortify their defenses. They spent the next hour driving around the subdivision and up and down the county road each way for a mile or so. Gunny asked several questions about how many people lived in the subdivision and how many houses there were. Jon knew that there were 62 lots and 47 houses but no one knew exactly how many people were living or staying in the neighborhood. When Gunny had seen enough, he told Mark to head back to the house. He asked for some paper and a pencil. Then, the men sat down at the picnic table. Gunny started drawing a map of the area as he spoke. Mark was amazed at the accuracy of the map.

“Mos’ of your threats will come from the road and that’s where I would concentrate my efforts first. You have one lane into the subdivision and one out with the ‘Silver Hills’ sign ‘tween them. I’d tear down the sign so that it don’t obstruct the guards’ veiw neither way. Then I’d barricade off one of the lanes and put a badass gate ‘cross the other, kinda like the one you told me about at that ranch.” Gunny said nodding at Mark. “I’d dig a good fox hole with sandbags ‘round it up your private road 30, 40 yards from the gate for the guards. Close ‘nough to be able to talk to someone, but not so close that they could get the jump on ya. Then, if’n someone needs to be let in, one guard opens the gate while the other covers him. The sub-division is about 600 yards wide and the main road through it runs pert’ much right up the middle. There’s a 50 or 60 yard buffer between the road and the closest properties. That contains the ditch, the front fence and then some empty field. The perimeter is fenced by a good 5 strand barbwire fence on the back and the sides. But the front only has that little decorative wood fence on this side of the ditch. I’d dig out the ditch so that it has a four foot vertical wall on this side. That’ll keep anything on wheels from being able to just drive through the ditch and into the field. I’d also try to find me some wire and put a barbwire fence across the front about 10 feet this side of the little fence too. That’ll slow down anybody trying to get in on foot. Then, you should dig two more fox holes. One on each side of the middle road half to two thirds of the way to the side fences. If someone attacks from the front, you can get some men in those fox holes and have over lapping fields of fire. You might even want to put two on each side. We also need to come up with some kind of comm system for the guards to get reinforcements if they need them. That should pert’ much cover the front. Now, for the sides and back. To guard them effec.....”

“You mean we need to guard the sides and back, TOO?” Jon asked.

“Yes, sir.” Gunny said flatly. “The east side is pretty easy because it is all pasture. Anyone tryin’ to get across it is going to be easy to see. Most of the west side is farmland. As long as the crops are not tall, it’ll be easy too. But, ifin it gets planted in corn or something it’ll be hard to see anyone ‘til they are right on the fence. The back and some of the west are gonna be a real bear. Most of that is brush. And anyone with any kind of woodcraft at all is gonna be able to get over the fence before you could stop them. Fortunately, it’s also the least likely place for neophytes to try to bust in or attack from. But, you get any shadow warrior types, that’s where they’ll come from, and they’re gonna ruin your day ifin you’re not ready. We need to look at the back and sides some more and figure out exactly how we want to guard and defend ‘em. Fer now, I would get started on the front, and when that’s finished we’ll get on the sides and then the back. The last thing I would work on at is an observation post to see people coming up and down the road.”

“Don’t you think all that’s kind of overkill?” Jon asked.

“Depends how much your ass is worth to you. Karate Man asked me to tell you what I think, and that’s what I think. Whether you do it or not is up to you.”

“Thanks, Gunny. Lisa and Jess are fixing lunch. We’d be pleased if you would stay and eat with us.” Mark offered.

“Thanks, Karate Man. Don’t mind if I do. Now, where’s my girls, Jimbo?”

The four men got up from the table. Jim and Gunny went to find the twins and Mark walked with Jon back to his house.

“I don’t think we need to do all of that stuff.” Jon commented. “Nobody is going to try to attack us in force like that or try to sneak in the back. It’s just a waste of resources and manpower.”

“It may be, Jon. But, I think we should consider it. We don’t know what is going to happen, and wouldn’t it be better to be safe than sorry?”

“Maybe, but I just don’t think it’s necessary.” Jon said emphatically.

When they reached Jon’s house, he and Mark spoke for a few more minutes. Jon promised to think about what Gunny had suggested. As Mark walked home, he found it curious that Jon had first wanted to put guards at the entrance and he was opposed to it. Now the roles had effectively reversed. When he got home, lunch was on the table. Gunny sat down, and one twin sat on each side of him. Mark had never seen him look happier. He would have to ask Jim if he ever had. During lunch they discussed the events of the last week. Gunny was not bashful about adding his two cents worth. When he heard about Marks encounter at Kroger, he really laid it on thick, teasing Mark about making that poor little defenseless boy piss his pants. Everyone else joined in the fun. Mark was getting used to it. When the topic turned back to the serious side, everyone agreed that so much had happened that it seemed more like a month than a week since the burst. When they were almost done with lunch, Mrs. Petersen dropped by.

“Hi, Mrs. Petersen. How are you?” Jess was the first to see her.

“I’m doing fine. I was just wondering if I could get some ice to chill some of the things I’ve fixed for the party.” She answered.

“Sure. How much do you need?” Mark asked.

“I think ten pounds should be enough.”

“A lot of the trays were already frozen last night so I emptied them into some plastic shopping bags and refilled them. David, would you go get one of the bags and bring it out to Mrs. Petersen.”

“Yes, sir.” David answered his dad.

“Mrs. Petersen. I would like to introduce you to my neighbor. This is Gunnery Sargent Marcus Pickwell. Jim said, then looked at Gunny. “This is Mark and Jess’s neighbor, Abigail Petersen.”

Gunny stood up and walked over to Mrs. Petersen. He shook her outstretched hand. “Everyone just calls me ‘Gunny’. It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Marcus.” Mrs. Petersen smiled and then spoke again. “Marcus, would you help me with this ice?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Gunny snapped out his answer and then smiled back.

Everyone just stared in disbelief as Mrs. Petersen walked back toward her house with Gunny in tow, carrying the ice. When they were safely out of earshot, Jim cracked up. The others followed suit.

“Did you see the way he snapped to?” Jim asked, barely able to catch his breath. “I thought he was going to salute when he said ‘Yes, ma’am.’”

“Did you see the way she called him ‘Marcus’ after he said to call him ‘Gunny’?” Lisa added.

Gunny was gone for the better part of an hour. When he came back, Mark and Jim were readjusting the new carburetor on Jim’s truck. He had a big smile on his face, bigger than the one Mark had noticed at lunch, and he seemed in a hurry to leave.

“What’s your hurry, Gunny? You sure took your time over at Abigail’s.” Mark said with a big grin, seeking revenge for the ribbing he had gotten earlier.

“We was jus’ talkin’!” Gunny snapped.

“Talking, huh? Jim jumped on Mark’s bandwagon this time. “Is that what they used to call it?”

“Boy, you watch the tone you take with me.” Gunny was using his best DI voice. “Or I’ll stick my foot so far up your ass that the next time you go to the doctor he’ll ask you how you got them boot tracks on your tonsils.”

“OK, Gunny. We were just teasing. Why don’t you stay for dinner?” Mark offered.

“Abby invited me to the dance tonight. I figured you boys could do with some watchin’ to make sure you don’t get out of hand. I’m going home to get cleaned up and then I’ll be back.” Gunny explained.

“I guess we could use a chaperone.” Jim said.

“Chaperone, hell. What you two boys need is a warden, but until we can find one, I guess I’ll just have to do the best I can.” He said as he climbed up into his truck. “I’ll be back before dark.”

“OK, Gunny. We’ll see you then.” Jim said.

Everyone ate dinner and then got ready for the dance. After the President’s broken record sounding speech, they all walked down to Jon’s. Mark had all of the ice in a big cooler that he had put in the wagon. Even though the dance wasn’t supposed to start until dark, the festivities had already begun. Music was playing, and everybody was visiting. Mark noticed that almost everyone was smiling for a change. This is a good idea, he thought. For the second time today, he found himself on the other side of the fence from where he started out.

“Ironic.” He mumbled to himself.

Mark pulled the wagon over by the punch bowl and Jess set down a big plate of chocolate chip cookies on a table that was already half full of cupcakes, brownies, and other treats. Many people had brought lawn chairs to sit in and Mark asked Jim to go back to the house with him to bring some for the two families. When they got back, the dance was in full swing. Gunny had arrived and he was talking with Mrs. Petersen and she was introducing him to some of the neighbors. A George Strait song started playing.

“Hey, Cowboy. Wanna dance?” Jess asked her husband.

“Sorry, ma’am, but I’m married to a mean old hag that might just castrate me if she found me dancing with pretty young filly like you.”

Jess punched him in the arm. “Get your sorry ass out here and dance with me you bum.”

“Oh, baby, I love it when you talk dirty to me.” Mark said as he led Jess out to the street turned dance floor.

The dance was a huge success. Everyone got to know each other a little better. Mark spent some time with some of the neighbors whom he had only known their names at most. He also filled in some of the men on Gunny’s suggestions for security. Some thought that they should implement them as soon as possible, and others, like Jon, thought that they were unnecessary. He talked with Professor Petrie for quite a long time. He also had changed his position on security and thought that what Gunny was proposing was a good idea. Security is not all they talked about, though. Ted Petrie was in charge of the history department at SAC, and he and Mark discussed at length the growth in power and size of the federal government since the civil war. They also spent a little time talking about how much Samantha was dancing with Ted’s son, Alex. After a while, Jess came back over and made him dance with her some more. In fact, no one escaped having to dance. David was forced to dance with the twins some, and even Gunny, protesting that his knee hurt, had to take a couple of turns around the floor with Abby.

At about 10:00 the dance started winding down. By 10:30 everyone had headed home. As the two families walked toward their house, they noticed a cool breeze out of the north.

“Must be a little cool front coming in.” Jim observed.

“It sure won’t hurt my feelings any.” Mark added. “Did Gunny leave in time for curfew?”

“Yes, but he didn’t look too happy having to leave the party before it was over.” Jim said. “It kind of reminded me of Cinderella, but with combat boots instead of glass slippers.”

Everybody laughed. When they were almost to the house David asked a question.

“Dad, do you think it’s good that the power went out?”

“No, son. Do you?”

“In some ways. I know a lot of people have died, and I know that some people don’t have a lot of food, but if it hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t have gotten to know the neighbors like we have.”

“I see your point. I guess there is always some good that comes out of everything. It shouldn’t take something like the burst to make us get to know the people that live around us, but for some reason, it did. Hopefully, we will learn from this. If the lights don’t come back on soon, we may learn a lot of things.”

Chapter 16 – Good News, Bad News

Once the twins had been put to bed the adults and teenagers talked about what they wanted to do the next day. Mark had promised Jerry that he would take him to get his Jeep. Sam and David both wanted to go with Mark. Lisa wanted to go check on her parents. Mark thought that he should try to get to Waco to check on his family too. Jim felt that they should find a way to get the gas and diesel that was at work as soon as possible. Jess said that she needed to review their master list and see if Kroger had received the shipment they were expecting.

“Does this mean that we are going to stay here? We never have made a definite decision.” Mark said.

“What does everyone think?” Jess asked.

“I vote for here.” Lisa stated. “I don’t like the politics at the ranch.”

“If we could get this place secured like Gunny suggested, I think we stand a better chance here. The ranch location is better than here, but they have too few people to really secure it. I think the larger group here gives us the best chance.” Jim gave his opinion.

“I liked the ranch. But, I would rather stay here at our house.” David said, which surprised Mark a little.

“I want to stay here too.” Jess implored. “I think everybody knows my reasons.”

“I may have different reasons than everybody else, but I want to stay too.” Sam added.

“Well, I guess I’ll make it unanimous.” Mark said. “I am still very concerned about some things, though.”

“What’s your biggest concern?” Jess asked.

“Water.”

“We have water.”

“Only as long as we have fuel for the generator. Once that runs out, and I don’t know when that will be, we can’t run the pump.” Mark explained.

“What about a hand pump like they used in the old days?” David asked.

“I don’t think those pumps will pull water up from very far. Our well is almost 400 feet deep.”

“What would do it?” Jim asked.

“A solarjack pump like they have at the ranch would do it. A windmill might. We would have to figure out how much water the neighborhood would need per day. Then see how many gallons per hour a windmill can pump.”

“Dad, remember at the ranch. They said that they took out an old windmill to put in the solarjack pump. Maybe we could get that windmill.” David suggested.

“That’s good thinking, Dave.” Mark said as David beamed.

“Maybe we could work out a trade with them.” Jim added. “Hunting, fishing, shooting, and karate lessons for the windmill and some of the other stuff we might need. I always wanted to make a living doing the things I love.”

“I guess we need to go talk to them before Saturday.” Mark said. “Man, we have so much to do and so little time.”

“We have plenty of time, don’t we?” Jess asked.

“Not really. According to the news, the riots are getting worse in the big cities. It’s only a matter of time before they start here and when they do, I don’t know how much we are going to be able to go into town. Or, go anywhere for that matter.”

“He’s right.” Jim interjected. “Todd and Mr. Davis figured about two weeks before riots started here. I think we may have a little longer, but they studied it at least some. To be on the safe side, we should try to get the most important stuff done by Sunday. Why don’t we make a list of everything we need to do and get and then prioritize it?”

Everyone agreed that Jim’s idea was a good one. They worked on the list for more than an hour. They couldn’t agree on some of the priorities, but they were able to put to bed what everyone needed to do the next day. Mark and Lisa would take the Jeep and drive the Drew’s to their ranch. Then they would come home through Uvalde and check on Lisa’s parents. Jim and Jess would take the trucks to town and buy more groceries if Kroger would let them. Then they would try to buy some jerry cans and bring home as much gas as they could. They would also load as much of the lumber from work that they could fit into the trucks. Sam would watch the twins and start cutting the deer meat that was in the freezer into strips for jerky. Mark said that they could no longer afford the gas to keep the deep freeze going. David was given the job that he least wanted. Someone needed to poll all of the neighbors and find out how many people each house contained, what skills everyone possessed, how they were fixed for food, if they had any medical needs, and what if any supplies and equipment they might have that the whole neighborhood could use. Mark explained to David to specifically ask about gardening equipment. He told David that this job was a very big responsibility. He suggested that Jess ask Mrs. Petersen if she would go with David. He assured David that he trusted him to do the job, but explained that some of the adults might be more comfortable answering questions if an adult was accompanying him. David said that he understood and promised to do his best. With the assignments for the next day done, everyone headed for bed except for Mark and Sam. They first went to the freezer and took the meat that Sam would work on in the morning to the kitchen to thaw out.

“Dad, do you think the lights will ever come back on?” Sam asked.

“Of course they will, sweetheart.”

“When?”

“That’s the big question, isn’t it?” Mark answered. “It could be two days, two weeks, or two years. I just don’t know. But, I think we’re doing the smart thing. We’re preparing like it’s going to be two years.”

“Can we make it for two years without power?”

“I think we can, but I’m not going to lie to you, it’s going to be tough. There is a lot of work to do and a lot of stuff that we need. The work we can do, but I don’t know where we are going to get some of the stuff. But, we will find a way to get by.”

“I know we will, Dad. Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I love the twins, but promise me that I’m not going to be the one to watch them all the time.”

“Sweetheart, I can promise you that. But you probably will have to watch them more than you are going to want. We are not going to have the luxury of making sure that all of the work is evenly divided. Everyone is going to have to pitch in where they can do the most good and where they are needed most. It’s not a punishment; it is just part of being a responsible adult.”

“I know, Dad. It’s just I want to do some of the exciting stuff too.”

“Be careful what you ask for, Sweetie. You may find that the ‘exciting’ stuff is not as exciting as you think.” Mark kissed his daughter on the head. “Now, get your butt to bed. You’ve got a lot of meat to cut tomorrow.”

“OK, Dad. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Sam headed out the door for the camper. Mark looked around the house. He thought that if it would just cool off a little more, they could sleep in the house. He wondered if there was anything they could do to get more circulation in the bedrooms. He would have to give that some thought. After he locked the doors, he headed to the camper and climbed into bed. He knew he had a big day tomorrow and that he needed to get some sleep, but his mind was racing. The last time he remembered looking at his watch it said 2:30.

* * *

When the alarm went off, Mark wished that he gotten some more sleep. He got up, showered, dressed, and headed outside. It was almost chilly. He checked the thermometer on the side of the camper. It said 64 degrees. Not exactly a blue northern, but pretty cool for August in Texas. He went to the shed and set three of the full jerry cans and one of the five gallon water jugs next to the Jeep. Two of the jerry cans went onto a carrier on the tail gate that also held the spare tire and a hi-lift jack. The third gas can and the water jug went behind the back seat with the tool box and first aid kit. There was also a 12 volt air compressor, an extra quart of oil, and a tow strap back there. Mark then topped off the Jeep's gas tank with another gas can and checked the oil.

About that time Lisa and Jim came out of their camper.

“Need any help?” Jim asked.

“No, I think the Jeep's ready. I was just going in the house to get a rifle. Is Lisa going to take a gun?”

“She didn't really want to, but I told her she had to take at least a handgun. I'm going to give her the Python. She likes shooting it, and she's pretty good with it.”

Mark, Jim, and Lisa walked into the house. Jess was in the kitchen.

“What are you doing in here?” Mark asked, surprised to see her up.

“I live here, remember?” She shot back.

“I know, I mean I didn't see you get up.”

“I got up when you were in the shower. I wanted to fix you and Lisa a good breakfast before you left.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Now sit down and eat, all of you.”

The three adults sat down at the breakfast table and ate biscuits and eggs. While they were eating, Jess was fixing sandwiches and putting them into a small soft sided cooler. They all discussed again what they had to get done today. When they were done, Mark, Jim, and Lisa walked into the den and Mark opened the safe. He got his FAL out and put it into the case that already had the magazines in it. Jim got his Colt Python out and put it in a gun rug. He then put a holster, the two speed loaders, and a box of extra ammo in a small range bag and handed it to Lisa. The four adults walked out to the Jeep and Mark and Lisa got in after they kissed their spouses.

“You guys be careful.” Jess admonished as she handed the cooler to Lisa.

“We will.” Mark promised.

“Tell your folks that I’m sorry the girls and I couldn’t come this time and that we love them.” Jim told Lisa.

“I will.” Lisa answered. “We’ll see you all tonight.”

Mark started the Jeep and headed out of the subdivision. As he turned onto the main road, the sun was just peeking over the horizon. When he and Lisa got to Jerry’s house, Jerry and Dale were waiting outside. They each had a rifle case and a small duffel bag. Mark helped them load the bags behind the back seat on top of the other stuff. They climbed into the back as they said hello to Lisa and put their rifle cases on the floor. As Mark pulled out onto the road, Jerry handed him a map with a route highlighted.

“We figured that it might be best to stay off of the interstate.” Jerry explained. “This is the way we go on holiday weekends to beat the traffic. It’s a little longer, but we shouldn’t have to dodge as many stalled cars.”

“That sounds good.” Mark replied. “After we get your Jeep running, Lisa and I are going to drive up to Uvalde to check on her parents.”

“I was wondering why she had come with you.” Dale smiled. “I thought that maybe she got elected to make sure we didn’t get into any trouble today.”

“Jess told me to watch you Drew boys real good. She said if Mark came home with another gun all of you would be in big trouble.” Lisa teased back.

The men all laughed. The trip to Cotulla went quickly. The foursome chatted about the events of the last eight days and how much longer it could go until it really got ugly in the city. Jerry had been right about there not being too many stalled cars on this route. However, any time Mark came to a hill or blind curve, he slowed way down, just in case. When they got to the Drew’s ranch, Jerry unlocked the gate and they drove up to the camp house. It only took Mark about 20 minutes to get the parts replaced on the Jeep. When they tried to start it, the battery would not turn the engine over fast enough to start. They hooked up the jumper cables from Marks jeep and the old CJ sprang to life on the next turn of the key. As Mark was taking the cables off of the battery on the Drew’s Jeep, he was distracted for a moment when Lisa said something about eating. When he glanced away, the unshrouded fan hit the outside edge of his right hand.

“Shit!” Mark yelled as he realized that this was the first time he had cursed in a couple of days. He dropped the cables on the ground and clutched the hand to his chest. It really hurt.

“What happened?” Lisa asked.

“The cooling fan hit my hand.” He responded as he looked at the hand. It had a small cut that didn’t seem to be bleeding. “But, I think it’s OK.”

Mark had spoken too soon. The fan strike had initially mashed the capillaries closed, but they had opened back up and the blood started to flow freely.

Lisa looked at the hand and had Mark move his fingers. She informed him that it would be OK, but it was going to hurt for several days. She got the first aid kit out of the Jeep and cleaned and then bandaged Mark's hand.

"You know if you really got hurt, it might be hard to find proper medical care, even if we weren't in the middle of nowhere." She warned him.

"I know." He said sheepishly. "We all need to make sure that we are extra careful."

The men washed up with some of the water that Mark had brought and then Lisa pulled out the cooler that Jess had given her and handed out sandwiches to everyone. After they had eaten, Jerry and Dale went to a storage building and retrieved some 5 gallon gas cans and filled the Jeeps tank. They loaded the remaining two full cans along with their bags and rifles into their Jeep.

"How long are you two going to stay in Uvalde?" Jerry asked.

"Probably only about an hour." Lisa answered. "I just want to check on my folks and we have to be back to Mark's house by dark."

"We were thinking about going with you, if that's OK?" Dale inquired. "We would feel better if we all stuck together, just in case there was any problem."

"We appreciate that." Mark responded. "Are we ready to go?"

Everyone nodded their heads and they loaded into the Jeeps and headed toward Uvalde.

Lisa's parents lived in a subdivision close to town. They had moved there after Lisa's dad had a stroke and could no longer work the farm. They had sold the farm, bought the house in town, and after her dad had recovered some from the stroke, they had bought a big motor home and toured the country.

As the two Jeeps approached the area where Lisa's parents lived, some of the houses were burned to the ground. A few of them were still smoldering. The closer they got to the subdivision, the worse the devastation was. When they reached the entrance, it was apparent that none of the houses had escaped destruction. Lisa was in tears.

"I'm sure they got out." Mark said as he brought the Jeep to a stop.

"What could have happened?" She asked.

"I don't know. Let's go back to town and find out."

Mark turned the Jeep around and Jerry followed him. They drove to the court house and parked near the entrance to the Sheriff's department. Mark notice that the vehicles parked in the spaces reserved for patrol cars didn't look quite right. Each had a light bar, antennas, and a sheriff's emblem on the door, but they were all different colors and makes. There was a maroon 1970's LTD, an old Dodge

pickup that still had some blue paint on it, and a beautiful late 60's GTO in candy apple red. Dale whistled as they passed the muscle car.

“Man, what I wouldn't give to have one of these.” He said longingly.

The other two men nodded agreement, but Lisa, if she even heard him, ignored the comment and marched directly for the entrance. When they got inside the door, there was a dispatcher and two deputies behind the counter. One of the deputies saw them and came to the counter.

“Can I help y'all?”

“I'm looking for my parents.” Lisa blurted. “My name is Lisa Davis. They lived in the subdivision north of town on Highway 83. The whole neighborhood is burned. What happened? Do you know where they are? Their names are George and Alice Garrett. I have to find them.”

“Ma'am, just calm down.” The deputy drawled. “A small airplane crashed into the subdivision when the burst hit. It started a fire and the volunteer fire department was not able to stop it. Most of the folk were able to get out. Why don't you folks come back to my desk, and we'll see what information we have on your folks.”

They followed the deputy to his desk and he motioned for Lisa to sit in the chair next to his desk. The men stood behind her. The deputy dug through a pile of papers and finally found the ones he was looking for. He ran his finger down the first page and then flipped the page. When he had looked at all three pages he flipped back to the first page and went through them again. He then set the report down and looked at Lisa.

“I have good news and bad news.” He began. “The good news is that there are no Garretts on the lists of fatalities or injuries from the fire.”

“Thank God.” Lisa exclaimed. “What's the bad news?”

“Well, all of the survivors went to stay with friends or relatives or are at the shelter that was set up at the high school. We got all of the names that we could of who went where, but your parents aren't on any of the lists.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means one of two things. First, and most likely, the records of survivors we have are very inaccurate. They may be staying with someone and we just don't have it recorded. Or...now this is just a possibility...we have a few bodies that we haven't been able to ID.”

“Oh my God!” Lisa cried putting her head in her hands.

Mark patted her on the shoulder and the deputy took hold of her hands.

“Now look here, Mrs. Davis, there is no sense getting yourself all worked up until you know for sure what happened. This is what you need to do. First go to the hospital and make sure that they are not there. Then go to the high school and see if they have any record of your folks. Finally, go to every friend or relative that you can think of and see if they know anything. If you still can’t find them, come back and we will test to see if any of the unidentified are your parents.”

“What do you mean, test?” Mark asked.

The deputy blew a long breath out before he answered.

“The people we haven’t ID’d yet were burned quite badly. Unfortunately, they are unrecognizable. The only way we can be sure of who they are is through a DNA test comparing them to a know relative. The bad part is we don’t know how long it will take to get the results once the power comes back on because there are going to be thousands of cases like this in the US.”

Lisa was shaking, but had managed to stop crying.

“Well, I guess we better get busy.” She announced. “Thanks for your help, Deputy.”

They walked back outside and headed for the Jeeps. Jerry whispered to Mark that he and Dale would stick with them for a while, but that they would have to head for home before too long. Mark told him that he understood. They loaded up and headed out for the hospital. Mark could see that Lisa was on the verge of crying again.

“Don’t worry Leese, we’ll find them.” Mark promised, praying that they would.

Chapter 17 – Committees

The hospital didn't have any record of the Garretts. The drive to the high school was only about 2 miles, but it seemed like it took forever to Mark. He thought it must seem even longer to Lisa. At the high school they found that the Red Cross was in charge in the gym. There must have been over 300 people living in there, Mark estimated. He was very thankful that his family was not reduced to this option. Mark explained the situation to one of the ladies from the Red Cross. She pulled out a long list of names and flipped back through some pages and started reading down the list.

"I'm sorry." She said. "We don't have any Garretts listed with the people from the fire. Maybe they are staying with someone in town."

Lisa started to shake and then to cry.

"I don't know where else to look." She sobbed. "All of their friends that I know of lived in the same neighborhood."

She really started crying hard and Mark reached out to pat her on the back. She turned and grabbed him around the neck, burying her head into his shoulder. She was crying so loud and squeezing him so hard that it was hard for him to breath. He patted her back and told her that they would look until they found them. Mark had never seen Lisa be anything but cool and collected. Jim had told her that she was extremely close to her parents, but he had not imagined that she would loose it like this. He felt awkward and didn't know what to do or say. Jess was just the opposite of Lisa when something like this happened, and Mark had never had to deal with a situation like this. He wished that Jim or Jess were here. They would know what to do.

"Lisa!" A voice called out. "Lisa, is that you?"

Lisa pulled her head out of Marks shoulder. "Mom!...Oh, God!...Mom! It's really you! They said that you weren't here. Where's Dad?"

"He's on the other side of the gym, playing cards. I was going to the bathroom when I heard someone crying and when I came closer to see what was going on, it was you." Mrs. Garrett said.

"I don't understand." Lisa explained. "They said that you weren't on the list of people from the fire?"

The Red Cross lady franticly looked through her list again.

"Here they are." She explained. "They are on the list of people stranded in town."

"That is because we were at the grocery store when the burst hit and we couldn't get home in our car." Alice Garrett started. "We finally found a ride back home, but by the time we got there, the whole neighborhood was engulfed in flames. We had nowhere to go and nothing to wear, so we came here."

“I’m so glad we found you. I was afraid that you had been killed.” Lisa cried with tears of joy now.

“You always did jump to the worst conclusion. How many times have I told you to be more positive?” Alice lightly scolded. “Why don’t we go see your father?”

“Sorry about the mix up.” The Red Cross lady apologized.

“It’s OK.” Lisa responded as she, her mother, and the three men headed to the other side of the gym.

When they found Lisa’s dad, she hugged him hard enough to make an anaconda proud. She reintroduced them to Mark, whom they vaguely remembered. Then she introduced them to the Drew brothers. While Lisa and her parents were catching up, Dale came up to Mark and told him that they really needed to be heading home. Mark asked them to wait just a couple of minutes. He then interrupted the Garrett’s visit with their only child.

“Lisa, I’m sorry to interrupt your reunion with your parents, but the Drew’s need to get home and so do we.”

“But, Mark, can’t we stay just a few more minutes?”

“What for?”

“So I can visit with my parents.” She answered him indignantly.

“You can’t visit with them on the way back?”

“You mean they can come with us?”

“Of course. Unless they don’t want to.”

“Young man, we wouldn’t want to be a burden.” George Garrett said emphatically.

“Mr. Garrett, any family of Jim’s and Lisa’s is family of ours. Plus, I can think of about a dozen things already that I could use your help on.”

“I appreciate that, son. But, I can’t do that much work since my stroke. I won’t be much help I’m afraid.”

“I have plenty of strong backs, Mr. Garrett. It’s knowledge that I need from you. So, if you don’t mind, why don’t we get your stuff and hit the road.”

“Young man, you drive a hard bargain. I’ll accept under one condition, and that is that you call me George.” The older gentleman extended his hand.

“Well then, George, I think we’ve got a deal.” Mark shook his hand.

Lisa was as happy as Mark had seen her since the burst. It only took the Garretts a minute to gather the few possessions that they had bought or been given since the fire destroyed their home. They thanked the Red Cross people for their hospitality and then headed for the Jeeps. Lisa and Alice climbed into the back of Mark’s CJ and then Mark helped George into the front passenger seat. Mark climbed in, started the engine, and then with Jerry and Dale following, pulled out onto the highway. The trip seemed short with everyone filling each other in on the events of the last week. When they got to the east of San Antonio, the Drews honked, waved, and then turned toward their houses. Twenty minutes later, Mark pulled into his driveway. The both trucks were parked around back and so was Gunny’s old Dodge. Mark could see that all three were weighted down to the overload springs. When the twins saw their grandparents, they ran up and launched themselves into the waiting arms of George and Alice. Jim came running up and hugged his in-laws as well. They all went over to the picnic table and started catching up. Jess came out of the house with Sam and David. Mark hugged the kids and kissed his wife.

“What happened to your hand?” She asked.

“Oh, I just got stupid for a minute and cut it. Lisa bandaged it up and said it will be OK...Where’s Gunny?” Mark asked Jess.

“I’ll give you three guesses, but you’ll only need one.” Jess answered with a wink. “I invited them both for supper, so they should be along shortly.”

Jim asked Mark to come look at what they had in the trucks. David tagged along with them. The Ford and the Chevy were full of plywood and Gunny’s Dodge was about half full of plywood with several stacks of two by fours on top of it. . Jim explained that they had gotten all of the plywood and some of the two by fours. He explained that there were still a bunch of two bys and some one bys at the shop. He figured that one more trip with all three trucks should finish off the wood. Then he told Mark to go into the shed. When Mark walked in, he saw eight or ten 55 gallon metal drums.

“What are these for?” He asked, pretty sure he already knew the answer.

“They are for the fuel. Gunny knows this guy who sells barrels for a living. We bought 10 of them and emptied the tanks at work into them. We got about 225 gallons of gas and around 150 of diesel. We have two that are empty, but we can siphon gas out of the stalled cars and fill them up if we want to. He also sells those blue water barrels like you have. I figured if everyone in the neighborhood bought one or two, we could cut back on how often we have to pump water. He even has some large water tanks, but they are pretty expensive.”

“This is awesome. Did you get any groceries?”

“Yes, the Kroger got a shipment in and we each got another \$50 worth. The manager said they felt they could keep this up until the lights came back on. He also told me that they were issuing credit to anyone who didn’t have cash. I asked him if that was a corporate decision and he told me that it was, but that rumor had it that the government had strongly suggested they do it and that they would

reimburse Kroger if they took any losses on it. I figure we will need to ferry everybody into town again. David has some good news too.”

“Yes, Dave, what did you find out?”

“Well most of the people here worked at things that won’t help us much. But, there is one exception. You know Mr. Hernandez’s friend, Mr. Vasquez? He is really Dr. Vasquez.”

“A doctor?” Mark was surprised.

“Not quite. He’s a vet. He said he has a lot of stuff at his office and was thinking about asking you if you could help him bring it to his house.” David said smiling.

“That’s great son. I’m sure we can do that. Did you find any gardening equipment?”

“Yes sir, three roto-tillers and lots of hand tools.”

“Excellent, anything else?”

“Quite a few people have hobbies that might be useful. Mrs. Petersen was really excited by one of the ladies that has a lot of jars for canning. I think that maybe the best thing was one of the men has a big welding shop. He said that he can weld most anything. He’s really a plumber, but he learned to weld in the Army. One of the other guys said that he used to be into CB’s a lot. He said that he has several radios in storage and that maybe he could get some of them to work. There were some other things that Mrs. Petersen thought might be useful, and she wrote them down.”

“Son that is wonderful. You did an excellent job.”

David’s face lit up. “Thanks, Dad.”

Mark went back to the house to check on how Sam did with the venison. She had cut it all up and was marinating it. Mark bragged on her, and thanked her for watching the girls. Supper was ready and Gunny and Abby showed up just in time. Introductions were made all around and then they sat down to eat the chili that Sam had made with some of the deer meat. The eight adults sat at the picnic table and the kids sat at the card table. Mark could see that Sam didn’t like not sitting with the adults. He figured that they could build another picnic table out of some of the 2 by 4’s and put it end to end with this one, so that no one would have to sit at the kids table. If Sam and David were going to be given adult jobs, then they should have some adult privileges, even if that was nothing more than sitting at the grown-up table. Everyone enjoyed the chili and complimented Sam on her cooking skills. That seemed to improve her disposition a little. As they ate, George and Alice filled everyone in on how it was to live in a shelter for a week.

“There was no privacy what-so-ever. That was the hardest part for me.” Alice said.

“I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.” George agreed. “We lost our house and all of our belongings, but the thing I missed most was being able to have a private conversation with my wife.”

After supper, the men went out and started unloading the trucks. They were almost halfway finished when it was time for the President's speech. They all gathered around the radio.

"My fellow Americans, I come to you tonight with some great news. Limited power has been restored to Washington D.C. and some of the other major east coast cities. Most of this power is being allocated to hospitals and other essential service providers. While we may still be a few days away from total power restoration, this is a promising first step."

"In spite of this wonderful news, I have some disturbing news as well. I am very concerned with the rioting and lawlessness that continues to plague some of our major cities. Most of the citizens in the majority of the cities and towns in our great nation have worked together for the common good. I would hope that everyone would follow the example set by most of the country. If the rioting is not stopped in the few trouble spots by tomorrow, I will have no choice but to declare limited martial law in those areas. This is a measure that I hope to not be forced into undertaking, but we will not tolerate the murder and mayhem that has been infecting these areas."

"I pray that you and your families are safe, and I ask you to pray for our country and its leadership in this crisis. Help your neighbors and your community. Thank you for your time and I will talk with you tomorrow. God bless."

"Please stay tuned to KSTX for the news and an important announcement."

The major items in the news were the announcement that the Kroger stores had resupplied and that citizens could get another \$50 worth of groceries and that the water was going to be off in the city for 12 hours starting at 7 PM tonight. Citizens were forbidden to store any more water than they needed for drinking and cooking for those 12 hours. The City Water Board said it was to do some maintenance on the pumps but Mark thought that it was to let them get enough water pumped up into the tanks to maintain the water pressure. The weatherman said that they should enjoy the cooler weather for another day or two, but then it would be warming back up. Just before the news ended, the announcer explained that the radio station had been running off an old back-up system that was powered by a diesel generator. They only stored enough fuel to run for a week, as they never expected it would take longer than that to get the power back on. He went on to say that they had been resupplied a couple of days ago, but they were unsure of when any more fuel could be counted on. Beginning tonight, the station would cut back their broadcast to 5 hours a day until the crisis was resolved. They would broadcast 2 hours in the morning, an hour at noon, and 2 hours in the evening. Mark wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the newsman's voice crack.

The whole group headed down to Jon's house for the meeting. The discussions were as spirited as Mark had seen them since the first day the lights went out. Some people were encouraged by the news of some power being restored. Others thought it was nothing more than a ruse to buy the government a few more days. Most were skeptical at best. Another argument was over the wisdom of declaring martial law. Some said that it was necessary to save the embattered cities from ruin. Others felt it was an overextension of the President's power and that it would set a dangerous precedent. Mark listened to the arguments for both sides. Each made good points, but Mark didn't know which, if either side was right. Once that discussion died down, Mark spoke to the group.

“I have something that I want to present to all of you. I would first like to introduce you to George and Alice Garrett. They are Lisa Davis’ parents. Their home in Uvalde was burned to the ground by a small airplane that crashed in their neighborhood when the burst hit. They were living in the Uvalde high school gym, but now they will be staying with us. George and Alice, until they retired were farmers and did some ranching. None of us knows how long the power is going to be out, but it seems that we all think it is prudent to assume that it’s not coming back on in the near future. I don’t know how much longer Kroger is going to be able to sell food. So, I think we need to try to start growing our own. Every body here has at least an acre of land, and there are 15 empty lots that could be turned into gardens. If we work together, we could get in some fall gardens and probably be able to get some food out of them in six to eight weeks.” Mark stopped to let what he had said sink in.

“So, what do we need to do?” Someone in the crowd asked after a minute.

“I think the first thing we need to do is to form a committee to study and plan what the best course of action is. We know we have some gardening equipment in the neighborhood, and between George and some of the others we have the knowledge. We have lots of labor available, so all we need is the raw material. I would suggest a four or five person committee be selected to present us with a plan in no more than two or three days.”

There were murmurs of approval from the crowd. “I nominate you, Mark, to head up the committee.” Someone shouted.

“Thanks, but this isn’t my strong suit. I may be a ‘Bean Counter’, but I never counted the kind of beans we’re talking about now. I think that George would be the logical candidate to head the committee.”

“He doesn’t even live here!” Jon shouted. “He doesn’t have as much at stake as the rest of us.”

“Jon, he does live here.” Mark was surprised at how calm his tone was, considering how aggravated he was with Jon right now. “And, he has just as much at stake as we all do. We are all trying to get ourselves and our families through this mess. George is the only one here that I know of who has made a living off of the land. Unless there is someone else who is more qualified, I believe he is the best man for the job.”

It was so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop. “I second the nomination of George Garrett to head the gardening committee.” Professor Petrie announced.

Mark smiled gratefully at the professor. “All those in favor....”

A hearty ‘Aye’ arose from the crowd.

“All those apposed....”

Not a sound was heard. Mark looked back at Jon and saw that he was standing with his arm folded and his cheeks puffed out like a bull frog. “The ‘ayes’ have it. Now we need some people to help. Does anyone have any gardening experience that would like to help?”

Four hands went up. Two women and two men. “Please give your names to George and you all set a time for your meeting. Today is Wednesday, right? Yes, then could you all have a plan to present to us at the meeting Friday evening?” Mark asked and was greeted by hearty nods of the head. “Good. Does anyone have anything else we need to discuss?”

“Are you going to be able to take us to the Kroger again, Mark?” Sherri Henderson asked.

“I am busy for the next couple of days, but I know how bad everyone needs to get to the store. So, if it’s OK with him, I would like to lend my truck to Jon and he can ferry you all back and forth tomorrow.”

Jon looked shocked at first and then the ice man attitude he had been displaying melted. “Uh, yeah, sure. I can do that. But if the lines are long, we can probably only get two groups done tomorrow.”

“Actually, Jon, I was thinking that you could use the truck like a bus. Make a round trip every hour or so and drop off and pick up as people are ready. That way everybody could go in one day.”

“Yeah, that would work, I guess.”

“OK, then, get with Jon if you want to go to Kroger tomorrow. Is there anything else?”

“Yes.” The man that David had pointed out to Mark earlier as the man with the welding shop raised his hand. Mark didn’t remember seeing him at a meeting before.

“Yes, sir.” Mark noticed how big the man was. He was probably 6’3” and 280 pounds. He looked like a lineman for the Cowboys, Mark thought.

“Please don’t call me sir.” The big man grinned. “It gives me a complex. My name is Daniel Lopez, but my friends just call me Chaparo.” Mark noticed that all of the Hispanics at the meeting chuckled at the man’s nickname. Mark would have to ask Manny about it.

“OK then, Chaparo, what’s on your mind.”

“I heard that some of you got a Marine to give you a security evaluation. And, that he made some suggestions of things we should do. Where do we stand on that and could he brief the whole group?”

“Gunny, would you come up and briefly go over what you said to us yesterday?”

Gunny got up in front of the group and as diplomatically as he could laid out what he had told Mark, Jim, and Jon the day before. Mark could see Jon visibly stiffen as Gunny spoke. When he was done, Chaparo asked his question again.

“So, where do we stand on all that?”

“I don’t think we stand anywhere on it.” Mark answered.

“Don’t you think we should get started on it?”

“Yes, I do. But it’s not up to me to decide. It’s up to everyone.”

“Maybe we should form another committee to study the plans.” Professor Petrie suggested.

“That’s a good idea.” Someone else shouted.

“We could do that.” Mark told the crowd. “Who do you want to head up the committee?” Mark saw Dr. Vasquez’s hand go up.

“I think you should do it, Mark.” He stated.

“I don’t think I’m the right person for this committee either. I don’t have any military experience.”

“Then get Gunny to do it!” Mark didn’t recognize the voice.

Jon jumped out of his chair like it was hot all of a sudden. “Now wait a minute, Gunny DOESN’T live here! I think that excludes him from being on a committee.”

Jon’s comments started the crowd murmuring again. After a minute Mark asked the crowd to quiet down.

“I think that Jon has a good point, anyone on a committee probably should live here. But that doesn’t stop the committee from bringing in any special advisors they deem fit. Does that seem OK to everyone.”

There was a chorus of affirmative answers.

“Now does anyone have combat military experience?”

No ones hand went up. Most of the residents of Silver Hills were too young to have served in Vietnam, and too old for Desert Storm.

“Does anyone have any military experience?”

Only two hands went up. Jon’s and Chaparo’s.

“Most of you know that Jon spent four years with the Marines in logistics and supply, Chaparo, what did you do?”

“I was in the Army for 12 years doing heavy equipment maintenance. I never saw combat, but I was close a couple of times.”

Mark thought that he would rather have this guy chair the committee. It seemed that he had the same sense of urgency about security as Mark. Jon seemed to be threatened by Gunny and that might get in his way of doing what was best for the community. He thought about asking the group to vote, but that would cause a problem no matter the outcome. If Chaparo won, Jon would be very bitter. And, if Jon won, then who knows what might happen with security. Suddenly, the solution came to Mark.

“Since we have two well qualified veterans, does anyone see a problem with them co-chairing the security committee?”

Everyone just shook their heads.

“Well since there are no objections, I guess you guys have the job. Who would like to help these fellows out?”

“We still want you to be on the committee, Mark.” Professor Petrie said. “You may not be a military man, but you do know about self defense.”

Mark thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you what Professor; I’ll do it if you’ll do it.”

“Well, OK.”

“Anyone else?”

One of the women’s hands went up. “I think it might be a good idea if you had a female on the committee, after all, we care about security as much as you men do. Plus we can make sure you boy’s don’t turn this into some kind of G. I. Joe fantasy.”

The murmur of female agreement was unmistakable. “How about you, ma’am?” Mark asked the woman.

“Me?” The woman stammered. “Oh, no. I’m just a single mom concerned about my kids. I don’t know anything about security. I just think a woman might think of some things that you men would tend to overlook. I’m sure one of the women here must have some experience that would be useful to the committee.”

Mark looked around. “How about it, any of you women want to help us out?”

No one said anything. “Well, ma’am.” Mark looked at the single mom. “Looks to me like you’re the one. If you don’t do it, who will?”

“OK, I will. I guess that’s what I get for opening my big mouth.” She answered.

“Thanks.” Mark smiled. “Jon, Chaparo, when do you want to get together?”

“Tomorrow, after the meeting?” Jon asked, looking at Chaparo.

“Sounds good to me. Is that OK with everyone else?” Chaparo answered.

All of the other security committee members nodded their heads.

Mark looked at Jon. “Anything else?”

Jon shook his head. “I guess we’ll see everybody tomorrow. If you need to go to the grocery store in the morning, come see me and we’ll figure out the bus schedule.”

George got with the members of his committee for a moment and then Mark’s group walked back to his house. Mark and Jim unloaded and stacked the wood out of the trucks while George and Gunny mostly supervised. They chatted about what they had to do tomorrow, and some of the things that they needed to find. Gunny excused himself to go say bye to Abby before he had to leave. The other men continued to talk. When the wood was unloaded they all went back up onto the deck with the women. Abby had gone home and brought some clothes for Alice. George, who was close to the same size as Mark was given a couple of pair of jeans and half a dozen shirts out of Mark’s closet. Everyone was fairly tired from their long day, and shortly after dark they headed to bed. George and Alice slept in the bed that the twins had been using in the pop-up and the dining table and benches in the camper were converted into a bed for the girls. Mark, before going to bed went into his bedroom and put a dollar in his black box. He wondered what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter 18 – The Angel

The next morning Mark got up to exercise. As he ran, he felt weighted down by how much there was to do, and how little time there was to do it. They had to get the rest of the lumber from work. He needed to go back to the ranch and work out a deal with Mr. Davis for the windmill. He had promised the Drews that he would lend them a truck to haul inventory to their house. He wanted to see if he could find some golf cart batteries like Rodney the auto parts man had told him about. He needed to get the security committee moving, and they needed to train the guards. He wanted to figure out a way to keep the house cool enough so that they could sleep inside. He needed to help Dr. Vasquez get the medicine and supplies from his office. They needed to try to find a way to get the fuel tanks from work to his house and then get fuel to fill them. Jess needed to get the kids going on their schoolwork. He wanted to go to Waco to check on his family. He knew that they would be OK for food. His brother, Mike, had stored a bunch of food and supplies for Y2K and Mark knew that he still had most of it put away. Heck, they were probably in better shape than he was as far as food went. That was his number one concern...food. They could get by on the \$50 worth a week from Kroger. It didn't provide a very diverse diet, but at least it kept their bellies full. But what if that were no longer available. If rioting started in town, the Kroger may have to shut down, or worse, be destroyed. What would they do then? They were going to start growing some food, but how long would it take to get anything out of a garden? He could go down to his deer lease in a couple of months and get lots of deer, hogs, and turkeys, as long as he had gas to drive that is. But hunting season was still over two months away. He felt that if they could get by for the next couple of months, then they could grow and hunt enough to get by. He would have to talk this over with the others and see if they had any ideas.

When he was done, he showered and dressed. He filled his truck with fuel and then drove it down to Jon's house for use as the grocery shuttle. When he got back home, breakfast was ready and all of the adults sat down to eat. As they spoke of what they need to accomplish for the day, Mark filled the others in on some of his concerns. Jim suggested that they see if anyone else has a car or truck that they could get to run. Maybe then they could get some of the other families to run some errands. George asked if anyone in the neighborhood had a trailer. David said that he thought he saw one at Chaparo's house when he and Mrs. Petersen did their survey. Mark wondered how he hadn't thought of those things. Worse yet on Mark's mind was what had they still not thought of. Well, Mark thought, better just concentrate on the things that I have to get done today. He zoned back into the conversation that the others were having.

"...are going to look at the gardening equipment on David's list and then look at the empty lots. Then we should be able to come up with a plan to present to the group." George stated.

"That sounds like a good plan to me." Jim said as the others nodded. "What do you think, Mark?"

"Yeah. That sounds real good." Mark agreed, not wanting anyone to know that he wasn't paying attention. "I guess we need to get the rest of the lumber from work. I'm going to see Chaparo right after breakfast to check out his trailer. If we can use it, maybe we can get the fuel tanks from work."

When breakfast was finished, Mark and Jim walked down to Chaparo's house with David as a guide. When they knocked on the door, the big plumber answered the door.

“Hey, Mark. What’s up?”

“We came down to see about borrowing your trailer.”

“Sure. Let me show you where it is.”

The four of them walked behind Chaparo’s house and into his garage/workshop. The trailer was parked in one corner and it was a big one. Sixteen feet long and eight feet wide, it would haul as much as Mark’s and Jim’s trucks combined, and then some.

“Do you think we could borrow it for the day? We have a load of lumber at work that we want to bring home.” Mark asked.

“I don’t see why not.” Chaparo answered. “It’s not doing me any good since my truck won’t start.”

“Thanks. David told me you had a nice workshop, but I had no idea that it was this nice.” Mark said as he noticed not only the welding equipment but also a big drill press, a metal lathe, and several other machines that he did not recognize.

“I was a machinist in the Army. I worked in the motor pool for most of my stint. We mostly fixed trucks and humvees, but sometimes we got to work on tanks and stuff too. Now I just do this stuff as a hobby.”

“It sounds like you enjoy it.” Jim observed. “Why did you get out of the army?”

“My *suegro*, my father-in-law, got sick and he needed someone to take over his plumbing business.” The big man said sadly. “But, I can’t complain, it has provided a good living for my family.”

“I see.” Said Mark. “I guess we’ll come pick up the trailer in a few minutes. Hey...Why don’t you come with us and see if there is anything that you think you might be able to use. I think I saw some welding supplies and some angle iron and stuff in the shop at work.”

“I appreciate that, but we are saving all of our cash for groceries.” Chaparo responded.

“You don’t need any money, my friend.” Jim informed him. “The bosses at work said that we could have whatever we wanted.”

“Is that so? Well, then, I’ll be ready by the time you come for the trailer.”

When the three men reached the gate at work, Gunny was waiting for them as they had arranged the night before. They were easily able to load the rest of the lumber onto the two trucks and the trailer. Chaparo looked in the welding shop and suggested that they take all of the welding rods. He didn’t need any of the equipment, as what he had at home was equal to or better than what was in the shop. When

he looked at the steel that was stacked outside the shop, he seemed impressed. There was not only a lot of angle iron, but quite a bit of square tubing in various sizes, and some steel pipe. There was too much weight wise to carry with all of the lumber, so they loaded as much of it as they could on the trailer. Mark told Chaparo that after lunch they would like to come back for the fuel tanks with the trailer, and that they could also get the rest of the metal. Everyone agreed that was a good idea and they headed for home. On the way, they passed Jon on his way to Kroger. They stopped to talk.

“Hey, guys!” Jim called.

“Hello.” Jon responded a little more coolly than Mark liked.

“How’s it going?” Mark asked.

“The lines are really long. I guess the word is getting around about Kroger giving credit. The people I took at eight were not quite halfway though the line by the time I made the eleven o’clock run. I think that this twelve o’clock group is the last one that stands a chance of getting through the line by six.”

“I agree. I guess we better take the rest tomorrow...early. We can use both trucks for a couple of runs in the morning.”

“We won’t need too. This makes 51 and we only have 12 more that I scheduled for the one o’clock run. We can take them at eight in the morning.”

“We only have 47 families that live here and some of went to the store yesterday.” Mark observed. “How did we get 63 people that need to go to the store today?”

Jon’s face screwed up as he answered as if the words tasted bad. “A lot of people are inviting their friends and relatives to move in with them.” Mark could hear ‘Like you!’ even though Jon didn’t say it. “I think we need to talk about this at the meeting tonight before we have so many people living in Silver Hills that we can’t control them.”

Mark didn’t like the way that Jon said ‘control’, but he didn’t want to get into an argument with him out here in the middle of the road. Probably better to just change the subject. “OK, Jon. When you get back from this run, will you come change trucks with us? We need to make another run to our work, and this trailer loaded down is a little much for Jim’s truck.”

“Sure thing.” Jon waved as he put the big red truck in gear and headed down the road.

“Who does he think needs to be controlled?” Chaparo asked sharply.

“I don’t know, but I didn’t like it either.” Mark answered.

“Me either. But I guess since I’m one of the ones he’s talking about my position is obvious.” Jim chimed in.

As they drove home they passed the little Baptist church. There was a man mowing the grass in front of the stone building. Mark figured that it was the pastor. On seeing the trucks, the man waved. The three men in the truck waved back as they passed.

Once home, they drove to Chaparo's and unloaded the steel and welding supplies. Then they drove to Mark's and unloaded the lumber. Mark noticed how quickly it was done with Chaparo helping. Then the four men sat down and ate some sandwiches and left over chili. Their discussion focused mainly around the meeting of the Security Committee. Chaparo agreed with everything that Gunny had proposed. The biggest problem he saw was communication.

"If the guards need to call for backups, how are we going to do that?" He asked.

"David told me one of the men has some CB radios that he can get to work." Mark suggested.

"How many does he have?"

"I don't know...three or four maybe. I have a couple in the shed that may be OK. How many do we need?"

"One in every house and one for each guard position." Chaparo answered.

"That many?" Jim asked.

"Chaparo's right. Without good com, you can't effectively repel a group of MZB's without a way for the guards to call for reinforcements." Gunny interjected.

"MZB's?"

"Another term for Tangos that these two pencil pushers came up with. I kinda like it though. It stands for 'Mutant Zombie Bikers.'" Gunny explained with a toothy grin.

"I see!" Chaparo laughed. "I kinda like it, too."

"We can see if anybody else has any CB's at the meeting tonight. That is if Jon doesn't piss them off so bad that everybody leaves." Mark observed.

"I don't think too many people are going to like him suggesting that they can't invite family to stay with them. I know the Mexican families won't." Chaparo said.

"Well, I guess we'll find out soon enough." Mark stated.

The men talked for a few more minutes. Mark and Jim described the gate that was at the ranch to Chaparo and he told them that he could easily build one out of some of the steel that they were getting today. About that time Jon showed up to switch trucks. He seemed to be in a little better mood and once he left with Jim's Chevy, the men hooked up the trailer to Mark's truck and took off. When they got to work they realized that they could not take both tanks and all of the steel. They decided to take

the gasoline tank and all of the steel. Once the steel was loaded, they tied some rope to the tank and slowly lowered it onto the trailer. Once it was strapped down, they loaded into the two trucks and headed back home. Mark was in the lead with Chaparo riding shotgun and Gunny brought up the rear with Jim in the old Dodge.

As they approached the church where the preacher had been mowing, Chaparo noticed something.

“What’s going on there?” He asked.

Mark noticed that there was a group of men standing in front of the church. They seemed to be working feverishly at something. As they drew closer he could make out one man on the ground and six or seven others kicking and hitting him. Mark slowed the truck down and he noticed that it was the pastor on the ground and the men who were kicking him looked like gang members. Mark slammed on the brakes, but before he could get the truck to a complete stop, Chaparo was out of the truck and running toward the brawl. Mark tried to get out of the truck, but as soon as he swung his feet out of the door, the truck lurched forward. He realized that the truck was still running and in gear and as soon as he had taken his foot off of the clutch the truck had started moving. Fortunately, he had also forgotten to take off his seatbelt and it allowed him to remain in the truck and get it stopped and shut off. Mark’s mind flashed back to the incident at the Kroger. However, instead of everything happening in slow motion, it seem that time had speeded up. Mark had his Colt Commander on this time, but he could not use it with Chaparo between him and the Bangers. He tried calling out to the big man, but Chaparo must have been so intent on his mission, that he did not hear Mark. The men kicking the preacher were so wrapped up in their mayhem that they did not see Chaparo bearing down on them. When he reached the bangers it looked like a tornado going through a trailer park. Bodies were flying everywhere. Chaparo bent over to pick up the preacher and started carrying him back toward the trucks. The bangers picked themselves up and were giving chase. Mark got out of the truck, but the bangers were still too close to Chaparo and the preacher to bring his gun to bear. As Chaparo approached the truck the bangers noticed the trucks and the three other men standing next to them. A couple of them stopped but there were still four or five hot on the trail. Mark moved toward the bangers and side kicked the first one in the stomach just as Chaparo passed him with the preacher. The combination of Mark’s foot moving toward the man as he was charging in folded him in half like a closing pocket knife. The impact also knocked Mark over, but he, unlike the man he had just kicked, could still breathe. As he was getting back up, he noticed that Chaparo had practically thrown the preacher into the front seat of his truck. Once Mark was on his feet, he noticed that Chaparo was on his right side and Jim was on his left. There were still four of the bangers moving toward the men. Mark snapped out a front kick and caught one of the men square in the *huevos*. He dropped like a rock holding his jewels and moaning. Jim punched another one as he ran in and Chaparo ducked a punch from one of the others and flipped him over his back as he stood back up. Mark was stepping toward the last man.

BOOM!

Everyone’s head swiveled to see Gunny pointing Bertha up in the air. There was smoke pouring out of the muzzle of the big 12 gauge as he dropped her down so that she pointed at one of the bangers.

“You bastards better haul your asses outta here or I’ll fill ‘em so full of holes that you’ll think you’re Swiss!” Gunny yelled.

Mark didn’t know if it was what Gunny said, or just the fact that his tone assured the bangers that he wouldn’t put up with any shit, or just the big black business end of Bertha that scared the bangers off. The ones who were not too hurt picked up the ones who were and ran toward an old International Harvester pickup that Mark had not noticed before. The truck was running and as soon as all seven men had jumped into the bed, the driver roared off toward town. The four men looked at each other and when they realized that they were all OK, they turned to check on the minister. He was lying across the seat and only seemed to be about half conscious. Chaparo reached in and gently pulled him out. A big contrast from the way he had put the preacher into the truck. His head was bleeding profusely, but other than that he didn’t have any other obvious injuries. Mark reached behind the back seat of his truck and pulled out his first aid kit. Lying there was the FAL in its case. A lot of good it would have done me there, he thought. I have to start carrying it where I can get it into action quickly if I need it. He pulled a large dressing, placed it on the preachers head, and applied pressure.

“Gunny, can you take your truck and go get Lisa?” Jim asked.

“Roger that. Take this in case they come back.” Gunny handed Bertha to Jim and headed for his truck. As he raced toward Silver Hills, the preacher started coming to.

“Did you see him?” He asked.

“See who?” Jim asked back.

“Did you see the angel?”

“What angel?”

“When those men were kicking and hitting me, I asked God to send me an angel. He did and the angel picked me up and carried me off. At first I thought he was taking me to heaven, but I guess he just took me away from those men.” The preacher looked blankly toward the sky.

Mark, Jim, and Chaparo just looked at each other.

“Yeah, Preacher.” Mark smiled. “We saw the angel. His name was Chaparo and God sent him just in time.”

Chapter 19 - Inklings

Within a couple of minutes a small crowd had appeared and they were asking questions about what happened. A woman came running up.

“Bob! Bob! Are you OK?” She cried.

“Cathy, it’s OK. I’m going to be fine.” The preacher said seeming to be regaining his faculties.

“What happened?” She asked.

“I was working on the yard in front of the church when these hoodlums drove up and demanded that I give them all the wine in the church. I tried to explain that we were Baptist and that we use grape juice for communion, but I guess that they didn’t like my answer and they started beating me. Thank God that these men came along and saved me.”

“Thank you so much.” She said to the three men with tears in her eyes. “Could you help me get him home? It’s just a little ways down the road.”

“We would be happy to ma’am. But my wife is on her way and she is a nurse. Why don’t we wait for her to get here before we move him.” Jim advised.

Within a couple of minutes Gunny came roaring up. He and Lisa got out of the truck and she checked the pastor out. Once she had checked to see if he had any neck or back injuries, she gave the OK to carefully move him. They put him and his wife in the back seat of Mark’s big red truck and drove them to their house. Once inside the house, Lisa bandaged his head and checked to see if he had a concussion. She said that he did, but that it was probably very mild. She then taped his ribs as she figured they were at least cracked by looking at the bruising. Lisa instructed the preacher and his wife for him to take it easy for a while. She told his wife to wake him up every couple of hours during the night and to come get her if he wouldn’t wake up, started having trouble breathing, developed a severe headache, or if anything else seemed to be bothering him. The pastor, who seemed to be getting better by the minute, introduced himself and his wife. He said that their names were Bob and Cathy Jones. He thanked the men and Lisa over and over and insisted that they and their families come to church on Sunday.

“Mark’s family and ours had already planned on coming this Sunday.” Lisa said.

“That’s great.” Bob responded.

“I’ll hafta to see if I kin make it.” Gunny said.

“I hope you can.”

“I haven’t been to church in a long time.” Chaparo explained. “And besides that we’re Catholic.”

“Brother Chaparo, please don’t let that keep you from coming. We had several Catholic families come worship with us last Sunday. It was just too far for them to walk to their church and we were glad to have them visit. Plus, God is always happy to see his children in his house, no matter how long it has been.”

“Well then, I guess we’ll be there.”

“Excellent.”

“Pastor?” Mark asked. “I noticed that the temperature in your house is very comfortable compared to ours. Do you know, is it because the house is all rock?”

“That may be part of it, but the main reason, I think, is the windows. You see, this parsonage was built in the late 40’s, before they had air conditioning. The windows go almost all the way up to the ten-foot ceilings and they open from the top as well as from the bottom. That lets the hot air out. They put central air conditioning in the house eight or ten years ago, but we don’t have to use it unless it gets really hot outside. The church is built the same way.”

“I see. Too bad they don’t build them like this any more.” Mark observed. “By the way, do you two need anything?”

“No, thanks, we are OK on food and there is not really anything else that we need.” Cathy answered.

“How about water?”

“We are just inside the city water service line.” Bob explained.

“OK then, I guess we better be going.”

“Thanks again, and we’ll see you all on Sunday.”

“Make sure you come get me if he has any problems.” Lisa told Cathy as she showed them out. “Just send someone to the entrance of the subdivision and the guards will tell them where Mark’s house is.”

“OK, I will.” Cathy promised.

When the group got home dinner was ready and it was time for the President’s speech. They listened to him talk as they ate. He made good on his threat from the day before. Los Angeles, Atlanta, Cleveland, and Detroit were placed under Martial Law. The President said that some Army Reserve troops were already in place, and reinforcements on the way, to take control of these cities. No one was allowed out of his or her home between 5:00 PM and 8:00 AM. Also anyone seen looting or vandalizing would be shot on sight. The President said, and really sounded like, he regretted having to do this, but that there was no other choice. He also acknowledged and thanked the European community for offering their help. Unfortunately, he said, they use a power format that is incompatible with ours,

so none of their spare transformers or controllers would do us any good. He did say that they were looking to see if there was anything they could do that could possibly help us. But even if they could, it was unlikely to give us any immediate relief. When the local news came on, there were a couple of items that everyone found interesting. The first was that City Water Board was shutting off the water again tonight. They said that they were not able to finish the pump maintenance last night and that they would be working on it again. Mark didn't know much about how the city water system worked, but he didn't see how doing maintenance on a pump could shut the whole system down. He was thankful that they had their own well. He just needed to get that windmill from the ranch. George had some experience with windmills and he was confident that they could get it to work. The second item of interest was that the Police Department was asking that property crimes not be reported to them unless the loss was over \$50,000. They explained that they did not have the resources to record or investigate these crimes. They asked the citizens to document as much information as they could and once the power was back on to report them then so that they could be logged into the computer.

When the news was over, everyone walked down to the Olsen house. George had a stack of papers that he and his committee had worked on. When they got to the meeting, Mark noticed that there were more people here than he had seen before. Jon was right about how many new people there were. Several people introduced members of their extended family that had come to stay in the subdivision. Mark also noticed that just about everyone was talking about the President's address. Some were outraged that he had actually put the military in charge of some cities and suspended the rights of the people in them. Others argued that he had done the right thing to make those cities safe, and, they said, what good are rights if you're afraid to go outside. A few people had heard about the attack on the Baptist preacher and came up to ask Mark about it.

Scott Simmons made an observation to Mark about the speech that he hadn't noticed before.

"Did you notice that the President didn't make any promises tonight about when the power would be back on?" Scott asked. "Also, he said they were looking to see if there was anything Europe could do to help us. If we are going to have the power back in a few days, why would we need Europe's help? I think he has been trying to forestall the inevitable, and now he's going to break the truth to the country real slow and hope that things don't come crashing down around his ears."

Mark thought that Scott was probably right. If the country got used to the idea of the power not coming back on a little at a time, maybe things would be OK. On the other hand, if it came as a shock to a large part of the country, who knows how bad things could get. One thing for sure, this was the first time Mark could remember the President not making a prediction about when the power would be back on. The more Mark thought about it, the more he felt a sense of urgency about getting all of his preparations done.

After a few minutes, Jon called the meeting to order.

"I know that we all are anxious to hear what the gardening committee has to present." Jon started. "But there is an issue that I feel we need to discuss first. It is apparent that many of us are moving our friends and family into the subdivision. I and some of the others are concerned that if this doesn't stop, we will not be able to grow enough food to support all of these people. We only have so much land to grow things on. I know each family that moves in can go to Kroger, but what if they shut

down or cut back on what they let us get? What if we can't take everybody any more? Plus, we are all getting water from Mark. He runs his generator to pump us water. The more people we have here, the more water we need, and the more gas he uses. What are we going to do if we run out of gas?"

Jon paused for effect. Many in the crowd just looked around. Some nodded their heads in agreement. A few turned red in the face.

"So what are you suggesting, Jon?" Someone in the crowd called out.

"I would suggest that we limit the number of people that can live on any one property to ten."

"You can't do that. Some of us are already over that number." Another person shouted.

"We could grandfather anybody who already has more than ten to the number they now have." Jon explained.

"Let me make sure I understand what you're suggesting, Jon." Professor Petrie said. "You want us to limit the number of people that can live on my property?"

"Yes." Jon obviously did not see the trap he was walking into.

"The property that I have the deed for? The PROPERTY that I paid for? The PROPERTY THAT MEN HAVE GONE TO WAR AND DIED SO THAT I COULD OWN IT AND DO AS I WISH WITH IT?" The professor's voice crescendo then lowered to almost a whisper. "What are you going to suggest next. That we adopt the policy of Red China and limit every couple to one child?"

Mark looked around. The heads that had been looking around a moment ago were now nodding and those that were nodding now were looking around like guilty schoolboys. Mark thought to himself 'The Professor is GOOOOOOOOD!'

"Well, it is something that I think we are going to have to make some hard decisions about." Jon stammered. "Mark, how long can you keep pumping water?"

Yeah, Jon, drag me into it when you get your back against the wall, Mark thought. But he knew he needed to try to stay on Jon's good side since the security meeting was right after this one. "I don't really know, Jon. That is a valid concern, but it should make you all feel better to know that I have a plan to get a windmill. That should give us all the water we need."

"That is good to know, but we still have the food situation to deal with." It didn't seem like Jon wanted to let this go.

"Maybe we should hear what George and his committee have to say about growing our own food. Then maybe we can all think about it for a day or two. How does that sound to everyone?" Mark hoped that would cool the crowd off without stepping on Jon's toes. Everyone seemed to be in agreement.

“OK, then I guess we’ll hear from the committee now and talk about this more tomorrow.” Jon said in a matter-of-fact tone.

George and the other committee members walked up to where the driveway met the garage. This had become the de facto speaking platform. The members conferred with each other for a second, and then George cleared his throat to speak.

“We have a lot of good news. Some of it is preliminary, as we still need to find more seed and check out a few items. However, the soil here is pretty fertile and we have enough land between the empty lots and everybody’s back yard to grow a lot of food. What we have tentatively come up with is to use some of the empty lots to grow things that we will need a lot of, like corn, beans, and potatoes. Then, everybody who wants to can put in a garden for their family to use. We can also raise some livestock. Some of you already have chickens, and one family has some high school students who are raising rabbits for their 4-H project. We could even raise a milk cow or two if we could find someone to sell us one. The bad news is that we have a lot of work to do. We have three tillers, but one of them is pretty small. There are only three gardens in the subdivision right now, and only one of them is of any size. We need to get started tilling the soil that we want to plant immediately. A lot of the items that we want to grow need to be planted in the next three weeks.”

“How quick can we get any food out of the gardens, George?” Someone asked.

“Well a few things you can start harvesting about two weeks after planting, but most of real food stuff takes 6 to 8 weeks to make. The committee thinks that we should start tilling some of the empty lots tomorrow and try to get them planted as soon as possible. Some of the committee members are going to try to get seed tomorrow and some of us are going to coordinate the tilling. We need volunteers to help with the work and we wanted to ask for donations toward the seed.”

Lots of hands went up. “Yes.” George pointed a gentleman in the front.

“Going back to what Jon was talking about, if we can get everything planted and going good, how many people can we feed?”

“That’s a hard question to answer. It depends on a lot of things. But assuming we couldn’t get any food except what we could grow...let’s see, we have about 45 acres in empty lots. If we use all of that for planting and keep any animals on the private lots, we could grow vegetables for conservatively 10 to 12 people per acre. So that comes out to...say 500 people, give or take.”

“That’s why I’m saying 10 per household. We have 47 houses, and 10 each would be 470.” Jon interjected.

“Remember, that doesn’t include any private gardens, or the possibility of bartering with a local farmer.” George added. “Plus, the numbers I gave you are really rough. We could work on it some more and probably give you all a better answer in a few days.” George explained.

The crowd seemed satisfied with that. A few hands went up and George pointed at a man with his hand up. “Yes?”

“I can help plow.”

“Thank you. Yes.” He pointed to another man.

“If we want to donate, who do we need to give the money to?”

“You can give it to Mary Patterson, she is going for the seed tomorrow if we can get a truck.” He answered. “And, if you would like to help with the tilling or planting, meet us at Marks house at eight o’clock in the morning.” All of the other hands dropped. “Does anyone else have any questions?”

No one said anything so George turned the meeting back over to Jon. Jon asked if anyone had anything else and Mark raised his hand.

“Yes, Mark.”

“I was wondering if anyone has an older car or a trailer that we could use. We can probably get anything made before ’80 to run and maybe even some that are a little newer than that. Also, if anyone has any kind of trailer, it could be used to let us haul more stuff per trip.”

Four hands went up. Dr. Vasquez had a horse trailer at his office. It was big enough to haul two horses. Another man had a small motorcycle trailer. Manny Hernandez had a 1988 Suburban. Mark told him that they might be able to get it running and he would talk with him about it later. The last man with his hand up was Professor Petrie. Mark called on him.

“I have a 1977 Trans Am in the garage. I tried to start it the day of the burst, but it would only turn over. If you can get it running, we can use it for whatever, but I have to warn you, it drinks a lot of gas.”

“We have plenty of gas sitting in all the cars that won’t run. Maybe tomorrow we can try to get the parts.” Mark looked back at Jon. “That’s all I have.”

“Anyone else?” Jon asked looking around. “Well then, I guess we’re adjourned. If you need to go to the store in the morning, be here at 7:30. And, members of the security committee, we’ll meet now.”

Every one except the committee members and Gunny headed home. Mark and Chaparo had asked him to stay for the meeting. Mark also had the map that Gunny had drawn for them the other day. Jon pulled a card table and some folding chairs out of his garage and everyone sat around the table. Introductions were made all around the table. All of the men knew each other, and they just introduced themselves for the benefit of Susan Banks, the only woman on the committee. Susan was a vice president down at the Wilson County State Bank. She had two boys age seven and ten. She also told them that she had been divorced for almost three years.

Chaparo started the meeting by asking Gunny to go over the suggestions that he had made a few days ago. Gunny got the map from Mark, spread it out on the table, and explained what he thought that

they should do. He suggested that they start with the front, as that would be where most people would try to get in from, at least at first. Then, he explained, they could work on the sides and the back.

“I would also get to trainin’ my guards right away. I noticed that they weren’t sittin’ down any more, but they still ain’t payin’ ‘tension like they should.”

“Gunny, do you really think that’s necessary?” Jon asked.

“Yes, sir. I do. Them boys you got up front prob’ly couldn’t stop those assho...’cuse me, ma’am...those gentlemen that attacked the preacher earlier. I counted eight of them. If they came armed, you’d be in heck of a jackpot.”

“But that was just a bunch of gang members or druggies looking for some wine.” Jon argued.

Yeah, you’re right. And it’s only been what, nine days since the lights went out. And, everyone still pret’ much has food ‘n’ water. In a coupla weeks when the food runs out, or the water quits running, how big and how desperate do you think the groups are gonna be then?”

Jon didn’t say anything. He just sat back in his chair with his arms folded. Several of the committee members, especially Susan, asked questions and Gunny answered them as diplomatically and thoroughly as he could. Mark was surprised that all of the questions Susan asked were very rational and insightful. When Gunny had answered all of their questions, he excused himself to go tell Abby goodbye and drive himself home before sundown. Mark asked Gunny if he could come over first thing in the morning and help run some errands. Gunny responded affirmatively and disappeared down the street.

“Well.” Said Chaparo. “What do we want to present to the group?”

“I think the gate might be a good idea, but doing the rest of that stuff is probably a waste of time.” Jon stated flatly.

“I don’t know, Jon, I think that everything that Gunny said made pretty good sense.” Chaparo said as the others nodded their heads in agreement. “I think we should suggest that we start on the gate, ditch, foxholes, and barbed-wire fence for the front. Also that we start a training program for the guards. Once that’s done we can look at what the next priority should be.”

“Who you gonna get to train the guards?” Jon spewed.

“I was thinking that you should do it. I pulled a lot of guard duty during my stint with the Army, but I understand you Marines are the best of the best. Isn’t that why you devil dogs are in charge of security for all of our foreign embassies?” Chaparo asked.

Jon’s demeanor immediately softened. “That’s true. I guess I could work out a training program.” Mark was shocked that a guy as big and gruff as Chaparo could be such a diplomat.

“Alright, that sounds good.” Professor Petrie said. “I second the motion that we present the work for the front of the subdivision to the group tomorrow.”

“All in favor?” Chaparo asked.

Everyone, including Jon raised their hand.

“OK, then. Pending approval, I would suggest we all take a part of the plan to head up. Jon is going to work on training the guards. I can be in charge of the gate and blocking off one of the driveways. Professor, can you take the fence?”

The professor nodded.

“That leaves the digging the ditch and the foxholes. Since that is the most labor intensive job would you two take it?” Chaparo asked looking at Mark and Susan.

Susan nodded as Mark answered. “That will be fine.”

“OK, then. I guess we’ll see if we get a ‘go’ tomorrow night.”

Everyone got up, shook hands and said ‘goodnight’. They all headed home except for Mark who went with Professor Petrie to look at his Trans Am.

When they were out of ear shot from Jon’s, Professor Petrie spoke. “Man, that Chaparo really handled that well, don’t you think?”

“Yes, he did. It surprised me that he was so diplomatic.”

“Me too. I hope he can keep it up. I probably would have lost my temper with Jon, and I am usually a pretty calm guy.”

“I know I would have lost my temper. But Chaparo just acted like nothing was the matter. I’m so glad we picked him to co-chair the committee.”

“Me too.” The professor agreed.

When they reached the Petrie house, Mark looked at the car. He whistled. “Man, Professor, this is sweet. T-tops, four on the floor, and it’s just like the one that Burt Reynolds drove in ‘Smokey and the Bandit’.”

“Please call me Ted. It was mine when I was in graduate school. I put it up after my son was born so that he could have it when he got his license. Do you think we can get it to run?”

“Yes, Ted, I do. And, since it has a trailer hitch, it will be a lot of help.”

The two men made plans to go to the parts store in the morning, shook hands, and then Mark headed home.

Chapter 20 – Mutant Zombie Bikers

Marks alarm went off at six o'clock as usual, but today instead of getting up and running, he turned it off and rolled over to try to catch a few more Z's. He had laid awake most of the night thinking about what might happen and what all he needed to get done before it did. The fact that the little cool front they had enjoyed for the past couple of days had disappeared and the humidity that South Texas was famous for had returned with a vengeance hadn't helped matters either. The next thing he knew a truck was starting. He looked at the clock and it read 7:18. He looked out the window of the camper and saw Jon driving off in Jim's truck to take the last group of what was now a rapidly increasing population from Silver Hills to the Kroger. He got up, showered quickly, and made his way to the kitchen in the house.

"Hey Sleepyhead." Jess greeted him as he noticed all of the other adults were sitting around the table. "What happened?"

"I just didn't feel like running this morning. I didn't sleep much last night."

"Yeah, I know. You tossed and turned all night."

"I'm sorry."

"That's OK. You only woke me up a couple of times and I went right back to sleep. Alice fixed some scrambled eggs and biscuits and gravy. You hungry?"

"You bet I am."

"So, how did the security meeting go last night, Mark?" Jim asked.

"Pretty good. Jon is being difficult at times, but Chaparo was able to get him into the boat with us. He agreed to start training the guards, if we get approval tonight at the meeting."

"Yeah he told me that he was looking at that. He said that most of what you all are going to suggest is probably a waste of time, but he figures that it won't hurt anything so he went along."

"Big of him. What did you think about his other idea to limit our population?"

"Well, obviously I didn't like it. I mean we already have 10 living here. What if you or Jess wanted to bring your parents here to live? It's your property and if you want to have 100 people live here, then that's your business."

"Yeah, that's kind of the way that I feel. I do see his point, though, about not being able to support too many people. But, like Ted pointed out last night, I don't think that we can tell people what or what not to do in their own homes. Hopefully we can find a solution before we hit a population of a million or so." Mark said with half a grin.

“What do you have planned for today?” Jess asked her husband.

“I am going to take Ted and maybe Manny to the parts store. We can probably fix Manny’s Suburban the same way Jim fixed his truck. But I don’t know if Manny has the \$600 for the parts. Then I’m going to stop by Jerry’s house and pick him up so that he can use my truck today.”

“Manny has always been so good to us. Maybe we should help him pay for the parts.” Jess suggested.

“You think so? I guess we could. But that’s a lot of money, and I don’t know how much use we’d be able to get out of it. If the stuff really hits the fan in the next week or so, I don’t even know if we’re going to be able to drive anywhere. I just don’t think it would be a wise investment.”

“I see what you mean, but if you change your mind, it’s OK with me.” She paused. By the way, can I use the Jeep today?”

“I promised Dr. Vasquez that we would help him get his vet supplies moved. I was going to ask Jim to help him.”

“Can we fit everything in the Jeep?” Jim asked.

“No. But, remember, he has a trailer at his office. You can fill it up and pull it with the Jeep.”

“OK, I can do that.”

“Take a rifle with you and leave it out where you can get to it. You might even want to take someone with you to stand guard while you and the Doc load the trailer.” Mark didn’t have to say why.

Jess jumped back in. “Well then since the Jeep is promised out, do you think Gunny could take us to the flea market?”

“What do you need from there?” Mark asked incredulously.

“Lisa, Alice, Abby, and I wanted to see if we could find anything we might be able to use.” Jess had that look in her eye that told Mark he was somehow in trouble. But, he wasn’t sure why this time.

“It’s probably not even going to be open.” He disputed.

“Some of the women heard at the Kroger that is going to be open today and tomorrow.”

“Well, maybe tomorrow someone can take you. I promised George and the gardening committee that someone would take them to get seed, and I already asked Gunny to do it.”

“Too bad we don’t have another vehicle.”

Mark realized too late what was happening. “We just can’t waste our money on a vehicle that’s not ours. We have too many other things that we need.” He argued.

“I see, and what good is all that money in the safe going to do us if we can’t even go to buy the things we need because we don’t have enough running vehicles in the neighborhood to go where we need to.” Jess finally showed a little emotion with her argument.

Mark knew that he couldn’t win this without it costing him much more than it was worth, but his pride wouldn’t let him just give up. “But, Babe, that’s a LOT of money!” Just then Mark saw Jim jump and look over at Lisa. He wasn’t sure if she had kicked his friend under the table, but he figured that her legs were just long enough to reach. All she did was just tilt her head slightly toward Mark once she had Jim’s attention.

“Mark, I think that Lisa and I would be willing to pitch in some on Manny’s truck if that would help.” Jim said.

“Yes, Jim. That would help. Thank you both. I guess I’ll go talk to Manny.” Mark wondered if the girls had set this up the night before, or if it was a spur of the moment thing. If it were spontaneous, they sure had been on the same wave length. Maybe women were telepathic. All he knew was, whether it had been a well rehearsed plan or an impromptu one, he had fallen in to it head first.

Mark went outside when he saw Gunny pull into the driveway. George had already gone out to coordinate the tilling. George told him they were going to start with the 5 acre lot that was directly across the street from Mark’s house. They were planning to plant it in corn. Mark asked George who Gunny needed to take for the seed. George called Mary Patterson and Dwight Rittiman over and introduced them to Mark and Gunny as the seed buyers. Gunny needed some gas, so Mark instructed him to the back where the fuel was stored. As they filled up the truck, Mark asked Gunny if he had his shotgun where he could get to it quickly. Gunny assured him that he didn’t need to worry and, once the truck was filled, loaded up his passengers and headed down the road. Jim left in the Jeep to go get Dr. Vasquez about the time Ted came walking up. Mark pulled his FAL and its magazines out from behind the back seat and put a loaded mag into the rifle. He didn’t chamber a round as that would only take a second if he needed to. He put the big rifle in the front seat with the muzzle pointed down at the floor. He thought that the CAR-15 that Jerry had lent him would have been a lot easier to carry because of its size, but they hadn’t checked it to see if it was sighted in correctly, so Mark just stayed with the .308. Mark and Ted got in the big red Ford and drove down to Manny’s house. Ted sat in the truck while Mark went up and knocked on the door. Manny answered and the two men looked under the hood of the big SUV. It was fuel injected and looked like it would need the same parts that Jim had used on his truck. Mark explained that the parts would be expensive, but he was sure that they could get it to run. When Manny asked how expensive and Mark told him, Manny whistled.

“My friend, I do not have that kind of cash. In fact we have spent almost all of the money we had in the house. Will this parts man take a check or a credit card?”

“I doubt it, Manny, not with the power out. But Jim and I can cover you.”

“I can not ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t ask, we offered. We need more vehicles in the subdivision that we can use. This will benefit everyone. And besides that...our wives insisted.”

Manny got a twinkle in his eye. “I see. It is that way at my house at times as well. I wear the pants...but she picks them out.”

“You got that right, buddy.” Mark agreed laughing.

When Manny climbed into the truck, he noticed Mark’s FAL sitting on the front seat. “Do you think I should bring my rifle too?” He asked Mark.

“It couldn’t hurt.” Mark answered and Manny hopped out of the truck and ran back into the house. “Ted we can stop by your house if you’d like to pick up a weapon.”

“I don’t own any guns. I had a .22 when I was growing up, but my wife doesn’t like guns and I never really saw the need to own any.” Ted explained.

When Manny came out of the house with his old .30-30 and climbed into the back seat, the three men headed to town. When they got to the parts store it was closed as Mark had suspected it would be. He pulled out the card with Rodney’s address on it and eased the truck back onto the road. As he made his way through the back streets to Rodney’s house he noticed that people seemed to have a different look about them. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was, but something just felt different. When he got to the parts man’s house he left the truck running with Ted and Manny inside. As he walked up to the front door, it opened and Rodney was holding an old 12 gauge long barreled shotgun.

“Hey, Mark. You need some more parts?”

“Yeah, Rodney, I do. How’s it going?”

“OK, I guess. Someone tried to steal my car the other night, but I scared them off with my shotgun.”

“Really. Is everyone OK?”

“Yeah. I just fired a round into the air and they ran off. But we’ve been keeping a close eye on things since then. Give me a minute, and I’ll follow you back to the store.”

“OK. Thanks.”

Mark climbed back into the truck and a moment later the garage door opened. Mark backed out of the way and Rodney pulled a beautiful black Charger out of the garage. Mark followed him to the store and when they got out, he asked Rodney about it.

“It’s a ’69.” Rodney told him. “I put a 440 in it that I balanced and blueprinted. Plus I spent a lot of money restoring her. She’s a real sweet ride...quick, too. That’s why I didn’t want some scumbag stealing her.”

The men went into the part’s store and bought what they needed. Manny’s parts weren’t quite as expensive as Jim’s had been because they didn’t need to change the intake manifold on the Suburban. Rodney sold them a two barrel carburetor that would just bolt on in place of the throttle body. Mark paid, and they all thanked Rodney. Mark asked if there was anything that they could do for him. He thanked them for the offer and told them that he was doing OK. They loaded up and headed for Jerry’s. When they got there, Mark honked the horn and Jerry ran down to open the gate. Mark asked if he wanted to borrow the truck for the rest of the day. Jerry was elated, but said that they were about to run his mother into the Doctor. He asked if he and Dale could come out to Silver Hills in an hour or so and pick it up. Mark told him that would be fine, but he told Jerry that he needed the truck back by this evening because he planned to pick up a windmill tomorrow. Jerry told him that would not be a problem. He said that they had already brought quite a few of the guns home in their Jeep. Mark reminded him how to get out to his house and the three men headed home.

On the way home the men talked of the things they needed to do, the things they missed with the power out, and their hopes that everything would be OK. Mark filled the other two men in on his plans for the windmill and how he hoped they could run water down to the front of the subdivision so that people who lived there didn’t have to carry water all the way from his house. Manny and Ted both spoke of their plans to put in a garden on their property as well as help with the community ones. Manny’s five kids and three grandkids, plus his father-in-law and his son’s girlfriend, meant that he planned to devote about an acre, or maybe a little more, of his property to gardening. Three of Manny’s kids had already moved out. Two were married and had kids of their own already. His middle son was sharing an apartment in town with his girlfriend. Manny said that his wife was not happy about that, and that when the unmarried couple got to his house she had put them in separate bedrooms. Manny was laughing as he told of the look on his son’s face, but that he was a smart boy and didn’t argue with his mama about it. He told Mark and Ted how his kids had all walked to his house. The married ones lived in La Vernia so it was only a ten or twelve mile walk for them. But the cohabitators had backpacked in from San Antonio. It had taken them two days. Manny was just glad that all of his family was safe and that he had enough room to put them all up, even if some of them were sleeping in the den and the dining room. Ted, on the other hand, only had his wife and son to feed and didn’t plan to plant more than about one quarter of an acre. Mark had not really spent much time thinking about how much of his property he should plant...just what he needed, something else to get done.

As the conversation turned lighter the men talked about what they missed the most. Mark really missed watch sports on TV and going to karate class. Ted said that he missed doing research on the internet and visiting with his fellow professors. Manny said that what he missed the most so far was air conditioning. Mark thought about how lucky they were to have the campers to sleep in. It would really be miserable to have to sleep in the house. He asked Manny and Ted about it and they both said that while the first several days had been miserable, they had started to get used to it. In fact, Ted said, until all of the humidity last night, it had almost been bearable for the last several days. If today was any indication though, tonight would not be a good one. It was only about eleven and it had to be over 90 degrees already. For it not to hit over 100 today would take a miracle.

Mark was thinking about the preacher's house and how it was cooler when the cab of the truck seemed to explode. All of the sudden there was a big hole in the middle of the windshield where the rearview mirror had been. Mark slammed on the brakes only to be greeted by a hammering jolt from the rear. What in the hell was going on? He tried to look in the mirror but it was no longer there. He looked in the side mirror, but couldn't see anything. He turned his head to look out the back and noticed that the back window was gone and most of it seemed to be on Manny. As he looked out the back it was obvious that another truck had hit him. OK, he thought, but what knocked a hole in my windshield. The reality of what was going on hit him like a truck hitting an armadillo on a lonely Texas highway. The truck was the same one that the men beating up the preacher had used to escape and the hole had been caused by a gun shot. Mark's only thought was to get away. He down shifted the truck and put his foot on the floor. It was the first time in ten years that he wished he had a gas motor instead of the diesel. The big motor would push the truck to over 100 miles per hour. Mark had done it once, just to see. But, it took forever to accelerate up to that. Mark looked out his side mirror and saw that the truck that had hit him was just starting to move. Maybe the head start would give him some time. He was in second gear now and approaching 40 MPH.

"Are you guys OK?" He screamed as he shifted the big truck into third.

"What happened?" Ted had a confused look on his face.

"I'm OK." Manny said. He was brushing the glass from the back window off of him. The look on his face told Mark that he knew what was going on.

"It's the guys that beat the preacher up yesterday." Mark explained to Ted. "I guess they want some payback." Mark kicked himself for stupidly chatting away like a schoolgirl and not paying attention to what was going on around him.

"You...you mean they're shooting at us?" Ted stammered.

Mark didn't answer. He was up to 65 now and shifting into fourth. He checked the mirror and while the old International Harvester wasn't gaining on him, the Ford didn't seem to be acquiring the kind of distance that he would have liked for it to, either. Mark's mind raced for a solution. They were probably four or five miles from home. But he couldn't just turn into the subdivision with this rolling cesspool of destruction in tow. Even if they did stop when he got to the entrance, they would know where he lived then. No, there had to be a better solution than that. Think, damn it, THINK, he rebuked himself. He could stop here and fight it out. But there had been eight yesterday, maybe more today, and he only had three. Two really...because Ted would probably not be very useful in a gun fight, and he didn't have a rifle anyway. Hell, he had never been in a gun fight either. How useful would he be? Well the best odds that he could hope for were two and a half; assuming Ted could shoot his .45, to eight. Not too promising. He needed help. If only Gunny and Jim were here. Should haves, could haves, and would haves would do him little good now, he thought. Focus on the problem, he told himself. He looked out the side mirror again. The other truck was starting to gain. They were maybe 75 or 100 yards behind him. Mark saw a man pop up out of the bed of the truck and lean over the cab with some kind of long gun. He saw a muzzle flash and instinctively ducked his head. The shot missed, he guessed, but the closer they got the easier it would be to hit the big red rolling target he was driving.

Mark looked at his passengers. Ted was scrunching down in his seat and Manny was cautiously looking out the back.

“Manny, can you give them something to think about?”

“Will do!” Manny picked his old Marlin and jacked a round into the chamber. He turned around in his seat and stuck the rifle out of the shattered back window. The sound of the 150 grain soft point exiting the barrel barely registered on Mark’s brain. Manny jacked the lever again.

Mark was coming up on a curve and he had to slow the truck down just a little. Once back on the straightaway he put his foot back on the floor. He looked back in the mirror again and saw that the IH had almost lost control in the curve and had to slow down considerably. There was a big curve up the road about a mile. Mark could stop the truck and they could open up on these MZB’s as they came around the curve. But the chance of stopping them all was slim. Plus they would have to use the truck for cover and Mark didn’t want to have his truck all shot up if he could help it. Besides probably only the engine would really stop a bullet. He looked, they were gaining again. Now there were two men leaning across the cab. One of them had a pistol, Mark could see, and it would not be very effective at this range. He was doing almost 75 and the diesel was accelerating very slowly at this speed. Just as he had to slow for the sharp curve he decided not to stop. There had to be a better solution. The sign on the road said to take the curve at 35 but Mark figured he could push it up to maybe 50. He told Manny and Ted to hold on as he braked hard down to 45, put the truck back into third and hit the accelerator. The big truck took the curve like an elephant on a tightrope but it stayed on the road. The driver of the other truck, not wanting to make the same mistake as before, slowed down, made the curve, and started closing the distance again. Mark heard something hit the truck.

“Manny what was that?” Mark yelled.

“They shot the tailgate! It looks like buckshot. Five or six holes. It punctured the tailgate but not the cab, Gracias a Dios. Else I would be a dead man.”

“Shoot some more and get them to back off.!”

“OK, Mark.”

Manny shot at the truck two times and it seemed to have the desired effect. The other truck dropped back to about a hundred yards. That would keep the shotgun and pistol from doing much harm unless the MZB’s got real lucky. But if they had a rifle, it would not keep him and his passengers safe. Manny had stopped shooting again.

“Manny keep shooting!”

“I only brought the bullets in the gun! I don’t want to waste them.”

Great, Mark thought. He knew the Marlin would hold six or seven rounds and that meant Manny had three or four shots left. The MZB’s were starting to close the gap again. Work the problem damnit, he thought. Maybe two miles to the subdivision now. He could stop right in front of the entrance and

then he would have the guards. Plus maybe someone would hear the shooting and come to help. That might even the odds a little. He had to keep the other truck back far enough to make it though. And he needed Manny to have a functioning weapon when they stopped.

“Ted.” Mark said. No answer. He looked at the scholar. Ted looked like he was in some kind of trance. “TED!!!”

“What?”

“Hand my rifle to Manny!”

Ted handed the rifle to Manny and he stuck it out the back window.

“Where’s the safety?!” Manny cried.

“It’s under your right thumb...push it down!”

CLICK!

It was the loudest sound Mark had ever heard. There was no round in the chamber.

“Manny! On the left side of the receiver...there’s a round silver handle. Pull it all the way back and let it go.”

Manny did as he was told and then put the rifle, that no less than 93 countries had used some variation of as their main battle rifle, out of the window.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Manny must have hit the International Harvester because it slammed on the brakes. A second later it was accelerating again. Half a mile to go, Mark thought. He could see the subdivision sign and the guards. He wondered who they were. He hoped they were good shots and wouldn’t panic. This was turning into what Gunny had called a real jackpot. Mark heard a bullet hit the truck.

BAM! BAM! Manny fired back.

Mark’s brain raced. If he stopped right by the guards would they figure out what was going on quick enough to help him? Or, would they just get shot before they could figure it out? No, he couldn’t just stop there. But he needed their help.

“Please, God, tell me what to do!” Mark prayed.

Mark didn’t know if was truly divine inspiration, the fact that he let his brain switch gears for a second, or coincidence. But, suddenly he knew what to do. He would drive past the guards and stop once the MZB’s were about 100 yards past too. That way the guards could put them in a cross fire. He checked his mirror. The truck was about 150 yards behind him.

“Get ready guys! I’m going to stop once we past the ‘Silver Hills’ sign!”

Mark roared past the entrance blaring his horn. He recognized the two men on guard duty. One of them was Scott Simmons, but he could not remember the other’s name. When they were almost even with the eastern edge of the subdivision, Mark slammed on the brakes and eased the truck into the shallow ditch. Once the truck had come to almost a complete stop Manny began rapid firing at the quickly approaching old truck. Mark undid his seatbelt, turned around, and leaned out of the side window with his .45 in his hand. Ted had sunk down to the floor. Just as Mark lined up the sights on the truck the windshield exploded from a .308 round out of the FAL. The truck skidded to a halt, sideways in the road, about 75 yards from Mark, Manny, and Ted. Mark saw that most of the men in the IH had pistols and a couple of shotguns. At this range the pistols would be of little use unless somebody was really good or really lucky. He knew he wasn’t that good and prayed that none of the MZB’s were either. Luck could go either way. Then he saw an AK stick out of the driver’s window. ‘YOU BIG TROUBLE!’ was one of Mark’s three year old nephew’s favorite things to say and it sure applied to that ugly rifle with the big banana clip. Mark concentrated his fire on the driver’s window. Manny was yelling something, but Mark couldn’t make it out. It only took a few seconds for him to empty his magazine and the way he was leaning out of the window he couldn’t reach the spares on his left hip. He pulled his upper body back into the truck to reload. Manny was struggling with a fresh magazine for the FAL that he must have reached over the front seat to get. Rounds were beginning to impact the truck with some regularity. Mark sunk down in his seat and yelled at Manny to rock the magazine into the rifle front to back. A second later he heard the big rifle bark. With a fresh mag in his Colt, he looked out the window again. The FAL had made the MZB’s duck their heads and they were firing blindly, so the impacts to the truck became almost nonexistent. The muzzle of the AK was sending out its deadly projectiles with flashes that looked like a Morse code message. Mark again opened up on the driver’s window. This time he tried to use a little more fire discipline and when he saw a puff of dust just below the door, he raised his point of aim about three feet. As he was squeezing the trigger, he saw the AK fall out of the truck. Then he heard the smack. It was the same sound he heard when he knew he had made a good shot on a deer or a hog. A micro second after that, he heard the supersonic crack of a hunting rifle. It was the guards. The firing from the MZB’s slowed as they tried to figure out what had happened. Then they turned all of their attention to their new found threat. Mark looked around and saw a mound of dirt about three feet high that was just inside the decorative fence to the subdivision. It must have been dirt that they pushed up to put in the barb wire fence. If he, Manny, and Ted could get behind it, it would give them some real cover and a better angle on the MZB’s. Mark yelled at Manny and Ted to get ready to bail out the passenger side and run for the mound. They both answered affirmatively and Manny told Ted to take his .30-30 as it came over the seat. Mark looked out the window and the MZB’s were still looking back at the guards.

“GO!”

Both doors flew open and Manny and Ted were running for the mound. Mark holstered his pistol, grabbed the three remaining FAL mags, and slid across the seat and out of the door. Manny and Ted were both to the short wooden fence and the slowed to step over it and then dove behind the dirt pile. As Mark was almost there, one of the MZB’s saw him running and turned his pistol toward them and the others followed suit. Mark jumped the fence in stride and slid feet first like he was trying to beat a short throw to third base. Bullets began to hit the dirt in front of them with sickening thumps. Mark

heard the crack of one of the guards' rifles again and a MZB fell out of the back of the truck like a rag doll that had been tossed out of a high rise. The others jumped out of the bed and hid behind it on Mark's side looking and firing back at the guards. Manny pushed the big black rifle at Mark and when he took it Manny grabbed his rifle from Ted. Mark didn't know how many rounds the FAL had in it so he pulled out the old mag and inserted a fresh one.

"Ready?" Manny asked.

"Let's rock!" Mark answered.

They popped up and fired. Manny shot once and Mark shot twice. Mark saw two men fall as he was ducking back down. The MZB's that were still on their feet all dropped their weapons and put their hands in the air at the same time like they had a collective conscious. When Mark saw this he popped up and covered the sky grabbers. The guards must have seen it too, because they stopped firing. Mark looked and Manny was standing right beside him.

"You all take 5 steps toward me and then lay down on the road." Mark called to the MZB's. The six men did as they were told just like they had been practicing that particular move all of their lives. Mark and Manny came around the dirt pile and slowly approached the truck. Mark could see that the guards were cautiously closing in as well. A few men were now running down the main road of the neighborhood toward the entrance with rifles. When they got to the truck, Mark told Manny to cover the men who were lying down while he checked the truck. Two men were obviously dead next to the truck and the third was holding his calf and rocking back and forth. Mark slung his rifle over his shoulder and pulled out his pistol to cover the man. He looked in the bed of the truck and seeing that it was empty, he picked all of the MZB weapons off of the asphalt and threw them into the back. He then looked in the cab. It looked like a five gallon can of red paint had exploded. The driver was lying over in the seat and most of the left side of his head was gone. The passenger was holding the right side of his stomach and a dark red oozed out from between his fingers. Mark could see a sawed off double barrel shotgun lying on the floor board next to the bleeding man. He slowly walked around the truck, careful to cover the unfortunate attacker with his .45, opened the door and retrieved the gun that was covered in a sticky goo. Mark just stared at the man and started to shake. By then the guards had gotten to the truck.

"Are you OK?" Scott asked.

"Yeah...I think so. Can you help Manny cover the guys on the other side of the truck?"

Scott nodded and the other guard put his hand on Mark's shoulder and gently pulled him back from the truck. Mark looked at the man and still couldn't remember his name. He did recognize that the man's rifle was a Weatherby Accumark though. Probably a .300 Weatherby, Mark thought. That would explain the hamburger that the dead men had been turned into.

"Can you cover this guy?" Mark asked the guard.

"Sure thing, Mark."

Mark could see more and more residents being drawn to the MZB truck as if it were a black hole and they were meteors passing through its gravitational pull. The closer they got the faster they moved. Mark walked toward the ditch. When he got there, what seemed like a year's worth of biscuits and gravy was expelled from his stomach with the force of an Apollo rocket.