

The Reluctant Survivalist

A Short Story

by Fleataxi

Chapter 1 - A Rude Awakening

Steve Smith was working on a car at his shop near Marine Air Station Miramar in the northern quadrant of the City of San Diego. San Diego was a strange city as cities went, it had a classic downtown, then due to urban sprawl, the city limits ranged anywhere from 10-25 miles from downtown, then the County of San Diego, CA extended beyond that from the Mexican border to the Riverside County line, almost 80 miles to the north. From east to west, the city went from the beaches to Route 125 in places, and the County extended out East into the desert. Due to ridiculously high housing costs, Steve had to buy a house out in Warner Springs, and commute 60 miles 1-way to work. He was glad when he purchased his motorcycle, a 2001 Kawasaki ZRX-1200 retro-sport bike. He was an experienced rider and held numerous motorcycle racing licenses, and was capable of driving the bike at its maximum speed of over 170mph, but rarely drove much more than the speed limit, both because he was a careful rider, and the kind of speeds he was capable of riding at could get him thrown in Jail or worse. He'd had too many friends killed or injured to ride recklessly, but he was glad he had the skill to in case he ever needed to get home quick.

That afternoon, he got his chance to ride "like a Bat out of Hell" when he was working on a customer's car and the lights went out. He thought it was another of California's famous power outages, which were occurring so frequently that some people had installed a generator and a transfer switch so they could stay in business. When his lights didn't come back on, Steve wondered "What the..." and tried to switch stations on his battery-powered radio, but it wasn't working. When one of his mechanics said that a car that started a second ago wouldn't start, it dawned on Steve that it might be EMP. If it was, it might be either a near miss, or the precursor to an all-out nuclear war. Either way, he didn't want to be anywhere near Miramar, since it was a prime target. He yelled at his mechanics that the balloon had just gone up, and they should go home right now. They locked the doors on the way out in case this was a false alarm, but Steve knew better. None of the other vehicles would start, except for 1 older mechanic's diesel truck, so everyone but Steve piled into it since they lived near each other and drove out. Steve took the Mylar cover off his bike, and saying a quick prayer, inserted the key, turned on the ignition, and started the bike. It rumbled to a start, and he said a quick prayer of Thanksgiving, gathered his emergency gear and ammo bag and stuffed it in his saddlebags while the bike warmed up. He filled the tank from a 5-gallon Jerry can of gasoline they kept at the shop, slipped on his shoulder holster carrying his Para Ord P-14 Limited and 2 spare mags in an off-side carrier, then put on his motorcycle racing leathers and helmet.

He pushed the bike out the door, and except for the idling motorcycle, it was strangely quiet. Normally there was traffic noise all up and down Miramar Road, which was a major North County thoroughfare. When he got to Miramar Road, he could see that his motorcycle was the only vehicle running except for a few commercial vehicles with diesel engines. Most of the people sat in their vehicles stunned, and seeing his opportunity to get the heck out of Dodge before things got bad he accelerated quickly to the fastest speed he could safely slalom through the stalled cars. Once he got clear, he climbed through the gears, and as the traffic thinned going east, he drove as fast as he dared. If this was Round 1 of a Nuclear attack, he had maybe 12 minutes to get out of Ground Zero, and he had burned up 3-4 minutes of precious time getting his head out of his ass and on the road. Miramar became Pomerado Road, then he turned onto Scripps-Poway Parkway which was a long steady climb until it joined State 67 to Ramona. He had to slow down again driving through Ramona due to traffic accidents and the usual congestion. Once he was clear of the town and headed toward Santa Ysabel on State Route 78, he accelerated to more than 100 mph even with the windy roads. He knew these roads like the back of his hand, and the turns were heavily banked, and his only risk would be running into a stalled car. Since it was the middle of the week and early afternoon, it was a fairly safe chance to take, since if he didn't get out of Ground Zero, he'd be dead in a matter of minutes anyway.

When he reached Santa Ysabel, he hung a hard left onto Route 79. He was less than 20 miles from home by now, and was hoping he would make it. He accelerated to the bike's top speed, since it was a straight road and he knew Route 79 would be totally deserted at this time of day. He was afraid to look down and check the speedometer, but guessed he was flying in excess of 150mph. If he hit anything at this speed, they would need a scraper and a sponge to clean up the accident site.

As he pulled into the driveway, he was facing west, and saw many bright flashes like flashbulbs and got down on the ground. He started counting to himself, and when he got to "one thousand 250" he heard the booms, and then the earth shook. He knew by the difference between the light and the sound that someone had just nuked San Diego, which was almost exactly 50 miles to his west. The breeze was blowing from the west at 8 knots, so he had maybe 5 hours to find shelter before the fall-out hit. He knew wherever he went, he'd have to stay at least 10 days. He cursed himself for not digging the basement shelter sooner, then remembered an old mining tunnel out in the desert his friend Matt had showed him when they were out riding the dunes on their ATVs. Steve knew he couldn't stay at his house, because in 5 hours the radiation levels from the fallout would be lethal. He remembered seeing 6 or 8 flashes, and several mushroom clouds from ground bursts, and knew that the radiation level would soon rise to more than 1,000 rads, which would be lethal to anyone not in a shelter with at least 6 feet of dirt or 8 inches of concrete overhead. He parked his bike, then started quickly packing his trailer.

He debated which vehicle to hook up to his toy box trailer, his half-ton Ford Pickup, or his Ford Bronco. They were both gasoline motors, and in the end, he realized he might need the 4wd, so he tried to start the Bronco. When it wouldn't start, he tried the truck. Neither would start despite the fact that he had converted them both to points and carburetors, which was legal because he lived outside California's designated smog zones.

Steve really wanted to take the Bronco, so he pulled his spare starter out of the steel ammo can he stored it in for EMP resistance, and installed it in the Bronco. He got the starter running, but it still wouldn't run, so he quickly replaced the alternator and distributor, which already had a set of points installed and the alignment marks set. He bumped his #1 cylinder to TDC and replaced the distributor, then the alternator. Finally he turned the key and it fired right up. He quickly finished loading the trailer and the Bronco with all the food and water it could carry, grabbed his clothing, camping gear, rifle, ammunition, cleaning and maintenance kit. Next he filled the trailer's water tank and 4 5-gallon water containers and loaded 8 5-gallon Jerry cans full of fresh gasoline in the back of the trailer, then wheeled his motorcycle and his 500cc 2wd ATV up the ramp into the back and secured them. He left his house with an hour to spare and drove down S-2 to S-22, or what the locals called The Glass Elevator down into the desert and out to Borrego Springs, and to the abandoned mine. He drove his Bronco and trailer into the mine tunnel as far as he could and quickly unpacked then set up a camping site in a side tunnel that opened to a huge cavern. He hoped he was deep enough into the tunnel to stop any fall-out from getting in, and the side tunnel was a sharp right bend off the main tunnel so he should be OK. He looked at his watch, then wrote down the date and time, knowing he shouldn't come out for 10-14 days to be safe. When he was finished making camp, he walked out to the mouth of the mine and his Geiger counter started clicking. He stopped before it reached his max value, and wrote the date, time and reading onto a stake, and drove it into the ground. He wanted to know how deep the radiation was penetrating the mine, and so far he was very safe, since he didn't max out the Geiger counter until he was within 50 feet of the mine's opening, and his vehicle was parked at least a quarter-mile down the tunnel. He'd check it again tomorrow, and meanwhile, he took out his dosimeter and clipped it to his shirt pocket to keep track of his total dosage. He spent the time reading, and taking readings of the radiation each morning. 10 days later, the radiation in the tunnel was back down to background levels, so he felt it was safe to go outside. He repacked his stuff, and drove into Borrego Springs.

He didn't see a living soul, and finally spotted the gas station he and Matt had stopped at 6 months ago. He remembered the owner was in his basement fiddling with his generator since it wouldn't work. Steve asked if he wanted some help, and he reluctantly agreed. Steve quickly diagnosed the problem, replaced the point set and set the gap, and the generator worked perfectly. The owner let Steve fill up his Bronco for free in appreciation. Steve knew the power was still out because he hadn't seen a single light in town. He checked the pumps, and the power was out. He walked into the bay, and the body of the owner was slumped on the floor with a bullet hole in his head. There wasn't anything Steve could do for him, so he ignored the body as best as possible, located the generator, and after several pulls, got it started. He climbed

out, walked back to his Bronco and filled the tank and every other gas container he had, then shut off the pump. He walked back into the basement, and shut off the generator so no one could drain the tanks in case he needed a fill-up later. He remembered he had a water faucet out back, and connected his water filter and hose to the spigot, and filled his water tanks, then connected to the black water dump, and dumped his tank and flushed it out. Since he still had water pressure, he used the bathroom and washed up as best as possible. He took everything useful from the gas station, including what he assumed was an NFA Mossberg 500A shotgun, 5 boxes of 00 Federal Tactical Buck and 5 boxes of Tactical 1oz slugs. He realized that if he was caught with it in California, he'd be old and grey when he got out of prison.

He needed to make a decision to either go Northeast to his friend Bill's house in NV, or go back home. He was frustrated because he couldn't get any news due to the EMP taking out all the radio stations. He knew his house was so isolated that someone had to deliberately be looking for it to find him. The downside of that isolation was the nearest shopping was in Ramona, almost 40 miles away. He was pretty sure some people in Ramona would be left alive, since they were in a high mountain valley, and some people had basements or shelters. If they were at work like he was, they were probably dead unless they found a good temporary shelter, but enough people would have survived to make scavenging the grocery stores difficult to extremely dangerous.

He faced the same dilemma if he went into Nevada. He wasn't sure what kind of reception he'd get even if Bill had survived. In the end, he realized he had water from an artesian well on his property and a 6-month supply of propane. All he needed was food, and defensive arms. He decided to drive back home. About 7 miles west of Borrego Springs, he spotted a woman with an infant hitchhiking. There was no cover around, so he was pretty sure it wasn't a trap, still he kept his shotgun pointed at the door, so if she was bait for a trap, she'd be the first one to die.

When he stopped, she said "Please help us. We've been walking since 5 miles back. We were ambushed on the road and they tried to drag me out of the truck and rape me on the spot. Larry came out with his gun and shot all 3 of them, but took a round in the head before they died. Little Nicky is all I have left."

"Where do you live?"

"We lived in an apartment in Southeast San Diego. When the first EMP went off, we just ran."

"Do you have any relatives in San Diego?"

"I doubt if any of them survived."

"I've got a couple of spare bedrooms if you want to stay with me for a while."

Nichole looked at him. Steve wasn't bad looking. Steve caught her look and said "I'm sorry, I don't think you ever told me your name."

"I'm sorry. It's Nichole, Nichole Stevens."

"Hi, I'm Steve Smith. Look if you want to stay with me, I wanted you to know I'm not expecting anything from you except you pull your own weight. I'm not expecting any sexual favors or anything."

Her opinion of Steve went up a couple of notches, then she said "That's funny, you don't look gay!"

"Nichole, you're a beautiful woman who's just lost her husband, and survived an attempted rape. The last thing you need is for me to put a move on you. We'll cross that bridge if and when we get there, but it will be totally up to you."

Nichole smiled and said "Thanks Steve."

He gave her several plastic liter bottles of water, and some snack food he got from the gas station, got little Nicky secured in his car seat in the back, and he drove back to his house in Warner Springs. He drove up the driveway, and nothing had been disturbed. Steve smelled smoke, and looking to the west, could see the sky was hazier than normal, and the sun was bright red despite it only being 3:00 in the afternoon, then he realized that the nuclear warheads must have started a firestorm in the densely packed urban and suburban areas of the county west of I-15. He hoped it didn't spread much further east, or he'd have to find a new home, maybe back in Borrego Springs. He didn't think the fires could cross 50 miles of desert. He parked the rig and started unloading it. He got fresh linens out for Nichole and Nicky, and showed her where she was going to sleep, and her own bathroom. She was glad for the privacy, and spent the rest of the afternoon laying in her bed crying. Once he got done unpacking, Steve made dinner, then they went to bed.

The next day, he went to check on his neighbor's place. He was a doctor and lived in town, and the house in Warner Springs was a vacation house for him. Steve talked with him, and found out they were both into preparedness. Rick told him that if he didn't make it back to the house, he should feel free to use anything in the house to help him survive. Steve had a key, and since it had been almost 2 weeks since the incident, and no sign of Rick, he was pretty sure he didn't make it. He missed his friend, but was grateful for the supplies.

He walked back over to the house, and asked Nichole if she could help him move some stuff to their house. He explained his conversation with Rick, and the fact that he was probably dead since it was two weeks later, and no sign of him. Steve got the pickup started after replacing the starter on the huge V-8, and they drove it over to Rick's place, and they loaded anything they

could use into it. Even with the full-size bed, it took them most of the day, and 4 truckloads to move their stored food and supplies. Rick had a bunch of long-term storage food in his closet, and a pantry full of commercially canned food. What blew Steve away was Rick's armory. He moved the light dresser and behind a false panel was a whole room full of guns, ammo, and gear. It took another whole trip to unload the armory and transfer it to Steve's place. Nichole looked at Steve as if he'd suddenly grown 2 heads, and he realized Nichole was a Sheeple to the core and needed a major education.

"Nichole, sit down, I need to explain a couple of things to you. Those nuclear bombs probably wiped out 80-90% of the population of San Diego County. That includes the Police and everyone else you used to rely on to protect you. The only thing that stands between us and death from starvation, attack, or worse are these weapons. You're going to have to learn to defend yourself, since I can't always be there, or I might be busy fighting the rest of the Mutant Zombie Biker horde off. Civilization as we knew it is gone, maybe for good. Things will quickly revert to the law of the jungle, and unless we have enough firepower to fight off any attacker, and the will to use it, we might as well kill ourselves and save the wait. I can teach you how to defend yourself and survive, but I can't give you the will to pull the trigger when you have to."

Nichole's green eyes flared "Wait a minute there Steve. I fought like a tiger to avoid getting raped."

"Yeah and your husband still died. If you had been armed and had the will to use it, things might have turned out different. You can't change the past, but you can try and keep it from happening again."

Nichole burst out crying. Steve let her get it out. Finally when she was finished he said "I'm not blaming you Nichole, stuff happens. You weren't raised with guns, and were probably socialized in school to think that they were evil. They're not evil. They're tools, just like a hammer. You can use a hammer to kill too."

"Ok Steve, what do you want me to do?"

"You have to want it. I can't force you to want to defend yourself and Nicky, but you have to realize the consequences of that training might result in you taking another human's life, even if he is a total scumbag."

"I'll never let anyone hurt Nicky."

"How are you going to stop them?"

Nichole's mind hit a brick wall. She almost said she'd kill the SOB, then realized she didn't

know the first thing about guns, except what she saw on the TV and in the movies.

“Steve, can you help me?”

“Ok Nichole. First thing tomorrow, I’ll set up the range, and teach you how to shoot the AR-15, then one of the pistols, and finally a 12-gauge shotgun.” Steve knew Rick had a P-14 just like his, because they bought them together. Steve didn’t like the AR-15, and called it a “poodle shooter” but it would be the perfect carbine for a woman, especially a novice shooter. Rick had a Bushmaster HBAR AR-15 flat-top with a 3x9x40 quick-disconnect scope, and 20 20-round magazines in a tactical soft case. Rick also had 2 Benelli Super Black Eagle shotguns which Steve positively drooled over when he saw them. Rick had a surprise for them, he had ordered 2 spare 24-inch barrels for the black synthetic shotguns, and had a gunsmith cut them down to 20 inches and mount a ghost-ring rear sight on the receiver and a tritium front sight to replace the bead. The 28-inch barrel was left stock for wing shooting. The 20-inch barrel was meant for home defense, and Steve was sure it would work perfectly. He thought it was a crying shame to chop the barrel down on a \$1400 gun, but Rick could afford it. Steve found 2 cases of 3" 00 Buck in the armory, and 1 case of rifled slugs. There were 4 cases of 5.56 NATO ammo, including 3 cases of 55gr FMJ ammo, and 1 of 55gr JHP Varmint ammo. The best score was 2 cases each of Corbon 200 gr. Flying Ashcan ammo and 230gr. FMJ practice ammo. One thing he didn’t understand was the case of 308 Match ammo. Rick didn’t own a .308 rifle. He had a 7mm Magnum he used for hunting. Steve was just glad to have the extra ammo. All he had on hand was 100 rounds of match ammo, and 200 rounds of practice ammo.

The next morning, Steve set up his ‘range’ which amounted to a folding card table and some pallets anchored on their side with a target stapled to it. He had 4 pallets: 1 at 15 feet, 1 at 15 yards, 1 at 50 yards, and 1 at 100 yards. First he showed Nichole everything there was to know about the AR-15. They moved over to the 50-yard line, and he got her into a good stable prone position, and had her dry fire until she could tell where the crosshairs were pointing as the trigger broke. He handed her a loaded 20 round magazine, and he could see her shaking like a leaf. He leaned over and said that it was OK, the rifle wasn’t going to jump up in full-auto and shoot everyone once she put the magazine in. She smiled and calmed down, so Steve moved back to the spotting scope. Her first round was right in the center of the 10-ring, but they were shooting at 50 yards. She followed his instructions to the letter, and tried to put the rest of the group in the same hole. She didn’t do badly for a beginner, and shot a 3-inch group that was high and right. He decided to leave her scope settings alone until her groups shrank and she switched to the 100-yard target, since she should be high at 50yds if her sights were properly set for 100 yards.

He handed her another magazine, and by the time she’d fired 200 rounds, her group size was down under 2 inches, and was steadily creeping in toward the x-ring. When she finished the last string, he said they should switch to the 100-yard line since the scope was really zeroed for the 100-yard line. When she laid down, she said she couldn’t see the target as clearly, so he had her

crank the magnification up to 9x. With the scope at 9X, it was much easier to see the center of the X-ring than it was a 3x at 50 yards. Once she got set, she told Steve the crosshairs were wiggling all over the place. Steve said that was normal, since every little vibration in her body was transmitted to the rifle, which made the barrel and the scope wiggle. The 1" x-ring was invisible without a telescopic sight at 100 yards, so everything she saw was magnified 9 times, including her natural fidgetiness. If she wanted to shoot x-ring groups, she had to get her breathing and nervousness under control, if she were religious, she could try reciting the 23rd Psalm, or the Lord's prayer, or otherwise she could try some deep breathing exercises. Either way, it should calm her down.

She was raised Baptist, so she knew the 23rd Psalm. She started reciting from memory "The Lord is my Shepherd..." By the time she finished, her scope image had settled down to oscillating around the X-ring. Steve told her that was excellent, and to do exactly what she did from now on. He told her in order to shoot through her wobble, she should squeeze the trigger when the crosshairs were on the way into the X so the trigger broke right before it crossed the center of the x, since it took a fraction of a second for the hammer to fall, the primer to ignite, and the powder to propel the bullet down the barrel. During that whole time, she could influence the path of the bullet. Once it left the barrel, it was on a ballistic arc to the target. She didn't understand a word he said except "on the way in", and her first round punched a clean hole right through the center of the X-ring. He didn't say anything except "Ok, do it exactly that way again." Her rifle cracked, and her second bullet was outside the x-ring in the 10-ring. She kept shooting, and Steve was proud of her. Most of her rounds stayed in the 10-ring or better.

When the gun locked open after the 20th round, she stood up with a big grin on her face. Steve stood up with his arms open, and she fell into his arms. He held her, and said "Great job Nichole. I was watching through the spotting scope, and it looked like you might have put all 20 rounds into a 2-3 inch group, and your first round was in the x-ring. If you're OK, I'm going to get some B-27 body silhouettes and some orange stickers for you to practice shot placement. There are 2 spots on the human body you want to try and hit with that little rifle. If you nail them right above the bridge of the nose, it's lights out, and Hasta la Vista Baby. That's the best shot for a .22 caliber rifle. The next best spot is right through the heart. It won't kill them as quickly, but they'll be hurting big time, and not in much condition to continue the attack once their blood pressure drops."

Nichole was taken aback until she remembered the whole point of this exercise wasn't punching holes in paper, but punching holes in dirtbags who were out to hurt or kill her or her 2-year-old son. She thought of her husband Larry, and the scene at their broken down car where the two men ripped the passenger door open, dragged her out of the car, and were trying to tear her clothes off when Larry pulled a pistol from God knows where and started shooting. He wasn't the greatest of shots, but he hit all 3 of the dirtbags with fatal hits. The 3rd managed to get his gun out, and with his dying breath cursed Larry and shot him in the head. Nichole screamed, and ran to the other side of the car, but she could see her husband's head was blown all over the

seats. She took little Nicky out of his car seat, converted it to a baby carrier, and took whatever food and water they had left in a shopping bag and started walking away from the scene down the road. It was a long lonely walk, and she was crying most of the way, mostly for her husband, partly for herself, and partly for her son, who'd grow up without a father if they survived. Twice she was so tired she wanted to lie down and die, but she knew if she gave up, her son was dead too. He was crying, she was crying, and she couldn't comfort him. Finally she sat down, unbuttoned the buttons on her blouse that were still there, and offered her son her breast. He sucked at the proffered nipple even though she wasn't lactating anymore. The sensations calmed them both down, and when he fell asleep, she put him back in the carrier, and buttoned up again. She was out of water, hungry and tired when she saw Steve's truck and thought to herself that even getting raped would be preferable to both of them dying of thirst in the middle of the desert. Luckily Steve was a gentleman, gave them food and water, and a place to stay without demanding anything in return.

When Steve came back after posting the new target, she snapped back to the present. Somehow she knew that Steve was a good man, and would die saving their lives if he had to. Suddenly she didn't want to lose him, and she knew that she'd have to become not only an excellent shot, but a decisive cold-blooded killer if necessary to keep Steve from dying protecting her like her husband Larry did. When she got back behind the scope, she could see the 2 orange dots on the black target that looked like the head and shoulders of a man. She remembered the face of the man that tried to rape her and killed her husband, and mentally put his face on the target as she squeezed the trigger, sending a round right through his forehead. She put 5 quick shots through his forehead before Steve touched her shoulder, breaking the spell. "He's dead Nichole, time to switch targets." She put the safety on the rifle, stood up and threw herself into Steve's arms crying. Steve didn't know what to do, so he held her while she sobbed hysterically. When she was done crying, he dried her tears, then she kissed him, and said "Thanks Steve." Her kiss was like a bolt of electricity, but he didn't push it any further. They spent the rest of the morning working with the AR-15.

They broke for lunch, then he handed her a P-14 just like his, and told her everything she needed to know to shoot a pistol, and the basic safety rules, modified for the current situation. Now the priority became killing the bad guy as quickly as possible, from as far away as possible, and forget about legal. He said if someone was armed, they were a threat. If they acted suspicious or threatening in any way, she was to shoot first and ask questions later. He had her dry fire 20 times pretending that she had a penny balanced on the slide as she squeezed the trigger. Her time with the rifle paid off, and she had the trigger squeeze down perfectly. He handed her a loaded magazine, and she slammed the mag home, grabbed the slide, and hauled it all the way to the rear and let it fly just like he showed her, then swept the safety up with her shooting thumb. He started her from low ready since she didn't have a holster yet, but was pretty sure Rick had some somewhere, probably in that pile of gear on the floor. When she was ready, he stood back and to her left to avoid getting hit with flying brass. She brought the gun up, he shooting thumb snapping the safety down to "fire" and resting on it while she shot. Her

first round went right through the center of the target, and you could cover her group with your hand. Steve was impressed, and moved her to the 15-yard target. She didn't do as well, but her group stayed on the paper. Next he put up another B-27 with 2-inch orange dots over the heart and the forehead. He told her to put 2 rounds into the heart, then 1 in the forehead, and keep repeating it until the magazine was empty. 15 rounds later, the target had 10 rounds in and around the heart dot, and 5 rounds in and around the forehead dot. Steve was thinking to himself "Dr. Frankenstein, you've created a monster!"

They fired maybe 300 rounds through the pistol that afternoon, and he could see she was getting tired. They went back in the house, and after she fed Nicky, he showed her how to clean the rifle and the pistol and reassemble them. He told her that she'd learn to shoot the shotgun tomorrow. That evening, after dinner, Steve was laying in bed when his door opened and Nichole walked in. "Steve, I hoped you wouldn't mind, but I can't sleep alone anymore, can I sleep with you?"

Steve pulled the covers off her side of the bed, and as she laid down next to him, she kissed him and said "Make love to me please."

Steve didn't need to be asked twice.

Chapter 2 - A New Life

The next morning, Steve woke up to Nichole holding him, and remembered that last night was one of the most passionate nights of his life, even better than his wedding night with his ex-wife. He hoped she was close enough to Ground Zero to die painlessly. He knew she wouldn't stand a chance of survival otherwise, and he didn't want her to die painfully because he still loved her. He looked over at Nichole and thought to himself "Not bad for a 40-year-old divorced man, Steve!" Judging by her fit trim body, he guessed she was between 28 and 32 years old. She awoke smiling, and saw Steve looking at her. He said "Good morning Beautiful!"

Nichole squeezed Steve harder and gave him a passionate kiss.

"What was that for?"

"Just because I love you. Last night I needed you, and I was grateful, then this morning I realized I love you. I know it's really soon for both of us, but this is a new civilization. I want to share your bed from now on, and hopefully we can have some kids together."

"I guess this means if we find a minister, we should get married."

"Why, where are we going to file the license, and besides I know that you'd lay down your life to protect Nicky and I. That's why I was trying so hard yesterday when we were shooting, because I don't want you to die protecting us."

Steve gave Nichole a kiss and said "Hopefully it won't come to that. If we're going to stay here, and you're planning on having more kids, we need to get to Ramona and grab some supplies. It's technically called looting, but since the owners of the property are dead, it's more like salvaging. Either way, we need to go before the National Guard gets its act together, or someone beats us to it. Would you feel better with Nicky in the truck with us, or home here?"

"I'd like to have him close, even if he would be safer here. I see what you mean, we'd have to leave him in the truck where he was vulnerable if we were to have any chance of getting supplies. Either way we risk his life, but I'd just feel better with him in the truck."

"Ok, let's get you up to speed on the shotgun, then we'll go shopping this afternoon."

Steve gave Nichole a kiss, then rolled out of bed to make breakfast. She got dressed, fed Nicky, and then they ate. After he cleaned up, he took the 2 shotguns, eye protection, and his electronic earmuffs out to the range, and started with the body silhouettes, but rearranged the targets from 10-25 yards, and spread them out laterally, so she could engage them all.

“Nichole, this might be difficult for you. Even with the semiauto action, the shotgun has more recoil than the AR-15. The good news is every time you pull the trigger, you’re sending over an dozen 30-caliber hardened lead balls down range. Of all the short-range weapons in Rick’s arsenal, this 12-gauge has the best stopping power, meaning if you hit someone in the chest, even if they’re wearing a vest, they’re going down, at least for a little bit. The max range with buckshot is right about 25 yards to guarantee enough pellets are going to hit to do the job. Later, I’ll have you fire some rifled slugs which can do a lot of damage out to 100 yards, but it’s like shooting a rifle. You still need to aim a shotgun. Let’s get started.”

Steve showed her how to operate the shotgun, including loading and unloading, how to operate the safety, and how to clear a jamb. Jambes rarely happened in a semiauto shotgun, but when they did, they really tied up the gun, and unless you did everything right, you could make it worse. He handed her the short-barreled Benelli Super Black Eagle, and she was glad to see the rear receiver-mounted peep sight and the front tritium sight lined up in her vision naturally. When she squeezed the trigger, the gun recoiled, but not as badly as she’d thought from seeing all those Hollywood movies. When she saw the target 30 feet away, it had a bunch of holes in it like she had just dumped a whole magazine of .45 caliber ammo into it. She understood what Steve meant now. Steve was pleased that her first shot had gone right through the center of the target, and she didn’t flinch or jump. He had her top the magazine off, and sweep left to right, engaging the targets. She had 4 rounds (3+1) so she started at the left target, put a round into it, swung the barrel over to the right, and as soon as the sights settled on the center of the chest, fired again. She did that 2 more times, then went back to low ready to admire her handiwork. All 4 targets had a well-centered group, but the 20 and 25 yard targets had huge groups. Steve explained to her that as she got farther and farther away, the group size opened up, and much past 25 yards, she couldn’t guarantee enough pellets would hit to stop them. They might die later, but she wanted to stop them Right Now.

Nichole said she wanted to check on Nicky, then they should go as soon as possible. Steve picked up the shotguns and ammo, reloaded both shotguns, and carried them into the house. He located 2 raid vests that Rick had at his house with a level IIA Kevlar lining and chicken plates. Steve was really grateful, and hoped he’d get a chance to thank Rick later. He filled the pockets of the raid vests with shotgun ammo, pistol magazines, and anything he thought they might need on this trip. He brought his universal key - a 48-inch bolt cutter and an electric lock pick set he used at work to open cars instead of calling the locksmith. Nichole fed Nicky, changed his diaper, and said that they were good to go. Steve handed her a raid vest and told her to put it on. She looked scared, and Steve said it was in case they came across anyone. He told her that it had a Kevlar lining as well as front and back chicken plates to stop 30-caliber rifle fire. The raid vest didn’t fit Nichole too well, so Steve helped her adjust it, thoroughly groping her in the process. He got beet red and apologized. She kissed him and said she didn’t mind him groping her at all. It took over an hour to get all 3 of them into his pickup that he decided to take instead of the Bronco since it could hold more loot. He knew he had a tarp and a rope in the back to tie down the load. He started the motor, handed her the Benelli, and he kept the Witness protection

shotgun next to him. They drove into town, and Ramona was deserted. Since the road was downhill, he shut off the motor with the stick shift in neutral and coasted. They rolled down the windows to listen for any noises, but all they could hear was the wind. Steve said to keep the windows down and her shotgun handy, then popped the clutch and restarted the motor. He kept the speed down so he wouldn't make much noise, and drove around the back of the Albertson's Store. Steve explained to Nichole that this store was your basic superstore with a pharmacy and everything. He was hoping they had a tractor-trailer combination that they could load up, and she'd have to drive the truck back home.

He parked out back, cut the lock on the roll-up door, and hit the jackpot. Parked inside the door still backed into the loading bay was an International Harvester tractor-trailer combination. They must have just finished unloading when the bombs hit because the back of the trailer was empty. Steve knew his way around the Navistar motor, and quickly got it running. He left the motor idling, and had Nichole help him load the trailer full of pallets of stuff they wanted using the pallet jack and forklift. He told her to concentrate on canned goods especially meat and vegetables, and all the paper products and baby food they would need. He showed her how to use the pallet jack, and said he was going to clean out the pharmacy department of everything he thought they could use.

When he walked into the store, the smell of the rotting meat and produce almost made him barf all over the place. He ran to the front of the store, found some Vicks Vaporub, and put some under his nose. It helped, but the smell still made him want to gag. While he was in the pharmacy department, but before he cut the lock, and possibly set off an alarm, he cleaned out all the OTC meds, first aid supplies and everything else they might ever need, and hauled it by the cartload back to the loading area, where he filled up several boxes full of supplies. Nichole had started dropping the pallets where he told her to, and he started up the forklift, and started loading the trailer. Once he had all the pallets she had hauled loaded, he looked around, and spotted some canned food and other items he'd like to have, and loaded it aboard the trailer. Steve thought "Score" when he found an entire pallet full of cases of 5lb. canned hams, and cleaned out the pallets of canned meats nearby, even taking the Spam, which he thought made pretty good dog food. When the trailer was full, he had Nichole back up to the next bay and started loading individual open cases of food that they wanted. When he was finished, he said that he was going to break into the pharmacy, which could set off an alarm, so she needed to be ready to go at a moment's notice and keep the truck running. He was going to grab everything they could use from the pharmacy. He cut the lock, and rolled the door up, and spent the next 5 minutes pulling stuff off the shelves, including antibiotics, pain meds, and all the narcotics to keep someone else from getting them, and anything else that looked remotely useful. He was pushing the cart back to the back door when he thought he heard something, so he ran through the store, quickly loaded Nichole's truck, and climbed into the tractor-trailer. With the engine still idling, he shifted into low gear and drove out the back of the parking lot, avoiding the front where he was certain he heard noises. After a tense hour or so, they arrived back at his house. After he climbed down, Nichole asked him "What are you going to do with all this?"

“I’m going to store the bulk of it at Rick’s house. How’s Nicky doing?”

“Sleeping soundly. I grabbed enough baby food, diapers and supplies for an entire orphanage.”

“Ok. We’re going to have to do this the hard way. I brought a heavy cart, the pallet jack, and a set of roller ramps. If I back up to Rick’s front door, I know he has a heavy duty cart that we can move cases in the house with. I need you to stack and organize the cases so we can find it later while I unload the truck. This is going to be hard labor, but it needs to get done. I’ll be in the trailer unloading the pallets onto the ramp, and if you get behind, I’ll help you pick up and store stuff.”

They unloaded the pick-up first, then spent the rest of the day unloading the truck, and storing most of it at Rick’s place. Nichole put a case of everything in the bed of Steve’s truck to bring back over to their house and store there. It took them the rest of the day, and Nichole checked on little Nicky every now and then, but he was sleeping peacefully. When it started to get dark, they called it quits and went home. When it was full dark, Nichole started lighting candles since Steve didn’t have any kerosene lanterns. She was in the process of making a list of what they needed when Steve announced that dinner was ready. He made ham, macaroni and cheese using 2 boxes of macaroni and cheese mix, and 1 16oz canned ham. Suddenly Nichole remembered how hungry she was, and ate a huge plateful, then fed and changed Nicky. Steve heard a scratching at his door, and pulled his P-14 out of the holster, then carefully looked out the window, and recognized his other neighbor’s German Shepard Lucky, except he looked like he hadn’t eaten in days. Steve opened the door, and Lucky stumbled in. Steve picked him up, carried him to a rug, laid him down and took a large Tupperware bowl full of water and sat it next to him. Lucky sat up enough to drink the bowl dry, so Steve kept filling it. Once Lucky was full, he looked like he had to go outside. Steve helped him out, and quickly made some rice and ham for Lucky. Once it was ready, Steve set the food next to Lucky’s bowl, and he ate the entire bowl full of food. Once he was finished, he sat down and Steve petted him. He knew that the only way Lucky would get this hungry was if Kevin and Karen were dead, since they treated Lucky like their kid. He felt sad, since they were his closest neighbors, and often socialized on the weekends. He left Lucky with Nichole, and drove over to Kevin’s house. He picked the front door lock with his electric lock pick, and there was no sign of life anywhere. Both Kevin and Karen worked at University Hospital, which was just off the 163 freeway in downtown, so he hoped they never knew what had hit them. He found Lucky’s bowl, food, toys and his favorite blanket, carried it to the truck, then drove home. Lucky was sacked out on the floor, and Nichole was petting him.

“Nichole, Lucky’s owners are probably dead. Lucky’s a good watchdog, and knows me. If you’re OK, I’d like to keep him.”

“I like dogs too, Lucky reminds me of a dog I once had, who was a German Shepard too. Sure, we can keep him. I’ll add Dog food and stuff to the list.”

“What list?”

“I’m making a list of all the supplies and equipment we’ll need to scavenge to survive up here. You had some serious holes in your survival plans.”

Steve looked at the list and read:

- 1) Propane
- 2) light
- 3) electricity or alternate power source
- 4) Perimeter Security
- 5) long-term fuel source for vehicles
- 6) food
- 7) supplies
- 8) Medical help or books
- 9) Entertainment & books

“Nichole, where did you get all these ideas?”

“My Husband Larry was into preparedness, unfortunately I wasn’t and we never made it past the “Bug-out” stage, and we didn’t even have somewhere to bug out to! I remember a conversation we had, that turned into an argument where he was reading off a list of all the stuff we needed to make our house survivable. I don’t think he ever included San Diego getting nuked in his preparations, because the 3 of us jumped into his diesel truck and drove like he was crazy, headed out Route 94 to the desert. We ran out of Diesel 5 miles east of where you picked us up.”

“Why didn’t you get fuel at the gas station on the western edge of town?”

“He said he had no power. The guys that tried to rape me were yelling at each other to make sure they siphoned the diesel out of our tanks. Problem was we were out too.”

“I wonder if they were the ones who shot the old man?”

“What old man? You mean the station owner?”

“Yeah, he was dead when I got there. That’s how I got the NFA shotgun. He had it on him, but I don’t think he never got off a shot, because the gun was fully loaded, and the safety was on. My guess is the dirtbags shot him in the back, and tried to steal fuel, only to discover the power was out.”

“How come you had a full tank of gas when you picked us up?”

“My friend Matt and I stopped there over a year ago on our way back from riding ATV’s in the desert. He was in the basement cussing his head off trying to get the generator started. I got it running for him, and he filled my tank for free in appreciation. He needed to replace the points on the motor, and I replaced them and set the gap. I remembered where he was, and that he had a generator, but it was a manual start unit.”

“That SOB lied to us, he said he had no power.”

“Probably didn’t want any trouble, and figured it was better to get you to move on down the road and get fuel elsewhere, or he was planning on selling it later for much more money. If that was the case, his greed caught up with him later when someone greedier than him decided to shoot him instead of paying for it, only to find out he didn’t have any power.”

“What a weird string of coincidences. Larry must have been running scared, because we passed several open gas stations in Jamul that had diesel, and he kept driving. We left South Bay with only half a tank of diesel, and ran out in the middle of the desert without more than a gallon or two of water on us. We drank most of it by the time those dirtbags showed up. Nicky and I started walking back west to San Diego, since I knew Blythe was over 100 miles away.”

“Nichole, if you’d have walked 2 miles east, you would have been in Borrego Springs again, where the gas station was. He may have been out of power, but he had plenty of fresh clean water. They get all their water from deep Artesian wells out there.”

“We almost died out there because I forgot one stupid little thing like that?”

“That and not bringing enough water, or defensive firepower. Even though we were still in California, whenever Matt and I went riding, we were always armed, and I always had guns in the trailer. My trailer carries 100 gallons of water. Still, I brought another 20 gallons, plus 20 gallons of gas, just in case.”

“Sounds like you were more into preparedness than even Larry!”

“Actually it was because of my friend Bill in Nevada. We met in college when we had the same biology class. When we weren’t ditching class to go surfing, we were talking about stuff. One of our favorite topics was “What if the big one hits?” We talked about survivalism and preparedness for hours. Once we were old enough, we started buying guns and ammo, then we bought Bug-out Bags, and a small supply of food, which probably was the phase Larry was in when the bombs started falling. Bill got tired of the BS, and moved to NV to a safer location in the middle of nowhere and bought a house. He upgraded his preps, but not much better than he had before, just a longer-term supply of food and water, and a fairly secure area. In the middle of the desert, he won’t have to worry about hordes of survivors, just the people from the nearby town, and most of them were Mormons and into preparedness anyway. I was on my way to his

place when I realized I needed to seek shelter for 2 weeks to wait for the radiation to die down to a safe level.”

“I know, Larry and I hid in the basement of an old brick schoolhouse for 2 weeks like you did. Once we got out, he told me never to let Nicky walk anywhere, since the radiation was worse close to the ground, and if he kicked up dust by walking, he could be getting a much higher dose than we were.”

Steve checked his dosimeter, and was glad to see he’d absorbed less than 10 rads. He remembered he wouldn’t start showing symptoms of radiation sickness until he absorbed around 100 rads. If he absorbed 400 rads, he would have a 50% chance of dying without heroic measures. At 500 rads, he was history. 10 rads wasn’t anything to worry about.

“You’re lucky I decided to go back to my house. Otherwise, I would have turned the other way, and been in Blythe in a couple of hours.”

“Why’d you turn back?”

“It’s over 1,000 miles to Bill’s house through possibly hostile territory and desolate desert. I wasn’t sure I could find gas or water, or if I’d run into more trouble on the road, and except for his location, he’s no better prepared than I am. My house is on a community well connected to an artesian well with enough pressure to keep the system pressurized without pumps.”

“I checked your tank, and your propane is half-full. We’re going to need more propane in a couple of months, and definitely before winter. Your furnace needs AC power to run, and you don’t have an alternate heat source.”

“I kind of forgot about that, it doesn’t get too cold here except in the winter.”

“Ok, you need propane to cook and heat water also.”

“Nichole, can you help me find the Yellow pages, I think there might be a Solar Power company in Borrego Springs. I know of dozens in San Diego, but I’m pretty sure they were damaged when the bombs went off, and even if they still are standing, I doubt if their equipment works due to EMP.”

“Here you go. Says here Borrego Solar in Borrego Springs, and a phone Number.”

“Never mind, I know where they are, right across the street from the gas station. The tank on that tractor-trailer was full when we got it from Albertson’s, and I know the gas station in Borrego Springs has diesel. Even if he doesn’t, we’ve got enough to make it there and back. Just to be on the safe side, I want you to drive the pick-up so we’re not stuck in case we have to

abandon the diesel for any reason.”

“Is there anything else we can get in Borrego Springs?”

“If we’ve got time, we can check downtown, and clean out anything we need. We should go first thing tomorrow.”

“Ok, works for me, if you’re sure.”

“Well, if he has some working equipment, we could grab enough batteries, inverters, solar panels and wind generators to make us self-sufficient for years. On second thought, the only thing that’s heavy is the batteries, and none of that stuff’s that big. Let’s take the truck and the Bronco. I can borrow Kevin’s trailer and haul anything light and large in their open trailer.”

“That sounds like a better idea Steve. I’ve got to go feed Nicky again. You want to start dinner.”

“Ham macaroni and cheese ok?”

“How long have you been a bachelor?”

“Almost 10 years - why does it show? I used to be a really good cook, but it doesn’t pay to cook for 1.”

Nichole went to check on Nicky, and by the time she came back, dinner was ready.

They left the next morning at first light right after Steve hooked up Kevin’s trailer, borrowed every gas can he owned, filled up both vehicles as full as he could get them, then they drove 50 miles to Borrego Springs. Lucky chose to ride in the Bronco with Steve. The town was a ghost town, and Steve stopped at the AE System dealer’s shop and pulled around back. The place was deserted, so he used his electric lock pick, and was inside in a minute. While Lucky stood guard, they started unloading anything Steve even remotely thought they could use, including all 50 Optima Deep-cycle AGM 12v/220Ah batteries and 6 Air-X wind turbines they had, putting the truck down on its overload springs, but just barely. Steve took every 2500 watt inverter he could find, hoping that he could get enough of them to work to have at least a 5Kw system, since he needed power for the furnace and refrigerator/freezer. There were tons of battery cable, wire, controllers, connectors, tools, and over 100 45-watt panels and frame components. The battery terminals were still covered so Steve put some of the gear in the bed of the truck, since the panels would be big and heavy, and he wanted to leave room and weight for anything else they could find in Borrego Springs.

Steve turned on Palm Canyon Road, stopped at a small strip mall called the Center Market, and

told Nichole to grab anything she wanted in the stores while he checked out the NAPA Auto parts store. He got all the replacement parts, batteries, oil, and various small parts for his truck and Bronco he could locate, and scored several cases of Pri-G. All he needed now was a large storage tank to hold a couple of thousand gallons of treated gasoline. When they were finished, she was wearing a brand-new T-shirt and sun glasses, and had a couple of boxes of things she wanted in the back seat of the truck. They walked into the True value hardware store and stocked up on tools and parts. Steve noticed the locked gun case, and called Nichole over and asked her if there were any guns she wanted. He described each rifle, then she said she wanted a .308 like his with a big scope so they could take out the dirtbags from as far away as possible. They had several .308 bolt-action rifles, but no Browning A-bolt rifles. He picked the lock, and slid the case open. She tried several of them, and couldn't decide between the Remington 700 with the stainless barrel and synthetic stock, and a Savage Model 10FP in .308 Winchester with a Burris 3.5-10x50 Fullfield II Rifle Scope with LRS plex already mounted. Steve thought the Savage would work better for her, especially since it would save them having to mount a scope to the rifle. He picked the lock on the back room, and found the case and several spare sets of batteries for the scope. He took all the ammo they had in stock, several nice scopes, all their cleaning supplies and several nice knives. They loaded a cart, and carried it out the front door, and loaded it in the back of Steve's Bronco.

Steve said he wanted to stop at the gas station on the way out, and fill up their tanks, and all the gas cans he found. The station was the way they had left it, and while Nichole played lookout with her .45 drawn, Steve went into the basement and started the generator again, and filled every gasoline container they had. He shut the pump off, and went inside, shut the generator off, added some fresh gasoline to the generator from a small gas can he found at the station, and secured the basement again. They drove more slowly home since they were heavily loaded. He took the long way home up S-2 to 78, which added 20 miles to the trip, but avoided the steep climb up the Glass Elevator which might have overheated the heavily loaded vehicles. Once they got home, they quickly unloaded both vehicles, then started unloading the truck and the trailer.

Steve had a spot under his house where he had started to dig a basement that was 6 feet deep, and waterproof. He assembled the racks he got from the AE distributor, and manhandled the heavy batteries onto the racks, installed the inverters, and connected the output of the inverters to a bank of fuse panels. He threw open and removed the main switch, disconnecting them from the grid for safety, then connected the leads from the fuse panels to the circuits on the main panel he wanted powered. He had worked wiring houses with his dad, so he knew what he was doing even though he wasn't a licensed electrician. He really didn't need the extra fuse panel, but he was almost paranoid about electricity, and the extra set of breakers wouldn't hurt. Besides, it gave him a location to distribute the load and control it. He threw all his breakers open, then started assembling the battery bank, wiring it in parallel with the provided connectors. The next day, he started assembling the solar panels, and installing them in the ground rack. He mounted the ground racks behind the house out of sight from the road in a spot

that got full sun all day, and tilted them to the correct angle. He ran the wires from the panels to the charge controllers, to the battery bank. He could tell by the lights flashing on the controllers that the battery bank was charging.

The next day, he took a post hole digger and started digging post holes to mount the 6 Air-X wind turbines on 1.5 inch thick-wall pipe with guys. He connected 3 10-foot sections of pipe with threaded connectors, attached the mounting bracket by threading it on top of the pipe, and attached the guy wire header to the pipe about 6 feet below the bracket right where the instructions told him to. He screwed the augers into the ground using a crescent wrench and a long pipe for leverage to hold the guy wires, then set the pole, and tightened the turnbuckles on the guy wires. He zip-tied the power leads to the pole, then connected the other end to a waterproof junction box, then installed the other 5 wind turbines and connected the leads to the same junction box. He ran a pair of heavy-gauge battery cables from the junction box to the house, and connected them directly to the battery bank, since the turbines had a built-in regulator. He was glad he got the new type controllers that converted extra voltage into current to charge the batteries quicker. When he crunched all the numbers, the solar panels would put out a maximum of 4500 watts combined, and the wind turbines would add another 2400 watts max, but only when the wind was really blowing. He had a 13KWH battery bank, and a maximum load of 5KWH if he ran everything all the time. If he got stingy, he could reduce that load to running the furnace during the winter, the washer and dryer as needed, and lights only when necessary. He made a note to replace all the incandescent fixtures with florescent units as soon as possible. That also meant that his favorite means of cooking, the microwave, would become a luxury. Also, he'd need to purchase at least a 5KW propane-powered generator, and hopefully a 10KW unit to charge his battery bank when neither the sun nor the wind was charging his system, and the batteries were dead, or once a month to equalize charges on the batteries. He found Nichole's list, scratched a few items off, and added a few.

Steve let the banks charge overnight, then slowly flipped on breakers. He called Nichole over and explained the system. She had to be very energy conscious, and needed to only run the appliances she absolutely had to. The furnace would have priority during the winter, and when she was running the washer and dryer, she shouldn't be using any other power. Nichole suggested stringing up a clothesline in the spare bedroom to air dry clothes, since the house was warm enough 10 months out of the year to air dry clothes overnight instead of using precious power and propane to speed up the process. She reminded Steve that they needed to do some more scavenging today, including a K-mart or Wal-mart for clothing, laundry supplies, and anything else they needed. Steve asked if they should bring the 18-wheeler, or the trailer. She said the pickup and trailer should be plenty unless he wanted to pick up an entire pallet full of laundry soap. Steve said they had the room, and if he got a whole pallet, that meant they wouldn't have to go back for 5-10 years. She had to agree with Steve's logic that having a 5-year supply of TP made sense since they had 2 extra houses to store it in. He asked her if she wanted to drive the pick-up again, and she said that was a good plan just in case something happened.

After breakfast they loaded up. This time Lucky rode in the pickup with Nichole. He wasn't feeling good enough to jump into the cab of the tractor-trailer with Steve. They stopped into a service station at the edge of town to fill up the tractor-trailer. Steve knew this station had a back-up generator, which was why he chose it. Once he got the generator going, he turned on 2 diesel pumps to feed both saddle tanks, and told Nichole to fill the tanks on the truck while she was at it, and keep watch for anyone around. Just before they were finished, Lucky barked and both Steve and Nichole drew their pistols and pointed it at the threat. An older farmer and his wife raised their hands and said "we're no threat. We heard the diesel rumbling, and came to check it out."

Steve could see they were unarmed, so he lowered his gun, but had Nichole keep them covered. Being careful not to cross her line of fire, Steve and Lucky checked them out. Lucky sniffed them then sat down, indicating by his body language that they were OK. Steve holstered his pistol, stuck out his hand and said "Hi, I'm Steve Smith, and this is my wife Nichole."

"You two are the first living people we've seen since the big bang. When we drove into town last week, it was deserted, and several houses we went into had dead people in it. How'd you two survive?"

"I hid out in a cave in the desert, and Nichole hid in the basement of a schoolhouse."

"Where's my manners, My name's Rudy, and my wife's name is Anne. When I saw the mushroom clouds, we hustled down to the root cellar and stayed there for 2 weeks. Good thing I dug it deep, because several of our neighbors tried to shelter in their basements of their wooden framed houses, and died of radiation sickness. We found most of the bodies in basements in a horrible state. It's sad too, if they had dug deeper, and covered the basement with either 18 inches of concrete or 6 feet of dirt like our root cellar, they might have survived."

"Rudy, how are you two fixed for food and weapons?"

"We got plenty of food, but not much more than a shotgun and a .22 thanks to the California Anti-gun laws."

"Guess what Rudy - Sacramento probably took a nuke, so you don't need to worry about that one anymore. We were headed over to Wal-Mart, if you want to join us, I can get you anything they have in stock."

"Great, we'll follow you."

Steve left the pumps and the generator on, and Rudy filled his ancient truck with as much gasoline as it would hold, and filled up all 4 Jerry cans full of gas. When they finished, Steve showed him where the generator was, and how to run the pumps. He told Rudy not to run the

generator unless he was pumping gas, and to make sure to shut it off to prevent any Mutant Zombie Biker types getting gas, and using it to attack them.

Rudy looked at Steve and realized he was deadly serious. He hoped Wal-Mart had some decent rifles. Otherwise, he hoped Keith, the owner of the gun store in town, didn't have time to put all his stuff in a safe before he bugged out. Even if he did, Rudy had a solution for it, but didn't want to use his small stash of high-explosives unless he needed to. Rudy served in the EOD during Vietnam, and had managed to smuggle a couple of pounds of C-4 and a dozen detonators home over his 2 tours. The C-4 was buried in an ammo can at his farm, and the detonators were buried in another can deep under his root cellar with shunts across the leads. They drove over to the Wal-mart, and while Steve and Rudy cleaned out Sporting Goods, Nichole and Anne used the pallet jacks to move stuff to the trailer, and decided to let Steve load the trailer when they were done. The pickings in the Sporting Goods department were pretty slim, still Steve managed to outfit Rudy with a couple of pump shotguns, a couple of .308 caliber bolt-action rifles, and a couple of semi-auto .22 rifles.

They cleaned out all their ammo, then checked the back area, and located the storage cage for the guns and ammo. It was closed with a gate and a lock, which Steve quickly defeated with his Universal Key. Rudy thought it was a good idea, and ran over to Hardware and picked up 2 more of them, so they'd have a spare. Steve was glad, because the cutter was getting dull from cutting all that hardened steel. When they opened the cage, there was a bunch of rifles, shotguns, Gerber and Leatherman Multi-tools and knives, and cases upon cases of ammo all on pallets. Steve ran back to the loading dock and got a pallet jack while Rudy secured the rifles onto a pallet to make them easy to load. Several hours later, they cleaned out the Wal-mart Sporting goods selection of guns and ammo to prevent any bad guys from getting them. Steve picked up a dozen Camelback Mule daybags, and a case of Katadyn purifiers, and boxes of miscellaneous camping gear. What really blew him away was a mummy sleeping bag the size of a softball, and a bivy tent that wasn't much bigger when collapsed. The bag/tent combination was waterproof, and rated to 0 degrees Fahrenheit. He grabbed all of them he could locate, and threw them into an empty box with the rest of the camping gear he wanted. Nichole didn't have a BOB, so he decided to grab everything she'd need for a really neat kit while they were there. Luckily the Wal-mart was well stocked, and he came up with most of the equipment he wanted. Meanwhile Nichole and Anne had cleared out all the cleaning supplies and paper products, and clothing. Steve started up the forklift after fussing with it for an hour, and finally got it started. They loaded the 18-wheeler's trailer as full as they could, then told Rudy they'd follow him back to his place and unload whatever they wanted there. Rudy suggested stopping at a gun store on the way out, so he could check if he got his stuff put up in the safe before he left.

They pulled into the parking lot, and Rudy peered into the door, and practically jumped up and down yelling "They're still here - hurry up will you!" It took Steve almost an hour to pick the lock, but they finally got it open, then cut the lock on the gate. Rudy was practically drooling looking at all the Semiauto rifles for sale. This dealer was into Springfield Armory rifles, and

had a whole case full of M-1a rifles, including several National Match rifles with the Springfield scopes already mounted. They grabbed all 6 National Match rifles and all the mags they could find, then spent a half-hour trying to find his back room to locate his ammo storage. Rudy found a hidden door, and Steve managed to pick the lock. Inside was his back room with reloading gear including reloaders, primers, powder and bullets; cases upon cases of ammo, and all the accessories he could use for a lifetime. They loaded Nichole's truck and Rudy's truck as full as they could. Rudy picked up several Kimber .45 pistols, and Steve checked his supply of magazines, and located 10 factory LEO marked P-14 high-cap magazines. Looking further back in the room Rudy saw the safe was open, and realized that the gun store must have done a lot of Law Enforcement business judging by the equipment he had in back. Nichole said that they were full, and needed to drop what they had and come back. They drove to Rudy's farm, unloaded the pickups, and left the 18-wheeler parked, then drove back, and cleaned out the gun store in several trips. The building was a stand-alone building with nothing but parking lot around it for 100 yards. Steve conferred with Rudy, and they agreed that they better burn it down since they had cleaned it out, and they didn't want to leave any evidence behind. The wind wasn't blowing that day, so Steve took a gallon can of gasoline, and spread it on the carpet from back to front, and once everyone was clear, Rudy lit a flare and threw it through the front door. The gasoline vapors lit with a whoosh, and the concussion knocked them off their feet. Once the building was fully involved, they drove off to Rudy's farm to divvy up the loot.

Chapter 3 - Surprises

When they reached Rudy's farm, they were amazed at the haul they had taken out of the gun shop. Nichole spotted an aluminum case that no one had opened before, and using his lock picks, Steve opened the large case only to discover 4 Mini-Uzis in .45 caliber and 40 loaded 30 round magazines, with some strange looking tubes next to them that Rudy recognized as SRT suppressors. Rudy was scratching his head, since he'd known Keith all his life, and knew he wasn't a class III dealer. The only thing he could guess was that Keith was holding them for someone that didn't want them at home for some reason. Rudy knew several Federal Agents who might have access to that kind of hardware, but wasn't sure whose they were. Rudy told Steve that they were full-auto and suppressed, and Nichole got nervous, then remembered that the "law" was probably a pile of dust somewhere, and if they could learn to use these weapons properly, they could do some serious damage to anyone trying to attack them. Keith's store was probably a cop shop, since he had a lot of LEO gear in the back, including half a dozen Level III vests with plates and raid-style LBVs. Between the 4 of them, they put 6 complete sets of gear together, then started inventorying the rifles and pistols. Some of the pistols were frankly junk, but he had some really nice ones too. The only thing they didn't have was some M -4/M -203 combinations, but they didn't have any 40mm grenades either.

They divided the ammo and weapons in half, making sure that they had the correct ammo for the guns they had. There was some swapping based on personal preferences, and Anne invited them to stay for dinner. They continued to go through the gear while Anne made dinner and watched Nicky. Steve had loaded the box of camping gear last, and decided to build 4 Bug-Out bags while he was there, and give 2 to Rudy and Anne. He took 4 large Camelback Mule equipped day bags and started putting things into them. He grouped items together so he knew how many of each he had, and put 1/4 in each bag, except for items like the SAK Hiker that he had dozens of, so he only put 2 in each bag. When he finished, Anne said dinner was ready, and Steve picked up the kits and brought them into the house and presented them to Rudy. Rudy thanked Steve, and went through the kits. He was impressed, Steve had done a pretty good job building a good BOB with just what he could find at the Wal-mart sporting goods department. When they sat down to eat, Rudy said grace, and all 4 of them said "Amen." After dinner, Anne said something about Rudy being a retired minister, and Steve looked at Nichole, who nodded.

"Rudy, Nichole and I were never officially married. I rescued her and Nicky when she was hitchhiking out in the desert after some MZB's tried to rape her and killed her husband. She's been living with me ever since, but we couldn't locate a minister to make it official."

"You two are already married in the eyes of God, but if you want to repeat the vows to each other, if you can wait a minute, I'll get my Bible with my wedding service in it."

Rudy came back 2 minutes later with his well-worn New King James Bible, and took a slip of

paper out of it with the wedding service. The 4 of them stood up, and Steve held Nichole's hand. Rudy started reciting from memory "Dearly Beloved..."

Steve was staring at Nichole, and almost missed his cue for the vows, but managed to say "I do" on cue. 2 minutes later, it was Nichole's turn. She was glad he left the "obey" part out, and said "I do" right on cue. Rudy finished the ceremony differently than he usually did.

"Steve, Nichole, by the exchange of vows, I declare you married according to the laws of God. Since there aren't too many people left, I don't need to remind you that what God has joined, let no man separate. Anyway, Steve, you can kiss your bride, and congratulations you two!"

Steve kissed Nichole, then he realized it was dark out, and they still had to drive home. Rudy and Anne helped them load the truck for the trip back home. Steve told them where they lived, and told them to feel free to stop by, then shook Rudy's hand and left. It took a while to get home with Steve driving the 18-wheeler in the dark and Nichole following in the pickup, but they made it 2 hours later. Nichole fed and changed Nicky, then put him to bed. Steve and Nichole were too tired for a "honeymoon" so after taking a shower, they crawled into bed and fell asleep in each other's arms. Steve woke up ready and raring to go, so Nichole obliged. Breakfast was delayed until lunch, but neither Steve nor Nichole complained. They finally got out of bed when Nichole heard Nicky crying. Steve got dressed and made breakfast, then they started unloading everything. He had given Rudy 2 of the Uzis and half the magazines, so he had 2 left, and almost a dozen cases of ammo for his .45's. At the bottom of the pile, he found a weird looking holster, and realized it was a custom tanker holster for the Mini-Uzi that carried it in front of the LBV in a cross-draw position, with an opposite side pouch that held 5 30-rd magazines and the suppressor. Steve thought it was strange until he tried it on over his motorcycle leathers, and it fit easily and didn't get in the way of his riding position. He remembered his friend Bill, and wondered if he had made it. There was no means of communications even though Bill was a Ham, he didn't own any long-distance radios, and Steve never bothered. He realized that he should at least attempt to find out if Bill was still alive, and the best way to do it was to ride his motorcycle, which had a 200 mile plus range if he kept it between 70-80mph. He was just going to take his P-14, but the Uzi offered more firepower in a slightly bigger package, and with the stock extended, slightly greater range. He still was planning on taking the P-14, but was going to carry it in his BOB with 5 spare loaded magazines as a last-ditch weapon.

He decided that first he needed to get Nichole and Nicky as prepared as possible, then he'd worry about how to make it from Warner Springs to Elko, NV.

Steve looked for Nichole's list, and decided that their next priorities were propane and a large storage tank for fuel. He talked to Nichole, and they got in the truck with Lucky and Nicky in the back, and drove back to Rudy's farm.

“Back so soon - I thought you lovebirds would take the week off.”

“We already took care of that. We need to locate a large gasoline tank, hopefully a portable tank on a trailer that I can haul back to the house, and a large delivery tanker full of propane to keep our propane tank full.”

“Ok, first of all, there are several fuel tanks stored in the back lot of the Highway department. They use them for keeping construction equipment fueled. They might have some diesel in them, but even 100 gallons of diesel in a 2,000 gallon tank won't hurt your engine. How were you going to fill it up?”

Steve shook his head, and Rudy suggested going to the Municipal airport, and locating the fuel truck, and seeing if he could get it started. It was a diesel, so it should start. If he wanted to store it a long time, he might as well fill it full of Avgas. Steve was glad that he had a points ignition, because all he had to do to run Avgas was to advance the timing a little. The motorcycle might be different, but he was only going to run 1 tank, then he'd fill up in Borrego Springs and Blythe with regular gas again. He thought it was an excellent idea, and asked Rudy if he needed any fuel. Rudy said he had a 2500 gallon tank full of diesel, and a transfer pump for his 55 gallon drums. Now that he got the pumps going, he could fill all 5 of his drums at once and refill his tank. Steve reminded Rudy to add Pri-D to the diesel so it would last. Rudy told Steve that the local farm equipment dealer sold Pri-D by the 55-gallon drum for the 2500 gallon tanks. Steve asked Rudy about the propane, and Rudy said they could use a bigger tank too, and he'd meet them over at the propane distributor's lot, and load their biggest tanks on the back of their flatbed trailer, and put a couple on each of their lots to give them over 2,000 gallons of propane storage each. Steve thought that was an idea, and told Rudy he'd meet them over there.

When they got to the propane distributor's place, Rudy said that they had just gotten a delivery, so their 3 30,000-gallon tanks should be full. 45,000 gallons each should last Nicky's lifetime. Steve got the work truck started, then used it's crane to lift a 1,000 gallon tank onto the back of the trailer, and secured it. They drove over to Rudy's place first and set then connected the tank to his existing tank and regulator, then drove back and filled up the propane delivery vehicle. Between the two of them, they figured it out, and got the delivery vehicle loaded with 3,000 gallons, then swung another 1,000 gallon tank onto the trailer. They set up the second tank and connected it to the other 2. Rudy had about 2500 gallons of propane storage now, so they filled both tanks to capacity, since it didn't get hot enough in Ramona to need to desert fill it, and in a month or two, it should be under 80% anyway. They drove back to the distributor, and repeated the process at Steve and Nichole's place. Rudy commented about the solar panels, and asked Steve where he got them. Steve told him he got them in Borrego Springs, but he knew of a house just this side of the Poway turn-off on 67 that had dozens of huge panels, and probably the battery banks and inverters to run it. Rudy asked Steve if he could help him get them tomorrow. Since Steve was in no hurry to get the gas, he said “Sure” and he'd meet Rudy first

thing tomorrow.

The next day, they met Rudy at his farm, and Rudy had a surprise for him. Rudy had a newer diesel truck with a work back on it, including a diesel powered welder, air compressor, and a full tool kit to work on virtually anything, including air ratchets. Steve knew the air ratchets would come in handy to disassemble the racks. They drove over to the propane dealer and borrowed their work truck and flat bed trailer, then drove over to the house on the hill. The place was totally deserted, so they helped themselves to the solar panels, inverters and batteries. It took most of the day to disassemble everything, even with the air tools. Rudy invited them over for dinner, and then they drove home. The next day Steve helped him assemble the power system, and Steve was glad when he saw that the panels were charging the battery bank, Rudy had 3 times as many panels as Steve did, and offered a rack of extra panels and controllers to Steve, who said yes in a heartbeat. He assembled and connected them that afternoon, and the next day drove down to the Highway department, and hitched an empty fuel tank to his truck, and drove home. He had Nichole drive him to the airport, and they located the fuel truck, which was still full of Avgas. Steve got the motor running and Nichole followed him home. Steve connected the hose to the filler cap of the tank, and started the pump. He filled the tank and left enough room for the Pri-G before the tanker was empty, so he filled up the pickup and Bronco's tanks and all his gas cans that were empty by now. It took much less time to drive the tanker back to the airport with the tank empty. He added the Pri-G the next morning, and he was good to go for now. Steve checked the list, and the only thing he was missing was perimeter security. He felt a new Chain Link fence was a waste of time, and just advertised out there that you had something worth protecting. He checked it off the list anyway, since Lucky was a good watch dog.

He handed the list to Nichole, and said he was finished, and he needed to check on Bill.

“Why are you going to drive all the way across Nevada just to check on someone who's either going to be OK or dead, risking your life in the process?”

“Nichole, we've been best friends for over 20 years, and I need to know. If I take the bike, the risk is minimal. I wanted to ask Rudy and Anne if you and Nicky could stay with them until I came back.”

“You mean IF you came back!”

Nichole stomped off as mad as he had ever seen her. What was it with these green-eyed redheads anyway!

He found her 5 minutes later crying her eyes out in their bed. He slid in next to her, and held her. Finally she looked into his eyes and said “You really need to know, don't you?”

“I love you and Nicky like I’ve never loved anyone before, but I’d be tormented by doubts the rest of my life if I didn’t know for sure. I should only be gone a week or so, and I’m traveling light. Either way, I should be home within 2 weeks max.”

“That will be the longest 2 weeks of my life.”

“Mine too Nichole, but I have to know. If I could call or send smoke signals believe me I would, but even Rudy said that anything more than short-range communications is almost impossible thanks to whomever popped all those nukes and damaged the ionosphere.”

“Why would that matter?”

“According to Bill, the ham bands that allow you to talk from State to State need to bounce off the ionosphere, or they just radiate into space, and never travel anywhere. The ionosphere might never recover, then again we both could be wrong. I’m not into long goodbyes, so I wanted to drop you off at Rudy’s place first thing tomorrow and hit the road. The sooner I go, the sooner I come back.”

“Ok, just hurry back.”

“I promise Nichole.”

Steve took a couple of hours to pack, he wanted to go light, but make sure he had enough to survive a week or two in the desert. He packed spare clothes, the tent, and sleeping bag in his saddlebags, and his essential gear in the Camelback daybag. When he was finished, he took a shower. Nichole was waiting for him, and she threw every ounce of passion she was feeling into that afternoon and evening. She didn’t know if she’d ever see Steve again, and prayed that she’d get pregnant that night, so if the worst happened and he never came back, she’d have a part of him for the rest of her life. Steve crawled out of bed later that evening to make something to eat. He had a long ride ahead of him, and he needed his strength. He made a pot of ham macaroni and cheese since it was quick and filling. Nichole walked in wearing just one of his tee-shirts that just barely covered herself, and they ate dinner, then she threw off the shirt and attacked him right in the kitchen. When Nichole finally let him up, he managed to make it to the bed before she started again. Finally she exhausted herself around midnight, and he was grateful for the 6 hours of sleep he got. He realized that he’d have to sleep in the desert, or he’d never get any sleep.

He got up at 0600 the next morning, made coffee and breakfast, then woke Nichole, who was disappointed he was dressed, then she realized how sore she was. She was amazed that Steve could even walk! After breakfast, he pulled the bike up into the bed of the truck and secured it with 2 straps, then loaded everyone into the truck including Lucky, their luggage and enough food to last Lucky 2 weeks. Rudy agreed to watch Nichole and Nicky for 2 weeks, then did a

strange thing. He asked Steve if he could pray over him. Steve wanted to take advantage of anything that could help get him back to Nichole, so he said yes. The old man laid his hands on Steve's shoulders and prayed aloud for God's protection and a safe journey for Steve. When he was finished, Steve kissed Nichole, shook Rudy's hands, and rolled the bike down out off the pickup and started it. While the engine warmed up, he got into his complete set of racing leathers and helmet, slid into the tanker holster holding the loaded Mini-Uzi and 5 magazines (the rest were in his daybag with the P-14 and 5 spare loaded mags for it as well.) He got on the bike, and Nichole ran up to him with tears in her eyes. Steve hugged her carefully because there was a loaded full-auto weapon between them. He told her he loved her, and he'd be back as soon as possible, and not to worry until he'd been gone 2 weeks, then kissed her and closed the visor so she couldn't see his tears, then turned and drove off.

Steve had the route memorized, but he still had a map pocket strapped to his tank, with the portion of the map visible that he was using. He'd planned stops every 200 miles for gas, and had included a 24-in bolt cutter, his lock picking set, and a bulb siphon in his kit so if he came across any abandoned vehicles, he could siphon the gas from them. He was wearing a Gerber Multi-plier on his belt, and his GT Knives Tanto Switchblade in his front pant pocket. He had his Rambo II knife and a pocket chainsaw in his saddle bags for anything bigger than that.

He drove down route 78 to the S-2, and stopped in Borrego Springs, to fill up, drain his tank, and refill his Camelback water carrier, and stretch. Once he was ready, he got back on his bike and rode to Blythe via SR-78. He stopped just long enough to siphon enough gas out of an abandoned pickup to fill his tank, then got back on for the ride to Needles which was another 97 miles north via US 95. He found another truck to siphon, then located a water spigot that still had pressure at the nearby farmhouse. He relieved himself in the back yard, washed his hands with the tube of Purell he carried, then filled a gallon ziploc with the water, and filtered it with the Katadyn filter, and pumped it into his Camelback Mule. He had another 96 miles to go before he jumped off into the Southern Nevada desert at Henderson NV, so he climbed back aboard the bike and drove up US 95 North to Henderson. Right outside the outskirts of Henderson he spotted an old fleabag motel that looked like a safe spot to spend the night. Before he went inside, he checked the outside spigot, and for some reason they too had water pressure. He made sure the place was deserted, then found a room that wasn't visible from the road, picked the simple door lock, wheeled his motorcycle inside, and was glad to see that the room still had clean sheets and towels. He locked the door behind him, closed the curtain, and stuck the chair behind the doorknob to slow anyone trying to get in down enough so he could get to the UZI. He stuck it by his bedside, mounted the suppressor because shooting in an enclosed room was LOUD, then took out his P-14, and got undressed to take a shower. Steve was surprised that he hadn't seen anyone, but he also hadn't seen any obvious blast damage. He wondered if Las Vegas had taken a nuke, or if everyone had fled, then got caught in the blast with no where to go. That might have been more likely, because he hadn't seen many dead bodies either. Once he was out of the shower, he washed his clothes and hung them to dry, and got dressed in clean clothes, then laid in bed.

The next morning's breakfast was an MRE and instant coffee. He used 1 of his instant heater packs to get the meal hot, and boiled water using his pocket Trioxane stove and the military canteen cup that nested underneath his military canteen. Once he packed everything yesterday, he realized he had just enough room in his saddlebag to pack his pistol belt and fanny pack emergency kit, which gave him a way to wear the P-14 openly, and carry a basic emergency kit on his person. Once he ate breakfast, he used the bathroom and washed his hands and face, and kept the spare bar of soap in case he needed it later.

Looking around out the window to make sure the coast was clear, he moved the chair out from under the door, and pushed the bike quietly out to the street, and started the motor. He already had his Camelback filled with filtered water, so he closed the door so he could use that room again on the return trip if necessary. He found an older pickup truck a block away, and siphoned a couple of gallons of gas from it, filling his tank. From here on out, he needed to refuel at every opportunity, since he was headed to the most deserted and desolate highway in the US, US 93/318, also known as the Extraterrestrial Highway that went between Las Vegas and Wells NV, which was decidedly the back way to Elko, but avoided all the big cities in Nevada except Las Vegas, but it detoured around it. The result was 400 miles of nothing but scrub brush and the occasional jackrabbit. Hopefully he'd be able to find an abandoned vehicle in Ash Springs or Alamo, NV. He concentrated on keeping the bike at no more than 80mph and watching ahead for danger. Judging by the total lack of humanity, his greatest danger on this ride would be boredom. There should have been people in Henderson or Lost Wages, since there were almost a million people living in Lost Wages before the Big Bang.

Just over an hour later, he arrived in Ash Springs, and spotted a promising looking car. It was newer, and had an anti-siphon device, but he knew how to bypass that, and stuck the point of his knife into the rubber hose right below the filler neck, and slipped the siphon hose into the tube, and threaded it into the tank. While he was filling his tank, he took some yellow traffic chalk, and marked the left front tire, so he'd know that he could hit that vehicle on the way back, since the tank was full.

Once the tank was full, he climbed back on the bike, and continued north on 318. 63 miles north were the next 2 towns, Lund and Preston. He really didn't need the fuel, but if he saw something promising, he'd stop long enough to see how much gas it had and how easy it would be to siphon a tankful out of the vehicle, and mark it if the vehicle was full. The next two towns after that would be Sunnyside and Ely. Between the two towns was another 120 miles, then 137 miles from Ely to Wells, with a couple of small towns in between. If he could get gas at Currie, he might try the short cut through Secret Pass, and come in the back way, avoiding any hassles he might come across from Wells to Elko on Interstate 80, which was a major East-West artery, and was sure to have either Law Enforcement or NG troops running checkpoints and possibly restricting travel to essential travel only.

He blew through Lund and Preston without seeing anything other than some stray dogs and cats,

then ran into trouble in Ely. He saw smoke ahead, and it was black enough to make him think it was a vehicle or a house burning. He pulled off the road down a driveway to evaluate the situation, and found a big Dodge 4x4 truck. He knew he stood a much greater chance in the truck if he could get it started than he did on the bike. He popped the hood, and it was a diesel, but someone who knew something about engines had obviously done some work on it, since it had a full Bully Dog kit including a turbocharger and propane injection. Since it was Diesel, he couldn't use it for fuel, but the big Dodge Cummins turbodiesel had enough horsepower and torque to push any blockade out of the way. He was glad he had the Uzi now, and once he had the bike secured in the bed, he climbed up into the cab, picked the ignition lock, turned it with a screwdriver, and it started right up. He thanked God when he realized both tanks were full. This truck could make it all the way to Elko easily on the diesel in the tank, and it was set up for off-road driving since they were in snow country. He backed out of the driveway still wearing his helmet and leathers, which might give him some protection against incoming fire, and drove down the road.

It turned out that a riot was in progress, but they had neglected to block the streets. He stood on the throttle, and held the horn down while the big twin air horns scared the shit out of the rioting looters, who jumped out of the way of the madman driving the big diesel truck. One idiot held his ground, and the resulting collision knocked the idiot down as Steve ran over him. He barely felt it and kept driving. 5 miles later, he was out of Ely and out of danger. He'd have to find a new route home, something that bypassed Ely for sure. 2 hours later, he reached Currie, and decided to try the Secret Pass. He found an abandoned vehicle, and getting out, didn't see anyone, so he filled a 5-gallon gas can that he found in the back of the truck with gasoline for the bike. Now he had 2 fill-ups available for the bike, plus 1 half-full tank, and a full rear tank of diesel fuel for the truck. He turned onto the road leading to Secret Pass and Halleck, and luckily remembered the turnoff for Lamoille, which was the back route to Bill's house. Half an hour later he pulled up in the driveway, and knew the news would be bad when he saw 2 dead dogs in the kennel, and looking around the back, saw Bill's favorite dog dead. Steve was sadder than he remembered in a long time when he picked the rear door lock. The house smelled horribly, and he was horrified for a second when he thought that there was a dead body in the house. He checked all the rooms, and was relieved to find that the food in the refrigerator had rotted in the heat. He walked into Bill's office, and the power was out, but something made him switch on Bill's Ham radio. The power came right on, and Steve couldn't understand it until he traced the power lead to a 72Ah deep-cycle battery. "Smart" thought Steve, "Now let's figure out how to work this thing." Hoping that he had it set on his most frequently used frequency, Steve keyed the mike. "Anyone out there?"

"Who is this, and why aren't you using a call sign?"

"Hi this is Steve Smith, and I'm trying to locate Bill Wilson. I'm at his radio, and his dogs are dead, and no one's home."

“How’d you get in?”

“He gave me a key years ago. Anyone know where Bill is? I drove my motorcycle all the way from San Diego to find out.”

Another operator came on. “WA7BWF calling Steve. I’m afraid I’ve got bad news for you. A bunch of the Elko Amateur Radio Club hams drove to Mountain Home for an ARC convention. The last we heard, Mountain Home was hit by 3 nukes, and nothing survived. I’m sorry, but he was going with them, and I’m pretty sure he’s dead.”

“Thanks, WA7BWF. What’s your name?”

“Gene, I’m one of the officers of the club. I’d have gone, but I’ve got the flu.”

“Thanks for telling me Gene. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Take anything there you can use, and learn how to use the radio, we might be the only means of communication for the immediate future.”

“Exactly Gene. I didn’t have any way of getting hold of Bill, so I had to drive up here, and I almost got caught in a riot in Ely.”

“The cities are running out of food and water. That’s the same everywhere. Las Vegas took a nuke right in downtown, so it’s a ghost town. Reno and Carson City too. My guess is maybe 10% of the state survived, and those were the ones with fallout shelters, or knew where one was. I’m running on batteries, so I’ve got to go. God Bless and 73's!”

“Thanks Gene, Goodbye!”

Steve set down the microphone and cried hard for a while. He and Bill had been through a lot together. He was the best man at Bill’s wedding, and they’d done everything together until Bill moved to Reno in 1993. Steve missed his best friend before, now that he knew he’d never see him again, it was devastating. After he mourned his friend a while, he realized he still had a wife and kid to get back to, so he disconnected the radio, took the radio, battery, charger, and antenna, then spotted his portable shortwave. Steve was amazed that it worked, then saw that it was unplugged and the antenna was disconnected. He took the radio, a bunch of batteries for it, the roll-up antenna, and all the survival gear that he knew about. He cleaned Bill’s gun collection out. He didn’t think much of Mini-14’s but for some reason Bill’s was a really good shooter. Probably because the only thing stock on it was the barreled receiver. He found Bill’s map collection and started planning his return route.

Chapter 4 - The long ride home

After Steve let Gene's advice sink in, he studied his maps, and if Ely were the only city in the Eastern desert corridor with problems, he'd be safer going back the way he came, because the other route got into California and too close to LA too soon. He looked at the detail map of Ely and mapped 3 routes around the trouble area he found last time, or maybe the looting would have burned out by then since there would be nothing worth looting. He buried the dogs as best as he could, and hoped Bill was in a better place. Thinking back over their conversations about religion, he was sure he was in Heaven. He wasn't too sure that he'd be able to join him later. Maybe he should talk to Rudy when he got back about that. Millions of people died just about a month ago with no warning, and here he was fat dumb and happy, or relatively. Now that he had a family to raise, the sense of responsibility weighed heavily on him. Steve slept in their garage that night, since they didn't have any water pressure for a shower, and the house reeked so bad he couldn't sleep. He was tempted to burn it down as a symbolic funeral pyre, then remembered they were surrounded by dry brown sage brush that caught fire if you just looked at it funny, and had a better idea. He didn't drink much, but found some Bushmills in the kitchen, and poured a shot, then drank a toast to Bill and Kimberly. He set the rest of the bottle back in the cupboard and went to sleep in the garage using old blankets for padding under his sleeping bag and bivy sack. The next morning he made coffee on their propane stove, and made sure the gas, electric and water were shut off before he left. His final thought as he left the house was "Vaya Con Dios, Bill."

He drove into town far enough to locate a gas station, bought several gas cans, and filled up both tanks and the cans with diesel. Bill and Kimberly had a cash stash in the house for emergencies, and since they weren't going to need it where they were, he took it, along with a picture frame in their hall full of wedding pictures to remember them by. Once his tanks were as full as he could get them, he drove back out to Lamoille and Secret pass, headed back home to Nichole. By the time he reached Ely, the rioting had ceased, and he managed to locate a gas station with diesel on the far end of town. The sign said cash only, and he spent the last of his cash filling everything he could with diesel. He didn't understand why Nevada had plenty of fuel when everyone else was out, then he realized everyone wasn't out, there was just no one delivering it in trucks. The stations that had fuel also had immense above ground fuel tanks. Maybe they were fuel distributors for the mines, and also sold retail fuel at the pump to make some extra money. For the rest of his trip, he'd pay attention and look for stations with huge above ground fuel tanks. He wrote down his milage and fuel used, did the math in his head, and realized he had enough fuel on board to make Henderson easily. If he filled up in Henderson, at the miles per gallon he was making, he could make it easily to Borrego Springs, fill up there, and bring a nice diesel truck home. If he made it that far with the truck, all he'd have to do is grab another 2500 gallon tank, get some Pri-D, and fill it with diesel. He hoped they sold diesel at the airport fuel farm, or he could find a way to fill the fuel truck full of Diesel.

He made Henderson that night without incident, located a fuel depot, and figured out how to fill his tanks from the depot. He saw a diesel pump off by itself, and guessed it was for fueling the fuel trucks. With no one around, he took his time, and finally got it running. He filled his tanks, and shut the pump off and drove to the hotel. It was a greater risk leaving the truck outside, but he couldn't park the truck in the room like he did with the bike. He unloaded the bed of the truck and moved it all into the room with him where it was crowded but secure. The next morning, he ate another MRE with instant coffee, and hit the road. The drive home from there was long, but uneventful. He filled up in Borrego Springs, and instead of taking the short-cut of S-2 up the glass elevator, he drove back to 78, and went through Julian and pulled into Jody's farm. Rudy almost shot him until he saw the bike in back, and Lucky running out to greet his master. Lucky beat Nichole by a second, but not in enthusiasm of her greeting.

When everyone had been thoroughly reintroduced, they all went into the family room to talk. Steve told them that Bill and his wife Kimberly were dead, and everything he knew from a ham named Gene. Rudy said he knew of a radio shop that sold all kinds of radio equipment, including a couple of rigs that could reach between their houses easily. Now that they both had working AE systems, they had the electricity to run the radios, and they could stay in touch. Steve knew he could install the mobile radios in their vehicles, and handle the base station installation as well. He hoped Rudy knew how to program the radios, or the instruction manual was really good. Anne made dinner, and Steve ate several helpings, since he really hadn't eaten anything but MRE's for the last 3 days. Once everyone was finished, Steve drove his new truck home, and Nichole followed in their old gasoline truck. They went to bed and straight to sleep since Steve was exhausted. Nichole held her husband all night, grateful he was alive.

The next morning, Steve made a ham and cheese omelet for breakfast. Nichole was wondering were Steve was getting the eggs, and how come she never saw any yolks. Steve told her that he bought a bunch of dehydrated scrambled egg powder, which was great for omelets, but not so good for fried eggs. She busted out laughing and told Steve he should have been a comedian. He said "That's funny, Bill was always telling me not to quit my day job."

Thinking about the death of his best friend reminded Steve of what he was thinking about earlier. They sat down on the couch, and Steve said

"I know it's never come up before, but what's your religious background and beliefs?"

"I was raised Catholic, and right before the Big Bang, my husband and I were occasionally going to a local Non-denominational Christian Church. We got tired of all the Hypocrisy of the Main Line churches. They were always trying to figure out a way to be good enough to get to heaven on their own. Then they spent the rest of their time stabbing each other in the back."

"I used to go to a main line church, but haven't been since my divorce. I was thinking that we should talk to Rudy, since he's all we've got, and find out what we're missing."

“Sounds like a plan. Larry and I were both serious about joining, but never got around to it. Then the Big Bang happened, and now Larry’s dead.”

“Him and a lot of people. But we have a second chance to get our act together, and I don’t want to waste it. I need to go into town tomorrow anyway to see about getting another tank full of diesel, so we can stop by Rudy’s on the way.”

They got everything and everyone into the diesel pickup, and drove to Rudy’s place. They had a long discussion about religion, and Rudy agreed to spend a couple of hours Sunday mornings with the 4 of them. It wouldn’t be really a church service, but sort of a bible study/sermon with Rudy doing most of the talking since what Steve and Nichole knew about the Bible could be written on a postage stamp with a magic marker. Rudy did give Steve a good tip about how to get the fuel truck full of diesel. He suggested bringing the storage tank up with the truck, and have Steve follow with the fuel truck. There was a fuel distributor in town with an overhead delivery system that should gravity feed if he got the right valves open. Steve picked up the fuel truck, drove it to the distributor’s depot where they filled the huge fuel delivery trucks and stood there studying the system for a few minutes before he thought he got it figured out. He turned a green valve marked Diesel, and pulled a lever, and a counter spun, and fuel went into the truck according to the sight window. When the sight window said the tank was full, Steve released the lever and spun the valve, closing the system.

Next they drove over to the Farm Equipment distributor and loaded several cases of Gallon containers of Pri-D into the bed of the truck. Nichole followed Steve back to their house, and parked the Diesel tank next to the gas tank and stuck a big huge green D sticker on the tank right up front next to the delivery hose. Steve connected the fill nozzle to the tank, and started pumping diesel in, then stopped and added a gallon of Pri-D when they were 1/3 full so it would mix thoroughly, then continued filling the tank. When the tank was full, Nichole filled the tanks on the International Harvester and the Dodge Ram 3500 4x4. Steve was impressed at how much fuel the Dodge Ram 3500 carried. Stock was 37 gallons, but for some reason, the dual tanks carried almost 70 gallons. Whoever upgraded this truck did a nice job! He liked the blue paint job, the dual rear wheels, and the 4wd would help in the winter. He was sure with the Bully Dog kit, it had way more than the 610 listed horsepower, and probably in the neighborhood of 800 hp, and about that much torque. The listed towing capacity was 15,000 pounds, but he as pretty sure he could pull 20 thousand without too much strain. When they were finished, Steve drove the fuel truck to the fuel distributor’s parking lot, and Nichole drove him back in the truck. When they got home, Lucky nearly flattened them with his greeting, so Steve knew he was feeling much better.

Steve made a pan of Lasagna from scratch, and Nichole decided that he really did know how to cook, when he announced dinner was ready a couple of hours later. Once she fed and changed Nicky, they went to bed. Nichole made up for lost time, but she wasn’t as frantic in her lovemaking as the night before Steve left, so he got to sleep at a decent hour and they didn’t

wake up wondering what the licence plate was of that truck that ran him over.

The next morning they drove over to Rudy's place, and he suggested they check out the Radio Shack store next to K-mart, and see what they have for communications equipment. Everyone piled into Steve's truck and they drove to the Radio Shack store. They had some handy-talkies that worked on Business frequencies, with a 6 mile range, some GMRS/FRS radios with comparable range, and a bunch of CB radios. Steve was the most familiar with the CB radios, so they started there. The first thing they did was make sure the units worked, since Rudy was afraid that the circuits were fried by the EMP. Steve tried all the CB radios in the store, and none worked. They sat down, and Steve said "At this point, I'm willing to try anything."

"How about Police radios. The Sheriff's department has all their storage in a basement with a concrete ceiling over it, and no windows. We might be able to find some working radios in there."

They scrounged around the store, and found several powerful flashlights that worked, and some florescent lights that worked, grabbed all the batteries that fit, and headed to the Sheriff's station. The building appeared abandoned, but the door was locked. Steve knew he was risking a major felony by breaking and entering, but there was dust on the doorstep, and no footprints that he could see when they arrived, so he knew no one had come through this door since the Big Bang. He took out his lock picking tools, and eventually got the door open. The power was out, so they turned on their flashlights. Once inside, they separated to find anything usable. Rudy found the door to the basement unlocked, so he went down first. He saw all kinds of electronic gear, and skipped the ones that were plugged in, or connected to antennas, and started looking around. When he found the storage area, he called upstairs "Steve, I've found it." and the other 3 joined him in a minute. Steve used his Universal Key, and cut the locks of the storage cages, and they started rummaging through the boxes. They found some older Motorola Police radio handy-talkies, in car repeaters, remote mounted police radios, antennas, coax cable rolls and all kinds of paperwork. Steve scrounged around some more, and located a generator, and saying a quick prayer, pulled the starter cord. Nothing happened until the 3rd pull, and the generator started running, then the lights came on. They turned off their flashlights, and more thoroughly surveyed the supply cabinets.

They started setting aside complete sets of radio gear including a handy-talkie with remote lapel mike, the matching in-car repeater, a second in-car radio, and antennas for everything. Rudy hoped they worked, since they weren't connected to anything, and were underground when the EMP could have hurt them. Steve found something very useful in another bin. The police had to open doors sometimes to execute search warrants when the parties weren't home. As a result, they had some pretty good burglary tools, including an electric lock picking set, and several sets of batteries. He found 3 complete sets including batteries, and showed everyone how to use them. Rudy said they probably wouldn't need one as often, so they took 1 and left the other 2 for Steve and Nichole. Rudy knew the most about radios of the 4 of them, and was concerned

because the Sheriff was using trunking radios, but hopeful because these seemed to be older radios. He was hoping the installation manuals would contain some way of using the radios in Simplex mode, where you transmitted and received on the same frequency. Another option would be to take an in-car repeater, and program it as an open repeater, set it on a hill midway between them with a battery bank and solar panels to power it, and a good antenna. Meanwhile Nichole had located the armory, used her electric door pick to get in, and was amazed at what she found. There were racks and racks of AR-15's with grenade launchers mounted, rotary gas launchers, bullet-proof raid vests, gas masks, helmets with riot control visors, and cases upon cases of 40mm and concussion (flash/bang) grenades. She yelled and Rudy came running, since he was the only one who had a clue what the numbers on the boxes stood for. He checked the numbers on the boxes, and most were riot control gas, smoke, or concussion grenades for room clearing. One crate was marked M -406 40mm HE 10/12. Rudy knew that the 406 40mm grenade was a high-explosive grenade designed for combat. He guessed that HSD must have been responsible for the recent military equipment, since all the riot grenades fit either the M -79 or the HAWK MM-1 12-shot rotary grenade launcher. Rudy decided that they needed to take possession of the contents of the Armory to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands, even though they still hadn't seen anyone else for weeks. They made several trips loading the pickup, driving to Rudy's, filling the pickup again, and so on. Finally the armory was empty, and they had taken anything of value in the storage area too. Anne said she'd make dinner and watch Nicky while the scavengers sorted out the loot.

The final tally was:

- 1)M16/M203 - 12
- 2)Remington 870 - 12
- 3) Level IV Raid Vests - 12
- 4) PASGT Helmets with visors - 12
- 5) Riot Shields - 12
- 6) HAWK MM-1 gas grenade launchers -3
- 7) M -79 40mm Grenade launchers -3
- 8) USGI 20-rd M -16 Magazines - 120

Ammo:

- SS109 - 5 cases
- Federal Tactical 00 Buckshot - 5 cases
- Federal Tactical 1oz Slug - 1 case
- Lake City .308 MATCH - 1 case
- 40mm M -406 HE grenades - 120
- 40mm M-651CS - 300
- 40mm M -1029 Crowd Control - 300
- 40mm M -576 Buckshot - 48

40mm M -680 White Smoke Canopy - 36

M84 Stun Grenade - 72

Rudy said that HSD had given them a standard load-out for a 12-man tactical team. Obviously they never made it to the armory in time. They should probably check the Sheriff's department parking lot, and empty any cruisers found there as well. Steve said he didn't need any of this stuff right now, and asked Rudy if he had room to store it. Rudy said they could build or move a storage building onto his farm, and they could store it there. After dinner, they drove home and fell asleep exhausted.

The next morning, they met after breakfast at Rudy's place, then checked out the Sheriff's parking lot, and removed some more weapons and gear, but nothing spectacular, then they drove over to the hardware/lumber store and picked up a kit to build a 12 x 20 storage building that included a floor. The store had a flatbed trailer, so Steve borrowed it since it was quicker to use their's than to get his. They loaded it, plus a dozen concrete pillars they needed to set it on, onto the trailer, and strapped the load down. It took the 4 of them 2 days to build the kit, even with everything being pre-cut, then they loaded the gear into the storage building and locked it. Rudy told Steve he'd figured out a way to make the radios work. The best idea was to drive up a fire road on the mountain between them, and install a repeater between their two sites with a solar panel and battery bank to run it, since it was designed to run on 12vdc anyway. They drove up the fire road, and someone had already installed a repeater there, but it didn't have a battery backup. Rudy goofed around with it, and discovered what frequencies it worked on, and wrote them down, then told Steve they should come back tomorrow with 2 charged batteries and a solar panel to make this repeater work. Rudy was hoping the EMP didn't damage it, then he saw an unusual box that looked like a breaker box, but it was installed between the antenna and the repeater. He guessed it was a lightning arrester, and flipped the switch back to on, and it stayed there. He hoped it had protected the antenna, but the only way they'd find out was to connect the batteries tomorrow.

They drove back to town, located 2 of the largest 12vdc deep cycle batteries they could find, made sure they were working, and drove back to Rudy's place to temporarily connect them to his bank, using the charging port with a huge diode to keep the batteries from back-feeding the system instead of charging. The next morning, they took the batteries, a 6 panel rack of 45-watt panels, and installed everything. Once he put power to the repeater, the lights were on. He used a hand-held radio programmed with the send and receive frequencies, and keyed it up, and heard the repeater reply, so he knew it was working. They drove back to Rudy's place, and Steve started mounting the radios and Rudy programmed them. Rudy checked them 1 by 1, and they all worked perfectly. They had 8 handie-talkies, 8 in vehicle repeaters, and 8 car radios plus 2 car radios configured as base stations. Rudy hooked his up, and told Steve he'd be up tomorrow morning to install his base station, Bronco, pick-up and the IH tractor/trailer. Steve drove into town, picked up a big 12vdc 220Ah Interstate AGM battery and connectors, then drove to radio shack to pick up some parts to make the connections. He found several 3-plug

cigarette lighter plug adapters, universal voltage adapters and some other stuff to power the chargers directly from 12vdc. He spent the rest of the afternoon soldering the connections, installing fuses, and connecting the battery to his battery bank with a blocking diode.

The next morning, Rudy showed up with his work truck pulling a trailer. Steve thought it was odd until he saw what was in the trailer. He had all the components necessary to install the radio as a base station, minus the battery Steve had already installed. Steve used Rudy's powered auger to dig a 3" by 2 foot deep hole in the ground while Rudy assembled 20 feet of thick-wall 1.5" threaded pipe, attached a guy wire connector to it, and U-bolted an antenna bracket to the top for his 1/4 wave ground plane antenna that Rudy fashioned out of a SO-239 connector and 1/8" welding rod. Rudy said he grabbed a bunch of the SO-239 connectors from Radio Shack, a huge roll of 50-ohm coax cable, and a bunch of PL-259 connectors. He stripped 1 end back and soldered the inner collar to the shielding braid, then made the rest of the connections, and finally connected the finished connector to the threaded section of the SO-239 connector and tightened it very snug with a vise-grip wrench. He zip-tied it every few feet to the pipe, then connected a grounding connector to the pipe just below the guy wire connector, and ran the grounding wire to the ground near the pole, and drove in an 8-foot copper-clad grounding rod, which grounded the mast, and gave some lightning protection to the antenna system. Steve bored 3 holes for guy anchors, then imbedded 8-inch long eye bolts with 1-inch fender washers and a nut in a ready-crete that they mixed on site. Rudy said to give the concrete a week to cure, then tighten the guy wires until they pinged. He connected 1 end of each guy wire to the end of a 8-inch turnbuckle, and the anchor to the other end of the turnbuckle so Steve could adjust the tension of the guy wires. With all 3 guy wires connected, he was finished outside except for routing the cable into the spare bedroom where Steve had set up the radio and the charger station.

Rudy thought the charger station was ingenious, since it saved the power from being inverted and transformed twice. Steve showed him the hookup, and what he needed to buy to build it. Rudy made a list, and said he was stopping off at Radio Shack on his way home. Once they had the cable inside, Rudy quickly made the other connection, cut off the extra cable, and connected it to the back of the radio. Rudy keyed the mike, and Anne replied on the other end, so Steve knew it worked. Rudy offered to help Steve install the radios on his vehicles, since he brought 4 NMO-mount antennas, and a 100 roll of 50-ohm RG-213. He even had the special hole-cutting drill bit to cut an NMO-sized hole in his roof. Between the two of them, it only took half the day to mount all the radios. Steve crawled under the dash to help route the antenna cable, then shoved the power leads through the firewall and connected them to a 20-amp noise filter he picked up at Radio Shack, since it was free. The filter was a cap/choke set that sent all AC ripple back to ground and suppressed voltage fluctuations. He connected the filter to the battery solenoid where possible, or to another connection that received power with the ignition off other than the positive terminal of the battery, to avoid corrosion problems. Once all the connections were made, they tested each radio, then the in-car repeaters and handy talkies.

Steve liked the in-car repeater, and told Rudy they should pick up the rest of the big VRLA deep-cycle batteries he found, and a battery isolator for each vehicle to run the in-vehicle repeaters and lights without draining the starting battery. Steve said he'd help him pick them up, since they weighed a ton, and help him install them in the vehicles tomorrow. By the end of the day, they had all 4 vehicles and their base station installed and tested, and the batteries on their handy talkies charging. They agreed on a simple code. Rudy's place was the Farm, Steve's was the Ranch, Steve's vehicles were #1-4, and Rudy's were #5 and 6, thus eliminating complicated FCC call signs, since they didn't have them anyway. Rudy told Steve to leave his radio on minimum power, and only boost power enough to complete the call, then turn it back down when he was finished. Even though they hadn't seen anyone, these radios could be heard at over 50 miles at full power, and the repeater even farther, so anyone on their frequency within 50 miles could hear their conversations on a ham radio or a scanner.

Steve mentally smacked himself, he forgot to hook up Bill's Shortwave radio, and he really needed to get a scanner too, just in case someone was using a radio out there. He asked Rudy, and he said they'd pick up a couple of scanners at Radio Shack if they could find some that worked. Once they were finished with everything, Steve helped Rudy pack up, and he headed home to get some chores done. Steve walked inside, and asked Nichole if anything needed doing. She looked at him with a mischievous grin, and said "We've got the rest of the afternoon free." Steve groaned inwardly, he wasn't that young anymore, and forgot to get some Viagra from the pharmacy when they raided it.

Steve survived, and managed to make breakfast in the morning. He made a note to himself to stop by Albertson's pharmacy and locate some Viagra. They drove the truck to Rudy's and they went on their Daily Scavenger Hunt, as Anne was calling it. She stayed at home with Nicky since there wasn't any perceivable threat in Ramona, and that allowed Nichole to help hunt without worrying about Nicky. Anne admitted to Nichole that at her age, she wasn't cut out for scavenging, and only went along to keep Rudy company. With Nicky to care for, she had something to do besides chores and cooking. Their first stop was Radio Shack, and they took all the scanners and short-wave receivers. They had some nice digital scanners and short-wave receiver, and some older analog models. Steve made sure they took all the scanner antennas and installation kits as well. They had several reel-type antennas, but Steve wanted to mount a multi-band antenna up high, and install some long-wire antennas for Bill's Shortwave radio, since he knew it worked. He also picked up enough parts to add a couple of power ports to the battery. With 220Ah available, a couple of extra amps wouldn't matter. He grabbed a book of scanner frequencies on the way out the door. Their next stop was the auto parts store to get all their VRLA Deep-cycle batteries, battery cable, and hopefully some battery isolators. They came up with 6 more batteries like Steve's, but only 5 isolators. Steve gave Rudy 2, saying he didn't need to drive his old gasoline pickup anymore since he had the big Dodge Ram 3500. It took a while to locate the battery cable and terminals, but they finally located a roll in the back, and a card of clamp-on terminals. Steve took their cable cutter with him to cut battery cables, and a couple of extra things he saw while he was back there that he thought would be useful.

He decided to wait for a trip without Rudy to stop at Albertson's and get the Viagra.

Chapter 5 - Life goes on

A couple of months later, Nichole woke up nauseous and realized she'd missed 2 periods. Rummaging through the First Aid supplies, she located an EPT kit, and used it. 5 minutes later, she found Steve, and gave him a big hug and said "Good morning Daddy!"

"Daddy?" It took Steve a minute to realize Nichole was pregnant. Since it was almost 6 months after they had been together, he knew the baby was his, and swept Nichole off her feet and gave her a big kiss. He sat her down, realizing that there was no medical help around. "Nichole, this might be risky since there's no hospitals or doctors handy. I've never done any first aid beyond bandaging cuts and stuff, so I'm not qualified to help you deliver our baby."

"Steve, let's call Rudy and Anne, maybe Anne has some suggestions?"

They walked over to the radio and called, Anne said to come on over after breakfast. When they got there, Nichole told Anne that she was pregnant. Anne was worried that it might be something serious, so she was greatly relieved. "Is that all? I come from a long line of Farmers, and we never had enough money to afford doctors. Mom gave birth to all of us right at home with a midwife. I've got everything I need right here to safely deliver your baby."

"What if it's a premie, or there's complications?"

Rudy spoke up. "We'll just have to leave it in God's hands since there aren't any doctors or hospitals available."

As Nichole's pregnancy progressed, Steve did more and more around the house, and after a brief flurry of scavenging for more baby stuff, settled in to be with his very pregnant wife. While all this was happening, Nichole was constantly telling him he didn't need to carry his P-14 anymore, since there wasn't anyone around, and insisted that he store the Mini-Uzis since Nicky was starting to crawl, and they had another kid on the way. Reluctantly, Steve agreed.

Rudy came over 1 day and asked Steve when he was going to put up the fence. Steve said they didn't need one since they were so remote. Rudy shook his head and said, "If anyone shows up, the fence could buy you precious seconds to prepare for an attack if they're hostile."

"Rudy, it's too much work, and there's no one around!"

"No one that you know of. If you're not going to put up the fence, at least move in with Anne and me. We've got a whole nuther house on the farm that's vacant, and you could use. Having us living close together would be much safer, and my farm is a much better location for long-term survival. We can grow our own food, and we are raising our own meat."

Steve was reluctant to leave his \$350,000 house behind, even to live in an admittedly more secure location. So he told Rudy “Let’s wait until after the baby is born.”

Rudy knew that Steve would never move, and he’d said his peace. He just prayed that nothing bad would happen to them.

6 months later, Nichole’s water broke, and they drove over to Rudy’s farm faster than they needed to. 8 hours later, Nichole gave 1 final push, screaming at the top of her lungs with the pain, and gave birth to a healthy baby girl. They had already decided that if it were a girl to name it Claire after Nichole’s mom.

Rudy reminded Steve of his promise to move after the baby was born, but he kept making excuses, and slowly stopped all the “paranoid” checks and protocols he had set up when the balloon went up, secure in the knowledge that the two couples were the only survivors for miles around. Rudy had asked him to at least install motion detecting lights, but Steve never got around to it, saying that Lucky would warn him if there were danger. Rudy pointed out that Lucky had to sleep too. Over the next couple of months, the couples talked less and less to each other. Rudy kept praying earnestly that Steve’s eyes would open to the danger he was placing his family in with his complacency, and that nothing bad would happen to them. From his experience in Vietnam, he knew that bad stuff happened when you least expected it, or were least prepared for it.

The Tet offensive was a classical example. All over South Vietnam, the US Army stood down for the Tet holiday while VC and NVA troops were readying themselves for an all-out assault to demoralize the US Army and send them home with their tails between their legs. Luckily the Sergeants got word, and quickly increased their threat status right before the attack, and managed to repulse most of the attacks. The NVA were right, it did send the US Army packing, not because the Army lost it’s will to fight, but the Politicians that started it did. When he got home, Rudy followed through on his vow to God, and became a Baptist Minister. He met and married Anne, and took over the family farm in Eastern Ramona California, and served a small flock of Baptists that owned a small country church in the valley.

Steve and Nichole grew more and more complacent, and Rudy realized that nothing he could say would change their minds, and he continued to pray for their safety. Steve and Nichole talked more and more on the Radio when Steve was away scavenging, and Rudy realized that they weren’t being too careful with the power settings, and had turned their radios up to Max power despite the warnings he had given them.

Chapter 6 - Bad Moon Rising

Way back when the EMP burst first happened, Big Bob was being transported for a hearing in San Diego Federal Court from an Arizona Federal Prison. Due to budget cuts, Descanso Honor Camp was frequently used to house dangerous prisoners overnight despite the fact that it was designed as a minimum security prison camp for trustees that worked with the CDF to shorten their sentences. Bob was put in a Solitary confinement cell for security reasons. When the power went out, the prisoners started scheming and planning. Bob wasn't the only dangerous criminal being temporarily housed there. They were short of Solitary cells, since they weren't meant to house dangerous criminals, so the "less dangerous" criminals were sent to General Population. The same budget cuts also reduced staffing to dangerous levels, and when they saw the flashes and mushroom clouds, they knew the end of the world was near, and the two probationary deputies deserted their posts and drove home to their families.

Once they realized the guards had left, the prisoners hatched their escape plan, and part of it included releasing Bob and several other dangerous criminals. Sam knew about the location of the armory, and had stolen a key which they used to unlock the armory, and helped themselves to the pistols and shotguns there. Bill said they needed to find food, water, and shelter very quick, since the radiation fallout would reach them in a little over 5 hours. Ralph knew where a nearby cave was, so they went into the motor pool, got several California Division of Forestry diesel trucks running, while the rest of the inmates gathered food, water, and supplies, then they all drove to the cave. Bob became the leader of their gang because he was the meanest and most ruthless psychopath among the bunch of cons. 25 of them spent 2 weeks stuck in a cave, then ventured out to loot and pillage. They started east of themselves in Julian and the desert, since they wanted to stay as far away from the "hot zone" as possible. They looted, pillaged, raped and killed any survivors they found. Several houses they looted had guns and rifles despite the draconian California Anti-gun laws, and they became better and better equipped as they looted through Julian and the desert.

After a couple of months, the pickings were getting slim, and they had lost 5 men to fights and accidents, so Bob sent out 2 man teams to locate fresh territory. One team had a working scanner, and picked up Steve's transmissions while they were scouting out Ramona. It took them quite a while to locate where they were transmitting from, since they used codes, but judging by their conversations, they had enough loot to last the entire crew 20 years. What really got them interested was hearing Nichole's voice on the radio. They fantasized that she looked as sexy as she sounded on the radio. Esteban wanted to go rape her themselves, but Jim said "Bob might find out, and he'd kill us for not sharing. Besides, what if they're armed? We've a better chance of succeeding if we bring the whole crew with us. Remember those full-auto AK's Bob found? They'd be perfect for this." It took several months, but eventually they found Steve's house, and almost forgot to tell Bob when they saw Nichole laying out topless wearing only a skimpy bikini bottom while nursing her new baby Claire on the front porch.

The next day, they drove back to the hideout and told Bob, and once the other teams had been recalled, they decided to raid the house, rape the woman, and take everything they had. Their usual tactic was to drive up at o-dark-thirty with the lights out and engines off, and sneak up to the house, and attack from close range before they could react.

The following night, Steve was rudely awakened by Lucky growling deep in his chest. Steve recognized the growl, and grabbed his P-14, and awoke Nichole. Grabbing his handheld radio, he called "Farm, this is ranch, we're under attack, send help!" Steve thought he had heard an acknowledgment, and set the radio down. Before they could do anything else, the windows all came crashing in, and these huge psychopaths were shooting anything that moved. Bob told them to make sure they didn't shoot the woman, since it had been a while since they had a party. If someone shot and killed her before he got to have her, he would kill them. Steve was fast with his 45, and shot several of them, but 20 against 1 was no odds, and one of the dirtbags shot him in the chest, then Bob shot him in the head with a .357 Magnum. Nichole screamed, and someone clubbed her over the head.

Half an hour later, Rudy rolled quietly to a stop outside their ranch. Hearing a woman's screams, he knew the news wouldn't be good. Grabbing his Night Vision Scope and his M -16/203, he loaded a HE round in the chamber, and grabbed the charging handle, saying to himself "lock and load". His Vietnam experiences came flooding back to him and he quietly stepped out of the truck. He scanned the windows with his NV scope, and the sight he saw through the windows made him wish he'd stayed at home. Steve's body was visible with a huge hole in his forehead and his brains splattered against a wall. Lucky's throat had been cut, and he was lying in a pool of blood. Half a dozen huge bearded shaggy men were taking turns brutally gang raping Nichole and torturing her. Several others were using Nicky and Claire's bodies for bayonet practice, while laughing hysterically. Rage welled up in Rudy, who had dedicated his life to serving God after surviving Vietnam. Rudy shouldered his M -16, and put his finger on the trigger of the M -203, and said to himself "God forgive me!" and pulled the trigger. There was a "bloop" and a second later, the entire front of the house exploded. He turned and got back into his truck, never seeing a mortally wounded survivor stagger out the back door. He fell and the last thing he saw was the bumper of Rudy's truck, and the bumper sticker that read "Peace through Superior Firepower!"

The End