

Just Another Day

Chapter 1 February 2006

"Mom? I have to go milk and Joseph (18 months) is awake, you need to get up."

"Ok sweetheart, I'll be right there." 'Lisa is incredibly sweet to let me sleep in right now' thought Susan.

Pregnant at 37 was not the same as pregnant at 27. Not that Susan was complaining, too many of her friends suffered from infertility. She was grateful that God had been so gracious to her and Robert. This would be their tenth child on Earth if all went well. They had two more with God; Susan had miscarried twice in between Lisa and Beth. Of course having 3 babies in as many years had probably contributed to her feeling tired all the time. Most women have more space in between babies not less as they get older. Susan occasionally wondered about that, but didn't tend to dwell on it.

6:45 am is what the clock in the dining room said when Susan came out to get breakfast going. Robert had started both the woodstoves and made coffee before he went to work, so the house was warm and the coffee was hot. A great start to the day, as Susan was definitely not a morning person, unlike Robert and their 13 year old daughter Lisa.

"I already changed Joseph for you mom, he was just wet."

"Ok thanks honey, I'll get his breakfast, you need to get out to the barn to milk. And thanks very much for letting me sleep in, I'm a little more tired than usual."

"No problem mom, you always get tired about 8 weeks out and the baby is due in 6."

Lisa gave Susan a hug, picked up the milk pail and headed out for morning chores. Susan smiled, sighed and started her day. She put the baby in his chair and got him his breakfast, started water in a pot for oatmeal and in the kettle for hot chocolate, and then went to check on Dad.

Robert's dad Bob Sr had lived with them since Mom died in 2000. Up till this summer he had been much more of a blessing to them than they had been to him, reading to the grandchildren and generally being a tremendous help around the homestead. He couldn't drive because the shrapnel in his brain gave him seizures, only one eye worked and that not very well, but it didn't slow him down much. He had been wounded on Okinawa in WWII and even though the scars on his face were very visible, the love in his heart was even more visible to the children. Unlike most children, they didn't tend to be afraid of people with disfiguring wounds or illnesses, since they were used to their Grandpa.

Which is what made the diagnosis so much more difficult for everyone. Robert had taken Dad to the VA

for his annual check up in July, just before he turned 81. During the regular mental profile the doctor had noticed signs of a decline. Further tests revealed what everyone worried about the most. Just like 3 of his seven brothers, Dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. At first it had been very hard to even discuss, and Dad never was told, since Robert and Susan both knew it was his worst fear, that he would become a burden on them. They never saw it that way and neither did any of the kids, but try convincing an 81 year old man of that. As the summer wore on they started noticing little things, but were very careful to try and let Dad do everything he could do so as not to speed up the decline. He had another appointment in October and the doctor was pleasantly surprised at how minimal the decline was. His theory was that the stimulation of interacting with the grandchildren was helping slow the progression of the disease.

Then in November Dad had gotten pneumonia and had to be hospitalized for several days. Robert, Susan and their oldest son Julien 18, had taken turns staying with him so he was never left alone, but the break in his routine caused a rapid decline over the next month or so. He was much more forgetful and they had to be very watchful around the propane stove, he would turn it on and forget it was on. This was fine if the pilot lit, but they all got used to sniffing for that rotten vegetable smell.....

Still all things being equal, it wasn't bad. The good days far outnumbered the bad and although Susan knew that would change she was hopeful that they could care for Dad at home for a long time to come yet. Dad was still asleep, so Susan went to the bottom of the stairs to call the rest of the children.

"Julien, Renee, Beth, its 7:15, time to get up." A variety of groans returned her greeting. "Come on guys I know, I'm sleepy too, but we need to get the day going."

"Ok mom be right down". One of the girls, Susan wasn't sure which called back.

Susan knew in about five minutes one of the girls or both would be down, but that Julien would require at least a second call, like her he was not a morning person. Susan finished her coffee and debated having a second cup but knew that the children would squeal and tell the midwife on her next visit. If the midwife had her preference, Susan wouldn't even have the one, but for the sake of the children in the house, the midwife let it go. Susan was quite unpleasant without that one cup of caffeine to get her day going. Besides one cup wasn't really going to do any damage.

The girls came down together, looking sleepy but not particularly cranky. Susan wished them both good morning and said "there's still some coffee on Renee, and Beth the water is just about hot for your chocolate. (Beth at 8 was a bit young for coffee.) I'm going to run in and get dressed, please let me know if the water boils for the oatmeal ok?"

"Kay mom."

When Susan came back out, they were both sitting at the table and Renee 15, had already gone out for the paper, she was reading the funnies. Susan went into the kitchen and sure enough the water was

boiling merrily away. Ah well, no one said she was perfect either. She finished the oatmeal and dished the girls up, just in time to see Jaicob 6, Patrick 5, Anne 4, and Rachel 3 coming down the stairs. "Good morning Mommy" they chorused.

"Good morning my dumplings, how did you sleep?"

"Good, I'm hungry, I hafta go potty, I had an accident Mommy". Trying to sort out who said what was a good brain building activity. Renee got up and took charge of Patrick (I had an accident) and Beth went in with Anne (I hafta go potty.) Jaicob (I'm hungry) was handed a bowl of oatmeal and told to start on that while Susan changed Rachel's diaper. Thank God that Anne had recently potty trained, three in diapers was challenging enough, she didn't want four at a time again, and when the new baby was born there would still be three.

7:30 am. Lisa came back in and reported that all the animals were fed and watered and she just had to strain the milk. Renee took over feeding the rest of the children breakfast while Susan headed upstairs to wake her firstborn. She knocked on his door, and was rewarded (if you want to call it that) with a groan. She opened the door and spoke to the pile of blankets on the bed.

"Son, its 7:30 and I'm almost out of wood for the stoves and you have to leave for work in 45 minutes."

"I know, I know, I'll be up in a minute."

"Julien I have heard that song before, and while I sympathize, you need to get up NOW. I do not appreciate having to haul my wide pregnant fanny up here to roll you out of the bed. You're the oldest you should be setting an example for the littles. And your sisters have schoolwork I don't want them having to do your wood hauling because you stayed in bed until five minutes before you have to go pick up the Amish crew. So get up."

"Fine, I'm up I'm up. Man being the oldest sucks."

"Please don't use that word, it sounds vulgar. And yes sometimes it does stink being the oldest. I am too you know."

"Yeah I know. And I didn't use 'that word' around the littles, for crying out loud Mom, I hate living with the language police."

"Well, it's much easier not to get into the habit of vulgarity to begin with and then you don't have to worry about who's around right?"

"Yes, alright you've made your point; can you leave now so I can get dressed?" "Please?"

"Sure, 5 minutes son, then I send the littles up."

Susan smiled and left the room. Julien HATED it when the littles pounced. He loved them and all, and they practically worshipped him, but not first thing in the morning, especially before coffee. That was downright unfair.

Perhaps she should lay off the language thing, Susan thought to herself. After all he was 18 and simply trying to find his place. He was a great young man in most respects and had no particular vices except for a love of coffee and the desire to solve his friends problems. Which was probably what he had been doing at 3 in the morning when he was still up on the internet.

Dad was up when she got downstairs. Today was a good day. He recognized everyone and knew where he was. She got him breakfast, his medications, and settled him down with his paper. Renee and Lisa had things well in hand with getting everyone up and dressed so Susan decided to spend a couple of minutes reading the paper online.....

8:00 am 'Well, no news is good news' Susan turned off the computer, and went into the dining room. "School time guys."

Everyone settled down with their books and the littles were put in front of a book on computer so Susan could work with the grade schoolers. Julien came in about 8:30 with several boxes of wood, enough to take them through the rest of the day until Robert came home. Susan thanked him and got no response. 'He's probably ticked at me for nagging him first thing in the morning.' She left it alone; he would snap out of it, he always did.

8:45 am. "Mom, I need to go get the guys, I'm taking the van."

"OK, what time will you be home?"

"I'm not sure; it depends on how much work this guy needs done on his barn."

"Well should I plan on you for supper?"

"Oh yeah, we won't be that late. I love you Mommy, bye."

Yep, he was definitely over his snit and felt bad about it. He tended to call her Mommy when he was apologetic.

"Have a good day Son."

He waved and left as the phone started to ring.....

"Hello?"

“Hello Beloved, how is your day going?”

“Pretty good, we got school started on time for a change. How are things on your end?”

“Traffic was heavy I got in about 7:45 so I’ll be a bit late tonight.”

“That’s ok, I can hold dinner.”

“What are we having?”

“Not sure something with beef in it, that’s what I got out to thaw.”

“Hold on honey they’re making an announcement over the speaker system.....”

“OH MY GOD!!!! Susan, is Julien still home?”

“No, he just left, why, what’s wrong?”

“Susan this is very important. Try and get Julien on the cell phone NOW. Tell him to come home ASAP. Somebody is nuking the country and we have three headed our way, they just told us all to go home.” I’m going to try and get out before it hits, my cell will probably be dead soon, get Julien back home and get the basement ready I’ll be there just as soon as I can.”

9:00 am The phone went dead in her hand.

‘OK, OK, be calm, you are the grown up here. Robert was running and talking so he’s probably in his car already. He said to call Julien, I’ll do that next.’

Susan reached Julien on the third ring. He had heard it on NPR and was already headed back home. Could she please call the Amish guy’s neighbor so he could let them know?

“Sure honey no problem, please hurry.” She placed a quick call to the neighbor and he said he’d pass the message on. Ok, that was done. Julien pulled into the drive just as she hung up the phone, he had probably not gotten that far before he turned around.

“Renee, Lisa, come here please. Beth, please keep track of the littles for just a minute.”

The girls walked into the living room, and Julien walked in about that same time.

“Girls, your Dad just called, someone is dropping nuclear weapons on certain cities and we are in the fallout zone.” He is on the way home but we need to get the basement ready for us to shelter in. Julien go get the buckets and start filling them with dirt. I know it will be hard but do the best you can. Lisa,

you put all the animals in the barn and then give your brother a hand. Make sure all the water troughs are full and that they have plenty of hay and feed.”

Renee, you take Beth and Jaicob and get all of bedding and the canned food from the pantry into the basement, and I will take care of filling the extra water buckets and getting the littles and Grandpa ready.” I’m not sure how much time we have, but let’s try and have this done in about two hours, by which time Dad will be home and we can finish.

“Mom, will Dad be able to get out in time?”

“I don’t know Renee, but let’s make the assumption that he will. I’ll turn the radio on so we can hear any news, but let’s get going.”

“MOM!!!!”

“What Lisa?”

“Can we say a prayer for Daddy?”

“Sure sweetheart that’s a great idea, we always have time for that.”

They bowed their heads and asked God to get Robert home safely, and to help them prepare adequately. Then they asked the Blessed Mother and Saint Joseph to intercede for their family that they get through this ok. Finally Lisa asked Saint Christopher to help Daddy get home safe.

They all felt just a bit better and went about doing their respective tasks. Susan could tell that Renee and especially Lisa were terrified about their father, well, so was she if anyone was asking, but she also knew that she needed to do her job right now, and freak out later. Julien had the same temperament as she did and was reacting about the same. She’d have to watch that, he internalized a lot, which was not always healthy.

11:30am “Ok, that’s about everything, except the buckets. Julien is there any way you could speed that up?”

“Nope. The ground is frozen and I’m having a really hard time getting anything.”

“OK, plan B. This is going to be gross, and I apologize in advance. Fill the buckets from the compost piles and the manure piles and put lids on them. They’ll stink a little, but we need those buckets filled.”

“OK, Lisa go get some gloves though, we don’t have to stink too.”

Lisa ran into the house and Julien asked Susan, “Mom, shouldn’t dad be here by now?”

“Yes, honey he should but please don’t mention it to the girls, I’m sure it’s just traffic holding him up.” Your father knows six different ways from here to there so it may take him a bit longer but he will get home.”

“Yeah, I know, but Lisa is really starting to lose it Mom.”

“Thanks for telling me honey, please keep an eye on her and I’ll talk to her as soon as I can. I’ve got to get back in and help Renee, Grandpa is a bit confused by the break in routine.”

Susan went back inside and listened for a minute to the radio. The reports were saying that one of the devices had been shot down but two more were headed for downtown. That was far south of the area where her husband worked. ‘Please God, let him have gotten out on time.’ Robert was late, but she wasn’t going to get worried for at least another hour. Nothing had hit yet.

“Renee, where’s Grandpa?”

“He’s in his room, packing up his National Geographics.”

“HUH?”

“He said we’d need something to read to pass the time in the shelter.”

“Well, ok, I guess. At least Grandpa can feel like he’s helping, but I’ll try and get your brother to carry them down for him. What’s he packing them in?”

“The big Rubbermaid tubs Mom. I tried to talk him into something smaller but he got mad.”

“That’s ok sweetheart, I’ll talk to your brother. The radio says we have about 6 more hours before we have to go to the shelter so I’m going to try and get the gardens tarped. Will you be alright in here with all the littles or should I wait?”

“Mom, how about if Beth and Lisa and I tarp the gardens and you stay in here?” You really shouldn’t be lifting right now anyway, and Grandpa listens to you better.”

“Ok honey, but Julien might need Lisa’s help still.”

Renee hesitated and then asked, “Mom, shouldn’t Dad be home by now?”

“Well, honey, it’s only 11:45. I’m assuming he left at 9 and I’m also assuming that traffic is terrible. So let’s not start to worry just yet.”

“Could you try and call him?”

“Sure honey I’ll try, but the phone might not be working.”

“Yeah I know, but try anyway.”

Susan dialed the phone and it rang and rang and rang until it clicked over into voice mail.

“Sorry honey he didn’t answer, the phones are probably out.”

“OK Mom, I’ll just keep praying.”

“Me too.”

Renee and Beth went out to start tarping the gardens and Susan continued to pack clothes for them to take downstairs. The news continued to be bad, but at least it was still on. 15 nuclear devices had hit the country. Fortunately for Susan they hadn’t hit all the major cities and so some of the networks were able to continue broadcasting. The entire state of California was completely gone, as was New York City. Chicago, Boston, Detroit and Washington D.C. had been hit by at least one device each that could be confirmed. 4 of the nukes had hit in California alone. There were several more still inbound, the military was trying to shoot them down. It was kind of weird, Susan thought, that most of the cities targeted were the really big ones with lots of people, but there were also middle of nowhere places like Kansas and Iowa that were on the hit list. Then she remembered that most of the food grown for the cities came from those states, and it made much more sense. She also remembered that if an EMP went off over Kansas it would take out much of the country’s electrical grid...

12:30pm The phone rang.....

Startling Susan. She had just finished, getting some lunch for everyone and Julien was hauling the indoor supplies down to the basement. The little camp stove was already down there with a lot of propane so at least they would have hot food. They also had every blanket in the house, and Grandpa’s magazines. The boxes of earth and manure would be stacked on the floor above the shelter. The basement was 3 feet of concrete all underground and had no windows, just an access door. They had stacked boxes of dirt on the stairs the previous autumn to provide some insulation. Susan was very glad of that, one less thing to deal with.

“Hello?”

“Hey kid. How’s it going?”

It was Susan’s Dad Charles. “I’m fine Daddy, where are you?”

“Your mother and I are just getting off the turnpike, we’ll be there in about 20 minutes. Is Robert home yet?”

“No, although he was on his way when he called at 9:00. Have you heard from the other kids yet?”

“We have your sister Trina in the car with us and her three kids, and your brother Pat is behind us with Kim and their daughter.” Amy was waiting for Ron to get home and then they’ll be on their way, they probably are already.”

“OK Daddy, can I talk to Mom for a minute?”

“No, she’s trying to calm Trina down but I’ll tell her to pray for Robert. That is what you were going to ask right?”

“Yes it was, thanks.”

“I love you kid we’ll see you soon.”

Susan hung up the phone. Her Dad had left the church before she was born, but he had never made fun of her or anyone else for their faith. That along with his genuine goodness, gave her hope that he still believed and might come back to the practice of his faith.

Well, at least she wouldn’t be the only grown-up at home anymore. Julien had finished carrying things downstairs and asked what he should do next. Susan told him to start placing the boxes of dirt over the top of the basement area they were going to be sheltering in. Renee came out of the bedroom with the chamber pot.

“Mom, we don’t have enough bags for two weeks. We forgot to buy some the last time we went to the grocery.”

“Ok, we’ll just have to use the bigger ones when we run out, if Grandpa doesn’t have any with him.”

Just then a car pulled up. It was Robert. The car looked a lot more beat up than usual, and Robert wasn’t by himself. Susan didn’t recognize the guy in the car with him, and neither did Julien. They both acted instinctively and grabbed a rifle. Susan had the .270 and Julien took his Dad’s .308.

Robert didn’t move and neither did his passenger. They seemed to be talking but Susan’s trouble radar was redlining. She covered him from the house and Julien started to walk toward his father’s car.

Both men got out and turned around. Robert called for Susan.

Julien ran back into the house and covered the strange man. Susan went outside. Robert hadn’t seen

Julien, but he did see Susan walking towards him with the .270 trained on the man he was with.

“Honey you can put the gun down.”

“Who is that, and are you ok?”

Robert could see that Susan was really upset. ‘The woman is mad, what have I done?’ He thought. Then he realized that Susan was actually terrified.

“This is Greg from work honey. His car wouldn’t start and he lives in downtown. He had nowhere else to go and I wasn’t about to leave him there. And I’m fine. We had a little fender bender on the way home, but nothing serious and we both just drove away from it. Have any devices actually hit yet?”

“Yes. The radio said that about 15 devices had already hit but I don’t know what size they were. They may have given that out in a later broadcast, but I have been trying to get the basement set up and haven’t been listening.”

“Ok. Let’s go in and listen, the radio signal in my car isn’t that great, and I couldn’t get a clear channel. Has your family called yet?”

“Yes they are all on the way, and should be here soon. I hope they get here before EMP takes out the cars. In the report I heard Kansas was one of the targets, and an EMP over Kansas would pretty much zap the entire country.”

“Are the radios protected?”

“Yes they’re all in faraday boxes in the basement already.”

The men both started walking towards the house. Susan and Julien had put the guns down but not back in the basement with the rest of the firearms. They would take them down when they went. Robert walked up to Susan and put his arms around her. “we’re ok honey, I’m home. Susan started to shake, and then she started to cry.

“Thank you God, Thank you God” she kept repeating. The older children were also crying, especially the girls but even Julien had tears in his eyes, and they all hugged whatever part of Robert they could reach. The littler children were happy to see Daddy but confused about the crying as was Bob Sr.

Susan collected herself first and apologized saying, “Sorry guys, the hormones took over for a minute.” That’s what she always said when she got overly emotional and it broke the tension. Everybody except Greg (who didn’t quite get the joke) laughed. “Hello Greg it’s nice to finally meet you in person. Robert has told me all about you.”

"It's nice to meet you as well ma'am, but I wish the circumstances were better."

"So do I and call me Susan. Don't call me ma'am, I work for a living." Susan had spent some years in the ARNG and had picked up that joke along the way. It was a VERY old joke but it had the desired effect. Greg laughed and seemed to relax a bit.

"Ok, what do we have left to do?" Robert asked.

"Everything is pretty much done except that the rest of the gardens need to be tarped, and we don't have enough buckets of dirt so we need to move the books and all the heavy furniture. We don't have clothes for Greg either, and my family will be here any minute. It's going to be a mite crowded. Right now we're at 28 souls including the baby." Susan patted her belly.

"That's ok it will be warmer too." Kids, you get back to whatever your mom had you doing I'll be out to help in a minute.

"What are we going to do for clothes for Greg?" We can't do laundry in the shelter and he is going to hate wearing the same thing for two weeks straight."

Greg replied, "That's true, but it beats the alternative. Thank you so much for taking me in at all."

Susan laughed, "I hadn't thought of it that way. You are most welcome and I'll see if we can't at least come up with sweat pants or something for you."

"Ma'am I do have my BOB with me, I keep it in the car at all times. I'm a little low on water, but I have some food and a couple of changes of clothes and a sleeping bag."

"Do you have a gun?" Susan asked.

Greg hesitated and then pulled out a .45.

"We aren't supposed to have these at work because of the rules but I just couldn't see being completely defenseless."

"Don't worry about it, Robert carries a .380 and I'll never tell your boss." Susan smiled and Greg smiled back.

"I don't know if that matters anymore ma'am, uh Susan."

Just then two cars pulled in. Robert said "Honey your folks are here. I'm going out to help them bring stuff in."

Greg volunteered to help as well, and shortly the basement was quite full. They had stacked everything they needed right away in the basement and everything else either on the stairs or on the floor above as additional protection. It wasn't perfect Susan knew, but it was better than nothing.

3:30 pm: They had gotten everything ready and were monitoring the meters and listening to the news. There were still a few EBS stations on, they must have been protected from the EMP blast, that Susan was sure had happened over Kansas. The second wave of bombs had started making impact around 1:30. Amy and Ron had gotten to the house about 1:45, walking. The car had stopped about 5 houses down from Robert and Susan's place, so they had left all of the gear in their van, figuring they could get help bringing it back. There was still no detectable radiation on the meters which is why Susan figured that there must have been a high altitude EMP detonation. They took the two wagons and Ron took Julien and Pat and went for their stuff. There were, in addition to the two suitcases of clothes, all of Ron's fishing and hunting gear. There was a little food, but not much and several cases of bottled water. They made it back to the house in two trips.

4:45p.m. The news reports were quite garbled so no one was sure about what the true situation was. Large sections of the country were completely incommunicado. Supposedly, the surviving members of Congress along with the Vice President were in the mountain. There were about 15 members of Congress that made it, everyone else was caught in the blast that hit D.C. as was the President. The local reporter said that it wasn't clear which members of Congress had made it. None of the Supreme Court Justices had made it, the entire judicial branch of the federal government was completely gone. Hopefully they could get a list when the VP, now the President addressed what was left of the Nation at 5:00 pm.

'At least everyone is here' Susan thought. Trina was still in hysterics, if she didn't calm down pretty soon Susan was going to sedate her with a rolling pin or something. The carrying on was getting on her last nerve. Well at least it wasn't unexpected, Trina never performed well in a crisis.

Susan's Mom, Anne, was still trying to get Trina to calm down and all of the children were in the family room playing. Thank God they were entertained, at least for now. They had a back up generator, it had also been in a faraday cage, but didn't want to use it until they absolutely had to. They didn't have a whole lot of gas, about 115 gallons between everyone's car tank and the 20 gallons in gas cans in the garage. Susan's Dad had stopped and filled everyone's car just before getting to Susan's house, but everyone in the county had the same idea and most of the stations were running out of gas or had run out. When Amy and Ron came through, that same station was out so they didn't have a lot left in their tank. They didn't plan on any long distance travel anyway so hopefully it would be enough to keep the well pump going when there wasn't enough rainfall. That was another thing to add to her mental list, they were going to have to set up a rain collection system of some sort. Maybe they could use the trash cans and definitely some Rubbermaid tubs.....

Susan wasn't really paying attention until her father addressed her directly.

“SUSAN!!! Come back into the room would you?”

“Sorry Dad, my mind was wandering a bit.”

“That’s ok you’ve had a busy morning, but we need the skinny on the fallout. How bad will it get, how long will it last, etc...”

Susan was the most knowledgeable person in the room NBC had been her MOS in the Guard. She had enlisted at 18 and stayed in for 6 years. This didn’t make her an expert by any stretch but she knew the most of the people in the room, especially since she was the family tinfoil hat member (not really but she had more time to read up on things.) and tried to keep current.

“Well, it really depends on what hit west of here and how big the bombs were. I’m hoping the radio will stay on long enough to get an idea of the situation, but honestly, I’m planning for two weeks in the shelter minimum and then we’ll see. It might be less if the meters go down, but I would plan on two weeks.”

“TWO WEEKS!!!! Are you kidding me? We all have to stay in the basement for two weeks? Susan, there are 27 people here. We can’t all stay in the basement for 2 weeks.”

“Pat, I never said this would be a resort vacation, I’m sorry I won’t have heated towels for you. Dad asked me a question and I answered it. If you want to take your chances with the radiation be my guest. I would rather be uncomfortable for a little while than VERY DEAD!!!”

“Susan, calm down that isn’t good for the baby. You are under enough stress as it is.” Robert put his hand on Susan’s. Then he turned to Pat.

Pat, let’s clear something up right now. We prepared, and you didn’t. You in fact made fun of us for worrying about it. Now that something HAS happened the first place you come is here. Now you’re second guessing everything we are saying because you don’t LIKE the situation. Tough ****. This isn’t a democracy and we aren’t voting. You either shelter in the basement or you don’t, but Susan and I are making the decisions here. If we want your input we’ll ask for it.” And one more thing.....Don’t you EVER raise your voice to my wife again got it?”

The entire room stared at Robert in total surprise. He hadn’t raised his voice, but something in his tone, along with the fact that he had used a vulgarity, let everyone know that he was deadly serious. This was so unlike his usual diplomatic self, that it produced immediate results. Pat muttered an apology and sat down.

“Thank you” Robert said. “Now as Susan said we will probably be down there for two weeks. That being the case there are some very mundane things we need to worry about. The basement is already crowded without us storing our waste products too, so all the men will have to take turns taking the

trash out. We don't have hazmat suits so I don't want anyone to carry the waste very far. It will be bagged so just put it on one of the buckets already up there. If nothing else it will be additional protection. We do have some face filters but not very good ones so be as quick as you can. Bob Sr. is of course exempt but all the other men need to take their turn."

"Why just the men?" Or do you think women are inferior?" Trina had come in for the last part of Robert's speech and as the family feminist she was ready to fight for her "rights".

"Well Trina if you want to take a turn taking a bag filled with everyone's poop out into the radiation zone I wouldn't stop you." Susan would have to get a towel to wipe up the sarcasm she spilled on the floor with that remark. Trina blushed and sat down. She didn't say anymore but she didn't apologize either.

Robert was always a gentleman to Trina (well to any woman for that matter) and Trina was always rude to Robert. She couldn't understand how Susan could put up with such a Neanderthal for a husband. Of course the "men" that Trina dated liked to knock her around but at least they treated her as an 'equal'.

She just couldn't understand the concept that 'equal' didn't mean 'same'. Both Susan and Anne had tried to explain it to her, but she thought that because Robert was the breadwinner, took out the trash and did the butchering that he was oppressing Susan and keeping her barefoot and pregnant.....of course Trina didn't understand the whole "open to life" concept either. All three of her 'surprise' children were by different fathers and she hadn't married any of the men. Well at least she hadn't aborted the babies.....

Susan sighed. It was going to be a LONG two weeks, but it was also a great opportunity for Trina to see true equality up close and personal. Hopefully Trina would get a clue.

5:00 pm "My fellow Americans. It is with great sadness and anger that I address you as your commander in chief this evening. As you have by now heard, the President, the entire Supreme Court and most of Congress, died in the blast that struck Washington D.C. With me here I have the few that weren't in D.C. when the bomb struck as they were either traveling or in their home states. Congress currently has about 6 members. Dr. Ron Paul and John Dingall are the remaining members of the US House of Representatives. Representing the Senate are Rick Santorum, Hillary Clinton, John McCain, John Kerry, . I am currently the sole surviving member of the executive branch that is here. The Secretary of State is on her way here but has not yet arrived. Until we get a firm grip on what is happening, I have the following directives. Go to your basement or nearest shelter underground. If you must leave home, please try and take food and water with you. All the churches have opened their doors as have the schools, but if you can stay home safely you are better off doing so. As you by now know, the entire eastern grid has been knocked out by EMP. We are broadcasting from our shelter, and will try and get updates from those areas that still have a functioning grid. If you can hear this broadcast, please understand that we will do everything we can to help everyone we can, but that for the most part you will have to care for yourselves for the next little while.

“To the criminal element I have the following message. All crimes against persons will be considered capitol crimes during this crisis. I have just deputized the entire nation and all citizens in all states have the right to protect themselves and their families. All gun laws are hereby suspended for the duration of this crisis and no law-abiding citizen will be prosecuted for having “illegal” firearms. I have great confidence in the citizens of this nation and I firmly believe that with the help of God we will emerge from this crisis stronger and more unified as a nation. This is not a weapons free declaration but you do have the right as well as the responsibility to protect yourself and your family. I am simply acknowledging that the federal government recognizes that right, not that we have the power to confer it.

Please keep listening to your local emergency broadcast station they can give you updates on fallout activity and how long you will need to shelter. I wish I could send emergency workers out, but that will not be possible for several days or possibly weeks. To any store owners out there, please give people what they need to survive keep track, and the government will do it’s best reimburse you later. Neighbors help each other, let’s get as many people through this as we can.”

“Finally, to all believer’s please ask God for strength and pray for me and the members of Congress that we will do right by this nation. Thank you, God Bless, you all and God Bless America.”

“Well I’ll be. That was the most coherent speech I’ve ever heard come out of a politician.” Said Charles.

Daddy, shhh, they’re saying something about the radiation.....”

“If you live in the following counties take shelter immediately, James, Hillside.....”

“That’s us, everyone hit the basement, now.”

They got the kids and went down to the basement. Robert, Greg and Charles moved the boxes in behind themselves to provide some protection. All of the gear was stacked around the perimeter and the bedding was in the middle. There were two chairs, both easy chairs. One was Bob Sr’s, they settled him down with a blanket and a book. Everyone agreed to give Susan the other chair. Susan was most grateful. Right now she just wanted to sleep. Renee and Lisa had brought books with them and so had Julien. There were several children’s games and storybooks to entertain the younger children and Amy was reading a story. The men were sitting around making plans and talking about man things, and Trina was crying to her mother again. Susan grabbed a sleeping bag and covered up with it. It was chilly in the basement but not freezing and with all the body heat it was warming up rather quickly. Susan drifted off to sleep thinking about how grateful she was that her family had all gotten to safety, including her brat sister.....

Chapter 2: In the Basement.....

“Susan”. “Susan honey you need to wake up.” Robert gently shook his wife.

“What YAWN..... what time is it?”

“About 8:30. I wouldn’t have woken you but I need some help here.”

“That’s ok, I wouldn’t have slept tonight if I slept much longer....not that it matters, but I don’t want the children’s time clocks all messed up. What do you need?”

“Well, I’m not really sure what’s going on with the meter, it isn’t really reading any radiation.”

“Um honey, that’s a good thing. We don’t want radiation down here. I’ve really been kind of freaked out about that, this basement isn’t exactly my preferred shelter to begin with. I mean I know we did the best we could with our finances but I would have preferred a dugout shelter separate from the house.”

A few extra notes on what they had done. Susan was always the more paranoid one when it came to survival and preparedness, (her training had taught her quite a bit more than she EVER wanted to know about the possible threats to her family) and although they had very little money she had been quite persistent about stocking up and contingency plans. In the case of prepping the basement, there hadn’t been a tremendous cost outlay, (they didn’t have the money to build a separate shelter which was Susan’s first choice) but there had been quite a bit of labor involved way in advance. The house was built of stone and concrete mortar that was 3 feet thick around the entire base of the house. The summer after they moved in, the entire family had basically back filled the entire foundation so that the base of the house was surrounded in dirt on all four sides. There were no windows, and the one set of doors leading directly to the outside was stacked full of boxes of earth to provide a barrier. It struck some of the neighbors as a bit weird but when one finally asked, Susan replied that it helped insulate the house in the winter but didn’t attract mice the way straw bales did. Since many of her neighbors put straw bales around their houses, the neighbor accepted the explanation.

So the main weakness of the basement shelter was the ceiling above, which Susan had minimized as much as possible by stacking the boxes of dirt (manure & compost) on the ceiling above them. It was far from foolproof she knew, but it was much better than nothing. They had also kept all of their water and enough food for three months in the basement. Susan stored for thirty people at all times, knowing that her family would show up and also planning for unexpected guests (like Greg). The food wouldn’t be all that fancy, but there was a tolerable variety so that people wouldn’t start suffering from menu fatigue. That was a concern, especially for the children.

Returning to the present Susan asked....“Have we done anything about supper yet?”

“No, that was my next question. Most of the adults aren’t hungry but the children are starting to really whine.”

“There is plenty of food in the boxes, and the Coleman stove is over by the Aunty Em doors. For obvious reasons, someone else will have to do the cooking.”

That comment got quizzical looks from more than one of Susan’s siblings, so Susan explained that being pregnant she was the last person that should be near an outside wall, as any radiation she absorbed would have a far greater impact on the baby than on her. Charles offered to cook supper; he was quite a good cook if a little fussy about his workspace.

“So what are we having? Beans & rice?” Julien who shared Susan’s passion for reading survival fiction said jokingly. Most of the stories they had read used those two items as a staple for meals. Which wasn’t a bad idea and they had a lot of both it was so cheap, but for the first night Susan thought something a bit more ‘normal’ was a better idea.

“How about Quesadillas? We have everything for them except the sour cream, which I’m sure we’ll be able to live without.” Besides we should use up the tortillas & cheese first, since it’s going to warm up quite a bit in here over the next two weeks February or not. We have a lot of body heat in here, and I don’t have any more ice for the coolers.” They had put all of the food from the refrigerator and the little freezer into the big camping coolers that Robert and Susan and their children used when reenacting. Robert and Susan had in fact met at a reenactment for the War of 1812, and also reenacted the Civil War.

This idea went over very well, and Charles started making quesadillas to order. The kids ate first, then adults, with the exception of Bob Sr., who actually got his supper at the same time as the smaller children. His schedule was very important to him and his supper was already late. After supper Anne and Amy collected all the trash (paper plates were shared to minimize this) and Robert got Bob Sr his meds. Then the bathroom rotation began.....

The bathroom was an old metal chamber pot inside of a wooden box that had a seat cutout on top. The pot was lined with a small trash bag which had kitty litter in the bottom to absorb moisture. The wooden box also had a hinged lid that closed, which kept the odor to a minimum. Susan had found it at an antique store and had bought it to take reenacting. The plastic shacks usually available at events could get pretty gross especially when it rained. A sheet had been tacked up for privacy, but someone still had to stand watch to prevent the children from peeking. After everyone had used the facility, the bag was full and Robert tied up the bag and stuffed it over in the corner to wait for takeout. To try and further minimize the smell, he dropped several handfuls of ashes into the bag that were left over from the woodstoves upstairs. Susan had insisted on saving some for this purpose. She just hoped it kept the smell down a bit. Being pregnant her sense of smell was in overdrive to begin with, and this many people this close together was going to be really hard on her nose.

Everyone got dressed for bed and the older children and adults took turns holding up a sheet so that people could have some privacy while dressing. Susan volunteered to read the bedtime story, (her family was in the middle of The Little House on the Prairie books) and although she was reading to the

children, pretty much everyone listened. (Not that they had much choice, the basement wasn't that big.) Afterwards they said nighttime prayer and people participated or were simply silent as they wished. Interestingly, Trina's daughter Rose participated although Trina did not.

By now it was after 10:00 and Robert went over to check the meter again. 'Funny', he thought, 'the meter still isn't picking anything up'. He thought about waking up Susan who was asleep again, but decided that she must be exhausted and he'd talk to her about it in the morning.

So passed their first night. Not terribly bad although there had been a few tense moments, but Robert wondered how long the peace would last. Susan's family was a great group of people, but they were also very opinionated (including Susan) and not shy about sharing those opinions which were sometimes wildly different. The basement was already quite crowded feeling and once the novelty wore off, the children were going to be a lot more difficult to contain, especially if they had to stay in the basement for two weeks.

Robert also worried quite a bit about Susan. She had never had a baby early, but if something was going to send her into premature labor the stress of this situation was likely to do it. Tomorrow he would ask her about which of her midwifery books he should read just in case.....

"Daddy, can I talk to you for a minute?" Renee hadn't really snuck up on him, he was just so deep in thought he hadn't heard her.

"Sure Princess, what is it?"

"I'm worried about mom. What if the baby comes early? There is no WAY the midwife can get here. And even if the baby doesn't come early, what if the midwife isn't around anymore?" Renee didn't say dead, but that's what she was thinking. "Would mom go to the hospital?"

"If she had to she would. Honey your mom may not like giving birth in a hospital but she isn't going to be foolish about it either. If the midwife can't make it we'll labor at home and go to the hospital for the birth. That way the staff will have minimum time to intervene with the birth process but there will be competent help available if something unusual happens."

"Ok, but what if we can't get to the hospital?"

"If that happens we'll have to do the best we can at home without the midwife. I'm sure your mom has already thought of this possibility, and has planned for it. You know how she likes to try and cover all the bases. I'll ask her in the morning, and you can be there if you'd like, ok? Now stop worrying and go to sleep."

"Ok daddy, goodnight I love you."

“Love you too Princess.”

Robert smiled inwardly to himself. Renee was so much like her mother in wanting to make sure she had a plan for everything and always knew what was going on. Hopefully he had allayed her concerns a little and she could get some sleep. Which is exactly what he intended to do himself.

Making his way over to the space on the floor next to Susan he laid down and put his hand on her belly just as he always did at night. His last thought before drifting off was that he really hoped his Dad slept through the night.....

Chapter 3: The Day After.....

Susan was the first one to wake up the next morning, which was very unusual. She woke with a start thinking....“Oh no, someone has to milk the cow and we overslept.” Then she remembered what had happened the previous day. Ok, well, now what? The cow would get mighty uncomfortable if it wasn't milked, but Susan didn't know if she was willing to risk anyone's health for a cow. She leaned over and whispered in Robert's ear, “wake up honey I need your advice.”

Robert who was a rather light sleeper under normal circumstances, immediately sat up. “What's the problem?”

“I was just wondering whether or not we should go try to check on the livestock?”

“Let's check the meters. If the level is safe then we'll send someone out. If not, the animals will just have to fend for themselves.”

“But honey Betsy is fresh and I'm worried about her getting mastitis.”

“Susan, if the radiation level is too high that will be the least of our concerns.”

“Oh yeah, sorry, had a fetal brain drain moment there. I need some coffee I'm thinking through mud here.”

“Coffee sounds good, I'll start some.”

Robert got up and started the Coleman stove and put the big percolator they used for campouts on the burner along with the teapot so that the children could have their hot chocolate. Meals were going to have to be in shifts with this many people, and he wished they had been able to afford a second stove. Sometimes it was really hard not to be resentful towards Susan's siblings. They were comfortable financially with the exception of Trina, and as soon as it hit the fan they had all showed up here, but not one of her siblings had ever offered to help with preparations. Charles and Anne had helped quite a bit with improving the homestead, and they had done their own stocking of foodstuffs as they were able.

But her sibling's entire survival plan was to come to their house. Such sheep they were. Robert had always planned to help the whole family of course, but some additional money to help with stocking up would have made the last ten years so much easier for him and Susan, and he imagined her parents as well. You couldn't pick your family though and at least they had the ability to support everyone.

The rest of the group was starting to stir and Charles came over to see if he could help. Anne and Amy were both trying to get the little people through the bathroom, and keep them quiet as Trina and Bob Sr. were still sleeping. Greg and Ron were cleaning up bedding to make room. Pat & Kim were searching through boxes for breakfast food and talking to Susan who along with Renee and Lisa, were getting children dressed as they were done with the bathroom. Once everyone was dressed and the hot drinks were ready, Greg passed out breakfast bars, while Kim went to wake up Trina. They weren't the greatest breakfast but they were definitely easier than trying to cook. Bob Sr. woke up at this point and wanted his cereal, so Robert fixed him a bowl with some evaporated milk that he watered down a bit. They had done that before when milk ran low. It wasn't the same as fresh milk but didn't taste terrible and they could use the rest of the can for coffee creamer.

With breakfast finished, they had Morning Prayer. It was probably past 6:00 am but they prayed the Angelus anyway and also prayed for the country and friends and family. Susan noticed that Greg knew the Angelus. So being Susan she asked him, and learned that he was a devout Catholic and a conservative, which explained why he and Robert had hit it off at work, they had been about the only two conservative Catholics in the entire building.

Robert had checked the indoor meter, the radiation level in the basement still at background levels. After he ate he climbed over boxes and checked the meter by the door to the upstairs. It was reading that a slight amount of radiation was present. He wasn't sure how much more was outside that door and he wasn't about to open it and find out.

"Well there is radiation showing up on the meter by the door but only a little bit. I'm going to try the radio and see if it's working."

The radio was a small solar radio with a hand crank as a back-up. The adults collectively held their breath while he turned it on. Miraculously, the EBS was still on the air, and gave a county by county radiation reading. They listened and it seemed that most of the fallout was to the east of them, which made sense since at least two bombs had gone off on that side of the state.

Although the radiation in their area wasn't terribly high it was high enough that they decided that Robert would go out quickly wearing a face mask and check on the livestock. Greg and Charles volunteered to go help him; they could feed and water everyone while he milked. They wouldn't use the milk of course.

All three men wore long sleeves and a poncho made out of a garbage bag. They worked quickly and since he wasn't keeping the milk Robert just milked the cow onto the ground. It would have been easier

if she had a calf, but they had just purchased her a few months earlier and she was pregnant but not due to calf until July. They also had two pregnant goats, who were due in May.

All the animals seemed to be doing alright even the chickens, but it was only the first day. Everyone was fed and watered, (There was a big barrel of water for the smaller animals and the larger ones had full watering troughs.) The guys were in the barn for about 15 minutes. The run to and from the basement took an additional 5 minutes, so they were outside the shelter a total of twenty minutes. They figured that they could get it down to 10 minutes in the barn in the future. They would go twice a day if fallout levels didn't get worse.

The barn was built of cement block into the side of a hill. It was surrounded by several feet of earth on three sides and this cut down radiation penetration considerably. They stopped at the top of the stairs and took off their outer layers of clothing. They also took off the rubber shoe protectors they had on over their boots. These were left outside the basement. Susan had bought several pairs of sweats at goodwill for just this purpose. They were cheap (about 1.00 per outfit) and could be thrown away. The rubber shoe covers she got at Wal-Mart. They were made to be worn over shoes and were easier to walk in than garbage bags, but still protected the shoes. They cost a bit more than the sweats, but were cheap, and since the guys could walk faster in them than the garbage bags it kept their exposure down. This alone made the price worth it to Susan.

According to the broadcast they should expect to shelter in the basement for at least another 5-6 days. Evidently not all of the bombs to their west had gone off and so the levels of expected radiation were less than first feared. Of course it helped a lot that this was an area not likely to get a lot of fallout to begin with. Something Susan had looked at when house hunting.

After getting the update, they opted to turn the radio down and leave one person monitoring it, Charles volunteered for the task, he was something of a news junkie.

"Ok, now what do we do for the rest of the day?" This was from Magdalen or Maggie as everyone called her. She was 8 but like the rest of the family had an opinion and wasn't afraid to express it.

"Well, my children are going to start school, you are more than welcome to work with Beth if you want, she's about your age. Or you could read a book."

"SCHOOL!!! Are you serious, we have to do school?!!!"

"No, you don't have to; I just told you what your cousins will be doing. It's up to your parents how they want you to spend your day."

Amy spoke up, "Actually I think that's a great idea. It will help the time go faster and you should make good use of your time."

“Dad, do I have to?”

“You heard your mother, it won’t kill you.”

“Well what do I do?”

Like most institutionally schooled children Maggie was used to being told what she had to do all the time. Susan suggested that she find out what Beth was working on first and study with her. Beth at the moment was working on reading comprehension and so the two girls started reading aloud (quietly) to each other. The other children started their lessons and Julien took Jaicob, Patrick and Ron Jr. off to the side and started working with them on a Lego creation. It didn’t seem like schoolwork to the boys, but actually it was helping them improve their fine motor skills. Boys had different educational needs than girls. Before the age of about 7, more active learning was much easier for them. Kim was working with Mandy in a phonics book that Susan had, at six she was just learning to read. Rose opted to pick out a book and read for awhile. The littlest children had crayons and coloring books so they could do “lessons” like the big kids

With all of the children settled in, and Bob Sr. asleep once again (he napped off and on throughout the day), Robert asked Susan if they could talk. Most of the other adults were either talking or reading. Thank God that they had a lot of books and magazines. This was a reading family from top to bottom and they would have gone nuts without something to read. Greg had wandered over to the radio to listen with Charles to the news, and they were talking softly about what they were hearing.

“This looks serious, what’s bothering you?”

“What do I do if you go into labor down here?”

At this point both Renee and Lisa joined them. They had heard the question and although she hadn’t said anything Lisa was just as worried as Renee was.

Susan thought a bit before responding. “Well, the first thing all three of you should do is read up on how to catch. The Hesperian foundation book for midwives (A Book for Midwives) has the most complete information in the most compact form. Then you should talk about who would do what, and what to do if there is a complication. Now we know that I have big babies, so Robert, you should practice how to get a sticky shoulder unstuck. It may not happen but better prepared than not.

You also need to review what a complete placenta looks like. There are pictures in the book, and I can take a look at it too. If something looks like it’s missing we’ll go from there. I can talk you through manual removal if I have to, but as long as you let things alone that shouldn’t happen.

Renee, you have the most practice giving injections so if the placenta doesn’t separate or I start to bleed too much you need to be prepared to give me an injection. I have some oxytocin that we use for the

cow in two prepared syringes for my body weight. I made them up yesterday, just in case. If you need to give the injection do it in my upper thigh where the most meat is. One should be plenty; the second is a back up. I would never suggest this in normal circumstances, but obviously these aren't normal circumstances. Obviously cleanliness is very important, I have the birth kit down here just in case, and if you have to touch me or do anything internal use the iodine to wash your hands and use the gloves. Use them once and then get a new pair, I have an entire box. Better safe than sorry.

Lisa, you are going to need to clean off the baby. You can use a cloth from the birth kit to wipe most of the gunk off, and then put the baby into a receiving blanket and make sure that the baby is warm enough. Newborns can't regulate their body temperature for about the first 24 hours so it's important that we keep the baby warm and covered. Put the cap on the baby's head and make sure you cover his/her feet. That's where most body heat escapes anyway.

Now, having just said all this, I don't think I'm going into labor just yet, if anything I'll probably go past due again. If a mother doesn't feel secure she is unlikely to go into labor. So, chances are I'll be pregnant for at least the next six weeks. However, it wouldn't hurt you guys to read up on things, just in case the midwife can't make it or we can't get to a hospital."

'Maybe I said too much' thought Susan. 'They all have a glazed look on their faces. I was trying to reassure them but maybe I just scared them.'

"Hey, are you three alright? I didn't mean to scare you."

Renee was the first to speak. "Well I'm not scared exactly, but I REALLY hope we don't have to do this."

"Yeah mom, I'm not sure I can do this." Lisa looked much younger than her thirteen years just at that moment.

"Well, I know that you can if you have to but I agree with you both if we don't have to go this route I will be much happier too." Robert was a little more prepared than the girls having been there with Susan for all the other births but he would still be much more comfortable if the midwife made it.

"Well if it's any consolation to the three of you, I have confidence in your ability to deal with it if it happens. If it'll make you feel better we can go over what to look for before a variation becomes a crisis. But I really would like you all to read up on it first. You might have additional questions after you read." Girls if you want you can even take that as your reading assignment instead of your usual one."

"OK mom." Both girls walked over to the box of midwifery books and grabbed A Book for Midwives and sat down. Renee started reading out loud to Lisa and both became quite absorbed within seconds.

"Robert, should I have done that? Or should I have just reassured them and let it go?"

“Beloved, I think you were just being realistic and if something does happen I would much rather they be informed and able to help than not.”

“I know, I was just thinking maybe I should have asked my mom or Kim or something.”

“Well, we know how the girls perform under a crisis and we don’t know how Kim does. Your mom would do great, but she doesn’t have any experience with this, and quite frankly I would prefer the girls, they have experience with the animals at least. Besides, we’d need your mom to keep Trina out of our hair.”

“There is that. I hope we can get out of this shelter at least before I have the baby, privacy is not exactly easy and I’m not into giving birth as a spectator sport.”

“Me neither.” “OK, now that we’ve discussed that let’s talk about how we are going to coordinate everything for as long as we are down here.”

“I think cold breakfast works well, I’m thinking simple lunches and then a more time consuming dinner. If nothing else we’ll need more time to make it. I don’t know that we’ll be down here for the full two weeks, although I think we should sleep down here until the radiation is approaching background levels and I don’t remember how long that will take. The children especially, as they can’t absorb the same amount as an adult. I of course should stay out of radiation as much as possible. EBS hasn’t said anything about taking Potassium iodide and as long as we aren’t getting a lot of radiation down here, I think it would be better if we didn’t.”

“Honey, are we getting enough oxygen down here? We have everything pretty much blocked off, and I am a little concerned about that.”

“Well, we don’t have all the cracks stopped up and radiation isn’t present in the air, just in particles in the air. I put the Hepa filter in the furnace, and we do have air getting in so hopefully we’ll be alright. That’s one of the reasons I don’t want to use the Coleman stove more than absolutely needed. Just keep track of the meters down here and by the stairs, if we see an increase in radiation down here then we have a problem.”

“Ok, we haven’t had anything show up on the meter down here but the one at the top of the stairs is showing a little bit.”

“How much is a little bit?”

“About 3R per hour.”

“Wow, that’s a lot less than I thought we’d get. What does the radio say?”

“Their readings are about 5R per hour”

“Well let’s go with the higher number then. As long as they are broadcasting let’s follow their suggestions. The only station we are getting is the local one anyway, so it’s people that live here. I highly doubt they are going to tell us to go out before it’s safe.”

“It’s too bad we don’t have any of those suits you saw online. Although what you improvised will work for short periods.”

“Yes, well, the money spends once honey. Personally I wish we had been able to get that Ham radio set-up, I’d dearly love to be able to communicate and find out who else is out there.”

“Oh well, hind sight is 20/20. At least we have all the essentials.”

“Yeah, that’s true. And the family is all safe. I think I’m going to go read for awhile. Do you have plans for lunch?”

“We could send out for Chinese. Seriously, I was thinking something low key like soup and sandwiches, then we could plan something a bit warmer for supper. I’m trying to use up all the stuff in the coolers early. So something with meat would be good. At least we don’t have to worry about thawing anything.”

Robert went and got out the last packages of steak they had from the last beef they had butchered. If they had to throw meat out because it spoiled he would much rather it be burger than steak. Cooking on the Coleman stove was going to be interesting but maybe a goulash or something. He’d think about it while he read. He started to ask Susan why she hadn’t put the steak in the chest freezer, when it occurred to him that it was full to the rim with all the hamburger and poultry they had.

Susan decided to read also, but about five minutes into her book she fell asleep.

So, what was everyone else doing? Charles and Greg were still talking about this that and the other thing, mainly getting to know each other. Charles had never met a stranger and this was coming in very handy since Greg felt rather uncomfortable as the only non-family member in the basement. Greg found himself telling Charles that he was the only child of immigrant parents from Poland. Both of his parents were deceased and he had no other family in the United States. He had graduated from a small Catholic school in Hamtramck and had gone on to Michigan State. He was single mainly because he hadn’t found her yet. Not that he wasn’t looking, but it was difficult to find a devout Catholic girl.

He had met Robert one day at church believe it or not. It had been a Holy day and they had gone to noon Mass at the same nearby church on their lunch hour. Robert had seen Greg pull into the parking lot and had recognized him. So he had said hello, and they ended up eating lunch together pretty often. Robert had told Susan about Greg, and both had been praying for him to find a good wife for some time. Greg told Charles pretty much his life story, and Charles just listened and let him talk, once in awhile asking a question or two.

Anne was reading a book on gardening. She had a green thumb and had gardened extensively but was a little rusty and decided to refresh her memory. Being the smart woman that she was, Anne knew that they were most likely going to be growing all their own food for awhile and that Susan was going to need help coordinating things since she would be caring for a new baby soon. Pat was reading a medical book, Susan had quite a few and he had studied nursing before family obligations and interest made him decide to go the business route instead. Now however, he knew that someone needed to know what to do in case of emergency and he was worried about his sister giving birth down here too. Ron and Amy were helping the littlest children color on some paper. They wanted to do "school" like the bigger children. Trina was reading a cookbook written in the early fifties, back when people cooked their food from scratch. The recipe for baked chicken had you start by removing the head and plucking the feathers. It sounded pretty gross to Trina but she knew that Susan's family had been raising their own meat for several years now so that was probably what they did. Actually for all her griping Trina was glad her sister had been so weird, it would probably keep all of them alive. But they'd better not expect her to start wearing dresses and going to church and all that crap, she wasn't some little submissive woman that would do whatever the men told her to.....

Susan woke up about two hours later, just in time for lunch. "I'm going to have to be careful about sleeping all the time; I don't want to screw up my clock either." They did have soup and sandwiches, and discussed what to do about dinner. Robert brought up the goulash idea and everyone said that sounded fine so they went with that.

After lunch the younger children started playing card games and board games while the older children and the adults sat down for a planning meeting. Robert asked Susan to sum up what needed to be done and her plans for how to do it. She was really much better at people management than he was and he was more than happy to defer to her on this type of thing.

"Well, first of all, it looks like we'll be down here for about 5-6 more days according to the radio and also our own meter readings. The children and I should at least sleep down here for awhile after that, but as long as the children don't play in the dirt outside they should be able to go upstairs for at least part of the day. The adults will have to be responsible for most of the decontamination and also burying the livestock that dies. The cow, if she survives can't be put out to pasture for awhile; I'm not sure how long. We have enough hay for a year if we have to go that route, and until we can talk to the vet, or test her milk we can't drink it. Since she's in the barn she may survive this but I don't know. Same thing goes for the chickens or anything else that survives. I'm not sure how we even go about testing some of the stuff but hopefully we can find out.

I can supervise and give advice, but I'm not going outside for quite awhile yet and you all need to shower and be in fresh clothing when you come to talk to me. Unborn babies are extremely vulnerable and I want a healthy baby born.

Next, we need to hook the big freezers up to the generator. Seeing as its February, the contents should

stay frozen since the freezers are out in the garage, but you never know, and we have a lot of meat in those that I don't want to lose. I have an inventory of the freezers in the food storage binder, so we don't have to redo that. I want to try and can as much of that meat as we are able to before we run out of gas since we don't know when or if we'll be able to get more. Hopefully we'll be able to empty the freezer before we run out. Once the gas cans are empty, we may need to siphon gas out of the automobiles until we can get that meat processed.

We have the propane stove until we run out of propane and the tank is almost full. We heat with wood, so that should last us a long time. If we do run out of propane we can also use the woodstove to can, but with the pressure canners I'd prefer to use the propane. We can light the stove with a match so we don't need electricity for that. Hopefully by next year we can get more propane for the stove. If not, we'll be practicing with the woodstove this summer bringing the canners up to pressure and regulating it.

Whether the grid is back up or not this is going to mess up the economy pretty good and I don't know what everyone's financial situation will be, so I'm preparing for the worst and praying for the best. With that in mind, we have to plan the garden and decide who is going to do what. I'll be rather housebound for a bit so I can do most of the cooking and with some help from the middle children maintain the household. That will free up the adults for the heavier work outside. If things do get back to normal, you can all take some of the produce home with you. If not, we'll need something to eat next winter.

Finally, we have to think about security. I'm not trying to be an alarmist, but I very much doubt that things will be back to normal anytime soon and there are a lot of people who didn't prepare for this kind of long term situation. Once they run out of food they will be getting desperate, and some may even find their way out here. We are pretty far away from any urban area, but still better to be safe than sorry. At the very least we should set up a night watch. I'm sure I haven't thought of everything, but I've tried to cover the most important stuff.

I know that most of you don't know how to do some of this stuff, and we are going back to about the 1870's with technology here, but everyone in this room is highly intelligent and should be able to pick up on how to do things pretty quickly. Since we reenact quite a bit, Robert, Julien and the girls do know how to live without electricity and will be glad I am sure to help bring everyone "down to speed" as it were.

That brings us to laundry, and other mundane things about non-electric living. We'll be doing our laundry by hand until the power comes back on. There is no way that I can do that by my self, not for this many people. That being the case, we'll have to have a laundry day where several people take turns. It also means that as soon as radiation levels are way down people are going to have to change their clothes less often. Not that I expect you to stay in filthy or wet clothes but we are going to have to be far more conservationist in outlook and that means conserving our energy too.

Did I forget anything? Oh, well, yes one more thing. Our septic system is not going to handle this many

people for very long, so as soon as possible we need to get an outhouse dug and set up. We can use our rinse water to water the gardens and we'll have to be careful about where we dump the soapy kind, but it can't go down the drain anymore. Baths will be in the tub and the water recycled into the gardens if possible." Little kids can take baths together especially since the water will have to be heated for each bath. Married couples you might want to think about bathing together too, but I'll leave that up to you.

"Do you really think it's going to be that long term?" asked Amy.

"Well, I don't know for sure, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Yeah me too. What about other things?"

"Such as?...."

"Well, I know you are ok with having the baby here, but what happens if someone breaks a leg, or gets sick or something?"

"Amy, I know a bit about most things, but I would be really happy if someone else would start really reading up on medical stuff." I have a lot of books on the subject, but haven't had the time to read them all." I would suggest that whoever volunteers not be squeamish." In fact, if everyone could pick a specialty get up to speed and then start cross training everyone else that would be great. I for one would hate to have one medical person, because what happens if that person gets sick or hurt? Same with everything else. Does that make sense to everyone?"

Pat spoke up at that point. "Well, I'll volunteer for the medical stuff, I was studying it and I'm certainly not squeamish. Maybe one of the older kids can study with me?"

"I'll do it Uncle Pat, I'm not squeamish either." This was Lisa, who although young was definitely NOT squeamish.

This got the ball rolling and pretty soon everyone had volunteered for something. People drifted away at that point and started looking through the boxes of books for relevant material. Robert and Susan were both bibliophiles (book lovers) so there were plenty of relevant books to go through. Not to mention all the stuff that Susan had downloaded off the internet.

The older children were told that they could use whatever they were studying as their reading assignments, literature is all well and good but survival was more important at this time. Even with the older children pitching in they were still a rather small group all things considered.

No-one had volunteered for security, mainly because no-one was sure what to do. Charles had been in the Army during Korea, and Susan in the late 80's but neither one had been a grunt. Susan had been NBC, which was great as far as knowledge went but not so much security. Charles had been in

electronics. But you work with what you've got. So Susan and Charles sat down and had a conversation. They counted up all the adults they had and the older children that could shoot. Not all of the adults could shoot, so they were put on watch with someone that could until they could be trained. Pat, Anne, Trina and Amy were not shooters and Charles freely admitted that he was a bit rusty. Greg was a shooter, although he mostly shot handgun (he had a CCW license) and wanted some practice with a rifle. Ron was a hunter and had lots of experience with his rifles, but not much with a handgun. Robert, Susan and their three oldest children were all very experienced with both, they had practiced quite a bit and both Robert and Susan had CCW licenses. So, they decided that shooting school was first on the agenda when they finished detoxing the house and yard.

Susan's anal retentive qualities were going to save some work on that end. She and the children had tarped all the gardens while waiting for Robert to get home. So when the time came they would just have to remove the tarps very carefully and then test the soil underneath.

Chapter 4 Cleaning Up.....

The next few days in the basement were very uneventful. Everyone read a lot and talked a lot about what they would do and the order in which they would do it. Bob Sr. was a bit confused as to what day it was but he seemed to remain pretty with it otherwise.

It was exactly one week when they announced on the radio that radiation levels had dropped enough that it was safe to go out. Susan and Amy stayed in the basement with all of the children except Julien, who wasn't really a child anymore although try telling his mother that. Everyone else went up to begin cleaning up.

First they checked on the livestock. Surprisingly, all of the animals were still alive except two of the chickens. The water troughs were filled, which took a long time pumping water by hand. Robert checked on the amount of feed available and although they had plenty of hay for awhile, chicken feed was going to run out in a couple of weeks. The chickens were going to be a problem if they couldn't let them out to free range.

The next step was cleaning off the roofs and dusting the house. This took about four days of working steadily in shifts. Susan was just glad the fallout had been so mild, otherwise it would have taken a lot longer. Finally 12 days after the bombs had gone off Susan and the children came out of the basement. Susan didn't stay out long, she was probably overreacting but as stir crazy as she was getting in the basement she really didn't want to expose the baby. They let the children run around the main floor of the house during the day, but everyone slept in the basement for the rest of February. They moved back up into the house in mid March.

The house had four bedrooms, a living room, and a family room that were being used as sleeping space. Anne and Charles were the smallest family so they took the master bedroom. Bob Sr. kept his room, he was familiar with it. Ron and Amy and their kids went into one of the upstairs bedrooms and Trina and

her kids went into the other. Pat and Kim and Mandy took the living room and Robert and Susan and their children took the family room since it was the biggest room in the house. It was also the room where the heating woodstove was located. So Robert was able to keep the stove going all night which helped heat the place. Fortunately they had always stored their wood in the garage so there wasn't any fallout on it to worry about. The kitchen woodstove could also heat and Pat kept that going throughout the night since it was right next to the living room.

The last week of March rolled around and the phones were still out as was the electricity. Working hard they had managed to get all of the meat canned before they had run out of gas for the generator. In fact, they still had half a tank in Julien's little pick-up truck. They also had some propane; they hadn't used it for anything but canning. They had water thanks to the hand pump, and the animals were still doing ok. Robert had made contact with their vet who lived about a five minute walk from the house. Doc Baker, (that's his name honest, no little house on the prairie jokes please) had tested all the animals and told them that the animals were fine. So they even had milk and eggs again. They had not been able to contact the midwife, she lived about 15 minutes away by car, which was several hours by horse, and they hadn't been able to spare the time. Susan wasn't worried though, the baby wasn't due until mid April and Susan always went overdue...

"Robert, wake up."

"What time is it?"

"About 2:30. Honey could you run me a bath?"

"NOW?"

"Yeah, I know it's a pain, but these Braxton Hicks contractions are really strong and I keep waking up."

"How far apart are they?"

"I don't know I'm not paying attention. It's not like it's labor or anything, I'm not even due for another week and I usually go about a week overdue, why?"

"Just curious. I'll get you a bath and then I want to time them."

"Ok if it will make you feel better, but the whole point of the bath is to get them to stop."

"I know, but if you have any more let me know ok?"

"Ok." Susan kept dozing off in between the 'contractions', and Robert had to wake her up when the bath was ready. She got into the bathtub and left the door to the bathroom open so the heat would come in from the stove. Robert sat right by the door to keep watch and also to time contractions. He

had a bad feeling that this was labor, early or not. The contractions were coming five minutes apart and were lasting for almost a minute. More telling was that Susan had to breathe through them and couldn't talk to him while having one.

"Susan honey, you're in labor. We had better send Julien to try and get the midwife."

"I'm not in labor and it's the middle of the night. Even if she's home and fine, I don't want to wake her in the middle of the night."

"OK, you just relax in the bath. I'm going to put water on for tea, I'll be right back."

"Ok."

Robert went into the family room and woke up Julien. "Son, mom is in labor and you need to go get Debra. Your mom however, is convinced she isn't in labor because she's early so I want you to be as quiet as possible while leaving."

"Ok Dad, I'll be back as soon as I can." Julien left out the sliding glass door so Susan wouldn't hear him, and waited until he was at the end of the driveway before putting the pedal to the metal.

Robert put the kettle on the woodstove and went back into the bathroom. "Sorry it took so long honey I wanted to check on the fire while I was out there."

"That's ok, I wish these stinking contractions would lighten up a bit, I'm tired."

Robert didn't say anything; he just waited and silently prayed that Julien would get back with the midwife soon.

Meanwhile, Julien was breaking all sorts of land speed records getting to Debra's house. He made the 15 minute drive in about 8, praying the whole way that the midwife was home. When he pulled into the driveway he laid on the horn to warn the house. Debra's husband Wayne came to the door with his shotgun at the ready and asked Julien what he wanted.

"Hi Mr. Wayne, it's Julien Schneider, my mom is in labor and my dad sent me to get Miss Debra. Is she home?" (Please say yes) he thought.

"DEB, it's the Schneider boy, Sue's in labor." (Thank you Jesus) was Julien's thought now. Debra yelled something that Julien didn't quite catch. "She says hold on she'll get her kit and be with you."

Wayne turned and went back into the house. He didn't mind his wife being the local midwife but he was getting to D@mn old for these middle of the night wake-up calls.

A few minutes later Debra came out the door lugging her kit. Julien jumped out of the truck and took it from her. "Can I put this in the back Miss Debra?"

"Sure, it'll be fine back there. Just let me grab the birthing stool your mom likes and we can get going."

Debra picked up her higher birthing stool and put it in the front of the truck, it was metal and she didn't want it getting cold on the drive over. Julien helped her in and shut the door for her before sprinting over to his own side and off they went. They made it back in about 6 minutes, as Julien was really worried about his mom. Thankfully there were no other cars along the way and if there were any LEO's out they weren't on the same road that Julien was on.

Susan heard Julien pull in (he wasn't as quiet as he was on the way out), and started fussing at Robert. "Honey I told you not to bother Debra and now we've wasted all that gas and...." Suddenly Susan got a very peculiar look on her face and stopped talking. Debra walked in at that moment saw the look and asked Susan.... "Hi hon, what's going on?"

"Hi Debra, I just felt the water bag in the introitus." (birth canal).

"Well ok then, let me wash my hands and we'll check you and see what's going on."

Debra washed her hands and after Susan had gotten out of the tub and onto the birthing stool, Debra checked her.

"Well hon, you are fully effaced, at 0 station and 8 cm dilated. (In English that means that the cervix has completely thinned out, the baby's head is right at the opening and that the cervix is opened almost completely-10 cm is complete.) I would say in another contraction or two you can push this baby out."

"I am?! But I'm early. I never go early."

"Well honey, I would be willing to bet that the added stress of the last month or so has probably altered your cycle a bit and ready or not you are having this baby tonight."

Susan looked around for Robert; he was right behind her massaging her lower back since it always hurt her more there.

"You knew didn't you?"

"Well, I suspected dear. I have been through this with you once or twice before." Robert gave her a kiss and smiled.

"Well, ok. Oh man here comes another one." Fortunately Susan was not a screamer. She tended to breathe loudly but that was about it.

Two contractions later, Susan got pushy and about five pushes later the head crowned.

“Ok Susan stop pushing so I can check for a cord.” Debra checked, and there was no cord around the baby’s neck. The baby rotated a quarter turn which was normal, and Debra told Susan she could push the baby out. “Good, then I can go back to sleep.” Debra started laughing as did Robert. On the next push out she came. The first sound she heard was laughter. That was a good thing.

“It’s a girl Susan. Oh my, she’s beautiful. I love you Susan.” Robert gave Susan a kiss and started crying, he did at every birth. No matter how many times he saw it, every child was a miracle. Susan was also crying and welcoming her new daughter. She was perfect. Everything was in order and functioning properly. She even pooped right away so they knew that part worked too.

“What’s her name?” Asked Debra.

“Miriam” they both said at once.

Miriam looked around and although she had cried for about 30 seconds, as she was born she stopped soon after and started looking around at her mom and dad and the new place she was in.

“Susan, its Mom, how are you sweetheart?”

“Fine Mom, I hope we didn’t wake you and Dad up.”

“You did honey, but since it’s for the baby we forgive you.” Charles said with a smile in his voice.

“Robert you should go wake up the children, so they can meet their new sibling.”

“That’s fine but let’s wait until we get you both cleaned up and into some dry clothing first.”

This process took about 30 minutes since they had to wait for the placenta. Debra like most midwives was very hands off. Unless there as a problem, she was more than willing to wait for the natural process to complete itself. Thankfully, there were no problems in this instance and 30 minutes later Robert helped Susan into the bed in the family room. Renee who had woken up when Julien left had already come in and was holding Miriam. She had even gotten to cut the umbilical cord this time.

They got Susan and Miriam all settled into the bed and Susan asked if there was any steak left. She usually had a really good steak and some eggs, juice and toast right after giving birth. Every time she had a baby she was ravenous and the steak was her reward for a job well done. Due to the strike and the after effects all the steak was gone, so she settled for three eggs, toast and juice. After eating heartily, Susan promptly fell asleep. It was still pitch black outside since it was only 5 am. Debra wanted to stay for awhile anyway to make sure there weren’t any postpartum complications like bleeding etc... So she

sat down and slept in the easy chair for awhile. Robert went to sleep also, but Anne and Charles got up and started breakfast for everyone.

At about 9 that morning Debra checked Susan for the last time, left instructions with Robert and Renee about what to do if there was a bleeding problem, and Julien took her home. She told him to come and get her if something happened, but she didn't think anything would.

"Well, that was an interesting birth."

"I don't know if interesting is the word I'd use Susan. Scary is more like it. Especially when you were acting like Cleopatra."

"Pardon?"

"You know, Queen of de Nile."

"Ha ha, you are such a comadian."

"Well, I'm glad everything went alright, and that you and Miriam are ok."

"Me too. Honey I'm going back to sleep, I'm really tired."

"That sounds like a good idea honey, why don't you do that. I on the other hand have to get the day going. We're starting seeds today."

"Ok, what are you starting?"

"Tomatoes and Peppers. The Celery was started back in February, and we have to transplant it to bigger pots, and we'll start the melons in about a week."

"Have fun."

Chapter 5 The New Normal

While Susan slept and the rest of the family started seeds, the world around them was starting to crack at the seams. Civilized people weren't really all that civilized after all.

President Cheney was still in the mountain, along with what remained of the Federal government. Secretary of State Rice had made it; and along with President Cheney, Congress (what was left anyway) and several military officers was meeting to discuss how best to get things under control.

"Thank you for coming ladies and gentlemen. First, I'd like Colonel Erickson to give us an overview of

what the situation is, and also if you can Colonel a brief description of just what happened.”

“Well Sir, the situation as we understand it is as follows. As near as we can figure there were explosions in or over the following US cities.

The following we have confirmed were nuclear devices.

Detroit, Michigan, New York, New York, Chicago, Illinois, Columbus, Ohio, Los Angeles, California, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Washington D.C., Phoenix, Arizona, and finally Charleston, South Carolina.

In addition there were conventional munitions explosions in the following cities.

Atlanta, Georgia, Boston, Massachusetts, Las Vegas, Nevada, Salina, Kansas, Billings, Montana, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Des Moines, Iowa, Burlington, Vermont, Jacksonville, Florida, and Memphis Tennessee. We have not yet confirmed if they were “dirty bombs” or not yet, communications are spotty at best. We have reason to suspect however, that some of them were.

“What is the estimated death toll Col.?” Asked Senator Santorum.

“We don’t have confirmation on those numbers yet Sir.”

“Well then give us your best guess for the love of Christ.” Was Senator Clinton’s comment. Hillary distrusted the military to begin with and this idiot Col. hemming and hawing got on her nerves. She ‘knew’ that he already had those figures, he just didn’t want to share the intel with them. It was always the same, keep congress in the dark. After all she and Bill had done it all the time when they had been in the white house. Poor Bill, he was probably trying to lie his way into heaven right about now. She thought with a smirk.

“Our current best guess based on population figures is that we have lost approximately, 25 million people ma’am.” The Col. Did his best but had a difficult time maintaining composure when stating that figure.

The room was completely silent as it’s occupants absorbed that number. Then President Cheney spoke.

“What about survivors?”

“We doubt that there are any in the areas of the initial burst Sir. We haven’t been able to contact any of our forces in some of the Eastern States and although we have managed to do flyovers we haven’t gone into any of the cities. Some of them we know to be hot and some are so damaged that it isn’t safe to send in ground troops without the heavy armored vehicles. Until we can get supply lines in place to fuel those vehicles and supply the personnel manning them the unit commanders are hesitant to send people in.”

“What about in areas not hit?”

“That brings us to the next problem sir. It’s total chaos. In the urban areas all across the country, they are running out or have run out of food. Transportation is at a complete standstill, no drivers are willing to run the risk of getting hijacked. Immediately after the attack the truckers were the only means of delivery and things were fine for the first few weeks. But as supplies started getting scarce and rationing started, so did hijackings. At the present time, most truckers aren’t willing to go into the cities unless they have an armed escort. This has had the effect of causing many urban residents to either flee towards the rural areas or fight over what’s left, sometimes violently. Local law enforcement is completely overwhelmed. Many are no longer even trying to do anything about the crimes, they are concentrating on protecting hospitals and other essential services. Every government entity that has communications capability is screaming for help.”

“Can we provide any help? Other than what we are already doing?”

“Not really Sir. We could call up the National Guard and many Governors have already done so, but there is a very real logistical problem with that. They can’t reach a number of them, and although they are broadcasting the call up over the radio, a lot of members aren’t hearing the message.”

“Well, then, you should round up all of those not responding and court martial them for being AWOL.”

“Senator Kerry, with all due respect, Sir, I doubt that any unit commander is willing to punish a soldier because his radio doesn’t work and he doesn’t know he’s been called up. We are attempting to get a hold of as many as we can, and about 63% of our guard units are at reasonable manpower levels at this time. Would you like to federalize them Mr. President?”

“No, I think it would be best if they stayed in their home states and helped out there. Is there anything we can do to support the states supply wise?”

“Well Sir it would probably help if we could use troops to transport food and medical supplies to the urban areas. Those are the most out of control places.”

“Very well, convey the necessary orders. Get a hold of all the governors or whoever is in charge in the individual states and ask them to get a list together of what they need the most. We have a limited amount of fuel, but what we do have will go to the hardest hit states first. Try and get updated death counts and we are going to need to start making plans to bury the dead and clean up the damage.”

“Sir, most of the bodies turned to ash in the explosions. In the more rural areas, the locals took care of burying their own dead, so our major efforts will be in the cities. We do have one other problem though Sir that you really need to address as soon as possible.”

“And that is?”

“Many of the people fleeing from the cities have nowhere to go Sir and some are behaving rather like feral dogs. They are forming packs and ravaging the countryside. In turn many of the residents of the rural areas are treating them like feral dogs.”

“Which means?...”

“Well, it means that the residents are shooting and burying them Sir.”

“It sounds like anarchy out there. You should just confiscate all their guns. Vigilantes are no better than criminals.”

“Shut up Hillary. These are not normal times and I will not prosecute people for trying to protect themselves and I will also not remove their ability to protect themselves. I do think that we need to get food to the cities as quickly as possible though, that might alleviate this problem somewhat.” President Cheney had finally lost his temper with the Senator from New York. Hillary Clinton looked outraged, but the President didn’t give her a chance to lash back at him, he thanked everyone and told the Col. to please get him those lists as soon as possible. Then he walked from the room. The Secretary of State quietly excused herself and went to check with the logistics officer and find out how much help the federal government could actually offer. This left the 6 Congressmen alone in the room.

“Who in the Hell does he think he is telling me to shut up!! That smirking SOB, how dare he!!”

“Hillary, you have to give him a break. He didn’t want to be president; he’s grieving the loss of a great many friends and is under a tremendous amount of stress. Don’t take it personally. Honestly I’d rather he be in charge than Condi. She’s fine as Secretary of State but quite frankly I don’t know how she would handle the responsibility of being president.” John Kerry was also not so sure he could handle a woman president, certainly not an unelected one, but he wasn’t about to tell Hillary that.

“Gentlemen, Lady, I think we are going to have to adjust our thinking here. This is not a normal situation and right now I think the best thing we can do is to support each other and the president. He is making the best decisions that he can under the circumstances, and given the magnitude of the crisis, the last thing the country needs is for us to be divided. Why we haven’t been invaded by ground forces yet I don’t understand, but I think it’s safe to say that it’s coming from somewhere. If we can’t help our own before the invasion force lands, we won’t be the remaining members of congress anymore because there won’t be a congress anymore. So how about if we try and get together here and come up with some suggestions to help Dick; rather than getting in a snit because he wasn’t exactly polite just now.” Rick Santorum never had gotten along with Hillary politically but he was at the moment more concerned with the nation than with his personal likes and dislikes. Very rare in a politician but there it was.

“I think Rick is right, we have to face the fact that we are really vulnerable to getting hit again here.”

“What about asking the UN for help?”

“Are you kidding? I don’t want to pay the price that would be required and I can guarantee you that Dick won’t either. We’d lose national sovereignty over it and the people would crucify us. Even the liberals would. Too many of them like their hunting weekends. Trust me on that one, it cost me the election in 2004.”

Actually it was the fact that you’re a gigolo that cost you the election but you think it was gun owners if that gives you comfort. Although he wouldn’t have ever said that aloud, it was people like Kerry that had prevented John McCain from switching parties. He just couldn’t bring himself to completely ally with people like that. He agreed with liberals on many things, but their value systems were just beyond his ability to comprehend.

For much of the rest of the afternoon, they all sat and brainstormed. It wasn’t really that they could do anything, but it made them feel like they were helping. (Sort of like when your three year old helps you bake a cake.)

So, just what was happening outside? Who had done this, how and why had they done it? Most importantly, could the United States survive it?

Well, in the urban areas it was pretty much as the Col. Had described it. There are three types of people in the world. Sheep (people who are basically clueless) Wolves, (Predators) and Sheepdogs (those willing to protect Sheep). Urban areas had lots of sheep and lots of wolves, with very few sheepdogs and some of the Wolves looked like Sheepdogs but weren’t. People were starting to starve in some places. Murder was common, as were rape and assaults. These all happened in broad daylight and many city dwellers couldn’t and/or wouldn’t own firearms. The consequence of that was vulnerability to predators. Of course those houses containing sheepdogs, were not as vulnerable and many of the criminal element didn’t have particularly good shooting skills. Suddenly the crazy gun-nut was the most popular person on the block. Politics as usual was hindering relief efforts rather than helping. (Go figure.)

Rural areas were faring much better. Most of this was simply location. Rural areas had fewer sheep, more sheepdogs, and the skill level that comes with being too poor to live that consumerist lifestyle, so popular in most cities. This is not to say that there weren’t ANY sheep, just that there were fewer and it was easier for the sheepdogs to protect a smaller flock. The few local wolves were dealt with rather quickly, and the wolves that spilled over from the cities usually met with strong, organized, armed resistance. Since most of the gangs were still in the cities fighting over what remained there, these groups of wolves were on average 10-20 people strong.

And the rest of the world you ask? Well, let’s start with the question of whom. The attack had come from several fronts. The explosives had been planted by Muslim terrorists who were members of Al Qaeda. The nuclear missiles were Chinese. The Chinese government had been told that Al Qaeda was planning this attack and jumped on the bandwagon.

Now for the second question, why? Well for Al Qaeda that was easy to answer. The U.S. was considered the decadent great Satan that must be eliminated from the Earth. Only then would the worldwide conquest of Islam become a reality. As for China; it had reached critical mass with their woman shortage and needed a good old fashioned war to thin the male herd. In case you didn't know it the Chinese government's one child policy has had the unintended consequence of throwing the gender number's way off. In Chinese culture, a boy child will care for his aged parents. A girl child on the other hand, will care for her husband's parents. So if they could only have one, parents opted for the boy. The government has finally tried to address the inequity but at the moment there are 120 boys born for every 100 girls. In a country with 1.3 billion people this translates into between 40 and 60 million fewer girls than boys, which translates into a lot of frustrated men. In order to prevent them from violently overthrowing the government, those in charge decided to focus them on another enemy, the U.S. There were some members of the Chinese government that raised the point that China would be shooting itself in the economic foot since exports to the US constituted 30% or about 300 billion dollars of China's GNP. These members pointed out that the U.S was not likely to continue buying from China if the two countries were at war. However, they were overruled by other members of the People's party, who thought that the market in the Middle East would make up the difference. Oh and yes they were planning to invade, troop transports were being loaded with troops and supplies. Those cargo containers that China ships to the US are also capable of being Trojan horses, lots of military supplies will fit in those things. The same ships can carry people just as easily as they can carry cargo containers, and as long as they don't all come up on deck at the same time, they probably wouldn't be noticed on satellite.

Which leads us to answer the question of how. Again a simple answer. Cargo containers. Over 24 million containers enter the country, and approximately 60% of those containers are never inspected. So it was quite easy for Al Qaeda and their allies to ship in massive amounts of explosive, hidden in ordinary shipments. They had been doing it for years, and sleeper cells in the U.S had been squirreling it away in various cities. In February of 2006 all the elements were in place, the signal was given and 20 cities exploded. Some were targeted because they had huge populations, some like Salina Kansas were specifically targeted with the nuclear missiles because they were food producing areas. The idea was to destroy the soil and make it impossible for the United States to feed itself. Of course by killing 25 million people, the United States had fewer mouths to feed, but in a country of 300 million, that isn't enough to make a substantial difference. So remember that rule of three...

Chapter 6 the second wave...

April 1st 2006.

Things were slowly stabilizing for Robert and Susan and their family. They had invited Greg to make his home with them for as long as he needed to, his was pretty much dust. Everyone capable had been trained to use a firearm and they took turns keeping watch 24/7. Of course everyone went outside armed and most of them were armed even inside. It was easier to wear it than to worry about one of the smaller children getting a hold of a loaded gun. Of course the children had all been thoroughly

trained in safety, but children don't always do what they are told, or they forget. Especially the two-four year olds.

They had suffered one loss. Not from wolves, but from Nature. Bob Sr. had passed away in his sleep, the day after Miriam was born. He had been on a number of heart medications and blood pressure medications, and those had run out about two weeks before his death. With no way to get more, it was just a matter of time. Robert and Susan knew it was coming and had spent much of the previous two weeks building memories with Bob and the grandchildren. Although saddened by their loss they were happy he had been able to greet Miriam, and consoled themselves with knowing that he was with God and his wife. Susan was also privately relieved somewhat, knowing how agonizing it had been for Bob, knowing that he was declining and not being able to stop it. Not to mention what it had done to Robert helplessly watching his father slip away slowly. They buried him under the cherry tree in the side yard. That way, he would be close enough for the grandchildren to safely visit. The cemetery and funeral home were too far away especially since no-one had any gas and they only went to church once a month by horse and wagon. It was 8 miles one way, which took about 45 minutes by horse. Percherons are great draft horses but they aren't very fast.

Speaking of wolves, they had a few incidents, but nothing really serious. Most of them didn't make it out that far, and those that did were taken care of by the "neighborhood watch". Everyone in the area including in town owned some form of firearm even if it was just a .22 for shooting raccoons or possums. After they had all come out of their basements they had passed the word, almost from house to house, to be on the lookout for looters. John Hill, who lived next door to the Schneiders was a HAM operator. He couldn't lift much, he was disabled with a bad back, but he could and did communicate with the sheriff in town and also the other HAMs in the area. Communication was slower but just as effective. So when the reports of illness in the cities started coming in, they heard all about it in Hillside.

Remember that bird flu started in Asia. Well, that wasn't an accident, it was an on purpose. China had been working on a bioweapon for over a decade. Scientists had warned that a virus would continue to mutate, which would make a vaccine less effective. If the communists had any respect for human life this would maybe have bothered them, but they didn't. Any soldiers in the invasion force that died were considered an acceptable loss. So along with explosives, vials of the virus had been shipped into the country. They were given to different operatives in other parts of the country. Other sleeper cells, made up of Chinese with student Visas were on college campuses in all sorts of areas. Mostly, smaller campuses in the Midwest and the South. Notice they weren't really targeted by the bombing campaign, those had been aimed at large population centers. College students who all went home in May when classes had ended. The smaller colleges hadn't closed after the bombings because although they were somewhat affected by the attacks they were in less urbanized areas and were far more able to keep things going with local assistance. Many were even able to arrange transportation for those fewer students who lived a distance from the college. All it takes is one person with the flu to infect the whole busload...

John came over and knocked on the door at 9:30 on the morning of April 1st. Susan was into clothes, but

pretty much still laying around, the baby was only four days old after all. That along with the death and funeral of Bob Sr. had pretty much worn her out.

“Hi John, come in.”

“Thanks Susan, how are you feeling?”

“Tired, but hanging in there. Robert is still being quite hennish so I’m lying around a lot. He’s even got me a babysitter.”

“I heard that young lady. Hi John, how are you?” Anne came into the family room and shook John’s hand. “At least with a bed in here Susan can lie down when she needs to and not feel like she’s missing out.” She gave Susan the look, and Susan took the hint and got back onto the bed. Anne was still her mother after all. Mom’s have that effect even on adult children.

“So what brings you here today John?”

“Well, there’s a watch meeting at Henry’s place this afternoon, and we’d like someone from your group to attend. The sheriff sent word through the line that some convicts have escaped from the state prison and are headed this way. We figure they’ll start showing up in the next couple of days. They’re on foot and looting as they go. They don’t seem to be going out of their way to attack people, but they aren’t really avoiding violent contact either. “

“How many are there John?”

“The sheriff said about 15 as near as they can figure. The guard force was too small to handle all the convicts even after they had released all the non-violent offenders. The prison had 250 convicts left, and they rioted. 73 were killed in the violence along with 5 guards. When the rest had been rounded up and counted there were 15 missing. The HAMS started reporting incidents going south from the prison about two days after the riots. Break ins and robberies, and a few shootings. No rapes have been reported yet, though. These guys seem more interested in food, water, booze and weaponry than violence.”

“Great, we just have thieving, murderous thugs to deal with rather than rapists. That makes me feel a whole lot safer.” Susan was tired but her sarcasm wasn’t.

“Has anyone died from the shootings?” Anne wanted to know.

“Not yet that I know of, but I’m not sure I know everything. Anyway, the meeting at Henry’s is at 3:00 this afternoon. That gives the farmers and the homesteaders time to talk and still get back home for evening chores. “

“Alright John, thanks for letting us know. I don’t know who, but someone will be there this afternoon. “

“Thanks, I’ll get back home then. Chris got in late last night and I want to be there when he gets up.”

“Oh that’s right, he was supposed to be coming home this week. Did the shuttle drop him off at the house?”

“No, he walked from town, but it was only 5 miles or so, and he had his pistol with him. I wasn’t too thrilled that he was walking home after dark. Chris didn’t see what the big deal was though; things have been pretty calm around the school. They even had the power back up before he left.”

“Well tell him we said hello. And for heaven’s sake explain to him that walking around out here is more of a four legged predator problem, but it’s still a problem. Speaking of predators, have you lost any more stock to dogs?”

“No, but I’ve probably shot a dozen just this week. We put everything in the barn at night and that’s pretty secure, and we take turns watching during the day. I’m glad Chris is home, one more set of eyes and one more pair of hands. Well, I’ll see whoever at the meeting. You take care Susan, make sure you get enough rest.”

“She will, if I have to tie her down.” Anne was joking, but only mostly.

John left right about the time Miriam woke up and wanted to eat. Susan nursed her and talked with her mother about what they might do to improve security. Not much more than they were doing now, was their conclusion. Miriam fell asleep as she finished eating and Susan wasn’t far behind her. Sleeping when the baby slept was the only way to get a decent amount of rest with a newborn. Anne left the room and went about cleaning the house and getting lunch together. Everyone else was outside, the adults working in the garden or improving the fence around the place, the children playing under the watchful eyes of the adults. It was pretty cold for April, not nuclear winter type cold, but colder than usual. Everyone was still wearing coats, and the children would be staying in after lunch. Normally they wouldn’t be out all morning, but with 28 people in the house, things were a bit crowded and the children needed to burn off some energy.

Robert had started a fire in the burn barrel with cardboard trash that was in the garage. That way the children could warm themselves if they got cold, without coming into the house and disturbing Susan and the baby.

At noon sharp, Anne rang the lunch bell. It was a large farm type bell mounted on a 4x4 post by the back door. Everyone came trooping in, the children’s coats and hats were left in the mudroom to be brushed and hung up after lunch. The adults hung their things on the line behind the woodstove in the kitchen. That way, they would dry and be warmed when people went back outside to work after eating. Robert washed up first and then went to wake Susan while the others cleaned up.

“Susan; honey it’s lunch time wake up.”

“Hi honey, can you take the baby?”

“Sure, I already washed up so I could. It’s funny, I don’t feel like I’m getting a lot of time with her, but since I’m home I see her more than I did the other children as newborns, at least during daylight hours.”

As they walked towards the dining room, Robert told Susan what they had accomplished that morning. They had finished wiring the back fence; there was a solar battery that charged the hotwire. Unlike John they had too much stock to put it all in the barn and the feral dogs had gotten into the pasture the night before, through a hole in the fence. Greg had been on watch and shot three of the dogs, but one of their sheep had been killed. The hole had been repaired and the whole back fence had been hotwired, so the next dog to try coming through, was going to get a nasty shock.

It was a shame about the sheep, but they hadn’t wasted it. After cutting away the part the dogs had chewed on, Greg and Robert had dressed out the sheep and it was currently hanging in the garage for a couple of days to age. Normally April was a bit warm for hanging meat, but this year it was still getting below freezing at night, and the high temperatures were only in the 40s during the day.

“By the way honey, what did you do with the wool from that sheep?”

“We took off the whole skin and I just left the wool on it, I wasn’t sure what you wanted me to do with it.”

“Well, how about if you go ahead and shear the skin, Lisa can spin the wool and we can use it for knitting or felting or whatever we need. Then you can process the skin how ever you want.”

“Maybe I can tan it. I’ll have to look into it. What would we use a sheepskin for though?”

“I have no idea. Why don’t I read up on that while I’m just sitting around? It will help keep me from being bored out of my skull. I mean I need the rest and I’m loving having a babymoon with Miriam, but a person can only sleep so much.”

“I’ll read up on it Susan, I want you to start your midwifery studies again. Debra is getting overwhelmed since the only OB in town left and nobody can get to Jackson right now. I saw Wayne at the last watch meeting and he said she is attending births every single day, and sometimes two or three a day. He didn’t say she was asking for help, but I got the impression that HE wouldn’t mind it if she had some.”

“Well, what about the family practice doctors? There are at least three in the area. I know Scott doesn’t have any experience with births but what about the other two?”

“Dr Yoga isn’t here any more; his wife insisted they go back to Florida to be with her family. They left right after we came out of the basement. Dr Wayne doesn’t have a clue about child birth most of his patients are older. So at the moment Debra is the only show in town.”

“Well no wonder Wayne is upset. Between the Amish ladies she usually does anyway, she has everyone for a twenty mile radius. I wonder how she’s getting to the houses that are further out though.”

“Wayne has a diesel truck that he got working, and a huge tank full of biodiesel. Not to mention the fact that a lot of people are paying her in gas or diesel. So she’s been using Wayne’s truck and bartering the gasoline for other things.”

“How do you know all this?”

“Like I said I saw Wayne at the last watch meeting. Then I asked around. Women aren’t the only ones who gossip you know, we just call it getting the news.”

Susan laughed at that and they went into the dining room. Everyone was assembled and waiting so they could pray together. Charles and Trina still didn’t join in, but they did maintain a respectful silence while everyone else did. Even Trina’s older two children were joining in.

Lunch was simple but palatable. Anne had made chicken and rice soup with some canned green beans as a side dish. She had also made two loaves of sourdough bread. They had yeast left, but were making sourdough bread every other time they baked. This would let them have yeast bread for a longer period of time and also it was helping to acclimate the children and adults that weren’t used to the taste of the sourdough. Conversation around the table was lively.

Susan led off by asking the children if they enjoyed the outdoors.

“We had fun but it’s really cold out there Aunt Susan. I’d almost rather be doing lessons.”

“Don’t worry Rose; you’ll still get schoolwork this afternoon.”

“Oh man, you shouldn’t have said anything Rose. I was enjoying the break.”

“Yeah, well it wouldn’t have mattered Lisa, your mom would have remembered anyway.”

“Maybe not if you hadn’t reminded her stupid.”

“HEY!. Don’t call me stupid you moron.”

“Lisa, Rose. That’s enough. We do not call each other names in this house. Lisa, since you started this argument, you can clean out the pigpen after your lessons are finished. Rose, since you continued it, you

can clean out the goat pen after your lessons are finished. And while you are doing that I suggest you try and get along since I'll be in the barn cleaning the other pens out."

"And just who do you think you are to discipline my child Robert?"

"Trina, let it go. We can talk about it later."

"No Dad, I want to talk about it now. Robert I asked you a question. Just who the Hell do you think you are usurping my parental authority like that?" The last sentence was yelled.

Amy and Ron looked at each other and with Greg, Pat and Kim, quietly took all of the children into the family room for schoolwork. They knew what was coming and didn't think the children needed to see it. When Trina got going it could be really ugly.

"Trina. I have been just as patient as I can be, but enough is enough. You didn't step in to stop Rose and it is not safe to let them have at it that way. All of the children need to learn to work together. These are not normal times and that bickering has no place here. What happens when they start fighting outside and aren't paying attention to their surroundings? We have feral dogs all over the place. They could be attacked by a pack of them and seriously injured because they aren't paying attention to anything but their spat. I am sorry I didn't consult you first, and if you have another punishment in mind, she is your daughter and you have every right to discipline her. I thought that by having the girls clean out pens next to each other I could also talk to them about the seriousness of the situation, and their need to get along without frightening them."

"Yeah right. You totally thought this out ahead of time. That is so much Bull****. You just wanted to remind everyone yet again that you are the Boss around here. I am so sick of your crap and how you order people around all the time. You act so big like you know everything and we'd all be dead if it wasn't for your benevolence and wisdom. We won't even BE here by the time your garden comes in things will be back to normal by then. So all you are doing is taking advantage of the unpaid labor force to get your garden in this year, since your usual slave is recovering from squirting out yet another baby for you."

Well that set Susan right off, and when aroused her temper was every bit as hot as Trina's. They WERE sisters after all.

"Well Trina while we are laying it all out in the open I have a few facts for you.

Fact number one. You would be dead right now if we hadn't taken you in and all three of your children right along with you.

Fact number two. You don't know your *** from a hole in the ground. You've been a parasite for your entire adult life, if it doesn't involve drinking and sleeping around or begging for money you are totally clueless. So having you decide when the garden gets planted or how much we plant would be risking all

of our lives since we need to eat what we grow.

Fact number three. Things will NOT be back to normal anytime soon. You are going to have to get used to a new normal. Try paying attention to the radio broadcasts and the news that the guys bring home from the watch meetings. In fact why don't you go to a watch meeting yourself instead of sitting around on your dead *** while everyone else protects you.

You won't learn to fire a gun properly and your room would be a sty if it wasn't for mom helping your 11 year old daughter clean it up. You have the nerve to sit there and ***** because Robert stepped in to discipline your daughter. That is so pathetic it's laughable. You either completely ignore your children or when someone calls you on it you scream at them. Mom and dad have been doing more parenting of those children than you have since they were born. You don't cook, you don't help outside, in fact all you have done the entire time you've been here is sit around, read books and come to the table to eat. I have had enough. Either get your **** together and start actually pulling your weight around here, or get out of my house. If it wasn't for the children I'd have thrown you out as soon as we came out of the basement.

Fact number four. We have 10 children because I wanted 10 children. I am not anyone's slave least of all Robert's. What you are implying is that he forces me to have children. If you ever say something like that again and I hear you, you'd better start running before I grab the nearest clue by four and beat you senseless with it. "

"Mom, Dad, I'm sorry if I offended you, but I have had enough of Trina's crap. I should have said these things to her awhile ago, but I didn't out of respect for you. She constantly insults us in our own house and acts put upon if we ask her to do anything. Things are hard enough without her adding to it."

"Don't worry about it dear, although I don't think the vulgar language was necessary."

"Actually Anne she was probably cleaning up her language for your sake. Now Trina, I'm going to add my two cents worth. Your sister is right. You have been nothing but deadweight around here and you need to knock that **** off. I HAVE been paying attention to the radio and I'd bet my life on the fact that we are going to be here for a very long time. Instead of complaining that Robert is being high handed, you might try being thankful that you and the children have someplace safe to be right now. The chaos in the urban areas is horrific and getting worse. Just how long do you think you'd last with the children on your own in your apartment? You want to talk slavery, think about what would happen if you were still there when the gangs took over. Not just to you but also to Rose. Start using your head for something other than a hat rack would you?"

Trina was in tears. Sadly they weren't tears of remorse, but tears of rage. How dare they gang up on her. She was in the right here.

"Fine, if that's how you feel, the kids and I can just leave."

“And go where? Have you been listening to anything we’ve been saying? The safest place for you is with other people, family preferably who love you and are willing to help you take care of yourself and the children.”

“Oh you really sound loving too Dad. No, I think we’ll just leave and go back home. You’re probably exaggerating the situation anyway. I know you and Mom don’t like my friends or my apartment building, you think by scaring me you can isolate me from my friends. Well forget that crap, I’m so outta here.”

“FINE. You want to commit suicide, you go right ahead, but you won’t be taking the children Trina. If you try it, I will shoot you myself.”

“MOM!!!!”

“ANNE!”

Trina was stunned. Her mom had always been the one who tried to keep her in the family and sympathized with her situation. For her to turn on Trina like this was a serious blow to Trina. But before she could respond Anne went on.

“Trina, I’m your mother and I love you. But I also love the children. I have waited for 30 years for you to put someone else ahead of yourself and I have finally realized that you never will. This whole rant you just subjected us to was about how we are cramping your style and ruining your good time. You impulsively decided to endanger the lives of those children, simply because you are mad at your sister and miss your friends. I’ve had enough. I will not watch you destroy those children’s lives. So. If you want to leave then do so, but the children stay. If you do stay, I suggest that you try really hard to remember that none of us HAVE to house you or care for you or care for your children. We do so because we love you, and the children. I further suggest that you try really hard to remember that this is Robert and Susan’s home and that it is incredibly stupid to insult the people who are providing a safe home for you and food in your stomach.”

With that, Anne got up and left the room. She was so upset, angry and sad at the same time that she couldn’t bear to remain in the room. Hopefully Trina would listen. If not then she really meant that she would protect her grandchildren by any means necessary, but Dear God, she hoped she didn’t have to.

Chapter Seven: Reality Bites

Trina was still furious, but she was also scared. Her mother had never turned on her before. In fact, Anne had always been her defender. Her threat to leave had been a bluff. She wanted the family to beg her to stay (it was always all about Trina). But they hadn’t. In fact, everyone had basically told her not to let the door hit on the way out.

Self preservation is a marvelous motivator.

“Fine, for mom’s sake I’ll stay; and I’ll even learn to shoot right so I can pull guard duty. I don’t want to upset mom.”

Susan smiled inwardly, Trina wasn’t about to apologize or back down. The whole ‘I’ll do it for mom’ bit was garbage. But since Susan really did love her sister despite everything, she let Trina climb out of the hole she had dug for herself with some grace. Robert also wanted to smooth things over. He loved Trina and her kids too, and was truly frightened about what would happen to them if they did leave.

“I’m very glad you won’t be leaving. Since you need to be comfortable to learn to shoot properly, who would you prefer to learn from?”

“I’d rather learn from Susan, she isn’t going to give me all that macho crap you guys will.”

“That would be fine with me; if it’s ok with you Susan?”

“Sure, I haven’t really practiced lately, and I need to anyway. How about we start tomorrow morning? There is that watch meeting this afternoon, and I don’t know who all is going but the rest of us should stick close to home and keep a look out. Robert, you are going right? Who did you want to take with you?”

“I thought I would leave it up to whoever wants to go, but I’d rather it not be more than three of us, we need most everyone here to look after things.”

“Well, since Dad is pretty savvy about security, he should go and I thought maybe Trina would like to go. That way she can check out the local situation at least. Trina, did you want to attend the watch meeting?”

“Sure as long as Dad is going.”

Sometimes it required more than the patience of a Saint to not reply to Trina’s barbs, but Susan figured it was definitely helping improve her diplomatic skills. It’s too bad Susan wasn’t a delegate to the UN, she’d rule the world by now.

Lunch being pretty much over, the rest of the family got up and went back to whatever chores they had been doing earlier. Susan went into the family room to listen to some of the children’s reading lessons, and help Lisa with her math (Algebra ½). Anne came back to the dining room where Trina was still sitting and began to clear the table.

“Mom?”

“Yes Trina.”

“Did you really mean that you would shoot me?”

“Honestly Trina, I don’t know how far I would go if you tried to take the children away right now. It’s really bad out there, especially in the cities. I have to be honest I’m rather worried about the future. We’ve been pretty safe way out here in the country, but being in a rural environment won’t protect us forever. It’s a very good thing that Susan and Robert are so well known and have good relations with their neighbors, or we wouldn’t be as safe as we are. There is strength in numbers, and I fear we are soon going to need all the numbers we can get.”

Trina started to cry. “Mom, I’m sorry, I have been really selfish and I do want to do better but I don’t really know how to start.”

“Why don’t you start by helping me clean up the lunch dishes, and we’ll talk some more. And Trina....stop throwing darts at Robert. He really doesn’t deserve them, he’s just trying to do his best for all of us. Furthermore Susan is wildly in love with him and the way you treat him really hurts her.

You may not know this, but she and Robert have spent the last ten years stocking up for all of us including you and your three children. They told your Dad and I a few years back. They didn’t ask for any help to do this and they haven’t asked for us to pay them back. Even all the work we are doing now is to ensure that we all eat this coming winter. So you might consider being a little nicer.”

“Well why haven’t they asked us to pay them back? And why didn’t they ask us to help pay for it?”

“I don’t know Trina, why don’t you ask your sister.”

They finished cleaning up after lunch in silence and then Trina went to wash up for the meeting. Anne went to help in the garden.

Chapter 8 Plans...

3:00 pm that day...Robert, Charles and Trina went over to Henry’s place. They had left at about 2:30. Since the horses were being used they had walked. Henry’s place was a big farm (over 300 acres) about a twenty minute walk or a mile by car. Robert knew Henry although not well, as well as many of the other people that were arriving on foot or horseback or wagon. By 3:00 there were about 60 people representing every household for a five mile radius around Henry’s farm.

Henry stepped up to the front of the crowd and asked for quiet.

“Thank you all for coming. I would like to open this meeting with a prayer for guidance.” All heads bowed and Henry began.

“Dear Lord, thank you for bringing us all here safely today. Please guide us as we decide how to best protect our families and neighbors and friends. Help us to work together and be a witness for you in all things, in Jesus name we pray, Amen.”

“Amen”

“Now, to the heart of the matter. I’ll turn this meeting over to Jeffrey since he works for the sheriff and has the most up to date information.”

“Thanks Henry. Well folks, here’s what we know. There is a band of convicts escaped from the prison up in Jackson. They’re working their way towards our area. Now we don’t know quite when they’ll get here since they aren’t traveling at a steady speed. We do know that they’ve already killed two people, but they seem to be avoiding confrontation when they can and just stealing things they need to live.”

“How many convicts are we talking here Jeffrey?” Robert’s next door neighbor John, asked.

“Well John as near as we can figure, there are ten. There were fifteen missing after the riot at the prison, but three of the prisoners were recovered alive not far from the prison and one was found dead about 10 miles south of Jackson. The last prisoner is in the hospital recovering from a gunshot wound to the groin.” This last statement was said with a broad grin and general laughter followed it.

“Ok, I just have to ask...how did the guy manage to get shot in his package?” George another local farmer was still laughing as he posed the question.

“Well George, it seems that he tried to get amorous with a young lady who was most unwilling, and armed. Evidently the guy isn’t used to country girls, he was very indignant that she was armed and worse for him, a decent shot. The young lady on the other hand was quite disgusted with herself for merely grazing him, seems she was trying to shoot his family jewels clean off. Said that nervousness affected her aim.” This report too was given with a broad grin, which was soon one of many broad grins in the crowd. Trina took all of this in and it rather startled her. Most of the men seemed happy that the girl had shot the criminal, and none were upset that she had been armed in the first place. But these same guys expected the women to do all the cooking and cleaning and womanly stuff. She just did not get it.

“Ok, back to the problem at hand. What the sheriff would like us to do is patrol our own area in teams and report anything to his office, so he can coordinate the capture of these idiots without people getting hurt. Do we have any volunteers?”

Just about all hands shot into the air, men as well as women.

“Thanks everyone, but unless we have to I’d rather not have women doing the patrols.”

Well, as one might have guessed this set Trina off.

“Why no women? You just talked about a girl shooting one of these guys and now you say no women. WHAT is it with you people? Women are ok if no man is around, but if you big brave strong men are present the little women should stay in the kitchen?”

Jeffrey, who was very used to dealing with Trina’s type as a police officer, was most patient in his response.

“Well ma’am, it has nothing to do with a woman’s capabilities. I know for a fact that most of the women around here are better shots than the men. However, women are susceptible to getting raped and men aren’t generally. We’ll have enough to worry about when these guys show up without adding that concern. Besides, with the men out on patrol someone is needed to protect the homes and children. I would rather my wife be protecting our children since she IS a better shot than I am. Actually because she is very accurate with a gun, the bad guys are much less likely to get anywhere near my children while she is present. Besides on a very mundane note, I would rather not have a woman other than my wife with me if I have to answer nature’s call and it is not a good idea for the patrols to go out of each other’s sight.”

Trina, red faced, sat down. It’s not that she was stupid, just very very, programmed by the liberal BS she had heard at school and in the media for most of her life. Now, she was beginning to get the idea that maybe the programming wasn’t entirely accurate.

While Trina was sitting there pondering, the men who had volunteered went up to the front and started organizing themselves. Jeffrey was coordinating pairs based on where everyone lived, using a county map on the table set up for the purpose. They didn’t write anything down of course, but every patrol knew the area they were supposed to cover and all the patrols overlapped a bit. Once this was all accomplished, many people left for home wanting to get there before dark. Trina missed all of this she was so deep in thought, and looked up confused when her father called her name.

“TRINA...come on we’re going now.” Charles waited until Trina got up and then they and Robert started home. “Trina, honey, are you alright?”

“I don’t know Dad, I think I need to talk to Mom and Susan when we get home. I just am not getting something.”

“Is it something about the meeting?”

“Yeah Robert it is, but I’d really rather talk it over with Mom and Susan.” Then Trina did something completely new.

“By the way, Robert.”

“Yes Trina?”

“Thanks. And I’m sorry I’ve been such a witch.”

“Your welcome. And I forgive you.” Robert didn’t say “that’s ok”, when it wasn’t, but he was very quick to forgive someone when they apologized.

The rest of the walk home was in near total silence. Both men were thinking about what they could do to improve security, and Trina was thinking about life, the universe and everything. Her world was completely different and she was finally beginning to realize that.

The three arrived back home just in time for supper. It was about 6:00 and they were having a simple supper of bean soup and cornbread. They were having a lot of cornbread lately. It didn’t keep as well as some other things and they wanted to use it up before it became rancid. Susan had stored whole corn from the feed store to grind into cornmeal once they ran out of the already ground stuff, so they would still be able to have cornbread in the future it would just be a lot more labor intensive. It’s too bad the Amish lived so far away, (about 20 minutes by car) they had a miller in their community.

“So, what did they cover at the meeting? Can someone bring the rest of us up to speed?” Pat had wanted to go, but once Charles had mentioned the need for someone to keep watch back at home had been fine with staying back, as long as someone gave him all the important details about the meeting.

“Not much other than to solidify plans for patrolling the area. There are ten convicts from Jackson still on the loose, and the sheriff is hoping to recapture them without anyone getting hurt.”

“So who all is on patrol?”

“Jeff decided to have one patrol from each home or farm. I told him privately that we have more manpower than some of the other areas so he delegated this area to us and I figured we could sit down with the neighbors after supper and plan shifts and things. The Deers can’t really patrol it’s just Victoria and Brad, none of their children are here, although a couple of their granddaughters were staying with them when TSHTF. Brad’s 78 and although he’s pretty healthy his eyesight isn’t all that great anymore. So, if everyone else agrees I’m going to ask him to set up a first aid station at his house. He’s retired but he was in family practice for about 20 years. That way he is still able to contribute, and it’s a real job so it won’t offend his dignity. Then we can patrol his area too without him feeling like he’s a burden. Besides, he’s deathly afraid of firearms. Always has been. His wife isn’t and she keeps a gun but he won’t touch it.”

“How very weird.”

“Not really Pat, he did his residency at a Detroit hospital and saw a lot of gunshot wounds from gang violence.”

“Gang violence? Wasn’t that before his time?”

“Nope. He went to medical school later on, I think he was 35 when he started. It’s actually a pretty neat story. Victoria was pregnant with their eighth child and he told her he wanted to become a doctor. She was tremendously supportive and ran a hair salon out of the house to put him through school. So he was in his forties when he began his residency. That would have been in the early 1970’s. Gang violence wasn’t as bad back then but it still existed. Especially in the cities like Detroit.”

“Oh. Well I guess that makes sense then. Sure we can patrol his property too, if the neighbors don’t have a problem with it.”

“I don’t think they will, he and Victoria are pretty well liked around here. He helped a lot of people out over the years, treating them or their kids; many times when they couldn’t pay him. Always worked something out, even took his payment in the form of food sometimes. Even made house calls, right up until the time he retired. Not many doctors did that; even thirty years ago. Both of them are very active at Church and in the community. Victoria ran the crisis pregnancy center, probably still runs it if someone comes to her for help. They are genuinely nice people both of them.”

“Anyway, that’s the plan at this point. Jeff said he’d rather the ladies watch the home front and the guys do the actual patrolling. Seems at least one of the escapees tried to assault a teenage girl last week. He got shot for his trouble, but it’s still something the sheriff and Jeff are worried about.”

“Who shot him, the girl’s father?” Greg wanted to know.

“Actually the girl he was trying to assault, shot him. Got him in a very sensitive spot too.”

“Bwahahaha oh that is too hilarious.” In Greg’s mental picture the girl looked a lot like Linda Hamilton from the Terminator movies.

“Not really, I’d be willing to bet it was quite traumatizing for the girl. She now has to live with shooting someone; you know. The reality is far different from the movies. It isn’t fake blood in real life.”

“You’re right Susan, I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Don’t worry about it Greg, many people wouldn’t. Maybe it’s because I’m a woman, but it’s really hard to have to live with the fact that you had to deliberately injure someone.”

“How would you know Aunt Susan?”

“Because Rose I had to shoot someone once.”

Everyone at the table except Robert was totally stunned by this announcement. All conversation stopped dead and they all collectively stared at Susan.

“What are you talking about Susan, when did you ever have to shoot someone?”

“I’d rather not talk about it Dad, it happened a long time ago.” Something in Susan’s tone told Charles he really needed to let it go.

“Well... ok.” Charles noted that Robert had not reacted with surprise when Susan had made her ‘announcement’, so he figured he could ask Robert later.

“Well, alrighty then, I guess we should go do evening chores. Who’s going with me?” Most of the children opted to go to the barn with Robert. The littler ones loved collecting eggs still, and the older ones realized that they needed to be out of the house just then. Ron and Pat both went too, they wanted to talk more about patrolling the area. Chores went smoothly and with those out of the way, the children were sent back into the house while the three men went to each of the neighbors homes and enlisted their help in securing the area. Everyone including Brad was whole heartedly in favor of Robert’s plan and they all agreed to the patrol schedule Robert had set up earlier. The last stop was John’s next door and then they planned to call it a night. Two neighbors from the South had agreed to patrol on the first shift. Robert and Pat had the third shift and they both wanted to get some sleep.

They walked up to John’s door and knocked. John answered the door there was no sign of Chris. John was a widower his wife Kathy had died of cancer the previous year.

“Hi John, just wanted to let you know that all the neighbors agreed to the patrol schedule and so you and Chris have the 4-8 am shift tomorrow if that’s still alright?”

“Well, I’ll definitely be able to do it, but I may need to borrow one of you guys to replace Chris tomorrow, he seems to be coming down with something. Says he’s nauseated and has a headache. I sent him to bed already it’s probably just being over tired from traveling. You have the midnight to four shift right?”

“Sure do.”

“Well if he’s still feeling bad, I’ll just let you know then and we can wake someone up if that’s ok.”

“How about we just plan on having Ron do the shift with you this time, if that’s ok with you Ron? Even if Chris is just tired, he needs a full night’s sleep.”

“Yeah I’ll do it no problem. If he’s just tired he needs to sleep it off anyway.”

“That sounds good. Thanks Ron.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Well, we need to get back home and get some sleep before our shift starts. See you at four John.”

“Ok see you then.”

The three men went home and went straight to bed. Robert had a Baby Ben wind up alarm clock that he set for about 3:30am.

It was about 9:00 p.m. when the men went to bed. The children were all in bed also, and the women were sitting at the dining room table having a cup of herbal tea before turning in themselves. They were talking quietly so as not to disturb the rest of the household. While the men had been planning patrols, the women led by Susan had been planning home security.

“I think Trina and I should go to the range tomorrow Mom. Can you look after Miriam for a couple of hours? I don’t want to take her, it’s too loud, and that way I can concentrate on teaching Trina. If the men are gong to be tied up patrolling the area, we all need to be able to take care of things here so they don’t have to worry about that too. Even if the two legged predators don’t show up, we can pretty much bet that the four legged ones will. A feral dog is actually more dangerous because you can’t negotiate with one. On the other hand, you don’t have to make a decision about whether or not to shoot one.”

“What does that mean? Shoot all dogs on sight?”

“Yeah Amy, it pretty much does mean that. If they are on or near our property, they are to be regarded as feral. I know you haven’t been doing much of that but you know that all of the guys have shot at least one dog. They aren’t pets at this point. They are wild and hungry and they’ll look at the stock AND the children as food. Besides, it’s actually kinder to put them down than to have them starve to death. By next winter the local game will be pretty scarce and they will get a lot more aggressive. I’d rather take them out now while they are still somewhat civilized relatively speaking. At least right now they are eating regularly and they sometimes hesitate a bit. That will not happen if they are starving.”

“I guess that makes sense, but I still feel bad about killing them.”

“Normally I would too, but not in this situation. I’d rather the children eat than the dogs.”

“So, what you’re saying is that we’re doing it for the children?”

“Yeah I guess so Kim. Wouldn’t the liberals be proud of me.” Susan grinned. Kim, Amy, Anne and even Trina grinned back.

“Ok, I’m getting overtired, it’s making me punchy. I’m going to bed. Trina, how about we go right after breakfast?”

“That sounds good to me Susan.”

“Goodnight everyone.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight”

“Night Honey,”

“Night.”

“Goodnight John Boy, goodnight Mary Ellen”. Everyone laughed and went to bed. Trina was really looking forward to getting Susan alone, she wanted to talk to her about some things...

Chapter 9: This isn’t your ordinary flu...

The night passed pretty peacefully. The convicts were still holed up somewhere to the north; evidently enjoying the plunder they already had. Robert had asked John how Chris was feeling when they had changed shifts. John said that Chris was feeling pretty bad. He was running a fever and said he felt all stuffed up. Robert suggested that John ask Brad to stop by in the morning and check on Chris if he wasn’t feeling any better.

Ron came in when they were relieved and said that they had stopped in and asked Brad to go over and check on Chris, he had headed out with them and the two had dropped Ron at home and gone on to John’s.

8:30 am: Robert and Susan’s house. Breakfast was over with and it being Sunday everyone was getting ready for church. Susan had forgotten that it was Sunday, she and Trina had agreed to put off target practice until after church. Normally they would have waited until Monday, but with the situation being what it was Susan didn’t want to wait that long. As they were getting everyone into the wagon, Brad came walking across the front yard towards them from John’s house.

“Hello Brad, how is Chris?”

Brad stopped about ten feet from the wagon and looked at them soberly.

“Robert, Susan, I have some bad news. Chris is dead.”

“WHAT!!! HOW?”

“I’m not sure yet. From what John has said he had all the symptoms of the flu. But the flu was not the cause of death, at least not directly. Chris had an acute Asthma attack. Whatever illness he had triggered his asthma, and by the time I got there it was too late. He died shortly after John and I got to John's place.

“ Oh no, how incredibly sad for John. I'd like to go see him, but what about the flu Chris had? Is it contagious?”

“I don’t know for sure Susan, but I’m acting as though it were. You might want to rethink going to church this morning, especially you Susan, that baby shouldn’t be out and about until I figure out what this is. Since Chris came home from school yesterday, I’m praying that it isn’t that avian flu we’ve heard reports of from the cities. Chris was going to a smaller school, but it had a very similar symptom pattern. even though Chris didn't die from it he did have some type of flu and I DO know the flu in the cities is pretty lethal.”

“ Oh Brad I hope it isn't bird flu. John was over here yesterday. How is John, by the way?”

“He’s doing ok, but he wasn’t prepared for the loss and he’s grieving pretty hard. It doesn’t help that I asked him to quarantine himself until we know whether or not this thing is communicable.”

“Brad, we can’t leave him all alone with nothing but his son’s body to keep him company. Someone needs to go sit with him. He still hasn’t gotten over Kathy’s death. I’m sure he’s beating himself up over leaving Chris to go on patrol. I don’t want him doing anything while in a state of depression. At the very least, someone needs to help him bury Chris.”

“I know Susan, but I can’t stay with him and I can’t really ask someone to go over there until I can guarantee their safety.”

“I’ll go.” Greg figured he was the logical one to go. He had no family to worry about and he knew about loss.

“Greg, what if it’s the bird flu?”

“If it is I’ve probably already been infected. I’ve been working with John on learning how to operate the radio for the past several weeks. I was over there most of yesterday too. John said he wanted a younger man to know how to work the HAM system in case Chris didn’t make it home, and/or he had another heart attack. John’s a great guy and I don’t want him to be alone right now. So, I’m going.”

Greg got down off of the wagon and began walking over to John’s place.

“Tell him we send our love and we’re praying for him Greg.” Greg waved at Susan to let her know he had heard.

“Well I guess we should all go back into the house, there’s no sense in exposing everyone at church.” We should also disinfect the doorknobs and walls and such. It’s most likely too late for that but it will give us something productive to do.” Anne did not like sitting around she’d rather be doing something.

“That’s a good idea Mom. Susan, we need to set up a sick room of some sort in case anyone comes down with this thing. Even if it isn't the bird flu there's no sense in getting everyone sick. I think we should use Mom and Dad’s room, it’s right next to the bathroom and somewhat cut off from the rest of the house.”

“That’s true Pat, but where will Dad and Mom sleep?”

“They’ll have to move into the living room with Kim and Mandy and I. The other sleeping areas are already pretty full. Is that ok with you Dad, and Mom?”

“ It’s fine with me. I hope we don’t have to quarantine anyone but you’re right it does make sense to get set up before hand in case we do have illness in the house. I’ll move things out while your mother is disinfecting. Susan, I think you should go lie down. The best way to keep from getting sick is to stay healthy. That means getting enough rest, and you just had that baby 5 days ago.”

“Yes, Dad.” Susan went into the house muttering under her breath about being smothered by mother hens. Robert heard her but didn’t say anything. As far as he was concerned everyone could mother hen her all they wanted to. Susan had a terrible habit of trying to do too much too soon after the birth of a baby, and this time around it was a lot more dangerous than usual, especially if they WERE dealing with the bird flu...

Chapter 10: This makes no sense...

In case you were wondering, it WAS the avian flu. Poor Chris had been roommates with a very nice Asian student. Well at least he seemed nice. Kim was actually a member of the Chinese military and had volunteered to take the virus to the United States. Kim's superiors had told him that his parents would be taken care of; and that the illness was designed to make people sick but was not lethal. His superiors had lied of course, but Kim was far too dead to care. The lethality rate was about 75%, but there was no rhyme or reason to who died and who lived. Well, not one that human beings understood anyway. God has a plan remember. When the flu hit the community that Robert and Susan lived in though it was going to be very difficult for some to remember that...

Sunday afternoon, around 2:00p.m.

Susan woke up from her nap feeling well rested and bored. However, she had read the book *The Great Influenza* and knew that her best hope of remaining healthy was to be careful and not push it, so she nursed Miriam and then sat around and read for the afternoon. At 3:00 p.m. she prayed a Divine Mercy chaplet and asked God to watch over her family and community and to please give them the grace to cope with whatever trials He sent their way. Since their property was fenced, they had let the children go outside along with the usual supervision. It would actually be more dangerous to keep everyone cooped up in the house. Besides they were setting up an irrigation system with the well and some old hose and water jugs, in case the rainfall wasn't all that stellar. They needed the garden to produce this year. Another couple of weeks and the cold weather crops could go in...maybe. It was still a cold spring.

Anne had spent the bulk of the afternoon cleaning everything in the house with bleach and water. Doorknobs, stair railings, even the walls that the little people tended to touch. She had all of the toothbrushes soaking in hydrogen peroxide and planned to give everyone their own glass for tooth brushing. Dixie cups would have been better, but they had run out and so would have to make do. She was feeling a little tired now but chalked it up to all the work she had done...

"Hi Mom, you look beat, why don't you sit down in here for awhile? Someone else can make dinner I'm sure."

"Trina's already taking care of dinner, and I am a bit tired. But the entire house is clean and the bedroom is set up in case someone gets sick."

"Mom, you didn't clean all by yourself did you? You were exposed yesterday too you know."

"Actually the girls helped quite a bit, but some things I just felt better taking care of myself."

"Just be careful Mom, you DO NOT need to be getting run down right now."

"I know dear. But if I get the flu, I get the flu. There isn't a whole lot I can do about it either way."

"No, but you can try and minimize the chances that you'll die from it."

"Honey, if God decides it's my time then it's my time. I'm not worried about it."

"Well I am. I'm not ready to lose you ok?"

"You'll never be ready dear. I wasn't ready to lose my parents either. But it's one of those things that you learn to bear."

"Ok, this is really creeping me out. Let's talk about something else."

This they proceeded to do for the next two hours until supper. Everyone seemed healthy all evening, and after evening prayer, they turned in around 9:00 p.m. No one had watch until the midnight to four shift. Most of the neighbors were either the only man in the house or older so Robert, Charles, Ron and Pat had agreed to take the midnight to four and the four to eight shifts every night. That way, an adult male would always be home at night at the other houses, and there would be at least two present at Robert and Susan's. The shifts were the same for everyone each day, consistency made it easier to plan chores and things. It also made the people on patrol more familiar with how their area looked normally during their watch shift. Theoretically this would make something unusual more easily noticed. John and Greg had been excused from patrol, John because of his grief and Greg because he needed to stay with John and take care of the radio system.

At midnight when Charles got up for his shift, he noticed that Anne was tossing and turning in the bed. He checked on her and discovered that she was running a fever. Charles was normally the calmest of men, but he absolutely adored his wife and he was instantly terrified.

"**** * * * * *!!!! Pat, WAKE UP!!!! Your mother has a fever!"

"WHAT!!! Oh God, please! NO!!" Pat sprang out of bed and threw some pants on. He went to Anne and checked on her much as Charles had done. She was feverish to the touch and was very restless. "Ok Dad, we need to get her into the other room now. Can you open the door for me?"

"No but you can open it for me." Charles had already picked Anne up and was carrying her towards the master bedroom. He gently laid Anne down on the bed and turned to Pat.

"I'm going to wake up Ron, he'll have to take my shift for me, I'm not leaving your mother."

"I'm already up Dad and I agree, you should stay with Mom, Robert and I will just take both shifts."

"Pat, I'm taking the walkie talkie with me, please ring if you need us." Robert didn't say it but what he meant was, if Mom gets really bad. "I'll stop at John's and ask Greg to ring up Fr. Tom on the HAM. Maybe he can get out here to give Mom the Sacrament of the Sick."

"Your Mother-in-law does NOT need Last Rites Robert!!!"

Robert, as a home schooling Dad slipped into teaching mode without even thinking about it.

"Dad, it's not referred to as Last Rites anymore or Extreme Unction, or any of the other things people used to call it. It is properly referred to as the Anointing of the Sick. The purpose of the sacrament was always to anoint an ill person and lay hands on them, (just as the Bible says) it was just that the English translation was lacking in earlier times. A person can get anointed as many times as they are ill. Since Mom is a practicing and devout Catholic it will bring her consolation and comfort."

Robert abruptly realizing what he was doing, and that this wasn't one of the children; stopped at that point and abruptly shifted topics.

"Pat, I think the best thing you can do is keep her hydrated and provide comfort measures. If it looks like she is having difficulty breathing, put her upright and do your best. And PRAY."

Robert and Ron took off to relieve the watch patrol. Robert did stop and ask Greg to call Father Tom, and check on John. John was still healthy physically but not so well emotionally. He was grieving pretty hard and had even gotten angry with Greg when Greg suggested prayer as a way to relieve his anguish a bit. John was a believer, just mad and not quite ready to forgive God for taking his family. Greg understood and kept his peace for the moment. He reached the rectory (another man from the parish—a widower with grown children, a HAM set-up and license, and a diesel truck had moved into the rectory with Fr. Tom. His name was also Pat, and he figured he could be of more help by driving Fr. Tom around to minister to the faithful, than he could patrolling (his eyesight wasn't the greatest anymore) and since the phones were out he could help people get in touch with the good priest. Pat took the message and said he would inform Fr. Tom which he did as soon as he got off the phone. There were, however, several other calls at the same time for the good padre's services, the flu it seems had infected more than one person in the area. Fr. Tom got his oil for anointing and his prayer book and they went to the people that needed him. Pat handed him a box of disposable masks.

"Here Father, wear one when you are in with the sick people. If this is that flu that's going around, you need to stay healthy, to help the rest of us."

"Thank you Pat, that's a good idea. I'll do just that."

Since the Schneiders were rather far out their house was one of the last on the list although one of the first to call. Such is reality in a rural area, when fuel is low. Fr Tom did not reach the Schneiders house until after 6:00 a.m.

"Thank you for coming Fr Tom, please come and see Mom right away, she is having a hard time breathing and I'm really afraid."

"Hello young man, and who are you please?"

"I'm Pat, Susan's brother. I've been nursing my Mom since I have the most experience except Susan. Susan is really upset because we won't let her near Mom but she just had the baby and..."

"Whoa, slow down there Pat. I'll talk to Susan when I've seen your mother, but I think you are entirely prudent to keep her away."

Fr. Tom walked into the bedroom as he and Pat were speaking. Anne was awake and restless.

"Mom, Father Tom is here".

"Hello Father, could you hear my confession, just in case I..."

"Certainly my dear. Pat I'll need you to step out. If your mother needs you I'll call you right back in. "

Pat left the room and Anne made her confession. Then Father anointed her with oil and laying his hands on her, prayed for her healing if it be God's will. This process left Anne pretty tired and she fell asleep during the anointing. She did seem to be breathing easier, although since he wasn't a doctor Father Tom couldn't really be sure. After washing his hands, the priest went out to talk to the rest of the family.

"How is she Father? and thank you for coming."

"Your mother seems to be holding her own in there Susan."

" Pat said you had several other calls. Has anyone died besides John's son?"

"No, although there are a couple of people in the hospital with breathing trouble. They are both on ventilators but the hospital in town only has three. We called up to the city hospital to see if they had more, but they have flu cases too and most of their ventilators are being used already."

"What about you Father, it would be horrible if you got sick."

"I'll certainly be taking precautions, but I'm not going to stop ministering to the sick. Hopefully there won't be an epidemic. So far the only people to get it besides your mother are the college kids that just came home. If everyone just stays home for a couple of weeks this thing will burn itself out. I suggested to Pat that he announce that over the HAM and hopefully the people with working radios will hear the message from EBS. They are announcing it in the major cities to try and get a handle on the outbreak there."

"Fr. I'm worried about my father. He stopped practicing the faith before I was born and no-one can pin him down on what he believes. Mom always said he was just mad about his childhood, but I'm really scared that if Mom dies it will just make him more angry with God. Mom was his whole world and I don't know how he'd deal with the loss. I honestly don't know how I'd deal with it and I DO believe." Susan started crying again.

"Pray Susan, that's all you personally can do. Leave the outcome in God's hands, both concerning your mother, and your father."

"I'll try Father but it's hard." Susan was about to continue when Julien came into the room.

"Mom, I don't feel well."

"Ok honey, why don't you go lay down?"

"Mom, I think I should go lay down in the sick room..." Julien turned green and ran for the bathroom.

"PAT!!!! Julien is throwing up! I think he has the flu!"

And so it went. First Julien then one by one everyone else in the house came down with the flu. Everyone that is; except Pat, Renee, Susan the two youngest babies; Jade and Miriam. Most members of the family had lighter cases and Fortunately Susan had read up on the subject enough to confine everyone strictly to bed upon onset of the first symptoms. Then she kept them there until well after they proclaimed they felt better. The original sickroom was obviously too small so the living room and the dining room had the beds placed in them as more and more of the family became ill. It was not only closer to the bathroom it was also closer to the kitchen and it was easier for the healthy to care for the sick that way. Pat was still adamant that Susan not get too close to the sick members of the family and so he and Renee cared for them while Susan cared for the babies and did the cooking. Thankfully among their preps were a large amount of disposable dishes and napkins which certainly helped make clean up easier, Pat just burned everything once a day in the burn pit. The plastic kind of smelled, but it was better than their other options and prevented the infection from hanging around. Pat did make sure to stand upwind from the smoke though.

As a result, not one member of the Schneider family died. For the better part of four weeks, they didn't see anyone except for Fr Tom twice. The first time he simply came, anointed the entire household and heard everyone's confession that wanted to confess, and had reached the age of reason (around 7). The second time was during the funeral Mass for the dead, after the epidemic had swept through the community. The dead had already been buried by then, but a Mass of resurrection was celebrated for them by the parish once the danger of contagion had passed.

Most people buried their dead on their home property since getting to the cemetery wasn't easily accomplished and many of the living were still recovering from the flu. As a community they had been hit but lightly, distance between houses having a lot to do with that.

The final death toll for the entire county was only around 150 people. In a county with around 25,000 souls, this was very good news. Most of the dead were the elderly or those with compromised immune systems. However, there was a problem. Those that became ill but survived had a rather long recovery time. This meant that many of the farmers put in very little in the way of early crops or none at all since they were either ill or recovering from the flu. The only farmers that got most of their crops in on time were the Amish. They already had a cooperative system in place and those farmers that were sick had their fields planted by neighbors and healthy family members. The Amish even planted some of their

non-Amish neighbors crops or cared for their livestock. This would become VERY important later on.

In the more urban areas however, the story was completely different. Population density had a lot to do with it. People living closer together passed on the infection more easily. The sheer number of people getting ill overwhelmed the health care infrastructure. Water, and sanitation crews became overwhelmed since a large percentage of the workforce got sick. So trash in the streets fed the rats, and sewer backups caused more problems which led to secondary epidemics of cholera, dysentery and other water borne illnesses which in turn made the sanitation and healthcare situations worse. People who could flee the cities did so in short order. People who couldn't died by the millions.

In the Mountain:

Dick Cheney reluctant president, sat in his office and tried to absorb the information he was getting. Death tolls, lack of food, lack of people for food production, etc... it was just too much bad news. And now, Senator Clinton was in front of him screaming that they needed to call in the UN.

"Dick, (She couldn't bring herself to call him Mr. President), you've got to call in the UN to restore order. It's total chaos out there and people are looting and rioting in all the cities."

"What could the UN do that we can't do with our own Military Hillary?"

"Not a thing except confiscate food & firearms and redistribute the food."

"We all know how much you hate the UN Rick, but this is a crisis. People are dieing all across the country."

"Hillary, I'm not going to use that as an excuse to violate the Constitution. I don't plan to govern by fiat here, and I'm certainly NOT calling in the UN."

The President came to a decision and turned to the Marine standing to his right.

"Please ask the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to join us in my office."

"Yes Sir." The Marine who was an aide to the Chairman, saluted, left the room and within ten minutes the Chairman joined them.

"Good morning Kevin."

"Good morning Mr. President."

"Kevin, call me Dick. I'm not at all in the mood to be formal. Could you give me a briefing on the current state of the military in the country?"

"Yes Sir, We've had most of the active duty people confined to base since the epidemic started. Those that had been on leave were quarantined for 14 days before being returned to their units. As a result we have had about 2000 fall ill service wide and less than 50 die most of secondary pneumonia infections."

"That's the first good news I've heard all day. How soon can we get them MOPPED up and bringing in food and supplies to the urban areas? Can we provide any medical support?"

"Well, Sir, we've been standing by awaiting your orders, we can probably have our people moving within hours. If you'd like to give me a list of the areas you want us to go into first...?"

"Honestly Kevin it doesn't really matter. Start with the areas closest to the bases and then move outward increasingly. That will get the maximum number of people help in the shortest amount of time. I assume you've already been taking care of the dependants?"

They were moved onto base right after the first attack sir. Our people can do their job better if they aren't worrying about the safety of their families. I'll pass the word to the base commanders and we'll get moving on this right away."

"Fine. Make sure the base commanders know we are on an AID mission only. I do NOT want to hear of any confiscation of any property, food or otherwise. My previous order about capitol crimes still stands. If a crime is committed by a civilian, turn it over to the local law enforcement if there is one. If not, detain the suspect until a civil authority can take care of it. I'm not going to turn this country into a police state. That's just what the terrorists want."

The General saluted, and left. Hillary who had been present for the entire exchange sneered at his retreating back.

"Are you out of your mind? This is the perfect opportunity to restore law and order. If we have to use the military at least use them to get control."

"Hillary, you are beginning to sound like a broken record. I'm not going to turn this country into a police state. I've already made that perfectly clear. Now get off it."

"Fine!!! And what happens when people start shooting at the military?"

"I expect them to shoot back. Which Kevin knows perfectly well. Look, just because some people are idiots or criminals, doesn't mean that everybody is."

Hillary started to go on, but the President cut her off.

"Hillary, if you don't want to come up with some concrete solutions to this problem, please leave. I've

had about all the stress I can handle today. In fact, I'm going to take a nap."

And he walked out, again leaving the Senator from NY furious and sputtering behind him. As he walked to his personal quarters, Dick reflected to himself that ****ing off Hillary was about the only bright spot these days....

Meanwhile back at the ranch....

Over at John's house, Greg was kept very busy calling people on the HAM. Brad and Fr Tom, as well as Keith, the Lutheran pastor, and Jamie; who was a Non-denominational pastor in town were all called upon by those stricken. Some of the people calling went to different churches but couldn't reach their own pastor. None of the three men asked about membership. In the spirit of true Christian charity, they went wherever they were called. Keith and Jaimie were both married with children, and exposed themselves again and again to the contagion. After the first rash of cases Fr Tom invited them to stay at the rectory with him. In this way, they could be available to anyone that needed them, (neither had access to a HAM) and they wouldn't expose their own families to the disease. The Anglican pastor, whose church was next to the Catholic church, was also living alone (his wife had died many years previous and his children were grown) but he continued to abide at home since he was a HAM operator himself. When he was called out he just walked next door and asked Pat to drive him wherever he needed to go.

Neither Greg nor John was stricken with the Flu, which would have been terrific, except for the deep depression that John slipped into. He just couldn't seem to get over the death of his son, and at the funeral, during the first week of the epidemic, he hadn't said more than two words to anyone including the pastor. (Keith in this case-John was Methodist, but the Methodist pastor was one of the earliest people to come down with the virus.) Greg tried to talk to John and Keith reminded him that his loved ones were with God, but it didn't seem to make that much of an impact. With everyone else being so busy taking care of their loved ones, during the next several weeks, John didn't get many visitors other than the occasional person coming over to request that a pastor be called. One night, about eight weeks after his son's death, John took his own life. He hung himself. Greg found him the following morning along with a note and a will that left all of his worldly possessions to Greg. The letter read...

Dear Greg,

Thank you for your support and encouragement these past weeks. I have come to the realization that all my loved ones are already in Heaven and I want to be there too. In the drawer is my will. I wrote it and Keith witnessed it the day of the funeral. I'm leaving everything to you, since my family is all gone and you've been so good to me. Thank you for trying to help, but obviously with everything going on God just forgot to come and get me so I'm taking care of it myself. Sorry if there's a mess.

John

The funeral for John was very small just Greg, pastor Keith, Fr Tom and the Schneiders. It was all the more sad because unlike the flu deaths, this one was avoidable.

"Fr Tom, what happens to Mr. John now?" Lisa had really liked their neighbor and wanted to be told that he was in Heaven.

"You mean does he go to Heaven or Hell?"

"Well, yes. I know that suicide is considered a mortal sin, but John wasn't Catholic, and I also think he wasn't in his right mind. Is there a chance for him? I mean what if he didn't know it was a sin?"

"Too bad for him. He's going to Hell."

"Actually Charles, that's not what the church teaches."

"Since when? I went to Catholic school for 12 years and the nuns told us suicides went to Hell. Along with people who eat meat on Friday, get divorced and remarried and a whole bunch of other things."

"Unfortunately a lot of people your age have told me similar stories. That list of things however is overly simplistic and doesn't take into account the mercy of God at all. If you'd like I can explain what the Catholic church does teach about it."

"Sure go ahead. This ought to be good." Susan thought this was not going to be a civil discussion and shepherded all the children back into the house. Trina quietly asked her to take baby Jade too, she wanted to hear the discussion.

"Let's start with what I'm sure, you were taught. Someone who commits a mortal (deadly) sin and doesn't repent goes to Hell. Right?"

"Yep." Charles was smug.

"Ok, what constitutes a mortal sin?"

"Grave matter, full knowledge, full consent of the will." Charles was still smug.

"What does THAT mean?" Trina wanted to know.

"Well Trina, your father is right, but let me rephrase it for you. In order to be mortal (deadly) sin, the church teaches that the action has to be a serious sin, you have to know it's a serious sin, and you have to do it anyway without coercion. If one of those conditions isn't present it is not a mortal (deadly) sin although it is still a sin."

"Hold on there Tom. I understand what you are saying but I'm not sure I agree with you. Sin is sin is sin. There aren't degrees of sin. That just isn't Biblical." Keith knew that Catholics were also Christians, but some of their beliefs were just, well, unbiblical.

"Actually Keith, the church bases the teaching of mortal versus venial sin upon 1 John 5:17 "All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly. Catholic belief about sin is this; Venial sins damage our relationship with God, but they are not deadly. Mortal sins however destroy our relationship with God and unless we repent, a mortal sin will eventually separate us from God for all eternity. Since we don't know John's state of mind when he died, one of those conditions may not have been fulfilled and therefore he might have been in a state of Grace when he died."

"And according to you, if he WAS in his right mind, he wouldn't be "in a state of Grace" as you put it. But that would mean you could lose your salvation."

"Yes, Catholics believe that you must die in a state of Grace to go to heaven. Which really; is not that different from what many Christians believe."

"Well now I know that's wrong, Once you are saved you are saved. That is very different from what you just said."

"In verbiage maybe, but in actual belief not really. Let me put it this way. If someone who believed they were 'saved' their whole life and was active in church read their Bible etc...started having an affair, divorced their spouse, publicly rejected God and His rules and then died while acting like that, what would you say about that person?"

"Well that they were never really saved to begin with."

"Well, ok, but the person and everyone that knew them thought they were. So my question to you would be how can anyone ever really be 100% sure that they aren't just fooling themselves? How can you know you're saved?"

"By their fruits."

"Ok, but up until the last month of our example person's life they had produced great fruit. How can you KNOW 100% that it isn't an illusion?"

"well, when you put it that way, I guess we just have to trust."

"Which is the same as the Catholic position. We've all been redeemed by the blood of Christ, and we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling. We trust in the mercy of God but we don't presume on it. In other words, I do my best to pick up my cross and follow Him and trust him to catch me when I

fall. But I still have to do my part."

"Which is also relevant to the question Lisa asked. Lisa I can't tell you where John is. I don't know what was in his heart or mind when he died. But I do trust in the Mercy of God and I will be praying for his soul. And before you can ask Keith, yes I think we should pray for people who are no longer with us. The church is one body. Catholics believe that the church Militant (Those on Earth), the church Suffering (those in Purgatory) and the Church Triumphant (those in Heaven) are all members of one body and should pray for one another. Now I know you don't believe in Purgatory Keith but that's a whole other topic, that maybe we can discuss later."

"Sure Tom, I'd like that." Keith still didn't agree with his friend on much of what they had just discussed, but it was fascinating to him to learn how the Catholics developed their beliefs.

"Anyway, Charles, does that clarify things for you at all?"

"Yes actually it does somewhat." Charles was thoughtful for the rest of the walk back to the house. Trina was very thoughtful too.

As they were nearing the house, Trina asked a question.

"Father Tom?"

"Yes?"

"What about someone who's done really bad stuff and is sorry for it. I mean I know about Confession and everything, but aren't some sins unforgivable?"

"Trina, God can forgive anything we repent of. The only 'unforgivable' sin is the one we don't repent of."

"Oh....Father Tom?"

"Yes Trina?"

"Do you have time to hear my confession?"

"I always have time for that."

"It's probably going to take a long time Father. I haven't been to Confession since the second grade."

"And I would imagine you don't remember every sin you committed since then either do you?"

"No Father I know I don't. Can I still go to confession?"

"Of course Trina. We'll go through and help you to remember as much as you can, and then you can also tell God that you are sorry for all your sins even the ones you don't remember. That is still a valid confession. Then if you remember something later you can confess it the next time you receive the Sacrament. But it will be forgiven whether you remember it or not. The important thing is to have repentance in your heart for ALL your sins, even the ones you've forgotten, because they have offended God. And Trina, one more thing."

"Yes Father?"

"Welcome Home."

"Chapter Eleven: Working together..."

They were quiet for the rest of the walk home and when they got there, Trina and Father Tom went off and Trina made her confession. When she came out she had obviously been crying but she also looked happier than anyone had seen her look in a very long time. Susan asked Father Tom and Keith (who had waited) to stay to supper, which they both politely declined citing a need to get back to the rectory.

Dinner was a silent, rather somber affair. People were trying to absorb all that they had been through over the past four months. So let's bring us up to date...

Mid February: A Nuclear Strike takes out half the country and most of the government. Dick Cheney succeeds to the presidency when George W. Bush is killed during the attack.

End of March: Robert and Susan's baby Miriam is born.

Beginning of April through mid June: An Influenza pandemic further devastates the cities. The more rural areas see far fewer fatalities, but due to illness many farmers are too late to get their staple crops into the ground. The Amish however do get most of their fields planted. It is a cold spring but not excessively so, just 5-10 degrees cooler than usual on average.

Mid June: where we are at the moment. Been a busy five months hasn't it?

"So, Keith, it looks like this epidemic has about burned itself out. Not that you aren't welcome, but maybe you can go home to your family pretty soon."

"Actually Tom, I wanted to talk to you about that. How would you feel about joining our family at my home? There is strength in numbers you know and maybe it would be better if all of us pastors were easy to reach. I don't have a HAM setup, but I do have a large house."

"Well, normally Keith I'd say sure, but you live really far out. It would actually make more sense for your family to join us here at the rectory. People are already used to contacting you here and since we are in town, it would be safer. Your congregation is more than welcome to use the church for Sunday Services. We could either stagger the times or you could use the social hall. We also have the old school building to use and we could ask Jaimie if he wants to join us as well. Being as Saint Anthony's is centrally located, it would provide the most access to the most people. It would also enable us to coordinate relief efforts. I have a feeling it's going to be a lean year for a lot of people."

"That's actually not a bad idea Tom. We could ask Brad if he doesn't mind opening his church for services too since he's right next door to you. Are you sure you won't mind all the children though?"

"Heh heh, I raised three of my nephews, their parents not being exactly up to the task. The only difficulty we might have is that the bedrooms are rather small and we'll have to double up the children some. Let's sit down with Jaimie and Brad and figure this out when we get back."

"Sounds good to me."

And that's what they did. Once they had discussed it, it was decided that Jaimie and his family would move into the Anglican Church rectory with Brad, and Keith and his family would move in with Tom and Pat. For Sunday Services, Brad would use the Anglican church, Father Tom would use the main sanctuary of the Catholic Church, Jaimie would use the social hall (his congregation was about 200 people and the social hall sat 250) and Keith would use the gym from the old school, which sat about 600 people. His congregation was normally about 325, but a large number of people from the other churches in the area had started going to his services when they could no longer reach their own pastor. So his services had been hovering around 450-500 people on a given Sunday-before the epidemic. Sometimes people got in from outlying areas and sometimes they didn't.

The change of venue was announced over the HAM radios and also over the local radio station which had begun broadcasting pertinent news at noon each day. Gasoline was running short although there was bio-diesel from a plant in the area. The Sheriff was driving his personal vehicle which was a diesel pick-up, and the gasoline was being rationed to the radio station and the ambulances. The electric grid was still down but the local hospital had solar back-up believe it or not, so they had electricity, although it was being utilized for critical needs only.

Meanwhile back at the farm...

"Do you guys plan to start patrolling again soon?"

"Actually we have been all along. People just filled in as people got sick."

"Oh."

"Don't feel too bad Susan, you can't notice EVERYTHING."

"Honey, we need to talk about the garden."

"What about it?"

"Well, I put in tomatoes, but I don't know how much of a harvest we'll get. I used the short season seeds because I was worried about a shortened growing season, but even so, it's still pretty cool out. I also got them to plant the seed potatoes before the epidemic started, so we might be able to harvest those and the peas, but I didn't get any melons at all, no cabbage, and we aren't going to be able to plant corn or grain this year. Winter Wheat maybe, but that won't be until later in the year and we'll run out of grain before we harvest it. We just didn't have the money to put up enough for everyone. I can plant beans still, I can put in carrots and mangels for the cow, and squash, if we plant a short season variety I might get pumpkins but I just don't think we are going to have a lot of variety this coming winter. We can't afford to butcher anything except the hogs, we need more breeding stock. I was thinking about riding down to Levi's and asking about trading our bull calf for one of his so I can breed the cow again. I'd like a second cow, but no-one is taking money anymore and we don't really have anything of value to trade.

"Well, maybe we can trade squash and tomatoes with somebody for grain."

"Who? Most of the farmers around here didn't get their crops into the ground either. The ones that did are going to have planted their own house gardens and won't need to trade. Most of the skills we have are the same skills that everyone who we would want to trade with would have. I can sew, and you can farm and build things, but so can everyone we know. I think we're in trouble here honey."

"Let me talk to the neighbors and see what we can come up with."

"Ok. I'm not going to mention this until I can get the adults alone, I don't want to start a panic among the children."

"Just put in everything seed wise that you think we can still grow. How about planting the cabbages in a shadier part of the property so it doesn't get bitter?"

"We could try it but I don't want to use up all the seed in case it doesn't work, we don't have more for next year. Hey, I just had a thought, if you and the guys could get us a greenhouse built with some wood and some of that 6 mil plastic we have in the garage, I could plant some stuff in pots and extend out the growing season a bit."

"How about if we try planting a section of land and raise a plastic canopy over it to extend out the growing season?"

"We could try it, but I don't know if it would work. Again, let's not use all the seed. What do you want to plant?"

"Corn. It doesn't have as long a seed viability as the grain and even if we just plant enough to save for seed next year we'll be better off than we otherwise would be. I can talk to Greg about using John's grazing land, since he left everything to Greg and he's pretty much eating over here most of the time anyway. Then we wouldn't have to worry about where to get feed for the animals."

"That would be a pretty tall greenhouse. And what about radiation in the grass, won't that hurt the animals or at least make them unfit for human consumption?"

"Well I have some 12 foot 2X4's that should be high enough for corn. On the grass, if we had gotten higher levels of fallout it would probably be a factor, but we didn't really get much so I'm not too worried. I can ask Tim (the vet) if you want."

"Well, it can't hurt to ask, but you're probably right."

"Let me go talk to Greg before I forget...hmmm I wonder who that is."

Robert looked out the window to see Wayne, Debra's husband pull up. He went to the door to greet him, but the look on Wayne's face stopped him cold.

"Hi Bob, is Susan here?"

"Yeah Wayne she's inside." Robert wanted to ask what was up but couldn't quite bring himself to do so. He'd find out soon he knew.

"Hi Susan, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine Wayne, what's the matter? Is something wrong with Debra?"

"No, well, yes. She died about a week ago. She went to a birth and caught that da** flu. She was gone within two days."

"Oh Wayne, I am SO sorry." Susan set down the baby and gave Wayne a hug. He was very stiff in her arms for about thirty seconds, and then she felt him give in to the grief. He started sobbing in her arms, and she just held him and let him cry. Robert took Miriam and quietly left the room. For several minutes everyone in the house could hear the sobs, and then they quieted, and from the next room Anne and Robert could hear Susan talking quietly to Wayne and then they heard them praying together.

"Thanks Susan, I'm sorry I lost it like that."

"Wayne don't be silly. You loved Debra very much and grief is a healthy thing. Besides you were more grieving for your loss than for her. Debra was a very devout Christian and she is going to God."

"Yeah, I know. She kept trying to get me to go to church with her, but I never would. It's not like I don't believe you know, I just am not sure about this whole organized religion thing."

"So Debra told me. Did you have a funeral service for her?"

"No, I couldn't get a hold of her pastor."

"Who was that?"

"The church over on Bayside road."

"Oh, that would be Jaimie. He and his family moved in with Brad, the Anglican Pastor in town to be more accessible. We could have Greg call them on the radio, I'm sure he'd come out."

"I'd like that. Maybe I'll talk to him about going some Sunday."

"I think Debra would like that Wayne."

"Yeah. Say Susan, I actually came over for another reason. Just before she died, Debra made me promise to give you all her midwife stuff. She also told me to send her ladies to you."

"WHAT!!! Wayne, I'm not a midwife yet, just a student. I can't possibly take over Debra's practice."

"That's what she thought you'd say and she told me to tell you something...His Grace is sufficient."

"Oh MAN, that is not fair Debra."

"Probably not. But seriously thinking about it, who else is there? None of the Doc's in town know what to do and there are probably 15 women due within the next month. If you don't help them out they'll be on their own. Anyway, I have her stuff in the truck. I'm also going to give you the little truck that she used. It's a diesel and you can put bio-diesel in it. I don't need it anymore. The only problem is that it's a stick shift, which I know you don't drive."

"Robert can drive one and so can most of the men. Until I get up to speed I'll just have one of them drive me. Whoo boy I was NOT expecting this today. Say, Wayne, did you get your crop into the ground?"

"Most of it. I didn't get any corn in this year but I did get wheat and soybeans. I figure I can use the beans for fuel and the wheat to help feed people. I don't figure it'll go far but we have a mill in town and people are going to need the food."

"Maybe you should talk to the pastors about how to distribute it to people."

"Say, now that's an idea. I'm not expecting to make a lot of money, but I have the seed and I don't feel right about letting people go hungry just because they can't pay for it."

"Maybe you could do a work for food thing on your place Wayne. That way people will feel like they are working for it instead of getting a handout and you'll get some help. I don't imagine it'll be easy to do by yourself, especially come harvest time. Even if they just help you with the machinery, or bagging stuff or something."

"That's true enough. There are a lot of little jobs around the place that I never can seem to get to, maybe it would help me get caught up and I could pay people in food. I will talk to the pastor about that. Anyway, I need to get going home, can someone ride back with me to get the truck?"

"Sure. let me go ask Robert. He needed to go talk to Greg about grazing on his place, he can ask about raising Jaimie on the radio at the same time."

Julien was dispatched to go bring back the little truck and Wayne took a great deal of time and effort explaining all the quirks of it to Julien. Being a natural mechanic, Julien was by far the wisest person to delegate this job to. Robert walked next door and got Greg's ok to use the

grazing land. He also put the call in to Pat to let him know about the need for Jaimie's services.

After supper that night all the adults were sitting around the table in the dining room. The older children had taken the younger ones into the family room to wind them down before bed.

"Whew, this has been a busy day. And I fear it's going to get a lot busier. How are you doing Susan?"

"Besides being scared out of my mind? I'm fine. Mom, what if I make a mistake and a baby or a mom dies?"

"Honey, you heard what Wayne said, there is no one else. Do the best you can and trust God to make up for what you lack."

"I just feel so inadequate. I don't know nearly enough."

"You know more than anyone else around here. Besides, you've had ten of your own. In terms of practical experience with labor and birth you know more than most doctors."

"Thanks Amy. I hadn't really thought of it that way. I'm still nervous though."

"That's natural, but you'll be fine."

"If you say so Dad. Listen while we're all here, and the children aren't, we need to talk about the food situation a bit. Robert and I were discussing it this morning, and we are going to have to really work hard to have enough to eat this winter. With everyone down with the flu we didn't get a lot of the stuff into the ground that we need. So, starting tomorrow, we are all going to have to get busy and get stuff in the ground as fast as possible. I know that Dad and Kim are still not back to 100%, so I was thinking that they could kind of run things in here and supervise the littler ones. That way, they can rest if they need to. Renee has asthma so she can't work outside, but she can definitely handle the cooking, and she can help with the smaller children so that Dad and Kim don't have to work as hard.

Robert is going to try and rig a greenhouse and a growing canopy so we can maybe get some corn in the ground for seed if not for harvest. How many people do you think you'll need to help honey?"

"Probably if there were four of us, we could get it done. That would leave the rest of you to plant. I was thinking of Julien, Ron, Pat and myself."

"Ok, that leaves Mom, Trina, Amy, Lisa, Rose and myself, unless we get Maggie and Beth to help. They need to be supervised, but they are both old enough to put seeds into the ground. Jake could help too, but he'll want to be with his Dad. I thought he could fetch you tools and stuff Robert."

"That's fine. Beth definitely. Ron, Amy, how do you feel about Maggie helping. She'll have to take a break from lessons, but many hands..."

"Oh absolutely. Maggie can work with me and I assume that Beth will work with you Susan?"

"Most of the time although I'll have to go in and nurse the baby periodically so I'll pair her up with Lisa and just work closely to the both of them. Does that sound alright to you Trina?"

"Yeah I guess so, although I don't know much about gardening. Maybe Ron should help you and I should help with the greenhouse."

"I see your point Trina, but the greenhouse is going to require upper body strength and you just don't have it like a guy does. Besides, Susan and your Mom know exactly what to plant and where. Someone is going to need to supervise anyway, so just plant to the depth and distance that they tell you. You'll catch on pretty quick though I'm sure."

Trina didn't say anything else although privately it bothered her. Division of labor along gender lines was not something she liked, it smacked of oppression of women. After supper, Trina and Susan headed over to the range. The baby had been fed and Trina still needed practice. Susan had been able to teach her the basics, but like any other skill practice makes perfect.

"Susan, doesn't it ever bother you?"

"What?"

"The whole man's work, woman's work thing,"

"No, but then I'm not insecure about my abilities."

"Meaning that you think I am?"

"Sometimes. Look Trina, it's a fact of life that men have more upper body strength. Men also tend to be very focused. They do one thing at a time and do it very well.

Women on the other hand tend to be able to multi-task better and have better fine motor control.

It's one of the reasons that women in general tend to be more accurate with a firearm than men.

It's not that men are better because they can lift more, it's not that women are better because we can shoot more accurately (generally-there are obviously exceptions), it's just that we are wired differently and we should play to our strengths.

I can't lift as much as Robert. He can't do six things at the same time while thinking about five more. But because he can do what he can do and I can do what I can do, we both have a higher quality of life. I can chop wood, but he does it faster. Robert can cook a meal, but I do it faster. He is far more logical and better in a crisis.

These things don't make him better or me better. It just is. Trina, your biggest problem is that you feel you have to prove that you are as good as a man. That's like comparing apples to oranges. They are both really tasty, but completely different fruits.

You aren't a man. You are a woman, and rather than comparing yourself to men you should really be asking yourself, am I being the best woman I can be?

See that's the big lie of feminism. A feminist says 'I am as good as a man'. To that I say, so what? Are you as good as a woman?"

"Well, I kind of see your point, but it still bothers me. What about guys that treat women like their inferior or stupid or whatever?"

"That's a problem of the individual man, not men as a gender. I would suggest that any man that treats a woman as an inferior is also very insecure. I would further suggest that you not have anything to do with such a man."

"I guess I know a lot of insecure men then."

"Probably. Look any man worthy of the name, treats all women like ladies, whether they are or not. If you find a man like that, thank his parents, who raised him to respect women. Not feminists who usually just rail at him and tell him what an animal he is. The problem as I see it is that the feminists got all of the media time. So that was the message that most men and women got bombarded with growing up. I know I did."

"Well, how did you get past it then?"

"Grace."

"Again with the Grace."

"Well you asked the question. Look I used to be all sorts of a feminist. But I wasn't very happy. I always felt like I had to prove myself. Then I met Robert.

It was this huge joke in our reenacting unit that he should have been born in the 1800's not the 1900's. He opened doors for all women, took off his hat when entering a building and stood when a woman entered a room. Any woman. I thought it was quaint, and that he more did it because we reenacted the Civil War. Then I started dating him and by golly, he did it all the time.

I discovered I liked being treated like a lady. I met his parents and his dad treated his mom the same way. It actually kind of scared me. But he was so easygoing and laid back I thought that he wouldn't actually boss me around or anything. And he doesn't. BUT. He definitely takes the leadership role in the family. He puts his foot down when he feels that it's important to the family to do so.

You know me Trina. I am incredibly strong willed and I'd be willing to bet that sometimes it would be much easier for him to just let me have my way. But he doesn't if he thinks it's better for me and for the family if I don't get my way.

And in all the years we've been married, he's not been wrong much. Once or twice, but that's a much better track record than most leaders you could name. Besides, he also takes responsibility for making the decisions. The couple of times I was right, he said so right away and took responsibility for getting us back on track or fixing whatever it was.

It finally dawned on me that he didn't feel threatened by me because he was very sure of who HE is. He could enjoy my strengths and support and encourage me in them because they didn't diminish his. But I think the biggest secret to our success is that neither one of us EVER puts the other one down.

I did put him down at the beginning of our marriage, but he never did it to me. He did however, tell me one day that it really hurt his feelings when I put him down especially in public. Then I had a choice to make. Did I keep on doing it, or did I stop? I chose to stop.

Don't get me wrong it was really hard at first, but like any habit it got easier the more I did it. I will say that we have an incredibly strong and happy marriage because of that one little choice I made to consider his feelings. Life is about choices and sometimes the seeming little ones make the most impact.

Sorry, I didn't mean to ramble. Let's shoot."

So they did just that for the next hour. Trina was thinking about what Susan had said. She did seem very happy and Robert was quite openly head over heels in love even after so many years of marriage. Maybe there was something to what Susan said. She just didn't know...

Chapter 12: There's gardening and then there's Gardening...

Early the next morning everyone was hard at it. Chores and breakfast were accomplished as quickly as possible before daybreak (5:00 am) to give maximum daylight hours to getting the garden in. It's one thing to plant a small plot, but the Schneiders had about two acres of garden going in just for vegetables to feed everyone. This didn't count the acre plot that was already planted to cool weather crops and tomatoes. Susan felt the need to hurry. If they didn't get a good harvest, they wouldn't have enough food to last another year.

The four men got the greenhouse up in just one day. two men would dig a hole four feet deep, one would put rocks at the bottom for drainage then they would put a post in and backfill the hole. This made the height of the greenhouse 8 feet and a few inches. They made a ceiling on the top with 8 foot 2x4s. So it was a series of upright square arches. The greenhouse was 8 feet wide and twelve feet long with a pole every two feet. So this meant four poles across the front and four across the back and four along each side (the corner poles were the fifth and sixth poles on the side.) Concrete would have been nice, but they didn't have any so they did the best they could. In order to cut down on the amount of wind coming at the greenhouse they put it against the east side of the house, and used brackets to attach one of the long sides to the house itself for some added stability. This way it would get the morning sun, but not the wind which usually came in from the west. After all the poles were in they stapled the 6 mil plastic to the poles and stretched it as best they could. It wasn't permanent, but it would do for a start. They also piled dirt along the bottom of the plastic burying about six inches of the plastic. Then dirt was piled along the outside also, to create something of a seal. They would wait a day or two and then plant the corn and see what happened.

That first day the women planted one acre. They were dead tired when they came in, and Robert told Susan to slow down.

"Honey, two or three more days will not make THAT much of a difference and you can't afford to lose your milk. We can't get formula for Miriam. Stop pushing yourselves so hard."

"I know Robert but I just feel like I have to hurry or we won't have enough."

"I do understand, but I mean it slow down. You plant 1/3 of an acre tomorrow and then stop. It's mostly beans left anyway right?"

"Yes, Beans and the mangels for the cow."

"Fine. Plant the mangels and one row of beans. Then plant a row of beans once a week until you run out of rows. That way they won't all ripen at once and we won't lose food trying to put it all up at the same time. I think we should start work on enlarging the root cellar tomorrow. Once you finish with the mangels, send everyone over to help shovel that can do that. You Susan need to go into the house and rest at that point. Help the children with school or something."

"Ok. In fact I'm going to bed right after supper. I'm really tired."

Everyone went to bed early (8 pm) except for the watch shift. The men were still taking turns patrolling and keeping watch in the area although they hadn't heard anything about that group of convicts or anyone else roaming with evil intent. Better safe than sorry.

About 2:00 am Robert went in and woke Susan.

"Susan, Susan honey, wake up."

"What? Oh Robert, What time is it?"

"About 2."

"In the morning!!? I thought you wanted me to slow down."

"Honey, you need to wake up. Jacob Weaver is here. His daughter Nettie is in labor, and he came to get you."

"In the buggy?" Susan was wide awake now and jumped out of bed. "That must have taken him two hours. Crap!!! I need to go."

"Whoa, honey he came on horseback, he said he ran the horse the whole way and it took about 45 minutes. You'll need to drive him back the horse needs to rest. I told him we'd get it back to him later. Here's a cup of coffee. You drink that and get dressed, I'll get Julien up and pack up the baby."

Susan drank her coffee and jumped into her clothes. Fortunately Debra's bags were already in the car and Susan packed her bag the same way since Debra had been her teacher. Robert got Julien up and let him know what was going on. Meanwhile Jacob stood quietly by the door waiting.

"Hello Jacob."

"Hello Susan."

Julien pulled the truck up to the door and Susan and Jacob got in.

"How was Nettie when you left Jacob?"

"She was having some pain, but not too bad I think."

Since the Amish didn't really talk about their pains this didn't help Susan much.

"How long had she been having the pain, did she say?"

"Oh, since around 8 this evening she said. I knew you'd ask so I asked her straight out. She said it felt like we should be getting you and so I came. She wanted Willie (her husband) to stay with her."

OH Crap. She had been in labor for six hours and this wasn't her first. Susan didn't say anything, but she did give Julien a look behind Jacob's back. Julien didn't say anything either, but he knew his mother and stepped on the accelerator. They got to Willie and Nettie's at about 2:30.

"Hello Susan."

"Hello Willie, where's Nettie?"

"Oh she's in the room there. I was with her, but she sent me out to get you, said to ask you to please hurry a bit."

"Julien, bring the bag!!!" Susan took off at a dead run. She got into the bedroom and saw that Nettie was pushing.

"Water Willie NOW!!!! I need to wash my hands." Just then she saw that the baby was crowning. Crap!!!! So much for sterile technique. Just then Willie came to the door with a jug of water. Susan already had her hands on the perineum, trying to gently ease the baby out so Nettie didn't tear.

"Please pour the water over my hands Willie, it's going to slop on the floor but I don't want Nettie to get an infection." Willie did what she asked.

Another contraction started and Nettie started to push.

"That's great Nettie, but breathe. The baby still needs oxygen. Here comes the head.....OK, the baby's head is out. Nettie, you need to stop pushing and pant like a dog for a minute I want to make sure the cord isn't around the baby's neck." Susan slipped a finger around the baby's neck and mercifully the cord wasn't there.

"Ok Nettie, one more big push. Here we come, ok, YES!!! Willie, would you like to tell Nettie what you have?"

Willie looked and told Nettie, "we have a son." The Amish are not a showy people, but they do have deep feelings. Willie was no different. There were tears in his eyes as he looked at his wife and she smiled at him. Susan finished cleaning off the baby and gave him to his mother. Nettie immediately put him to the breast. She was not a first time mother and the other midwife had told her to do this right away to help with the bleeding.

It was true. Most homebirth midwives didn't even take clients that weren't planning to breastfeed. All other considerations aside, the act of nursing the baby stimulated the production of oxytocin, which was the hormone that produced contractions. In the hospital, doctors can use the synthetic pitocin to produce contractions, but it's a controlled substance and midwives didn't have access to it unless they could get a doctor to write a prescription for it. However unless the midwife was also a nurse, which many weren't, it was illegal for the doctor to write the prescription. A few doctors felt strongly enough about homebirth that they did it, but very few were willing to take the chance of being prosecuted. Although, Susan thought she knew a couple that might do it under the current circumstances, she'd still be hampered by a lack of availability of the drug.

Nettie's baby was nursing well. About 10 minutes after he was born Susan saw something coming out of the birth canal and it wasn't the placenta.

"Oh my Lord. Nettie, you have another baby in there, give the boy to Willie, I need you to push. Wait, it's coming out feet first." OH Crap. Susan had never seen a twin birth or a breech birth. 'Think, girl think. Ok, make sure it's both feet. Check. Ok, check for a cord. CRAP. "Ok Nettie, the cord is coming out with the baby, we have to get this baby born fast. Push for everything you are worth on this contraction." Nettie looked scared but bore down and pushed for all she was worth. Susan reached her hands up inside and tried to keep as much pressure off the cord as possible. The good news was that this baby was a bit smaller and this left room for Susan to maneuver. Nettie was still pushing and the baby came out fairly easily. He was a little blue, but Susan cleared out his mouth with a bulb syringe and started massaging him (another boy) vigorously.

"Ok Nettie, talk to your baby. tell him you love him and he needs to breathe for you."

"Levi, Levi, you need to breathe for Ma. Please Levi, let me welcome you to the world."

"That's good Nettie, here help me rub him." Nettie started mimicking Susan's movements and kept talking to her baby. Suddenly the baby gulped and started to breathe and then cry. Susan was sure she had never heard a sweeter sound. Nettie kept touching little Levi and cooing to him.

"Oh thank you God! Oh thank you Sweet Jesus!" Susan couldn't even think of anything else to say. She then noticed Willie, who was holding the first boy. He wasn't saying anything but tears were steadily running down his cheeks and he was rubbing his son's small back.

"Well Levi has a name, have you picked one for his older brother?"

"Jacob for Nettie's father."

"That works out just perfect. Now each of your father's have a grandson named for them. Willie, why don't you go over and sit by Nettie and little Levi? I'm sure young Jacob is not happy about being taken from his meal." Jacob most assuredly was not as he was crying quite loudly.

Susan got Nettie set up with some pillows so she could nurse both babies, and watched very carefully for the afterbirth. It came out shortly after (about 15 minutes after the second twin was born). Susan checked it over carefully and made sure it was intact. Thankfully it was. She also watched Nettie's bleeding very carefully. With twins there is a larger placenta which means a larger open area to bleed after the birth.

Nettie however did very well. She was young and in very good physical shape. Still, Susan wasn't taking any chances. She cleaned up Nettie very well, checked for tears (there were none, just a small skid mark) and asked Nettie's mother Alice to make her a hearty breakfast. There were eggs and whole wheat bread and even some smoked ham.

The Amish didn't refrigerate anything but either smoked or canned it. That along with fresh milk made for a good and protein filled breakfast.

While Nettie was eating Susan did the newborn assessment on both babies. Jacob was perfect and weighed in at 7 pounds 1 ounce. Levi was also perfect and weighed in a 6 pounds even.

Susan stayed for several hours to make sure all was well and then sat with Nettie's mother and gave her many instructions about what to look for and how to handle it. She checked Nettie again and told them she would be back in two days. If there was anything that worried them they should go down to Chuck's house (he was an English neighbor with a CB) and have him call the sheriff, who would in turn get a hold of her via Greg on the HAM. Susan finished cleaning up and had some breakfast herself. Then she packed up and she and Julien headed home. It was about 11:30 am.

"You ok Mom?"

"No. I'm still scared. That could have gone sooo badly. What the heck am I doing. I am NOT ready for this."

"Look Mom, I know you were really scared but you did great. You didn't panic and you did everything you knew how to do. You're always telling me to trust that God will make up for your lack, right? I think maybe you should listen to your own advice. Besides, what would they have done if you hadn't been there. They really didn't know what to do."

"That's true. SAY...when did you go getting all smart on me?" Susan smiled at her beloved first born.

"I don't know about smart mom, but I do listen to you occasionally." Julien smiled back at his mom.

When they pulled in everyone stopped and came into the house. They all wanted to know how it went. Fortunately it was about lunchtime so it didn't disrupt things too badly. Susan filled everyone in with Julien adding his impressions. Everyone was very glad things went well and were full of praise for Susan and the job she had done. Robert too was very proud of his wife, but knew her much better than the others.

After lunch, Julien was sent out to help Ron and Pat with the root cellar (he had napped much of the time at Willie and Nettie's, and besides, he was pumped on adrenalin). Susan went to lay down and nurse the baby again. Robert followed her into the bedroom.

"You alright beloved? Or are you second guessing yourself?"

"Ah how well you know me. What if she had bled too much. What if the second baby had gotten stuck?"
What if..."

"Susan you'll make yourself sick with worry. None of that happened. If it had, God expects you to do your best and no more. However, I do want you to turn over the garden to your Mom and spend more time with your books. These sorts of things will come up and I'd rather you feel prepared for them as much as you possibly can.

I also think you need to take on an apprentice. Sometimes you need two midwives, especially at a multiple birth. And what happens if two women are in labor at the same time? We need to start sharing information here. I think Debra should have looked for more apprentices than you, but I also understand that homebirth was much less common three months ago, and she just didn't have the business to sustain more than one midwife. That is no longer true and this is not a good situation for the community."

"OK."

"Ok? I expected more of a fight, or at least discussion."

"I'm too tired to discuss, and you're right so why should I fight about it?"

"Get some sleep my sensible beloved wife."

"I love you Robert." Susan was asleep about 3 seconds later. Robert took the baby and put her in her snuggli while he went out to check with the rest of the family. The three men were digging out the root cellar and seemed fine so he went out to the garden.

"Hi Mom, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure Robert what's on your mind?"

"How's planting going?"

"We're just about finished with the row of beans. The mangels were all planted this morning. I'm using some of the dirty animal bedding for mulch, it should cut down on the weeds. Susan had already done that around the tomatoes and things, and I'm all about saving labor."

"Me too. Listen Mom, I wanted to know if you'd be willing to take over supervising the garden. Susan was really shaken this morning and I want her to have some time to study up a bit. She's the only game in town right now, and we both know she won't turn anyone down. I just don't want her to worry herself to death in the process. I really don't want a baby dying on her or a mother because of a lack of knowledge on her part. Or even a perceived lack of knowledge."

I think that's a great idea Robert, I don't mind taking over the garden. Has Susan thought about training another midwife to help her out?"

"I suggested it, she said it was a good idea. The only problem is that I don't know who would have the desire to learn it or the aptitude for it. Midwives are very special people."

"Why don't you ask the pastors? Surely among their congregations someone is right for this task?"

"Thanks Mom, that's a great idea, I'll do that."

They finished planting at about 3 pm that afternoon. Susan was still tired but Robert woke her up anyway so she could sleep that night. She spent some time with the children while Renee and Kim got supper. Then they all ate and went to bed.

The last thing Susan thought before drifting off to sleep was how nice it would be when things slowed down a little...

Chapter 13: When Things slow down...

Susan woke up the next morning and after breakfast she hit the books. The rest of the family (minus patrol people) went to work finishing the garden and the root cellar. So Susan, Renee and the two babies were the only ones in the house. The other young children were close by the adults, but children needed to get fresh air and playtime in the sunshine. About 10:30 that morning, a truck pulled up. It wasn't one Renee recognized, so she ran to get her mom.

"Mom come quick, there's a truck out front."

"Here take this, the baby is asleep so leave her there." Susan came out of the room with her 9mm which she handed to Renee. Susan had the shotgun and a round was already chambered.

"Slip out back and let the rest of the family know we have company."

"Ok Mom. Be careful."

"I will."

Susan was already to the door at this point and looking outside at the truck. There was a man and a woman in the front with a car seat in between. 'Hmmm, they don't look threatening, who IS that?'

"HELLO THE HOUSE!!"

"WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

"SUSAN? IS THAT YOU?"

"I REPEAT!! WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

"SUSAN IF THAT'S YOU IT'S YOUR COUSIN NES."

"PLEASE GET OUT OF THE TRUCK AND STAND WHERE I CAN SEE YOU."

"OK IF YOU POINT THE GUN SOMEWHERE ELSE."

'Fair enough' Susan thought 'I can always bring it back on target pretty fast.'

The man got out of the truck and by golly it WAS Susan's cousin. She opened the door and ran out into the yard. She caught up with Nes (short for Nestor-it's a family name no jokes please) just as he rounded the front of the truck, and gave him a fierce hug. Then she and Nes walked around to the other side of the truck and Susan grabbed Nes's wife Sherrie and gave her a fierce hug too.

"Where have you been? How did you get here? Who's truck is that? Where's the rest of the family? Are you guys healthy? Is the baby with you?" Susan probably should have asked the last two questions first but family was family and she hadn't thought about it. She was just so glad to see family.

Nes started laughing. "Yes, the baby is with us, all three of us are healthy, the baby and I got the flu but Sherrie knew enough to put us both right to bed and we recovered. The rest of the family didn't make it, and the truck is a neighbor's who also didn't make it. He told me to take his truck and get Sherrie and the baby the He** out of the city right before he died. Nes wasn't laughing anymore and Susan wasn't

either. She had a million more questions, but knew that Nes probably didn't want to tell this story more than once. So she just turned to Sherrie and said: "Come on, let's get your stuff unloaded and get you guys something to eat. It's about time for lunch anyway."

Sherrie started to tear up. "Thanks Susan, it's been a pretty rough couple of months and we weren't sure you'd still be here or if you had room for us. But we don't really have any other place to go. It's an absolute nightmare out there."

"Well, we'll have to double up a bit, but for you, we'll make the room. My Mom will be so thrilled that you are here. She's been very worried about you both and the baby. I probably should have told her to tell you to come here in the first place. I mean obviously we don't have room for the ENTIRE family, but a couple more we can handle. Pat will be pretty glad too."

While she was talking (remember that conversation about women being able to multitask?) Susan and Nes and Sherrie were busily unloading the baby and their gear from the front of the truck. Nes Jr. wasn't really a baby anymore he was 2, but all children under 5 were called baby by Susan.

By this time Renee had notified the rest of the family that someone had arrived and they came into the house just as Susan and the cousins walked in. There was much rejoicing and hugs and tears and busyness getting food ready. Everyone wanted to hear the story, but it's always better on a full stomach you know?

They sat down and Robert said a long prayer of thanksgiving for the safe arrival of the cousins. Then they ate. After lunch the men got the little ones settled down for a nap and the women made short work of the dishes. People were very anxious to hear the news, but the garden and the root cellar needed daylight to finish. Nes said that was fine, and asked if he could help with the root cellar.

"Sure Nes, but don't you have to finish unloading?"

"Actually all we have in the back is food and tools. Our neighbor had some stuff that he told me to take along with his guns and I have some stuff from my dad's house, tools and mementoes and things and we had a bit of food left. So the truck bed is pretty full, although we don't have any extra gas. We just about coasted here on fumes. I was afraid we'd have to walk the last couple of miles."

"So you didn't bring a lot of clothes then?"

"No, I think we brought like four days worth for each of us. I figured we could wash clothes and the food was more important."

"Good thinking. How about ammunition?"

"We have three of those green military cans full. Our neighbor had a shotgun and a rifle he used for

hunting."

"So you don't have any handguns?" This came from Susan.

"No."

"Ok. Well, how about if you all go back out and finish what you were doing and Sherrie and I can carry stuff in and Renee can watch the little ones. She wanted to bake bread this afternoon anyway."

"That sounds good. What's for supper tonight?"

"I'm not sure actually. Renee?"

"I thought we'd have chili. We have a bunch from last year's canning and I can make some bread to go with it. The lettuce is doing pretty good in the lettuce beds so we can have salad too."

"That sounds good Princess. Well, we'd best get back to it gentlemen." Robert and the men went back to work and those on garden detail also went back to work. Susan and Sherrie went to the truck and looked in the back. It had a bed cap on it and was stuffed to the top.

"Well, let's work smarter not harder. Robert has a small dolley that we move boxes and stuff with, I'll get that out of the garage and we can take heavier loads without hurting ourselves."

"That sounds pretty good to me. I'm not sure what all we have, I know that Nes & Mike put a bunch of already loaded boxes in the back from Mike's basement. I don't even know if Nes knows what's in there, but we didn't really have time to look."

"You mentioned that before. I know we agreed to wait until this evening, but is it really THAT bad in the city?"

"It is in ours. And we live in a pretty nice area." Sherrie paused. "Well, it WAS a pretty nice area."

"Well, I'm relieved you guys made it out alright then; and even more relieved you made it here safely." Susan's curiosity was driving her nuts, but she was determined not to push. Something had happened that had really spooked Sherrie.

It took them a little over two hours to completely unload the truck. Some of the boxes were quite heavy and a few were also rather large leaving Susan and Sherrie both wondering how Nes & Mike had managed to load them in the first place. (Sherrie had been in the house watching the baby while they had loaded early that morning.) Nes was over 7 feet tall and quite strong, but he wasn't Ahnold or anything. And according to Sherrie, Mike was about 5'9" and not super muscular either. Yet another question Susan saved for later.

Out in the garden the woman and children had worked very efficiently and had the garden completely planted. Anne and Amy and Trina sent the children into the house to wash up for supper while they finished the last row.

"I am so glad Nes and Sherrie thought to come here."

"Why didn't you just tell them to come here if things got bad Mom?"

"Because it isn't my house. I knew your sister was putting things by for our family, but I didn't know if she had enough extra for anyone else. I also didn't know how to just invite a few and not invite the whole bunch. Robert and Susan don't have enough land to support that many people for one thing and they aren't that close to most of the extended bunch anyway."

"Yeah but we've always been pretty close with Nes and his family."

"Your dad and I have, but Susan hasn't really gone to many family things in quite awhile."

"I wonder why?"

"Well Trina, she got rather tired of all the sarcastic comments about how her family chooses to live. Especially since some of the family didn't bother to wait until the children weren't within earshot. Rather than subject her children to that sort of thing, she and Robert just decided to stop attending family gatherings."

"Oh. I didn't know they were that bad about it."

"I don't think she told anyone. The only reason I know is because I asked her about it directly one time. Your sister isn't into confrontation, she would rather just withdraw."

"Yeah I can see that."

"We're about done here, let's get the tools cleaned up and go wash up for dinner."

Supper was a very pleasant time for everyone. The table was quite crowded with the additional people but that was ok. Susan had invited Greg for dinner so he could meet Nes and Sherrie, and because she hated the thought of him eating alone every night. After supper, the men did the dishes and the women got the children dressed for bed. There was story time and prayer time and then the children were tucked in. Susan made some herbal tea and hot chocolate for those that wanted it, and the adults and oldest three children settled down to hear how Nes and Sherrie had gotten to them.

"Ok so, where do we start?"

"Let's start at the beginning. How did your family do after the bombs went off?"

"There was a shelter in the basement where I work. Sherrie and Junior came to the office and we spent two weeks in the shelter there. It was not what I'd call a pleasant experience, but we lived. There were about 200 people in the shelter and they really didn't have enough supplies for that many people. By the time they said it was safe to leave it was really gross in there. It smelled and the food was just about gone. I'm mightily relieved that we didn't have to stay longer.

We went to our apartment, but the electric and the water weren't working so we grabbed some clothes and headed over to my dad's place. He and his wife were still there, they had stayed in the basement. I think they had some radiation poisoning, although I'm not sure. My Dad complained that he was tired a lot. We never did hear from my sisters. Things were going ok and the local Red Cross was giving out food and water at Saint Joe's down the street. We still had a little bit, but my dad and I both went to get the Red Cross stuff every day, especially the water. We cleaned out some garbage cans and caught rain water and stuff for bathing and washing stuff with, but fortunately we didn't have to drink it.

Then the flu hit and everyone got it except Sherrie. Dad's wife got it first and she was gone within 24 hours. That was really hard on my dad. He didn't think he'd outlive my Mom, much less his second wife. Then my Dad and Junior and I came down with it all at the same time. Sherrie told us all to go right to bed, but you know how stubborn dad can be. He didn't listen and then he got really bad. I honestly don't think he really cared anymore. The phones were out and we couldn't get gas, so we had no way to get him to the hospital. Our neighbor Mike had some gas, but he was already at the hospital with his wife and some of his kids.

Sherrie did her best, but she didn't have a ventilator or anything and Dad didn't make it."

Nes paused and took a deep breath and went on. No one said anything to interrupt, but everyone was visibly upset and many were silently crying.

"Anyway, after Junior and I got over the flu, we pretty much limped along on what we had. We were starting to run low on food, the Red Cross stopped giving out stuff about a week ago. The gangs had come in and it was getting pretty dangerous. We almost didn't make it out ourselves." Nes stopped talking and sat back. It was obvious there was more to the story, but he needed to get himself back together.

"Nes, how did you get Mike's truck to drive here? If he died from the Flu..."

Sherrie answered.

"Susan, Mike didn't die from the flu. He was shot. He and his one son made it through the flu although his wife and other children didn't survive. His son got shot a week ago when gang bangers tried to break

in. We figured they started looting houses when the Red Cross stopped handing out food. Nes ran over to Mike's and helped fight them off, but Jess, Mike's son, was shot in the stomach. I applied pressure and we all went with Mike to the hospital.

It was surreal, we were in the bed of the truck Nes was holding the shotgun and I was trying to keep Jess alive until we got there. Junior was in the front seat with Mike, and thankfully he fell asleep. It was like driving through a war zone.

We finally got to the hospital and the only reason they treated him was because one of the nurses used to work with me and vouched for us that we weren't gang members. The hospitals are completely overrun and they didn't have any blood products available at all.

The ER doctor tried really hard to stop the bleeding but Jess had simply lost too much. He died from the blood loss. The staff was setting up so we could give direct transfusions but he didn't live long enough.

They buried Jess near the hospital, in a mass grave. There just isn't room or time for single burials anymore. I'm glad we were there for Mike, most people didn't even have someone there to pray for them.

Afterwards we went back home. Mike had a little over half a tank of gas left in his truck.

We were the only ones left at our house and he was the only one left at his, so we decided to try and get to your place. Mike & Nes were loading our combined stuff in Mike's truck when someone started shooting."

"Did the gang come back?"

"No, at least I don't think it was the same gang. This was just a couple of guys. Mike shot one and Nes shot the other one. They both crawled away, but Mike got hit in the chest in the process. I thought it was a glancing wound, but now I think it must have hit his right lung.

He wouldn't let us take him to the hospital; said we wouldn't have enough gas to get to your house if we did that. Nes argued with him but he locked himself in the bedroom and refused to come out." Talked to us both through the door and told us where the rest of his stuff was. Nes agreed to load the truck; I think he figured eventually he could talk Mike out. Like I said, it didn't seem that serious of a wound, so we thought we had a little bit of time.

I stayed inside with Junior and talked to Mike through the door while Nes loaded. I could hear him getting weaker and after about 25 minutes he stopped answering me. I yelled for Nes and he decided to break the door in. He yelled to let Mike know it was us and kicked the door in. Mike was already unconscious. The wound had been a lot worse than I thought, I hadn't gotten a good look at it, but it got his right lung pretty bad.

He had left us a note that said not to bury him but told Nes to get me and the baby to safety. Not to make his sacrifice a vain one by doing something stupid and getting ourselves killed, just to put his body in a hole in the ground. Nes didn't really say much just a prayer over the body and then finished loading the truck. Then we left for your place.

Nes wasn't kidding when he said we coasted here on fumes. I don't know if it will even turn over again. I have never been so scared in my life. We took the turnpike but no one was manning the tollbooths. There were cars all over the road but no place was completely blocked. We drove on the side a lot.

Once we got into Michigan we started looking for someone to tell us your street address or something. We knew the general vicinity of where your place was, but we didn't remember exactly how to get here.

We were really worried about running out of gas, when we saw a police officer on a horse down the road a bit from us. We drove up to him and Nes asked if he knew where you lived. He didn't seem to want to tell us at first, but Nes pulled out his driver's license and told the police officer that he's your cousin. About the same time, the Officer saw Junior. I guess he figured we weren't lying because he gave us directions."

"You're lucky. Nowadays, most people wouldn't have told you even with Junior in the truck. And the police are spread pretty thin so it's rather amazing that you ran into one."

"I don't think it was luck at all Uncle Charles. I think a lot of people in heaven were interceding for us. That is the only reason we got here."

Charles looked thoughtful. "You could be right about that Nes. You could be right."

Chapter 14: The Simple Life...

It was pretty late when Greg went home and they all went to bed. Some of the men had missed the story as they were on patrol, but were filled in after a late breakfast the next morning. Robert had gotten up when the children had, letting Susan sleep in. Robert was a morning person anyway, and liked to do start his day off with prayer while watching the sun come up. Eventually everyone was up (by 8:00 which is considered sleeping in on a homestead or farm), and plans were made for the day.

"So, what's on tap for today?"

"Well, first we need to get Nes and Sherrie up to speed on firearms. I'm sure you recognize the need to be firearms capable right?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely."

"Robert, how about if Susan works with Sherrie and I'll work with Nes. That will free you up to handle things here."

"That sounds good to me Dad."

"Is that ok with you Susan?"

"Sure, but it will have to be this morning. We need to unpack and inventory what Nes and Sherrie brought this afternoon, especially the clothes since tomorrow is laundry day."

"Laundry day?"

"Yes, laundry is a lot more labor intensive when you do it by hand so we have one day a week that everyone pitches in and does the laundry together."

"Oh. I see."

"Speaking of which is there any word on when they'll get the electricity back online?"

"The last I heard they were still working on restoring power to the major cities. Out here it's going to take a bit longer."

"Be glad that's your problem. I'd rather do without electric than have to depend on the Red Cross for food."

"I hear you there Sherrie."

Nes and Sherrie both did very well on the range. Susan started Sherrie off with the .22 since it didn't have much recoil and got her used to the operation end of things.

Of course Charles started both off with the usual safety lecture. Some might think it was overdone, but each firing session was always started with a review about range safety and awareness of where the muzzle was pointed at all times. Review never hurt anyone, and with all the children, it was better to be safe than sorry.

That afternoon they unpacked the boxes. Since the garden was done, all the women worked at it together. While they worked they talked.

"Susan, I was wondering, why doesn't Renee go outside much?"

"She has severe Asthma. Since we only have one inhaler and her oral medication is running low, she

stays inside much of the time to prevent triggering an attack. We are currently trying to change her diet to help."

"Really, what are you doing? Nes had really bad asthma as a child and I'm concerned that Junior may develop it too."

"Well, she takes 1000mg of vitamin C twice a day and she doesn't eat wheat bread, that's why she always bakes two types. We don't have enough rye berries for everyone, but she needs to eat rye bread. In fact we plan to sow rye this fall when the garden is harvested."

"I thought you planted in the spring?"

"Well most crops yes, but Winter Wheat and Rye are sown in the fall. Which is a good thing for us, we only have ten acres. We'll put the rye and the wheat in the garden patches. Not only will it keep the topsoil from eroding, it will also help keeps the weeds down since they won't really have any place to grow since the grains will be there."

"That's pretty neat."

"Yeah I love lazy gardening."

"Anything else for the asthma?"

"Oh yeah, right. She doesn't eat a lot of dairy, although she drinks the goat milk and uses that in baking. It doesn't seem to bother her as much. We're eventually going to run out of vitamin C, so I'm hoping that it'll be easier for her this summer since they won't be spraying the fields the way they usually do. There aren't a lot of the chemicals available that they usually use and some of the fields didn't get planted because the farmers were down with the flu."

"Won't that cause a food shortage in the cities? "

"It will cause a food shortage everywhere. That's why we offered all of our neighbors seeds and advice on when to plant and how to control pests. We'd rather help our neighbor a bit to provide for himself than to worry about him taking our crop. Actually a lot of the neighbors do know how to garden they just didn't have enough seed to completely depend on their garden. We've been in the habit of buying the 10 cent end of the season seed packets for awhile. Some seeds like beans and things stay viable for quite awhile if you store them right."

" What made you think to do that?"

"Honestly Amy because I know myself well enough to know I couldn't turn away a hungry child and I also know we can't grow enough food to feed all of our neighbors and all of us."

"Hmmm. Well, we really need to get this finished, it's about two hours until supper."

The big boxes that had come from Mike's were mostly food and ammunition for the rifles and the shotgun that Nes and Sherrie had brought with them. There were also some books a photo album of Mike and his family and a Bible.

"What should we do with the photo album and the Bible?"

"I think we should keep them and hopefully we can get them to his extended family eventually."

They finished up right about supper time. Since the next day was laundry day they all went to bed early. Truth be told, they were still tired from the late night before.

It was Pat and Ron that were patrolling about 2 a.m. when all heck broke loose...

Chapter 15: Judgment Day...

They had started a night watch at the house too. Ron and Pat were out on patrol and Amy was taking her shift in the house. She saw Greg (with flashlight in hand) running towards the house. Amy met him at the door.

"Hi Greg what's up?"

"Ron and Pat just radioed in that there is a group of people headed this way. They don't know if they're friendly or not but they said it looks like a bunch of men. No women and no children. So we're assuming they aren't selling Avon."

"Ok I'll wake the house."

"Wake Susan up first I also got a call just before Ron's that there's a lady in labor in town. I wrote down her name and directions to her house."

When it rains it pours. Amy started rousing the house. Susan woke up and got her message, Greg offered to stay at the house and help watch while Julien drove Susan. They took the baby with them and Trina and her baby as well. Trina had expressed interest in helping with midwifery and since she had a young baby also this was deemed a good thing; to get her out of harm's way.

There wasn't really room in the truck for everyone and in normal times they wouldn't have held the babies but these were obviously not normal times. So off they went to town. By this time it was about 2:30a.m.

"Susan, what if I freak out?"

"I'll kick you out of the room. But really Trina, it isn't really that freaky usually. Seriously though, if there is a complication I really need you to hold it together and if I tell you to do something do EXACTLY what I tell you. When the problem is resolved, THEN you can freak out all you want."

"Ok I'll do my best."

"Really Aunt Trina it's actually pretty awesome to be at a birth. You get to hear the baby's first cry and the Mom and Dad crying with happiness. Everybody is so happy and full of wonder at the miracle of the whole process. I mean I've never actually SEEN the birth part, but just being in the house is cool."

"How many births have you been to Julien?"

"Well 7 of my siblings and the Amish twin birth the other night. THAT was a little freaky ."

"Yeah I guess it would be. Hey, are you going to be ok taking care of both the babies?"

"Unless they both have blowout diapers at the same time no sweat. I watch my little brothers and sisters all the time."

"Here we are, I think."

Susan got out and was met by a very relieved looking man (she assumed it was the father). Julien and Trina unloaded the babies and her birth kit, other than the small bag she carried with her. The mom was looking very tired and didn't really acknowledge Susan's greeting.

"I'm sorry I didn't catch your name?"

"Fred and my wife's name is Karen."

"How long has Karen been in labor Fred?"

"I don't know I think a couple of hours."

"Has she given birth before?"

"No, this is our first."

"Ok, I may need your help here so stay close... Karen, I'm Susan the midwife, I need to check you and see how far along you are. Can we go into the bedroom? It's far easier on you if you lay down."

Karen didn't respond, just went into the room. Susan looked at Fred.

"Has she talked at all?"

"Well, at first she did, but not for about the last hour. She doesn't make any noise."

"Ok." This did not bode well. Susan had never met this couple so she was going to have to do a lot of guessing here, but the fact that Karen wasn't responding verbally indicated that she was not coping well with labor.

Susan did an internal exam and discovered that Karen was about 4 cm dilated, 60% effaced and -3 station.

(In English that means.....)

The cervix is the opening to the uterus and is shaped like a thick donut. As the woman labors, it opens (to a total of 10 cm) and thins out (effacement). The baby's head pushing on it helps facilitate this process. For a mental picture think of putting a tight turtleneck over your head. A baby has to do that with the cervix in order to be born. -3 station meant that the baby's head was very high up in the uterus and not really pushing effectively yet.

The good news was that the baby was vertex or in a head down position, perfect for being born.

"Ok, Karen you are doing well, and the baby is in a perfect position and the heartbeat sounds really good. It will be a little while yet though and you look like you're feeling quite a bit of pain am I right?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. It's tiring you out too I'm sure. What I'd like to do with your permission is get you into a comfortable position and help you use these contractions more efficiently. Hopefully we can speed up the process a bit and relieve the pain some."

"I can't take this anymore."

"Karen, I know it feels that way, but I promise if you work with me it won't hurt as bad. It will still hurt, but not as bad. Fred do you have running water?"

"No, but I have several garbage cans full of water out back."

"Ok. I'd like you to boil a bunch of water and put it in the tub. We'll need that later. Fill the tub about half full. I'd like you to do that now so it's more or less sterile water but it cools down before we need it.

The babies are sleeping so Trina, Julien, can you give Fred a hand?"

"Ok"

"Sure"

"Ok, Karen while they take care of that, I want you to lie down in whatever position makes you comfortable."

Karen laid down on her right side, with some pillows supporting her back and belly.

Ok, Karen, I'm not going to examine you or even touch you again but I do want to talk you through some relaxing tricks I use when I'm having a baby."

"Do they work?" Getting comfortable and having Susan there seemed to be relaxing Karen a bit and she was getting more responsive.

"I think so. I've had ten children so far and no drugs with any of them."

"You have TEN kids?" Karen looked amazed.

"Yes, so I do know something of what you're feeling."

Just then another contraction started and Karen immediately started to tense up. Susan immediately started speaking in a soft pleasant voice, to try and relax her.

"Ok, Karen, try and relax.

The uterus is a muscle and the more you tense the more it hurts.

I know the temptation is to tense away from the pain but honestly it just makes it hurt worse.

Try and ride the contraction like a wave or a roller coaster. The peak of the contraction is the top of the wave, after that it's all downhill....

Ok, you're doing great,

relax,

breathe normally, just like when you try and go to sleep.

Great,

relax,

breathe, almost there,

can you feel it going down,

breathe,

ok good, that is one contraction you never have to have again.

How was that? A bit easier?"

"Well, it still wasn't great but it hurt less."

"Good. When you have the next one remind yourself and I will too, that the more you relax, the more that contraction can open your cervix. The more each individual contraction opens things up the fewer contractions you'll have.

So the more you relax, the sooner you'll have that baby.

In between, I'd like you to try and rest. If you fall asleep that wouldn't be a bad thing either. Don't worry you won't miss the birth."

"Ok. Thanks. I'm sorry I don't remember your name."

" Susan. And you're most welcome." Susan sat quietly in a chair and timed the contractions, they were about 15 minutes apart and lasted about 30 seconds. Still very early labor. Karen was relaxing and even dozing in between. Hopefully things would speed up after she rested a bit. This had all the earmarks of a long morning...

Meanwhile back at the farm....

Everyone was up, armed and ready. Ron had radioed again (they had walkie talkies that someone in the neighborhood had donated to the patrols) and told Greg that as near as they could figure there were about 20 men and they were headed towards the farm.

Most of the houses in that area were empty, people had begun to double up for protection and many of the farmers hadn't gotten crops in or if they had were coming in during daylight to work the fields.

Robert and Susan's farm was on a paved road, and they were the only ones in their immediate area with livestock. There were lots of other animal farms south of them, but this group was coming down from

the north.

So they waited. Ron and Pat were staying well hidden, but they followed behind to keep the group in their sights both figuratively and literally. The men weren't very quiet; although they weren't being overly loud it was obvious they weren't really familiar with the country. When they reached the farm and recognized it as occupied, they tried to quiet down even more. The men didn't approach the house, but went to the barn. Upon finding the doors locked one of the men shot the lock off. At that point, Robert had a decision to make. Should they attack, or should they wait and see what the men would do. Robert decided to wait.

The men came out of the barn rather quickly, about 10 of them were carrying chickens. They went around to the garden and started picking things that looked edible (which wasn't much. Some peas and a few beans and radishes). Again, Robert decided to wait.

Then one of the men caught a glimpse of a curtain moving.

"HEY. Rod, someone's awake in there. I think they saw us."

"SHEEIT. I was hopin' we could do this quiet. Well, I guess we'll have to do it the hard way. Ok, guys we have a witness, we need to take the house."

"Aw Fu**. Rod I'm hungry. I don't want to mess with this Sh**. It's probably some old couple anyway. He**, whoever it was is probaly dyin of a heart attack anyway. Let's just get going.

"Mike, I don't want any of your sh**. I'm the boss and I said we need to take the house. RFN."

The men put their loot down and prepared to take the house. As they moved forward, Robert made the call.... "Defend the house." Everyone acquired a target and took their shot. 9 of the men went down. The remaining men dove for cover, except there wasn't really any. Those in the house acquired another target, and took their shot. This time 10 men were hit. (Lisa being young and nervous had missed her first shot.) The remaining man, started running away. He was shot, by more than one person. None of the bad guys had gotten off a shot unless you count the wild firing they did as they hit the dirt.

"IS anyone in the house hurt?"

"Dad, Lisa's throwing up." Renee was next to her sister, and Lisa was indeed throwing up. Everything she had eaten in the last 24 hours.

"Lisa, honey, are you hurt?" Robert had run to his daughter. Charles meanwhile was checking on the rest of the house, no one had gotten hit by the wild shots.

"Oh Daddy I shot a person." Lisa wasn't physically hurt but she was reacting to what she had just done.

"I know honey." Robert held his daughter, while Greg radioed Ron and asked him to check for survivors.

"And Ron be extremely careful, if they aren't all dead they are still armed."

Ron and Pat checked and determined that two of the men were still alive. One didn't look like he would be for long though. They disarmed and bound the man that wasn't too badly injured, and disarmed all of the other men just to be safe. Greg called the sheriff and told him there were two wounded men and 18 dead ones at the farm could they hurry up, one of the men was in bad shape.

"Are any of your people hurt Greg?"

"No, just the men that were robbing the place."

"Ok, we'll be there as soon as we can. It'll probably be a couple of hours though." the sheriff wasn't a callous man, but his compassion for criminals who attempted murder wasn't always in ample supply.

He was at the house the men in question had just left. Fortunately there was no-one living there, (they had doubled up) but the men had trashed the place and shot the dogs left to guard the property at night. One had been alive and in great pain when the sheriff and deputies arrived. The sheriff had just finished putting the dog out of it's misery when Greg reached him on the radio. (Did I mention that the sheriff is a dog lover?)

Next Greg called Father Tom and asked him to come out. Lisa was sobbing on her father's shoulder and kept repeating that she had murdered someone. Father Tom said he would come and was there within about 20 minutes. By this time it was almost dawn about 5:00 am.

Upon arriving the priest first went to the wounded men and anointed the critically wounded man who was no longer conscious. He also prayed for healing, and repentance. The other man didn't seem that interested in talking to the priest, but he did ask if he was going to be executed.

"I doubt it son, the sheriff is on his way to get you."

"I'm not your Fu**ing son old man. Save your religious crap and your prayers for those who want them"

" I pray for everyone who crosses my path and so I'll pray for you too, but you need to know that my praying for you doesn't guarantee anything. You have to want redemption and ask for it, to get it. It's a free gift but you do have to tell God you want it. You see, God is a gentleman; so if it is your wish to go to Hell he will let you have your way, although it would break His heart."

"Yeah right like God cares about me. He doesn't give a Fu** about me."

"You are so wrong. He cares enough that he freely offered himself for your Redemption. He also cares enough that you didn't die just now like all of your friends did."

"Yeah well, I deserve to go to Hell, just like they deserve it."

"So do I. So does everyone else. But YOU don't have to. All you have to do is repent and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ. Ask Him for forgiveness. Ask Him for mercy. Ask Him for the grace of Baptism. "

"Whatever" The man turned his head away from the priest.

Sighing inwardly, Father Tom went into the house. He would pray for the man, and he always tried to reach every non-Christian he met, but sometimes it was very difficult to remember to be charitable. He was only human after all...

Chapter 16: Beginnings....

It was now 6:00 a.m. Karen had been able to relax with Susan's coaching and had even slept for a couple of hours. Now however, the contractions were getting stronger and closer together.

"Ok Karen let's get you into the tub. Trina, did you put the Epsom salts in the tub?"

"Yes, I did. What is that for anyway?"

"It's to kill germs and help prevent infection. I wouldn't have Karen get into the tub if her water had broken, but since it hasn't we should be fine."

"But we boiled the water; that should have killed any germs."

"Yes, but we didn't boil the tub."

"Ahh."

Karen got into the tub. She was getting to the last bit of labor (called transition) when the cervix opens from 8cm to 10 cm. Most women agree that this is the most painful portion of labor. Having Karen finish off labor in the tub made it easier for her to cope with the strength of the contraction.

"Oh that feels better it's not so hard to deal with. Why didn't you have me get in here sooner Susan?"

"Well, the danger is if you get into the water too soon it can stall your labor. Now some women don't have that problem and there are different schools of thought. My personal attitude is that labor hurts and I would rather get it over with. So I generally only use the water therapy for transition or if the mother won't relax and help herself. Since you did beautifully once you knew what to do, water wasn't

needed earlier on."

"OOOOH FRED.... here comes another one." Fred was at Karen's side and started lovingly talking her through the contraction.

"Ok baby, breathe easy,"

"relax"

"I love you"

"Our baby is almost here"

"Breathe, hang on... almost over"

"Ok. All gone?"

"Yes."

Karen rested her head on Fred's arm.

Susan had been working with Fred, trying to get him more involved. He obviously loved his wife, and was just as obviously at a total loss in this situation. It would have been much easier for Susan to just take over, but it was better by far to encourage the father to be as involved as possible, helping his wife bring their child into the world. Some fathers wouldn't or couldn't and some mothers didn't want that either.

Susan always respected the couple's wishes but encouraged as well. Her theory was that if the woman felt she could rely on her man to get her through childbirth it also helped her feel she could rely on him in other areas. For the man it not only gave him an outlet for his desire to cherish and support his wife, (which made him feel more manly) it also helped him bond with his child. This strengthened the whole family unit and made a better situation for the child to be born into.

This philosophy was Susan's and the result of her beliefs about male female relationships and experience at births. Many other midwives (mostly of the feminist persuasion) vocally disagreed with her at midwifery conferences she had attended, but Susan had seen it in action too many times. The more supportively involved the man was in the birth (not talking about those that took over the birth-different subject entirely), the closer the entire family was after the birth.

Karen continued to labor for about 20 minutes and then....

"Karen, do you feel like pushing?"

"YEASSSS." Feel like it....well she already was.

"Ok, let's get you on the birthing stool after this contraction." Since this was a first baby pushing would take a while. Susan was in no hurry, but it was easier on the woman if she didn't have to move around much after pushing started.

Karen's water still hadn't broken, and since she was pushing Susan wanted to figure out where the baby was.

"Ok Karen, I'm going to check you after the next contraction is finished. It might send you right into another one but I'd like to find out where the baby is ok?"

"Ok."

Some midwives would have checked before this and some checked during a contraction. Susan checked when she did for the following reasons.

Susan knew that the baby was presenting head first, she had checked Karen right before transition had started, and the baby had been at +1 station (head right at the opening to the cervix and coming through a bit with the water bag bulging around it). She didn't check during a contraction unless she absolutely had to because it hurt like mad. Labor was painful enough without adding to it unnecessarily. At least in Susan's opinion.

"Oh God here comes another one..."

"I know honey I'm sorry, everything is looking great though so you can just push out that baby." Susan would explain the rest after the contraction ended.

"Whew that was a strong one."

"I know they usually are which is why I try not to check too often. Ok here's the good news. The baby's head is at the top of the birth canal and Baby's heart tones are really good.

So let's try and shorten the pushing stage. Fred, you need to get right behind Karen and support her back.

Karen when you want to push, I want you to breathe normally and try not to tighten up your face.

Put all your energy into your bottom which will make the push more effective.

And don't hold your breath. Remember you are still breathing for the baby, and the baby is working

hard too. You both need the oxygen.

Working together with all three of them, (Karen, the baby and Fred) Susan coached over the next half an hour. Then....

"Karen, the head is crowning....Push hard now....Push....."

The head was born and Susan had Karen pant instead of push. She checked for a cord, explaining to Trina and the couple what she was doing. There was no cord but the baby didn't rotate by itself. Susan gently rotated the baby and the rest of the birth was uneventful.

"Well, Fred what do you have?" Susan knew but liked to let the Dad make the announcement.

"Oh Karen, she's a girl. I love you Baby." Fred was crying as he kissed his wife.

Karen was crying too and said, "Oh Fred she's beautiful."

"Yes she is just as beautiful as you are."

"Oh yeah, I'm so gorgeous with my hair all sweaty and crap running down my legs."

Fred meant every word when he looked at his wife and said. "You are the most beautiful woman in the world to me."

Susan was teary eyed herself. No matter how many times she witnessed this scene it always touched her.

And Trina? She was absolutely stunned by what she had just seen. She had never been present at one of Susan's births and her boyfriends (only one had stuck around long enough for the birth) hadn't been exactly supportive during the process. Her Mom and sisters had been there of course but they couldn't support her like the father could have. Trina couldn't help thinking....'I've been robbed.'

Susan and Trina cleaned up Karen, the baby and the bathroom. Susan set the towels and other things to soak in cold water and told Fred how to wash them. the placenta was born with no problem and after about 4 hours Susan prepared to leave. She told Fred just to take Karen to the hospital if there were any concerns. Being in town they were much closer to the hospital than Susan was to them.

"I'll be back in a day or two to check on you, and I'll stop at the hospital to let them know you are here."

"Thank for you help Susan, I don't know if we can ever repay you. I don't have any money and we're getting our food from the church kitchen."

"Don't worry about it Fred. You're a plumber right?"

"Well yeah, although I'm unemployed."

"Susan he's the best plumber in the area." Karen was all sorts of ready to brag on Fred.

"Well I'm ok. I haven't gotten a lot of calls for plumbing lately though. People aren't using their drains with the water out."

"I'll tell you what Fred. I'll talk to Robert and the next time we need a plumber for something we'll call you and you can do the job in exchange for me helping with the birth. Deal?"

"That sounds great. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Susan highly doubted she'd need a plumber anytime soon but it didn't cost her anything to help Fred retain his self respect. No one likes to be a charity case, least of all a man with a family to provide for. Susan wrote it down on the labor chart and Fred signed it.

Susan had no set fee, but let each client pay what they felt they could afford. Usually the poorer families paid more than the wealthy ones. For some reason some wealthy people didn't have an accurate picture of what someone's time and knowledge were worth. Susan didn't worry about it though. Robert had always been the bread winner in the family and God had always provided....

Chapter 17: Endings...

Father Tom reached the house and went directly into Lisa's room. Robert was still with her and although she was no longer crying, (or vomiting), she was still obviously very upset.

"Lisa, Father Tom is here, would you like to talk to him?"

"Yes. Father Tom can I make a confession?"

"Of course Lisa"

"Can I do it in front of my Dad?"

"If you'd like."

"Ok" Lisa was trying to hold it together but she started crying again. "Bless me Father for I have sinned...." "Oh Father I murdered someone!!!"

"No Lisa you didn't. You shot someone and probably killed them but you did NOT murder anyone."

"But..."

"Lisa. I know that this is hard and I know that you feel really bad because you caused another person's death, but it's very important that you understand the difference between protecting yourself and murder.

You did not ask those men to attack your house. They chose to do that evil thing. You defended yourself and helped to defend your little brother's and sisters and cousins. If you hadn't done that, those men would have hurt you or someone you love very badly. Those men out in the yard have already killed people.

That is not murder. That is self defense and self defense has always been perfectly acceptable for Christians. It is also perfectly acceptable to defend the helpless. Now, if you would like I will pray with you for those poor men's souls. There are a couple that are still alive and we will pray especially hard for them. The one's that are dead we will just pray for God's mercy on them. The ones still alive can still make the choice for repentance and conversion so let's pray for them first. Ok?"

"Ok. Father are you sure it wasn't a sin?"

"I'm sure. Now let's pray..."

So Lisa and Father Tom, (and Robert) prayed for the conversion and salvation of the men still alive and for God's mercy on those that had died. Afterwards Lisa felt much better and consented to take a nap and let her Dad go out into the living room with the priest.

"Thanks Father. I tried telling her the same thing, but she didn't believe me."

"Well, sometimes children need to hear it from someone not their parent."

"Being a priest didn't hurt either."

"No, probably not."

Charles motioned to Robert.

"The sheriff is here and the unconscious man is dead."

"Ok thanks Dad."

Robert walked outside to greet the sheriff.

"Hi Dennis how are you?"

"Pretty good Rob, although it's been a right busy morning."

"Here too. We got a call for Susan to go to a birth in town at the same time we got the call about the group of unfriendlys headed our way."

"Did Susan make it out alright?"

"Yes. She took her sister and Julien and the two babies with her. We figured they'd all be safer in town and Susan really needs to get some other women up to speed, she isn't going to be able to handle all the births in the county by herself."

"And that number is probably going to go up in about nine months."

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh didn't you know? There isn't any birth control left in the entire county. The hospital and every drug store is out of everything. The hospital is still getting calls for IUDs but they don't have any more. I put out a call to the surrounding counties, but they have the same problem. It isn't being shipped in and everyone has run out."

"Oh boy."

"You can say that again."

"You know Dennis, there are several people at our church that know how to use Natural Family Planning. Maybe you should ask Father Tom about offering some classes."

"Hey that's a great idea. I'll do that. Now, let's go see how they are doing processing that thug in your back yard."

Both men walked around the side of the house into the backyard. Two deputies were in the process of giving first aid to the wounded criminal.

"How is he Jeff?"

"He'll be fine sheriff. It's just a flesh wound on his leg. We read him his rights and put the cuffs on him. He says he wants a lawyer."

"Oh really? Well son, if you want a lawyer you're going to have to wait until we can locate one. In case you hadn't noticed it, this isn't the big city and we don't have a lot of lawyers around here. But I'll see

what I can do for you. In the meantime, you'll have to accept my hospitality down at the police station."

"Aren't you even going to take me to the hospital?"

"Nope. I have a doctor friend that makes prison calls. He can patch you up in a cell just as easily as he can a hospital room and that way I don't have to waste an extra deputy guarding you. We're a little busy trying to help folks out right now and quite frankly I've spent about as much time on you as I care to."

The two deputies loaded the sulking prisoner into the squad car, and waving at Robert and Dennis pulled out of the driveway headed to town. A few seconds later Julien's truck came into view. They pulled up and Susan greeted Dennis as she got out.

"Hi Dennis what brings you out here?"

"Well you missed some excitement. There were about 20 thugs that decided to pick on the wrong house and we just came out to get the one remaining thug. I'll send someone out to get the rest of them for burial later on this afternoon. Please don't touch them, I'll send a photographer out too. Have to be as official as we can be under the circumstances."

"I'll make sure no one goes out there until your man arrives, but could you send him out soon? Today is laundry day and I don't want to have to look at dead bodies while we're doing it you know?"

Dennis laughed. "Sure Susan, I'll call it in now." He walked over to his truck shaking his head. If anyone had told him he would be having this kind of conversation with Susan Schneider six months ago he would have called them looney. Calmly discussing moving the dead bodies out of her yard so she could do laundry in peace.

Well any way you looked at it life sure had changed since February.