

FROM THE BOTTOM UP

by Machinist

## CHAPTER 1

So, for the first time in my life, I bought a nickel bag of pot. And I got caught. Dumbest thing I ever did. How was I to know the guy selling it was a cop? Then, they trumped up the charges to distribution, with two lying cops swearing on a stack of Bibles that I had said I was going to sell it, not smoke it. I was so broke at the time that I ended up with a public defender for a lawyer, and all she knew was for me to cop a plea. It was easier for her because she didn't have to prepare a court case. After a few weeks in the county jail with all the city drunks, wife beaters, and druggies, I was getting nowhere with this. They had me convinced to plead guilty to low quantity drug sales and I took the deal. That was the third dumbest thing I ever did, and cost me 5 years in the State joint.

I reserve dumb thing number two spot for marrying Joanna Potter, the prettiest girl in our small town. She's the reason I was so broke. After a couple years, her spending habits were driving me nuts, and that was the reason I had decided to smoke some pot for the first time in my life. Bad idea. Nobody to blame for it all but me, though. No matter what shortcomings I have, I take a little pride in trying to be a realist, so yep, it was all my fault, the result of my own bad decisions. I listened to the AA meetings in the jail for a pastime, hearing the men admit to being alcoholics. The thought went through my head then, "My name is Wesley Hardin Blake, and I'm a jailbird". Some shame in that, but I sure didn't plan to make a career of it like the druggies and drinking guys. I would have bet anything that as soon as they could find something to drink, they'd be right back at it. That was one problem I didn't have.

The time in the county jail was the worst of it. There was absolutely nothing to do except read the religious tracts that the do-gooder missionary sorts left there, and nothing to look forward to each day but the meals, and they were nothing to write home about. I did read a lot of those tracts, but they were all geared toward getting you to 'repent and seek God's salvation'. I had already repented. What I needed was something to look forward to. My future looked pretty sucky from where I sat. My wife filed for divorce as soon as I got arrested and I signed the papers a few weeks later. That happened a lot to guys who get arrested, according to what the guys in jail said. She ended up with our car and the household goods, including that expensive china she'd had to have. She got the car payments, too, so I guess that was alright. The last I heard, she went home to live with her parents, according to my sister.

Joanna was really an all right kid to start with, just spoiled. Her dad made a lot of money and doted on her. Back then, I was fresh out of the Army, after 4 years in the Motor Pool wrenching on trucks and Humvees. That had gotten me a good job as a mechanic at the Chevy dealership. I'd managed to get a good toolbox bought and paid for, then saved some money. It was hard work, but I enjoyed it. We had a great time for the first few months after we got married in 2001. We were both 25 years old. I just couldn't make money as fast as she could spend it. Other than that, we got along fine. We'd known each other all through school, and had always gotten along, even dated a few times.

My folks did okay, but their factory jobs didn't pay all that well, and I had no interest in going to college if they could have afforded it. I did enjoy tinkering with cars, and had a job through High School at a garage. I had started buying tools back then, looking for cheap deals and learned that good quality was worth the price, in most cases. At this point in my life, my tool box and a few clothes was all I owned in the world. My big sister, God bless her, had gotten those all from my wife and had them stored at her place for me. But I had no place to live when I got out, so I figured I'd have to take the Halfway House deal they offered, where I could work at some crap job until I got enough money ahead to live on my own. That would mean living in the worst part of Indianapolis, and it would be over 100 miles from home. That would be bad, but I'd have to do it somehow.

The penitentiary was rough, but life settled into a routine. Everybody had to have a 'job' of some sort in prison. Nobody really WORKED. They borrowed the Russian saying, "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us". Most of them ended up in the kitchen, or doing housekeeping, mopping floors or whatever because they didn't know anything else. My mechanic's background got me a job in the General Maintenance Shop, which was some kind of salvation. At least the few men who worked there had a little something on the ball, and I could do something I enjoyed during the day. It was barely enough money to buy coffee, cigarettes if you used them, and some snacks from the prison store they called the Commissary. After work, it was back to the cell block and listening to the overgrown brats misbehaving, fighting over the TV channel, and yelling about whatever small issue they picked on, trying to give meaning to something in their life.

There are predators of many kinds in the prison system, but I didn't have any problem with most of them. I didn't drink, smoke, or gamble, nor was I homosexual, so those pitfalls were easy for me to avoid. I didn't have any big attitude about being a Macho Man or run my mouth, either, which were the other sources of trouble. I was basically a nice guy, and some of the cons did try to take advantage of that, but I dealt with that as best I could.

I learned quick that no matter what happened in there, I didn't see or hear anything. Some guys got stabbed over gambling debts, or other peeves, but you just walk your own way and if asked, you say, "There was a body on the floor? I didn't see a body". It saved all kinds of trouble, and maybe saved your neck. Ratting out another con was a fast way to die.

Most of the time, I could ignore the fence and the razor wire around the joint, the guard towers with their automatic weapons, and the nonsense of the people inside all that. After work, I could go to the library and find something to read, and my sister sent me a book now and then. I began to ask for her to send Haynes car repair manuals that she could get at the local Auto Zone store. She also subscribed me to The Mother Earth News magazine. It wasn't as good as it used to be, but it helped give me some idea about what things cost, and some ideas for cheap ways to live when I got out. May God bless my sister Gloria until the end of her days, and then take her home to heaven! Man, was I grateful. Gloria was 4 years older, and had always looked after her baby brother. I was really bummed with women after Joanna, but if I ever found one like my sister, I'd marry her in a heartbeat and do whatever it took to keep her happy.

At evening mail call, I got letters from Gloria about once a week, and one from my mother maybe every couple months, with check inside for a \$100 that went into my Commissary account. That meant I could buy instant coffee, snack foods, shampoo and a few other things the prison did not provide, like thong sandals to keep from getting athlete's foot in the communal showers.

Mom and Dad just couldn't accept that one of their kids was in jail. But Mom said she felt guilty if she didn't do something for me. There was no chance of my parents ever coming to visit me, although Gloria came a few times when she could convince her husband, Bob Stowe, that there was no way he could talk her out of it. She made it a couple times a year, and that helped keep me grounded in reality about the world outside the fence. Bob never came. He wasn't a bad guy, but he always looked down on anyone that worked with their hands for a living, so he didn't think much of me to begin with. When I got locked up, I was anathema to his niche in society. Gloria gave him the blues about that, from what I could tell.

I got locked up in the spring of 2003, and had a 5 year 'bit' to do. I was focused on getting out. Unlike the professional and petty criminals around me, I had a real life to go back to, as little as it was. The

men around me saw that, and pretty much left me alone, except for trying to get me do something for them. The penitentiary was not air conditioned, and in summer the all masonry structure turned into an oven. They sold electric fans in the Commissary, but few had money to buy them. Old ones kept getting traded around as guys finished their time and got out.

I had a good side business going patching up the old fans, repairing eyeglass frames, and fixing radio headphones that had broken wires. I made not telling how many of those things to heat water for instant coffee, or instant soups they sold in the Commissary. It was just any old electric cord cut off of some junked appliance, then a couple pieces of metal with an insulating spacer between them. You just put the metal electrodes in the cup of water and then plug it in until the water was steaming. If you touched the cup or anything close to it while it was plugged in, you would be electrocuted. Nobody died from them, but a few got a lesson in electrical safety.

The cons took to calling me "MacGyver", and said I could fix anything. I got paid in coffee and snacks, and sometimes a favor, such as doing my laundry for the week, or bringing me a some fruit or a good sandwich stolen from the kitchen. The cops all knew about this sort of trade going on and generally ignored it. They couldn't stop it anyway. Their general take on it was that as long as we were messing around with this sort of thing, we weren't killing each other, or them. It meant that my Commissary account was steadily building up a balance of savings. At roughly \$120 a month, my pay didn't amount to much, but I didn't spend much, either, after I bought a fan and a radio. I figured that by the time my out date rolled around, I should have at least \$1,500 in there, and they paid that out to you in cash when you got out.

There were two cops who ran the General Maintenance shop. Bill Gibbons was pretty cool, for a cop. He was the senior cop there, and that was good, because the other one, Gary Pate, was a punk and aggravated everybody, especially Bill. Gary had a juvenile attitude and caused no end of grief for Bill by keeping his crew upset. He said things to demean the inmates at every opportunity, probably to assuage his own poor ego. Bill was close enough to retirement that he didn't want anybody rocking his boat, and he had responsibilities to fulfill, so he tried to keep the peace.

Our shop took care of the kitchen equipment that kept everybody fed, a lot of the office equipment, the elevators, some stuff in the ancient steam heating system, and the vehicles. That included the 3 prison transport buses they used to shuffle inmates around between county jails for court dates, and between state prisons if they needed to break up a gang or something. They also had 4 pickup trucks, 2 of them equipped with snowplows for winter use, and there was a motor pool of cars for general staff use. By working on all these, I managed to stay somewhat up to date on mechanical knowledge. It beat the heck out of baking bread or making other food for 1200 men a day in the kitchen with a bunch of total idiots.

In the Fall of 2005, my parents were killed in an auto accident. According to witnesses, some idiot tried to pass them without enough room and took a header into an oncoming garbage truck. They died in the resulting pileup. Bob was good at administrative things, being the business manager at an investment firm. He got a law suit filed on our behalf for wrongful death against the guilty driver. His insurance finally paid off, after a long delayed court battle. To his credit, Bob had stuck with it and kept it moving. He knew that Gloria would benefit by half of it, so he was motivated. He couldn't have cared less about me.

When all was said and done, and the lawyers got their half of the settlement, the remainder did pay off the mortgage on Mom and Dad's old house, and a little left over. Gloria said the place needed some

work, so they had a new roof put on it and got the plumbing fixed up. Bob didn't want to sell the house then because real estate values were going up fast. They had it rented out when the real estate bubble popped. Again, to Bob's credit, he tried his best to sell it, to no avail. It was too far out of town, it was an old ranch style built in the 70's, and there were thousands on the market when the real estate market began to run out of buyers with good credit. They kept it rented, but they had to drop the rate. Three months before I got out, they lost their renter and decided that I could live there and pay them rent at half rate, since it was half mine. It was the best thing I had going for me at the time.

I wrote to my old employer at the Chevy dealership about a job, but got turned down. I was pretty despondent over that, but Gloria convinced me to write to a private repair garage across town and that guy agreed to hire me on a straight commission basis. If I didn't produce, it was no skin off his nose, because I would be paid the "flat rate" commission based on what work I actually got done. There was no base salary and there were no fringe benefits. Whatever, it was a job.

Since I had a place to live, some money in my account, and a job lined up, I wasn't required to go to the Halfway House. I breathed a sigh of relief at that. Too many things went on in those places that got guys busted and sent right back to prison. They were full of drugs, and a lot of other things.

Eventually, my release date came around. Seemed like forever to me, but with a sense of something like disbelief, I found myself getting measured up for a pair of cheap jeans and a shirt, a pair of shoes, and a windbreaker to wear when I walked out the gate. A couple of sleepless nights later, I had one day to go.

I had never liked that Gary Pate. I knew better than to say anything to him, let alone give him what he had coming. If you are in prison and ever plan on getting out, you don't cross the cops. Still, he was a typical wannabe who never amounted to much until he got this job as a prison guard. Then he got enough money together for a down payment on that decked out pickup and mortgaged his soul to the finance company to buy it. He brought it into the prison maintenance shop to keep it tuned up and have the guys wash and wax it for him every couple weeks. After we got off work, he used the shop to change his oil and do a lube job on it. From what he said, it was a girl magnet. But he lied a lot.

His last job had been driving a bread truck and he had gotten fired when he wrecked it. Gary fancied himself a ladies man, having curly blond hair and looking a little bit like Alan Jackson, the country singer. He cultivated that look with a mustache to match, and wore cowboy duds when he was off duty. He generally made life miserable for us convicts with his attitude as a guard. Most of the guys said he wanted to be a cop, as we called the guards, because some little girl stole his lunch money in the 3rd grade and he wanted to get back at the world. "Too lazy to work and too scared to steal", was the general assessment that convicts applied to people who took a job as a prison guard.

I had one day left on my bit and I was going home. Nobody really believes that day will ever come when they are locked up, but it does, eventually. I had one more day to work in the maintenance shop, so I decided to make it count. There had been a lot of windy days that Spring, and it blew a lot of dust in from the sand pile they kept around for winter use on sidewalks and the occasional masonry repair job. We had been told to clean up the shop that day, so I swept off the window sills into a dust pan and dumped some of that gritty dust into an empty plastic oil bottle. I refilled it from the bulk barrel with 30 weight and cleaned the bottle thoroughly, then sat it back on the shelf with the full ones, in front.

Gary had me wash and wax his pride and joy one last time and ragged me about it, knowing I was getting out. I smiled at him and said, "Glad to do it one last time, for old times' sake!" The next

morning, my sister picked me up at the gate at 7:00 AM in her nearly new Volvo, and off we went.

The next evening after work hours, Gary used the oil in the Maintenance Shop to do a change in his big Cummins diesel engine. I didn't know it, but Gary never made it home the next night. His 3 year old, out-of-warranty truck blew 3 connecting rods on the Interstate about 8 miles from the prison. His boss, Bill Gibbons, couldn't prove anything, but he had a pretty good idea what had happened. He chuckled to himself when Gary wasn't around. Prisons breed some hard characters, convicts and cops alike.

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## CHAPTER 2

It was June 1st when Gloria took me home to southern Indiana. They still had the gas and electric turned on, and she had moved my clothes over to our parents' old house. She had saved their kitchen utensils, and most of their lawn and garden stuff, and a lot of junk. It was all still in the old detached garage in the back. The house had an attached garage, so they just locked up the old building and left the stuff in there, not being accessible to their past renters. All I needed was some groceries and I would be moved in. We attended to that, and she took me to the branch office to get my driver's license. I opened a checking account with \$1,200 of what I'd saved in prison, which left \$643 in my pocket. That went pretty fast, buying a few new clothes, a wrist watch, getting a decent haircut, and paying for the groceries. I was amazed at how much things cost now.

Being in my home town was blessing. Salem had it's warts and pimples, but it's a friendly country town, and being the county seat, it's just big enough to have most anything you might need. Retail prices are sometimes a little higher than at the Walmart in the city, but you can find a lot of good deals right here at home. It's not hard to get around because it's small, about 6,000 people, and that means most businesses cover several kinds of things. One hardware store has garden stuff and caters to the Amish crowd, while the other one has a big line of tools and a rental center.

Some things had changed in 5 years. There were banks everywhere and way more restaurants than I remembered. There was a new mini mall where the handle factory used to be. The handle factory and the furniture plant had been heavily damaged in a major flood, and both had closed down. But the people were pretty much the same. There was still a crowd at the tiny diner on Main Street in the morning, mostly farmers jawing about crops and the weather. Everybody still knew a lot about everyone else's business, and probably knew your family for a couple generations back. That was good and bad. It meant there was no such thing as privacy like in a big city, but it also meant that you automatically had a network of folks to hook you up with what you needed. I grew up here and I was comfortable with all that.

Wednesday morning of the next week, Gloria drove me to town so I could report to my parole officer as required. I told him I already had a job and I had been working for two days the past week. I would have to submit to drug testing, he would check on me at my job, and come see me at my home. I'd have to tell him ahead of time if I was going to be out of town overnight. Whatever. I signed some papers and left. I knew the guy slightly, and didn't expect any trouble out of him. We were getting along, and that was good. He had read my file from the prison, and didn't expect me to be a problem for him, either. He probably knew how I got shafted on the whole deal, too.

The \$1,200 got spent that day. I couldn't have my sister running me around forever, so I hunted up a ride. I saw an ad in the paper and bought a 1978 Chevy 1/2 ton pickup that barely ran for \$1,000 cash. It was not pretty. There was cardboard in the seat over some busted springs, and a back fender that waved in the breeze if I got it over 30 MPH. License, 3 months liability insurance, a tag, and a tank of gas had me nearly broke.

What the heck, I thought, it was a ride, and it was mine. I did have a couple hundred left in my pocket. That was good thing, because the battery died the next day. I was amazed that it cost me nearly 100 bucks for a battery and one new cable. I did what was needed to keep it legal, because even a small traffic infraction could land a parolee back in jail. I was bug-eyed scared about that, and took to turning off into a store or something if there was a cop behind me.

Work went pretty well after the first week of mostly doing oil changes and tuneups. The boss decided to let me try some better paying, more complicated jobs and I began to make money. I went to sleep at night reading repair manuals, because I still had some catching up to do on the newer cars.

I didn't really have any friends to speak of now, most of them having married, moved, or something since I got out of high school. Being pretty fresh out of prison, I was paranoid for a while about how people would treat me. It took months before I lost the feeling that I had "convict" tattooed on my forehead, or something. The fact was, only a rare few even knew who I was, and nobody put me down about it. It still took years to gain any self confidence. Having a job, relatives, and the people I worked with helped a lot to make me feel like part of real life again. The bottom line is, it's about how you treat other people that decides how they see you.

I did run into Barry Klein, our class nerd, when I dropped into the computer store one day to look about finding a used one. He was helpful and said the thing to do was look online at Craigslist. I said I can't do that without a computer.

He said, "Oh. Yeah. Well, let me look here for a minute."

He did his tappity- tap thing and said, "Here's one. It's an Acer laptop, and it's cheap. They want \$100 for it. Here's the number."

He wrote it on a scrap of paper and handed it to me.

"Can I buy you lunch or something? You didn't make anything on this."

"Nah. Come in when you want to get internet service and we'll fix you up. The boss will be happy with that."

I thanked him and left. I called the guy and when I showed him \$80 cash, he took it. A week later I had some money ahead and got wireless internet service. The package came with internet based phone service, for \$70 a month and included unlimited long distance calls. Sounded good to me.

The computer would crash if I tried to watch videos on it. I finally figured out it was getting hot. Four pop bottle caps under it allowed more air to get through the mini cooling fan and the problem went away. Maybe that was why I got it so cheap, or maybe it was just because it was a couple years old. Computers depreciate really fast, I had learned. I spent some time learning how it worked, and with a tip now and then from Barry, I fumbled my way through learning how to use the internet. Prison really puts you out of touch with life.

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Mom and Dad's house had a two car garage on it, so I used that to work on my old truck some at night. In a few weeks I had found a better seat at the junkyard and gotten the brakes fixed. Donny Whitson was the old man who owned the junkyard. He remembered me from my high school days when I bought parts from him. He treated me right on the old parts I needed. The engine burned oil, but it started and ran pretty good. I had put some cheap new spark plugs in it and new plug wires. That got it running smooth again. I wired the fender down where a brace had rusted off, then put some STP in the engine and the oil pressure came up to something near normal. If I babied this thing, it would probably run for quite a while. The front tires were pretty bald, so I found a couple off a wreck at the junk dealer's for 20 bucks apiece and got them bubble balanced for another \$10. They ran smooth enough if



I kept it under 50 MPH.

I gave the thing a good bath and cleaned out the cab, then went over the inside with a scrub brush and some soapy water. When I put the better seat back in and added a cheap seat cover, it began to look better. The old 350 V8 was a gas hog, but at least it was a stick shift, so I was getting better than ten MPG around town. I could live with that no more than I drove. My boss came up with some old snow tires for the back, and I saved one of the old ones for a spare. It was August now, and things were looking a little better for me. I even had almost \$1,000 in my checking account again, but I had learned how fast that could disappear with the high prices now.

As soon as I could after getting settled in the job and got my truck in shape, I had used Dad's old tiller to dig up their small garden spot. I had set out some tomato plants and put in lettuce, radishes, green beans, and two short rows of sweet corn. We had grown up with his gardening, and it just didn't seem right to not have it going. I even put in two rows of late potatoes. Groceries were getting more expensive, so it made sense to me. I didn't have any idea about canning food, but I could eat cheaper all summer, then put potatoes in the basement and leftover sweet corn in the freezer.

I began to think about paying Gloria and Bob for their half of the place so I could do what I wanted to with it, but I didn't have the money and my credit was shot. I felt like I was living somewhat at their mercy, and I didn't care for that with Bob in the picture. He liked to think he was a smart money man, and I knew he had wanted to sell the place and invest the proceeds. That would be all right with me, if I had some notice, but we needed to talk about that.

I was still having to tinker with the old truck regularly to keep it going, and that took some money. Sometimes I had to walk the mile and a half to work because the truck had problems. The shifter linkage, a throwout bearing, headlights, hoses, and belts all went bad, but I was gaining on it. I put a rebuilt alternator on it, and patched up some wiring. The floorboard had a couple holes that I patched with junk sheet metal and some self tapping screws. The cancer in the truck bed was too much, so I gave \$200 for a used bed from Donny, and he had the guys help me get it put on with their big front loader. I gave the whole works a coat of Wal Mart's finest dark blue spray paint, over the rust and all. At least it was all the same color now.

When my Parole Officer came by the house to check on me one afternoon, I was picking green beans.

He asked, "Did you get a different truck?"

"No, I just got a used bed and some spray paint."

"Well, it looks a lot better. You doing all right?"

"Yeah. The job is making more money. Seems like a lot of people are getting their cars fixed now, instead of trading them in. We're busy. I put in almost 60 hours last week."

"Look, the reason I came out is, I'm going to cut you loose from parole early. You are established here, and have a good job, no problem with drug tests. I feel confident you will be fine, so I put in the recommendation. Stay out of trouble until the end of August next week, and you'll be finished. I brought the paperwork."

He handed me my copy and we shook hands. "Thanks! I guess I'm a citizen again."

"I don't need to waste time on guys like you. There are a lot of people getting released from prison early because of State budget constraints, and I have a big case load. Most of them are problem children. You aren't."

"I guess that's a compliment."

"Yes, it's a compliment. Keep up the good work."

I thanked him again as he left. He wasn't a bad guy. I suppose we had been as near to friends as you ever could be with a parole officer.

When he was gone, I thought about what had happened to me and although I liked women as much as any young man, I had no interest in getting married again. I could run my life just fine without that. And a lot of girls my age were really selfish. They were just out for what they could get. I had been listening to stories from our customers and it did not bode well for anybody dating now. So far, since I had got out of prison I hadn't dated anyone. I wasn't sure I wanted to start.

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I took a bread sack full of green beans and some nice ripe tomatoes over to Gloria. I knew she didn't have a garden, because Bob was NOT going to till up his acre and a half of grass. He probably spent more on that lawn than it cost me to live each month. My old truck did not complement the neighborhood very well, so I hadn't gone there often, but Gloria was my sister and I wanted to do what I could for her. She came out the back door and smiled at me, followed by her beautiful Golden Retriever. They didn't have any kids, so she mothered the dog.

"Hi Wes! How're you doing? Sandy, let him alone."  
Sandy, the dog, was giving me a slurpy dog kiss.

"I'm fine. I brought you some veggies."

"Come in and we'll get something to drink."

"You all doing okay?"

"We're fine. Bob's business is falling off. With all the credit problems in the banks, people are scared to invest in anything and it has cut into our income. Things are getting tight. I wish we'd never bought this big house. Bob doesn't want kids, and we don't need 4 bedrooms. But he had it bought before we got married, and now it probably isn't worth what we owe on it. He was going to flip it and make a ton of money, but that isn't going to happen now."

"Are you going to be all right?"

"I think so. If we can get Mom and Dad's house sold, it would help a lot. That would pay down some loans for us and we'd be comfortable again. He thinks he might have a prospect for it."

"I can find a place to live, so don't worry about me in the deal. I could use my half of the money, too."

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## CHAPTER 3

I suppose I'm not a bad looking guy. I'm in good shape, just over 6 feet tall and a little over 170 pounds, with brown hair and blue eyes, and kind of a bony face that can be a problem shaving if I'm not careful. I've usually got grease under my fingernails and grease stains on my clothes, so i don't make the impression that i'm told most girls are looking for. I do clean up okay, and I try to be clean if I'm going out shopping or to grab a meal. I got some looks from girls, but it always made me think about what happened the last time I fell for that.

I was going through the checkout at the discount grocery at near closing time when the checkout girl said, "You're Wes Blake, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Do I know you?"

"Don't remember me, I guess. I'm Ashley Kemper. We were in the same class in high school."

I finally could see the resemblance to the girl I had known slightly 8 or 10 years ago.

"Yeah! I remember you! You were the quiet math whiz that made us all look bad. You wore a pony tail back then."

"Yeah, and braces. I was so ashamed of them I wouldn't talk to anyone."

"I always thought you were nice. I should have asked you out."

"But Joanna had your eye then."

My face fell to the floor and she saw it.

"Sorry. I said something wrong, didn't I? I didn't mean to."

"That's okay. Me and Joanna didn't work out."

"That's a shame," she said and finished checking me out, handing me the change from a couple twenties.

"Over and done with now. How about you? Did you ever get married?"

"No. I came close, but glad I didn't. Me and that guy didn't work out, either. So, are you dating anybody now?"

"No, not since I've been home. You knew all about that, I suppose?"

She helped me sack up my groceries, saying, "I heard a little. The word on the street is that you got hung for dealing dope and you didn't do it."

"Oh, I bought some all right, but that was just possession. They lied and said I was going to sell it, 'cuz the cops and the prosecutor had this deal going, I was told. Nice little back-patting society they had to

make each other look good. Trumped up a misdemeanor to a minor felony and I got 5 years."

She was pulling out her cash drawer as we talked, then said, "Follow me down to Taco Bell, and we can talk about old times over something to eat?"

"Yeah, I'd like that." I broke my vow to myself right there on the spot. I was afraid her looks had gotten to me, because she was really a pretty girl now. But it was what she had to say and how she said it that really got my attention.

I took my time getting my groceries put in the truck, and waited until she came out. She got into an old Ford Focus that had seen better days, and took off. I followed at a discreet distance.

She ordered a meal and had it paid for before I could say anything.

"I was gonna buy," I told her.

"I invited, so I'm buying my own."

We got our food and sat in a booth away from the counter where it was quieter. The cheap food attracted a lot of teenagers, and they tended to be noisy. The noise actually gave us some privacy to talk, since nobody could hear us. I started the ball rolling.

"What have you been doing?"

"I got a scholarship for a couple years at college, but when it ran out, that was it. I wasn't going to borrow money for school, and my folks couldn't afford it. So I went to work. I'd been dating a guy for a while and we had talked about getting married, but he got mad one night and smacked my face. That was it. I haven't seen him since."

"I got no respect for a guy who would hit a girl. That just ain't right."

"I hit him back. Pretty hard, too. I sprained my wrist, but I broke his nose, too. He couldn't see to drive with his eyes all teared up, so I drove his car to my folks house and got out. I guess he drove himself home later."

I looked her over a little closer and saw that she had a sturdy build. She wasn't heavy, but she was solid. She saw the look and said, "I grew up on Dad's farm and worked like the men. I was probably stronger than he was, just not as big."

I tried to change the subject. "You been working at the store very long?"

"Just since last year. What are you doing now?"

"I'm a mechanic. I'm working at John Wilson's garage now."

"Oh, I'm glad you got a good job. Jobs are impossible to find now. I had a job at the Title and Abstract Company office until they cut back last year. Real estate slowed down to nothing. I got my old car paid off at least, but it needs some work now and I don't know if I can afford it."

"Let me figure out what's up with your car and I'll make sure you can afford it."

"Oh, I didn't mean that. I'm not asking for favors."

"I know. I'm offering. I can do it at home, not at the shop. I'm living at Mom and Dad's old place now."

"Where is that?"

"Place where I grew up, just at the edge of town past the Fairgrounds on old Highway 160."

"That's not too far from me. I'm staying with my parents, too. Just can't afford to move out."

"My folks are gone now. They died in a car crash almost 4 years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. What I meant was, it's just up to me about working on your car at home. I rent from my sister and her husband, Gloria and Bob Stowe. They own half of it since we never did get the place sold and the estate settled. Oh, it's settled on paper, but it's a joint deed to the place. I agreed to pay half rent until we can get it sold. I needed a place to live when I got out of prison. It's working okay for now."

"You sound really mature. It's in your eyes, too. Like you see right through people."

"Huh. Well, I guess I've been a lot of places and seen a lot of things. First the Army I went to play in the sandbox, because I couldn't find a good job right out of school. That could have been worse. I was in the motor pool keeping the vehicles running. Then I got married, I worked until she spent me broke and I got sent to prison. Kinda been to see the elephant, as they used to say."

"That makes my life seem pretty tame."

"I'll take a tame life if I can get it."

It was getting late, and I had to work the next day, so we headed outside. She was off work the next day. I told her where I lived and she said she'd bring her car around for me to look at tomorrow. We traded phone numbers and said goodbye. I went home feeling better than I had in a long time, and hoping that I wasn't starting something stupid.

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I worked a little late the next day to finish a valve job that paid me 6 hours for Remove and Replace, which meant that we had sent the machine work downtown. At \$15 an hour that paid 90 bucks and I had it done in under 4 hours actual time. I would have still gotten paid \$90 if it had taken me a week. Getting paid 'flat-rate' was sort of like being in business for yourself.

When I drove in at home, I called Ashley and told her I was ready for the car. She came in the drive a few minutes later. I was still grubby dirty from work and was ready to apologize for it. I was surprised to see that she was in dirty jeans and a Tee shirt, and wearing boots that had been in a barn. Her sandy colored hair was pulled back in a knot under a ball cap and she had a smudge on her chin.

"Looks like you've been working too," I told her.

She grinned and said, "Dad was moving cattle today. I live there, so I got appointed to help. Dad works for the County Road Department, and has to do the farming after work."

"What can you tell me about the car?"

"It gets crappy gas mileage and it doesn't run worth a darn. It used to do a lot better."

"Burn any oil?"

"Not that I noticed. Maybe down a little when it comes time to change it. I do that, so I check it."

"Had the oxygen sensor replaced since you had it?"

"I don't know what that is."

"It's a little thing that screws into the exhaust pipe and tells the computer how to mix the gas and air. I guess it hasn't been replaced yet. Let's listen to it a minute. Start it up."

It ran okay at idle, but most any engine would. I held my hand over the exhaust for a few seconds then smelled my hand. "Running a little rich, 'cause I can smell gas. Shut it off and I'll see if I can get the sensor out. I brought my top tool box home tonight. How does it run on the highway?"

"Okay, but it's doggy. No power to pass like it used to have. I hope I don't need an engine in this thing."

"I doubt it's that bad. C'mon in and let's get some iced tea. That's something I like, it's a lot cheaper than sodas, and I can make it easy enough."

The exhaust was hot, so we let it cool down a few minutes while we both got some cold tea out of the fridge. I looked under the hood and decided it could use a set of plugs and wires, too. It took about 10 minutes to get the sensor out, being rusty like they mostly are, and hard to get to. It had anti-sieze compound on it though, so it came out without damaging the threads.

"C'mon and get in the truck. Auto Zone is still open and they should have the part."

"I didn't bring any money. I'll have to go home and get some."

"I'll get it. You can pay me later. Besides, I get a discount."

The sensor cost \$32, it was \$4 each for 4 plugs, the best grade platinum tips, and \$18 for the plug wires. It took less than an hour to get it all put back on and running again. I had to adjust the idle speed down a little after the tuneup.

"Take it for a drive and see if I did any good here."

I got in with her and she drove a mile down the highway, then turned off on a county road.

"Hey! This thing's got it's pep back! You did good!"

"I didn't think it was too bad off. How many miles are on it?"

"Almost 150,000 and that had me worried."

"It should run another 50K without any major trouble, since you change oil regular. Oh, it might want some hoses or a radiator, or some other smaller items, but the drive train should go a while yet."

"This is home," she said as she pulled in a lane and drove up to an old fashioned farm house. A neat set of old buildings lay beyond it. An older man was driving cattle out a corral by the barn.

"You get finished Dad?"

"Yeah. Ran 'em all through the squeeze chute and finished giving the shots. I hate buyin' shipped in calves. They always get sick." When the cattle were all out of the barn lot, he shut the pasture gate and came up to us.

"This is Wes Blake. I gotta go get money to pay him for fixing my car." She trotted off toward the house.

"I'm Joe Kemper," the man said, and stuck out his hand.

We shook hands and began to do the small town get-acquainted thing. I told him my parents' names and gave him some history. He caught on quick and said, " Yeah, I know who you are. Most folks around here think you got a raw deal. Sorry 'bout your folks. I knew your Dad a little, and always heard good about you all. What're you doin' these days?"

"I'm working for John Wilson's garage. It's flat rate, so I get paid for whatever I get done. I can do all right at that, but there's no insurance or anything, just Workman's Comp."

"When did you get home?"

"The first of June. I'm living in my folks' old place, until me an' my sister can get it sold and settle things. I'll have to find another place then, but I get half the money from the house. I'll find something."

We talked on for half an hour and got to know each other. I got a look at their farm operation. It was small by today's standards, but it was respectable. Finally Ashley came out again. She had washed up and had her hair in a ponytail and had on clean clothes.

"That's not fair! I still look like a bum," I told her.

"I decided I would cook your supper for a tip on the car work. You can clean up while I cook. You do have food in the house, right?"

"Yeah, I've got food. And that would be nice to not have to eat my own cooking for a change."

"I know the parts cost \$71, or close enough, so what do you want for labor and I'll pay you now."

She had passed my little test with flying colors. I had been willing to gamble my labor and even the parts money to find out if she was going to try to get the best of me on the deal.

"Just pay me for parts and call it good. I haven't had a home cooked meal in years. That'll be enough."

"You said you get paid \$15 an hour, right? So here's \$90. You earned it and then some. You're honest and that is worth a lot to me."

Her Dad smiled a little and said, "Don't try to argue with her when her mind's made up. I never had any luck at it."

There were crinkles around his eyes when he said that. I decided I liked him. I rolled my eyes a little and pocketed the money. I grinned and told her, "Now let's see about that cooking thing. I'm anxious to learn about that."

"Okay, let's go do that."

We got in the car and were soon at my place. She was a good cook. I had some freshly dug potatoes that she peeled, sliced and fried in bacon grease, and she found my leftover green beans and heated them up, and had some ham slices frying in another skillet. She'd dug in the fridge and made a salad with lettuce, sliced radishes, and tomatoes. It all got to the table at the same time, as I was combing my wet hair from a shower. I had clean jeans and a Tee shirt now, so I looked more presentable. I made some instant coffee and we sat on the patio in back to drink it.

"You have a garden going."

"Not much of one, but that's where I got the green beans and potatoes and the salad. I'm not much of a farmer, but I can get a meal together if I have to."

"You are different. I haven't put it all together yet."

"No mystery about me. What you see is what you get."

"That's what's different. Most of the guys I know are full of talk about themselves and you don't say anything unless I dig it out of you, then it's the plain truth. It's nice to be able to talk to somebody who isn't playing head games."

"I've had enough head games to do me for a lifetime."

"I'll bet you have. You want to come to our house for Sunday dinner?"

"That sounds good. What are you having?"

"What do you want?"

"Peach pie. The rest is up to you."

"Call it a date."

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## CHAPTER 4

That dinner probably sealed my fate. It was good. I met her mother Kate, and found her to be strong in many ways. Her dad and I talked shop a little, as men do, and in the process I told him I had in mind to watch for a deal on a car to fix up and sell to make a few extra dollars. He allowed as how he might know of something for me. Her mother was pleasant and friendly, but I could tell she was looking me over good.

My sister called the next day and said they had a nibble on the house. Would it be all right to show it to the people? I told her sure, come ahead. That was the beginning of a lot of trouble because the people decided to buy the place. It meant I had to find a place to rent within a couple weeks, because they wanted to get moved in before school started. Oh joy. I hate moving.

I did find a trailer to rent not far from downtown. It was cheap and it was close to work, but it had no outside space and no garage. Gloria convinced Bob to store the stuff from the garages that I wanted to keep. They had a big "workshop" building he called it, although he never did a lick of work in it. It was a place to store his toys, like the boat, his expensive zero turn mower, an ATV, and his motorcycle. Actually, when I got the stuff all stacked in the building in a corner and threw a tarp over it, he said it didn't look as bad as he thought it would. That's why I put the tarp over it all. I understood Bob's need for good appearances. It saved me renting some storage space. After I left, I remembered that the motorcycle wasn't there. I talked to Gloria on the phone later and she said he'd sold it.

Selling the place then was the best possible thing that could have happened for us, because a month later, nobody could find a mortgage loan anywhere for less than 25% down payment and nobody had that much saved. The real estate market fell on its' butt when the bank troubles were in the news in September. I got online and did some researching about that. At least the trailer park had internet service, and it was a fast wireless provider. What I found got me worried. It seemed that the banks had sent their man to Congress and told them they needed vast amounts of money to bail them out, or the whole system would crumble. They got their money, but nobody liked it much.

I had just a week of feeling very comfortable with \$52,000 from the house sale in the bank, before I got really worried about whether the bank was a safe place to have it or not. I got online and found there were ratings for banks, and by dumb luck, I had picked the only 4 star bank in town. It was locally owned and that was a good thing too, but it still worried me. I had no idea how much worry it could be to have some money and not know what to do with it. I Googled like a madman and ran into financial sites, and then gold sites, and then some sites where the people called themselves "preppers". They scared the daylights out of me. The more I read, the more concerned I was. A lot of people were convinced that our money and banking system was ready to collapse in a pile. I had learned a lot, but had more questions than ever.

I tend to keep things to myself, so Ashley got to prodding me about what was on my mind. I finally told her and she said, "Let's go talk to Dad," so we did.

After hearing my concerns, he said, "Well, when I'm not sure what to do, I try not to do anything until I get it figured out."

"That makes a lot of sense to me, " I told him, "but I still need to figure out if the bank is going to be safe or not."

"Okay, in the meantime, hunt up a couple more high-rated banks and spread it around. That way, you've got a better chance if something goes wrong at one of them."

So simple. Why didn't I think of that? The old guy had a lot of common sense and it helped calm me down. We talked for most of the evening about what I wanted in the way of a place to live and how I might get there. Joe was a much better advisor than I had ever dreamed, and when he said things they were simple to understand.

He began with, "In hard times, prices come down, especially on big things that people have to borrow money to buy. You got lucky, it seems to me, getting that house sold when you did. The TV says that banks are hard up and need this bailout from the government. If that's so, then they're not going to be loaning money as easy as they have been. Most already want a big down payment they said, and nobody has any savings to speak of now. They all live hand to mouth. Looks to me like if you just hang onto your money for year or so, you'll find a lot better deal on property."

I decided he had the best idea. The next day I moved money to a total of four banks. They all paid a little interest on a passbook savings account, and I didn't want to tie up the money in anything like a CD.

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Joe did find me a car to fix up. Some old lady at their church had it and would be going into an assisted living home soon. She had no use for the car since she could no longer drive. It was a 1998 Chevy Malibu with a crumpled fender and 56,000 miles on it. She was asking \$1,000 for it. Other than needing a tuneup, I couldn't find anything else wrong with it and paid her in cash. She signed the title and I put down on the price line what seemed fair to me, and got it licensed in my name. I called the insurance people to get immediate coverage, and duct taped the tail light back on.

I washed my old truck, wiped the tires with brake fluid to make them look younger, and put a for sale ad in the paper. I got my \$1,200 for it 4 days after the paper came out. I had about gotten my money back what I'd spent on the truck, and had driven it for 3 months. It seemed that used cars and trucks were in demand. People couldn't afford new ones.

It took a couple weeks to beat the Malibu's fender into shape enough that body putty would finish it. I never claimed to be a body man, but the result looked okay after some touch up spray paint. I put a used tail light on it, and did a detail cleaning job, then a tuneup. I bought a gallon of xylol paint solvent for \$10.99, which is the main ingredient in fuel injector cleaner and a lot cheaper. I added some every time I filled up with gas. After a couple tanks, it was running smooth as silk. The hoses and belts looked old and dried out, so for the sake of preventing trouble, I went ahead and replaced them all. It took a while to replace all those little vacuum hoses, but it didn't cost much and made a big difference in how it ran. When the car was as good as I could make it, I still had spent only about \$300 more than what I got for the truck, license and all. This car had 100,000 less miles on it and was 20 years younger than the truck.

I wanted to be able to haul things, so I bought a trailer hitch kit and installed that in my so-called driveway. The gravelled strip was barely longer than the car. I needed more room to do anything much. There was room on the grass beyond my parking spot to park something, so that's where the little utility trailer went. I had seen it sitting in the guy's yard with a for sale sign, and we made a deal. It turned out he needed money to fix his ATV, so I took a look at that and did the work as part of the trailer price. We were both happy. It was a 4' x 7', one of the smallest, but suitable for me. They sold at the farm

stores for around \$500 but this one had a little rust and was a little banged up. All told, I gave him \$250 in cash and did a couple hours work for it. It wanted some new treated floor boards and a coat of paint, and it looked like new.

There were a lot of late nights for me on the computer, researching everything I could find about money, investments, and real estate prices. I desperately wanted to own a place to live, and what I was reading said I needed enough ground to raise some food, too. My thinking was, I needed a place to work on cars, or whatever else might come along. What I read about money said that the value of a dollar was going down. I knew prices on groceries and other things had gone up, but from what I saw, real estate was going down, so I decided to wait on buying anything.

I was making more than enough money to live on. The trailer rent was \$200 a month. Water and sewage were included, but I had to pay for electricity and natural gas for cooking, hot water and heating. The utilities cost me about \$90 to \$100 a month. My take home pay had been running between \$450 and \$630 a week. I had been spending less than \$400 a month for a gasoline, food, and eating out with Ashley. That even included some 'new' clothes at the Goodwill and Salvation Army stores. I had anywhere from \$1000 to \$1800 a month left over and it was going into cash savings, like, stuffed in the mattress cash. The natural gas cost more when the weather began to get cold, but only went to \$130 a month at most. By Thanksgiving, I felt a little flush with cash for the first time in my life with over \$4000 in my cash stash.

I was not a trusting soul, so I had loosened a piece of the interior panelling and removed some insulation from the bedroom wall. The old trailer was a little beat up so it didn't show, and I kept a dresser sitting in front of it. There were bundles of twenties in there, and a few fifties. I didn't want many big bills. I had mentally weighed the dangers of fire in the trailer, vs my car getting stolen if I kept money in there. I wanted a more secure spot, but that was the best I could do then.

My rented trailer had two bedrooms, and I only used the small one. The back bedroom was larger and had vinyl floor covering. I took the bed apart and set it up against the wall so I had more floor space for storage. I began to spend more on the tools of my trade, because the prices were going up. I learned long ago that those tool trucks that come around to mechanic's shops are a rip off. I could buy good imported tools with a guarantee at Auto Zone for far less money. If I broke it, they replaced it, just like Sears, but for half the price. A lot of my new tools got stored at home in the trailer, since I had what I needed at work. I was buying bigger stuff for working on farm equipment and trucks in case I could get a better job doing that.

An auction provided a bucketful of top quality 1" drive sockets. I found a 1" drive impact wrench at the dump that somebody had thrown away, the kind they use to change big truck tires. It had a 1/4" air fitting on the inlet, so I knew why they thought it was no good. It couldn't get nearly enough air through that. I took it apart and gave all the pieces a bath in gasoline with a brass wire brush, dumped the gas on some grass in the driveway, and put it back together with plenty of oil. I ordered some 1/2" air fittings from an industrial supplier, and 1/2" air hose from Harbor Freight online. When I took it to work and tried it out, I had only spent about \$200 on the pile and had a good, made in the USA, Chicago Pneumatic impact wrench that would twist off a truck axle. I didn't need it at work, so it got stashed at home. Retail, it would have cost me over \$1,000 for the sockets and impact wrench.

The county landfill provided me with a very rusty old floor jack that turned out to be a Blackhawk 1 1/2 ton unit. It was stuck, full of water, and wanted a few repairs. I got it unstuck and got the water out of the cylinder, refilled it with oil and patiently worked it up and down dozens of times until it worked

freely. I knew a guy who did sandblasting on the side, and had the jack and a whole pile of other tools cleaned down to the bare metal. I spent evenings getting it all a fresh coat of paint when the weather allowed.

The junkyard had a chain hoist that had a crack in the housing. I bought that and some junk log chains for \$18 and gave them the wash and clean routine, then sprayed them with aluminum paint to prevent more rust. The hoist I got fixed at the local welding shop, and when it was repainted, it looked like a new one. Harbor Freight had a sale going where I found a trolley for the chain hoist that fit an I-beam, and I brought it home. I dreamed of the day when I would have a place of my own to set it all up.

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## CHAPTER 5

Ashley and I had talked about this and she had been bugging me to set up shop at her Dad's place. She thought that would kill a whole flock of birds with one stone. Her Dad's stuff needed some work, for which he would provide space in his machine shed. I needed a place to put my stuff, and a place to work on vehicles to buy and sell. I hated to be beholden to my girlfriend's parents, but I finally decided it would be a good thing for now and made the move.

She was spending more and more time at my place, and her parents were surely aware of what was in store. We spent some afternoons together and more than a few nights. The times when I woke up from a nightmare ready to fight, she helped get me awake and then settled down enough to sleep again. It was less often now, but I still dreamed about war and prison every night, it seemed like. Although I didn't always remember the dreams, I knew the after effects well. I had never had a shoulder to cry on before. It made me feel an inch high to have her see me terrified and crying, but she made it go away. I knew I had found the woman I wanted. I couldn't understand what she saw in me, but if she was happy, I was in heaven. We made our plans to get married later in the Spring.

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Joe's combine was old and needed work before next wheat season, so I spent many hours on it, under it and inside of it that winter. We had cobbled up a wood stove out of a barrel and got some heat in the drafty old machine shed. When we cut some firewood, Joe taught me how to use chainsaws without hurting myself, and I taught him how to keep them running. He was a steady old guy, never working fast, but always moving and making something happen. We got comfortable working together that winter. He got his machinery in good shape for the next season, and I made some money on a couple cars that I put through the shop.

Back in the Fall, I had read some things that made silver coins look like a good investment. I was brand new at investing of any kind, but I figured that I had to do some gambling at this point. What money I had wasn't enough to get me a place to live without a mortgage, and I had learned enough to know I didn't want to go in debt. My life had been a series of disasters, and I just couldn't see getting into anything like a 20 or 30 year mortgage with things as shaky as they looked to me. So, if I could make some money with something like silver or gold, I would stand a chance of having my dream. Still, I wasn't fool enough to jump in the deep water without testing it. I left the money from the house sale in the banks.

The last week of October I took the money out of the wall in the trailer and counted it up. I had just over \$5,000 with that month's savings. I had talked to several people on some financial and homesteading forums about this, and got a recommendation to buy old US silver coins, made before 1964 when they still had 90% silver content. I took my pile of cash to an old established coin shop in Louisville, and found that a little over \$4,000 would get me two bags of silver, each with \$250 face value of coins. The 'spot' price of silver then was \$9.12 an ounce.

The bags were pretty heavy, and too bulky to fit nicely in the trailer wall, so I talked to Joe and we found a place to hide it in the machine shed. The bags fit into a couple old gallon paint buckets that we sat on the shelf with the grease and oil and filters. The next three months I made enough on the cars I fixed up and sold to get another \$250 bag, but the spot price had gone up to \$11 an ounce, so that cost me \$2450. That meant my original 2 bags were now worth \$4900, so that was okay with me. I kept watching the price of real estate on the Multiple Listing Service online and it was steadily trending down. Silver was going up, so it made sense to me to keep up what I was doing.

## CHAPTER 6

Ashley had money sense, there was no doubt of that, so she really shocked me when she said she wanted a nice engagement and wedding ring set. I was shocked beyond speech until she called me over to the computer and showed me what she wanted. It looked like a million bucks, but it was a 1/2 carat Zirconia stone in a beautiful white gold ring setting she found on [eBay](#) for \$62, with shipping. My confidence was restored.

I said, "That was rotten to do that to me."

She replied, "Yes, I know, but I hoped it would make you more secure about me when you figured it out. I didn't let you hang for more than a minute. I'm sorry if it really bothered you."

"Well, I wouldn't say it really bothered me THAT much, but I thought I was having a flashback for a minute there."

She got up from the desk and put her arms around me and said, "Let me make it up to you, okay?"

I had no problem with that.

We got married at the Courthouse in the Clerk's Office with the cheapest wedding I had ever heard about. She had things to do and so did I, so we did it on my lunch hour when she had a day off. Her parents came with us and John Wilson came to act as a witness. Joe and Kate took us out for a really nice dinner that evening at a fine restaurant and that was the extent of our celebration. Well, that's all that we were willing to talk about.

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It wasn't all work and no play for us newlyweds, although we spent 3 or 4 evenings a week at her folks place while I worked on whatever project I had going then. We made a trip to the city every two weeks, shopping for our needs and digging for bargains at the Goodwill and the big flea market in Clarksville. There was always a golden oldie movie on Hulu, and we picked up one now and then from the Walmart discount bin. We both liked popcorn made in a pan on the stove with real butter. Neither of us smoked, and what alcohol we drank didn't amount to anything. We bought a 24 pack of canned beer at the grocery when it was on sale, and it took us a month or more to drink it, but it went well with popcorn and a movie. Both of us hated crowds, so we never went to a theater. Worse than the crowds were the prices.

In February of 2009, the TV stations all went to the new digital signal, so our \$5 set from Goodwill wouldn't work until we got a converter box a few months later when they went on sale. We seldom watched TV anyway. There was too much for us to do. In summer, there were the various small town festivals, the county fair, and holiday events. It all happened within a mile or less of our trailer, so we walked to most of them. It was less trouble than finding a place to park. We did each have a Tracfone, literally the cheapest cellphone around. They got used only when we needed to change plans or something like that. We just didn't have much need for a phone, not being into the social side of them. We spent something like \$8 each a month to keep that going.

I had told Ashley that her money was hers and mine was too, and we opened a joint checking account as soon as we had gotten married. I never thought I'd ever trust a woman that much again, but she earned it. I told her that I'd never have married her if I had not been able to trust her with my money.

She spent money on a few clothes at the Goodwill, mostly, and a little at Walmart, always from her own check. I had to nudge her to spend on anything beyond what she earned.

Her big interest for a while had been cast iron cookware, so she was delighted when I brought home some crusty-rusty skillets and a Dutch oven from the junkyard. They cost me an average of \$2 each. She found a pair of old pots at a flea market in town, and got an old handsaw, a carpenter's square, 2 hammers and a wood plane at the same time. The guy must have needed the money, because he sold the whole pile for 20 bucks. We tried several things to get the stuff cleaned up, but I finally took it all to my sandblaster buddy and he did it all for \$30. All we had to do was polish the stuff with sandpaper and put a finish on it. The carpenter tools got paste wax to prevent rust, and the wood handles got sanded and varnished. The cast iron cookware got bacon grease and an hour in the oven at low temperature, repeated until she was happy with it.

College had been a disappointment for Ashley. She had expected to learn something new and enlightening, but found she was bored by the content covered in the first two years. It hadn't done a thing for her job prospects, either. The internet was an entirely different thing, though. She spent hours in the mornings digging around and learning new things. She let me check the financial sites before I went to work at 7:00 AM, then it was hers until she had to go to work at 10:00. We read the world news together over supper, and then if we weren't going to work at the farm, we took turns reading the homesteader sites. Ashley really got into those sites after I showed her a few I'd found. That gave both of us the urge to get a place out of town. The trailer park was very confining at times, even though we could go to her parents' farm in 15 minutes.

Springtime brought the threat of tornadoes in south Indiana, and that made us very insecure. If there was bad weather predicted, we went to the farm and if there was a storm warning, we all went to their basement. Ashley and I talked about the shelves full of home canned food in their basement, and how nice it would be to have that. It got us thinking about property until it had become almost an obsession. I had kept adding to the silver collection whenever I had the extra money. Ashley contributed some to the savings sometimes. We thought it would take forever to save enough to buy a place. Then we discovered foreclosed properties.

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## CHAPTER 7

The online Multiple Listing Service had a search feature that could be refined to look at foreclosures only. It didn't take long to find some properties that we could afford, but none of them looked like what we wanted. Cities and towns had too many restrictions for me to start doing car repair at home. We needed something out in the county that was zoned for agriculture. In our lax county, that left the door open for almost anything within reason.

Nothing struck us as being close to what we wanted, so we bided our time. Real estate prices were still dropping. By the end of March, I had added another sack of silver to our collection. Spot price had gone up to \$13 or more an ounce, so this \$250 bag cost me \$2,900. That made an even \$1,000 in coins we had, that had cost me \$9,350. It was worth \$10,600 now. So far, this was beating the socks off bank interest rates on savings. I was scared to death the price would fall, but the investment sites were all saying it would keep going up because of all the money being printed and given to banks. I decided to hold onto it for a while. That cheap computer had been worth a lot, for what I had been learning with it.

Ashley saw a place she liked in the regular for sale listings and wanted to go look at it. It had 5 acres and a nice metal building behind a 3 bedroom ranch style home. They were asking \$148,000 for it all, and I thought that was stupid expensive, but I agreed to go look at it. We rode out to see it with the agent and listened to her tell about how wonderful the place was, with the beautiful lawn in front. When I saw it, it looked like it would take all day to mow it. I thought maybe you could put a couple beef calves out there to eat some of that grass, but there wasn't a fence anywhere on the place.

After we'd toured the place, we asked the lady if she had anything that was nearer to being a hobby farm than a residence? Something with a less expensive home and some farm buildings? She thought a minute and said, well there's a fixer-upper out this way, but it's not all that nice. She drove about 5 miles from Cambellsburg across the flat farmland until we came to the long hill leading down to Cave River Valley. That hill is steep. It would be a pain to get out of there in snowy weather.

We looked at it and liked it. The house was old, a pretty standard old 6 room farmhouse, 4 rooms downstairs plus an added bathroom, and 2 bedrooms upstairs with the old sloped ceilings. There was a small barn, but it was in rough shape.

Several sheds dotted the hillside behind it where the trees started. There was a total of 24 acres, mostly hilly woods, but there was a field in by the creek out front of maybe 5 or 6 acres. There were signs that the field had flooded lately on one corner, but the house was on much higher ground so it looked to be safe enough. The driveway had a huge culvert where the little creek ran through along the county road. We walked over the place and saw the garden spot behind the house, obviously having been used for generations. A young couple owned it, apparently, because we saw some kid toys in the yard. There was no farm machinery around, but the field had last year's corn stubble in it, so they must be renting the ground to somebody.

They wanted \$128,500 for the place. It had been on the market for a while, the agent said and hinted that the price was negotiable. I nodded and said we would have to talk to the bank and see if we could afford it, but I doubted it. The agent looked disappointed and wasn't nearly so friendly going back to town.

I did some research on the computer. The realty ad had a Google Maps birdseye view of the place, and it showed a lot when I looked over the area. There were only a couple houses anywhere close. Mostly,



it was farmland in the creek bottom, with steeply wooded hillsides at the edges of the valley. I couldn't expect it to be a business location, because nobody could find the place, but it would be just fine for my hobby of repairing and selling cars. Nobody would complain out there. And there might be some farmer business for a mechanic. But, we simply could not afford it. We were both a little bummed about that.

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I was more bummed after I got to work the next Monday. John Wilson said he just didn't have enough work to keep me busy, and I knew it was the truth. I was the last man hired, so of course, I was the one to be laid off. At least I was off parole, so I didn't have to deal with the PO telling me I HAD to have a job. The truth was, I had enough money in the bank that if I didn't have a job for a long time I wouldn't go hungry, but that was savings that I meant to keep for buying a house. That day, I was really glad we hadn't taken out a mortgage and bought a house.

I went back home and hitched up the utility trailer. Some of the guys at the shop helped me load my toolboxes in it, and wished me good luck finding work. I took the toolboxes straight out to Joe's machine shed with my stay-at-home tools and told him what happened, and said that I was headed out to look for a job.

All the mechanic's shops were pretty dead these days, but I asked around anyway that morning. No luck that day, so I figured I'd do the unemployment thing ASAP. I didn't really expect to get hired anytime soon, so I wanted to keep working on my own for now. I had seen a pickup at Steve Young's junkyard out in the country. It didn't look too bad, except it didn't have an engine in it. It was another old Chevy, this one an early 80's model. It was a 3/4 ton, and still had the big 4 speed in it, and lots of springs in the back. The body was pretty good and the cab interior looked really good. I dropped by our trailer and picked up what cash I had there, then drove out of town the 5 miles to ask about the truck. Steve must have been slack on business too, because he sold it cheap enough. For \$500 he even agreed to take it out to Joe and Kate's with his wrecker for the price and had it there well before supper time.

I thought I'd seen a wrecked Chevy truck with a 6 cylinder in it at Whitson's yard in town, so I went to investigate, still pulling the trailer. The wreck had been T-boned and was pretty well a goner. It took some fancy torch work, but they got the engine out, complete with the motor mounts and a chunk of frame on both sides. We set it on the trailer with his big loader that handled junk cars, and I was on the way for \$200. No guarantee on the engine, because it could have suffered in the wreck, he said. I had looked at the odometer and saw 88,000 miles on it. It was a nice looking truck, so I thought the engine had probably been properly serviced. I got the clutch and pressure plate, too, so it should be drop-in job.

What I did not have was an engine stand, nor an engine hoist. I was afraid to lift a heavy engine with my chain hoist using the trusses in the machine shed. They just didn't look strong enough. When I unhooked from the trailer at Joe's, Steve's man had delivered the old truck, and Joe had directed him into the open bay I was using, which saved us a lot of trouble moving a dead truck around.

Ashley was working until 9:00 PM that night, so I made a trip to Harbor Freight in Jeffersonville and bought their better model engine hoist, the kind with a hydraulic jack that lifts an arm. By the time Ashley got off work, I had the project off to a good start. I figured I could have the truck on the road again in a week or two at the most, and ready for sale.

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I was reading the giveaway newspaper over breakfast and told Ashley, "Here's a maintenance job at that printing place in Scottsburg. I should go apply for that."

"I thought you didn't like factory work."

"I don't, but this isn't standing in one place all day doing the same thing over and over. This is fixing their machinery. I'll clean up and go over there today."

"I'm off today. Why don't I go with you and we can get some shopping done at the Walmart over there?"

"You'll be stuck sitting in the car while I fill out an application."

"That's okay, it can't take very long."

"Okay, let's do that, and go see their Goodwill store, too. It's right there by the Walmart. I should buy some engine oil and gear oil for that truck project. How about lunch at the Waffle House?"

"Good. I'll get ready."

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"They offered me the job, second shift and start tomorrow night. I turned it down. Not enough money."

Ashley asked, "What did they offer to pay you?"

"They said they start maintenance at \$9.20 an hour, and after you're there for a year you get automatic raises up to their top pay of \$10.55 an hour. You have to join some lame Union and pay them dues, too. I told him I made \$15 as a mechanic and I was low man in the place. He said, 'I can get a warm body for this job for less than \$9.00 an hour.' I told him, 'Yep, I bet you can. But if you want brains to go with it, it will cost you \$15 and up.' I left and he looked unhappy. Too bad for him. "

"Jobs are hard to get, so I guess they think people will take less money now."

"I know. But I can make a lot better than that working on old stuff to buy and sell. I just hate that I have to impose on your folks for a place to work."

"Dad loves having you around, and Mom likes you, too."

"I like them, too, but it just isn't right to use his shop building without paying for it."

"But you have been paying for it. Dad said you saved him thousands of dollars doing the work on the combine and baler. That is worth real money, and he knows it better than anybody. Everybody thinks this is a great deal, except you."

"Well, I'm used to paying my own way."

"You are, so get that through your thick head. Oh. And Mom said she wanted you to look at her washing machine. It's making a new noise. Dad said he doesn't know anything about washers, and she refuses to take it to that guy downtown."

The washing machine just needed the feet readjusted so it sat flat on the floor, because one of the rubber footpad things was missing. I had glued a piece of rubber cut from an old inner tube on the metal foot, and that kept it from vibrating. Kate heard it run quietly again and gave us a cherry pie to take home. I finally began to see that they really appreciated having some help around the place, and felt a little less guilty about using the shop.

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## CHAPTER 8

Our trip to Walmart had cost a lot more than I expected. Groceries and everything else were still going up. It was beginning to worry me about how much money I could make, compared to the higher prices. The boxes of food kept getting smaller, too. I was wishing I had room for a garden, but the trailer lot had no place for it. Gas was going up again. It had hit \$4.12 a gallon in the summer of 2008, but then it dropped like a rock so that a year later, this summer it was under 2 bucks for a short time. Now it was inching up again and was around \$2.66 where we lived. Everyone was afraid to buy anything big, especially a new car, thinking gas could go up again and it would be hard to make ends meet.

I looked at real estate ads for something to do, but I was discouraged about buying our own place now that I was out of a regular job. The TV had been saying that housing prices were falling, but I didn't see it in the ads for our county. Ashley didn't seem to be worried about it, but I was tired of living in the trailer park with no room to do much of anything I wanted to do.

On July 1st, 2009, the government started the "Cash for Clunkers" program. That threw a big wrench in my fixer-upper business, because within a couple months, almost 700,000 cars, SUV's and pickups had been destroyed to get the government rebate for buying a new car. What followed was a big price increase in the used car market, because not everybody could afford a new car, even with a four thousand dollar rebate. So many old vehicles were scrapped that it got to be hard to find one suitable for me to repair and resell. And they destroyed the engines in the ones they took in on the program. They had the junkers drain the oil, put in some silicate stuff and run the engine until it seized up. Couldn't even get those apart, let alone rebuild one.

I had just gotten the 1982 Chevy truck running when this made the news. I thought about it and the next day I talked to Donny Whitson at the junkyard. He said he had scrapped a hundred or more old cars under that program, and didn't have a rebuildable wreck in his yard. That bothered me a lot, so I talked to Joe about fixing farm equipment for his neighbors.

"Well, they's plenty of that to do, but it's mostly welding and such. Can you weld?"

"I did some in prison, but it wasn't real pretty."

"I got that old Lincoln buzz box welder you can practice with if you want to. Might have to go get some more welding rods."

"I'll do that, and I'll study up on welding, too."

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Ashley was working more hours per week, because they had laid off one of the checkout clerks at the grocery. She came home tired because they had to restock shelves when they weren't busy at the checkouts, but it meant that we had about enough money to live with her check alone. I was determined to make my share of the money, if I had to invent my own job. There sure weren't any jobs around town.

The '82 pickup I'd bought was up and running now, and it was a pretty good old truck. I put an ad in the paper to sell it, but got no response at all. I had put a couple new tires on the front, and the back ones weren't too bad. I'd also had to have new exhaust put on it, then with the title transfer fee, sales tax, license, and insurance, I had about \$1,400 in it. I was asking \$1,950 for it, and I thought that was

cheap, but I didn't even get any lookers, so Joe and I began to use the truck around the farm. I couldn't afford to drop the price any more, so I thought we just as well get some use out of it. The old truck had a heavy receiver hitch, so we could pull wagons around the farm, or my utility trailer with it.

I wanted to get some money coming in, so I got busy learning to be a better welder. I bought some cheap welding gloves and a 9" angle grinder with grinding wheels and a wire brush for it at Harbor Freight. I got several boxes of welding rods at the welding supply place in Jeffersonville along with some new lens filters for the helmet. Ashley found a leather jacket at the Salvation Army store to protect me from sparks. I wore it backwards so the collar protected my neck and the back was open so it was cooler to wear. I picked up some scrap iron at the junkyards to use for patching materials. Even as cheap as I could do it, I spent about \$400, but by the end of another week, I could do a respectable job of welding on most things, and I was learning more about it on the internet.

We didn't really want to make a formal business out of this, with all the licenses, taxes, insurance, and other costs, so Joe just put the word out that I needed to make a few bucks and could probably fix most of what a farmer would need done. The first thing that showed up was his neighbor's combine. He had managed to run one corner of the corn head into a post and wadded up the sheet metal. I got it apart and made a lot of noise beating the dents and wrinkles out of it. Some of the internal bracing cracked in the process, so I welded that back together and got him going again so he'd be ready for corn season.

I spent a hard day at it, and part of the next morning. I remembered a line from an old novel I'd read, where the hero commented that clean cars seem to run better, so I went downtown and found some spray paint that matched the faded red on the combine and put a coat on the repaired part. When the man came over to pick it up, he was delighted to pay me \$150 in cash for what I judged to be about 10 hours work on it. He said new parts to fix it would have cost over \$600. I only had a few jobs like that before my unemployment checks ran out, but it helped.

Billy James saw me in the auto parts store one day and said hello. We had worked together at John Wilson's, and he told me Wilson was barely keeping him and one other man busy, instead of the 6 he once had working. Times were tough all over. He asked if I'd applied for Food Stamps, and I told him no, I could feed myself just fine. I thought it was okay to get unemployment, since it was an insurance thing, the same as insurance on a car or a house. But Food Stamps I thought was charity like Welfare, and I wasn't going to do that. Billy allowed as how he would be first in line to get Food Stamps if he was out of work, but he was glad I was getting by without it.

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It was getting on toward time to start picking corn when Joe had severe chest pains and Kate rushed him to the hospital. He was in Floyd County Hospital in New Albany for a couple weeks before they did a catheterization and then later, double bypass surgery. He came out of it pretty well, and was up and walking around by the first of October, but we all knew he had no business driving heavy equipment for the County Highway Department, nor doing the farming.

I had taken over feeding the cattle, hogs, and chickens while he was in the hospital so that Ashley could spend all the time she wanted to with him. I didn't have a lot else to do, except for an occasional welding job, and I even began to get acquainted with Kate's kitchen so I could have something ready for the women to eat when they got home from seeing Joe. For over a month, Ashley and I hardly saw each other except in passing on her way to work or the hospital. I did the laundry, and generally made like a housewife and farmer to keep things going.

At least Joe and Kate had pretty good insurance from his job for the County, but his paycheck had stopped, Kate hadn't had a job in years, and although the County gave him early retirement, that check didn't amount to nearly what he had been making. Joe had 40 acres of corn standing in the field, and the doctor had ordered him not to pick up anything heavy from now on. They had done what they could for him, and he could live a long time, but not doing any heavy work. Kate was worried sick. She had dark circles under her eyes and had lost some weight.

Ashley told me she had to do whatever they needed, since she was an only child and there just wasn't anyone else to do it. I agreed and told her I'd do whatever I could for them. They had treated me as well as my own parents, and besides, I liked them a lot. We all talked it over and decided it was foolish for us to keep paying rent on the trailer when we spent most of our time at the farm and the farmhouse was huge. We moved. Should have done it when I got laid off, I suppose, but it just didn't feel right at the time.

Moving didn't take long. All my tools were already at the farm, except for the pliers and screwdriver in the kitchen drawer. All we had there was our clothes, a few groceries and the household stuff. It all sort of disappeared into the collection in the farmhouse. We had the entire upstairs for ourselves, 3 bedrooms and a smaller room that had probably been the nursery when the place was built. We put the computer in there on a cheap computer desk we'd found at Goodwill. It had some chips off the corners where you could see the particle board under the plastic fake wood veneer, but it was sturdy enough, and it gave us a place to park our important papers too.

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The next few weeks flew by me. When I wasn't on the combine, I was feeding livestock, or cutting firewood. Joe had a good stack of wood already cut and dried for the outdoor wood furnace, but they had not been heating the upstairs, so with us in residence, it would take more fuel. I cut wood like a madman. Joe had a hydraulic wood splitter, so that took a lot of drudgery out of the job, but it was still a workout. By Thanksgiving, we thought we had it under control. With Joe's careful guidance, I had learned a lot about farming in a very short time. I could see that there was much more to know about it, though.

Gloria called the second week of November and said I needed to come get the stuff I had stored in Bob's workshop. On the phone, I didn't ask why, but just apologized for leaving it there for so long. I took my old Chevy pickup across town to the exclusive subdivision on the hillside. I thought about it and decided that I didn't much care what the neighbor's thought about my old truck. This one looked a lot better than that first one, but it had barnyard mud on the tires and looked like a farm truck.

I hadn't seen my sister in several weeks, and was shocked at how strained she looked. Not wanting to pry in her affairs, I said, "Hi Sis. What's up?"

"We lost the house, that's what."

"You WHAT?"

"You heard right. Our house is in foreclosure. Bob's company first laid off most of the sales people, then he was told they would close the office this month. His pay had been mostly commissions on what investments his people sold, and it had just dried up to nothing. He's been losing money driving to work for the past 4 months."

"How come I never heard anything about this? Can i help some way? What can I do?"

"Not much, unless you've got \$360,000 laying around you don't need. That's what we owe on the house and the car. Bob sold the boat at a loss to get rid of the payments, and he let the lawn mower go back to the bank. He thought he had his Mercedes sold, but it didn't pan out. He's trying to trade it in for something cheap to drive, but not having any luck at that. We sold my Volvo two months ago, but we've been living on that money. It's bad."

She cried on my shoulder for a while and all I could do was hug her and let her cry. I didn't know what to say. Her dog Sandy was worried about her and was leaning on her leg. It took a while for Sis to get calmed down. I was thinking furiously while she was letting out all the stored up grief and worry. It all depended on what Bob was able to do. So, I asked her about that.

"What's Bob up to now?"

Gloria got a decorator print paper towel from the kitchen and blew her nose, then said with a stuffy nose, "I don't know. He went out this morning with his Mercedes to try to trade it off, or sell it someplace. I don't even know where he went. He said something about a dealer in Louisville that bought cars. Let's hope he can get it done. He doesn't talk to me much now."

"Let's go get my stuff out of the workshop, and think about this," I told her.

"Okay. Yeah, I need to get some fresh air." She reached down and petted Sandy on the head, then told the dog, "Come on girl. Let's go outside."

The dog beat her to the door, smiling and wagging her tail. We followed her across the back yard to the workshop building and went inside. The place was pretty bare. Bob's toys were gone. There was a cheap riding mower in there, but that was about it, beyond the rake and shovel sort of things. I hit the button by the garage door and the opener kicked in. I went out the big door and backed my truck inside to load up. It didn't take all that long until I had the tarp over the load and was ready to go. I'd been thinking while I worked.

I asked, "What happened to the money from selling our parents' house? You got \$52,000 out of that."

"I paid off the Volvo, and Bob invested the rest in something, but he's already sold that to keep up the payments on his car. He lost a lot on the investments, some kind of foreign bonds, so there wasn't enough left to pay off the Mercedes."

"So it's all gone."

"You were talking about buying silver coins back then. It sounded good to me, so I bought a bag of quarters at that place in Louisville you told me about. It cost me about \$2,500 and something then. I didn't tell Bob about that, for some reason. I put the bag in my cedar chest under my wedding dress. I suppose it is still there, if Bob hasn't found it."

"Good. Silver is up now. It's worth twice what you paid for it, so you're not flat broke."

"I'm going to keep it, too. Bob has lost everything we had and all the rest of what I inherited from the house. He won't get a chance at it from here on. I think I've had about enough of him. He's hard to get

along with and treats me like dirt since things started going bad. Sometimes I don't care if he comes home or not."

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## CHAPTER 9

I heard later that Bob came home that night, and he had traded off the Mercedes for a much older VW Jetta, free and clear. He wasn't happy, though. He started ranting and raving about how Gloria had to have this fine house and that had been his ruination. Actually, she had tried to talk him out of buying it before they got married, but he had convinced her it was a great investment. She told him that, and I guess they had quite a fight. He made the mistake of slapping Gloria's face, and that did the job, right there. She picked up a big stainless steel skillet and smacked him right upside the head with it. Knocked him colder'n a wedge. Gloria never did take any sass from anybody. She called me and said she thought she'd killed him.

I drove over there faster than the law allowed, and found him sitting up on the kitchen floor, still groggy. One side of his head was swelling up and his eye was swelling shut. She must have slung that skillet for all she was worth. But he was alive. She had a couple bruises starting to show on her face, too, but she looked a lot better than he did right then.

Bob asked what the hell was I doing there, and started to get up. Gloria told him to stay where he was, or she'd knock him back down. She had the skillet in hand, and he thought better of it. I told her to get her stuff and put it in my truck, because she didn't have to put up with the likes of him. Our Dad had made her cedar chest, so I helped her carry it and the contents out to my truck. She got some trash bags and emptied her closet into them. Next, she cleaned out the kitchen of cookware, including her big skillet and all the silverware, then went to work on her bathroom. She double bagged that stuff, because it was heavy. There was her nice laptop computer that went into a suitcase with all her backup discs, and I lost track of what was in the rest. The truck bed was pretty full when she went in the kitchen the last time.

Bob was sitting at the breakfast bar on a stool and had ice wrapped in a towel on the side of his head. Gloria was in fine form by then. She walked over to him and said, "That's it. We're finished. You get to pay the bill for the divorce because you took all my money. I don't want to hear anything out of you, ever again. At least the house is in YOUR name, so you enjoy it. You make any complaints about your little accident of falling down the back steps, and I'll see you in court for spousal abuse. Don't forget, I have Wes for a witness to you hitting me, then falling out the back door when I ran away. You got all that straight now?"

He nodded slowly, his eyes looked a little dilated to me like he had a concussion. Remind me to never make my Sis really mad. Not a good idea. She'd thumped me pretty good when we were kids and I needed it. Sis and I got in my truck and left him sitting there. I told her we had a room for her, and we were going home, so just relax now. Bob knew I would swear to whatever was necessary to take care of Sis, so I didn't expect any trouble out of him.

It was pretty late, but the lights were all on when we drove in to the farm. Joe and Kate knew Gloria fairly well from a few visits, so they were pretty upset when they saw her face. It was beginning to color up a little by then. Kate and Ashley fussed over her and gave her the first real sympathy she'd had in a long time. Joe and I went off to ourselves in his den. I told him what really happened and he got a good laugh out of it. He'd met Bob a time or two, and said he was pretty stuck up.

"He had that coming. He better not try to give that girl any grief about it, either, or he'll find himself in a worse pickle than he ever dreamed about. Gloria is smart. She'll fix his wagon if he doesn't leave her alone."

I agreed. "Yep. He best let it lay."

I changed the subject. "I hate to bring my family trouble to your house tonight, but I didn't have anywhere else to go with her. I'll find her someplace...."

Joe interrupted me. "You'll do no sucha thing. I like that young woman and she's family now, same as you are, so you just don't go rockin' the boat, you hear?"

"Uhh. Yessir. I hear just fine."

'You've been a lifesaver for us Wes, and don't think we aren't grateful. You just do whatever makes sense for Gloria and that'll be fine."

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Gloria had some ideas of her own on that score. She and Ashley used makeup to cover the bruising where Bob had slapped her. When they came to breakfast, Gloria looked pretty good. Kate bustled about the kitchen and got a meal on the table. While we ate, Gloria told what was on her mind.

"Wes, I need a ride to Louisville to sell those coins, because I need a car of some kind. I'm hoping you can help me find something I can afford."

I nodded while I chewed bacon and eggs, then said, "Yep. I can do that. Here."

I handed her the keys to my Malibu. "You can have the Malibu. I don't drive it now. I'm here all day and if I need to go somewhere, I drive the truck because I'm always hauling something."

Gloria started to protest and I cut her off. "You've been taking care of me all my life. My turn now, so just keep quiet and deal with it."

"I never expected that Wes. I'm not asking for you to..."

"I know, but I'm doing it, so that'll be that. What else do you need to do today?"

Gloria had to think about it for a minute. She said, "I need a job. I haven't worked since right after Bob and I got married. He thought if I worked, it made him look bad. But I am still an LPN, and there are jobs around for nurses. If I have a car to drive, I'll be going to look for a job as soon as I get back from Louisville. I can rent an apartment in a day or two and not have to impose on you kind people."

Kate said, "It's not imposing. You're family, just like Wes. We're glad to help."

"I appreciate it a lot, but I'll get on my own as fast as I can. If I get a job here in town, I should live close to it, and there are places I'll be able to afford."

Joe told her, "I can see you think like Wes, but you are welcome here as long as you want to stay. Okay?"

Gloria gave him that gorgeous smile of hers and said, "Okay."

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## CHAPTER 10

Shortly after Thanksgiving, we had butchering to do. I had never butchered anything bigger than a rabbit when Dad took me hunting as a kid, so I was some concerned about doing this. I shouldn't have wasted any worry over it, because with Joe guiding things, it went smooth as could be. Gloria even turned out to help cut up and package meat. She was just trying to pay back their favors to her, but they insisted that she take home some beef tenderloin and a couple huge round steaks for her help. No more than she ate, she made a dozen freezer packages out of it.

I had scrounged an I-beam with help from Billy James, who had found some work for a big construction company in the city. I cut a couple small trees and made support posts out of them, spiked to the bottom of trusses in the machinery shed. The I-beam went on top of the posts in the machinery shed where we had the shop. I hung my trolley and chain hoist on it and used it working on farm equipment.

I should say that the machinery shed was big. It was called a shed only because of the shed-type roof that sloped mostly one way, but it was big enough to house the tractor, combine, baler, Joe and Kate's pickup, and still have room for a double bay for me to work on things. I think Joe said it is 32 feet by 120 feet long. That much space was impossible to heat with a stove, and only 4 of the bays had doors and a concrete floor anyway. That section with doors was walled off from the rest of it that was open on one side. The open part had a gravel floor. It was a big metal building. Most farms didn't have enough shed room for their equipment, but Joe did. There were a couple older wood sheds that housed the smaller equipment.

For butchering, it made a fine place to hang a beef. Joe's tractor had a front loader on it, so that made it easy to dispose of the waste products. That means the guts, for those who haven't done this. They got buried on the back of the farm in a washout where it was easy to cave some dirt over it. We didn't want to attract any coyotes or stray dogs. The back of the farm was 3/4 of a mile away, and sloped downhill that direction. It got steeper as you went toward the back, ending in the woods where it was too steep to clear off and farm. Somewhere down in that valley below was a year-around creek where a lot of deer and other wildlife got water.

As fast as we got the beef in the freezer, Joe and Kate wanted to kill a couple hogs. They would go mostly in the smoke house, so freezer room wasn't an issue. After a dry salt and sugar cure packed in wood boxes, the hams, shoulders, bacon, and jowls all got hung up and smoked over a red oak fire for 2 weeks. They would all keep until hot weather, I was assured. By then, we would have some room in the freezers so what pork was left could be frozen.

Joe said that his grandparents had no electricity until the 1950's, so they used the pork up before it spoiled and ate mostly fresh chicken or canned beef in the summer. He said there was the remains of their old springhouse down over the hill to the west. It was a hike from the house, but not all that far, so they had kept milk and butter and such there before refrigeration. That man never opened his mouth without teaching me something.

Sis had helped again, learning to cut meat now. She had a nice apartment in the residential area of town that was close enough to her job in a nursing home that she could walk the 6 blocks if she wanted to. When the streets were slick in winter, she was walking to work. She had always been sensible with money. Her only extravagance now was a paying a little more for the apartment because they allowed

her to keep her dog, where cheaper places would not. Gloria seemed to be happier now than when she was married, although I could tell she was lonely and came out to the farm fairly regularly to visit.

The old farmhouse had a good sized cellar under it that we had filled with canned goods on shelves and potatoes in wood boxes. The shelves were pretty full. Joe and Kate had never gone in for the convenience food thing. They both were farm raised and still did most things like their grandparents had taught them. They hadn't had a milk cow for many years, but when Ashley and I moved in, Joe suggested that we teach one of his Angus to be milked when her calf came. We only milked her in the morning, after penning her calf away overnight in the stall next to her. She wasn't a dairy cow, and didn't give all that much milk, but it was more than we needed. Kate made some cottage cheese, and showed us how to skim off cream and how to make butter with her old cranked churn. The grocery bill for the 4 of us didn't amount to much.

The farm had once had dairy cows and the stalls were still in the barn, used for storage now. That part had a concrete floor with a manure trench behind where the cows had stood to be milked. That barn is huge. It had been built with enough loft space for storing loose hay, back before balers were invented. There were actually 3 stories to the barn, the loft, the main floor where feed and equipment was kept, and the basement for livestock. The basement was open on the back side, since it was built on a hillside. On the front side, the main floor was level with the ground on the uphill side, so you could drive a wagon load of hay in there to unload in the hayloft above it. The old hook affair for unloading loose hay off a wagon was still hanging way up it the top on it's roller track.

They had a well up by the house, and a septic system, so there were no water or sewage bills. The well was one of those old hand dug jobs with limestone blocks laid to line it. It was big enough inside to let a bucket down on a rope and get water. They had the top covered with a metal plate where a hand pump sat. Kate had me pull that pump out one day when she couldn't get water out fast enough to suit her. She said the cylinder needed new "leathers", whatever that was. I found out when I got the pump cylinder out of the well. It was a leather cup that worked as a piston inside a cast iron cylinder to do the pumping. I was amazed that the hardware store in town still had new leather parts for the pump. While we had it out, Joe had me get some new pipe and hone the inside of the brass-lined iron cylinder. I gave the pump a fresh coat of John Deere green paint, and Kate was delighted.

When it went back together, the water came out with no difficulty, and surprisingly fast. About two dozen strokes on the handle filled the 3 gallon bucket they kept there. There was even one of those speckled enamelware tin cups for getting a drink. Had its' own hook right on the pump. There was an electric pump, too, down in the cellar, but the hand pump was great when you were thirsty from hoeing in the garden, or all sweaty and itchy from haymaking.

Kate dried clothes on the line outside even when it was cold out. If it got really cold, she put up lines in the kitchen and dining room area. Those rooms had been joined long ago by removing a wall. We hung our clothes upstairs in a spare bedroom. It didn't seem like any real trouble, and there was no need for a clothes dryer. Those things run up an electric bill fast.

There was no heat bill, either. I cut a lot of firewood, but not an unreasonable amount for such a big house. It had good storm windows and doors, and they had insulation blown in the walls and attic years ago. All I had to do was keep the chainsaws running and make some firewood. We might spend \$50 to \$100 a year to maintain the woodcutting operation, but that was cheap for heat.

Electricity was the biggest monthly bill, except for insurance. Joe had applied for Social Security

Disability, but it was still in process, with a lawyer getting paid to make that happen. When it did, he would be eligible for Medicaid, but for now they had to pay their own health insurance and it was expensive. There were deductibles and Joe had to see his heart doctor regularly, and also pay a fair amount for medications. Kate was healthy as a horse, but they had her covered, too. They were both 59 years old, so it would be another 3 years before she could start Social Security and Medicare.

Those expenses made a big dent in their income, but we had done well on the farm this year because Joe had contracted most of his corn at \$4.08 a bushel. The price of corn always fell a dollar or more at harvest time, so he hedged that with futures contracts like most farmers. His 60 acres of corn had done pretty well this year, and yielded about 160 bushels per acre, which was very good for this end of the state. The corn made a gross income of \$39,000 this year, but he had a lot of expenses to come out of that for seed, fertilizer, chemicals, diesel fuel, and equipment maintenance. That ate up half of his gross income, and he did better than most keeping the costs down. I was learning more about the business side of farming. There was a lot more to it than just throwing out some seed and watching it turn into money.

Joe had also sold some feeder calves back in the summer when prices were high, so all we had to feed through the winter was his bull and 22 brood cows. It meant handling a lot of hay. He still used the small square baler so that meant a lot of handling. We had talked about getting a round baler to save labor, and since his heart attack, it was almost a necessity. He could drive the tractor just fine, but not for long hot days making hay. We had to do something about the hay situation before next season.

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Nobody had heard a word about Bob Stowe since he and Gloria's divorce was final. He didn't seem to be around town any more, but nobody missed him. Gloria joined us for Christmas and brought her dog. Sandy was such a polite creature that we all fell in love with her. I hadn't had a dog since we were kids, and it made me want to get another. Joe and Kate had a great stock dog that had died of old age a few years ago, but they hadn't got another one. Joe began to get interested, though, after spending the day around Sandy. We had all become a pretty close family now, and Bob wasn't even mentioned. We got together for New Year's Eve, too. Kate always grew some popcorn in the garden, and they had a nice orchard, so the women made candy apples and popcorn balls, while Joe and I got into a little of Kate's dandelion wine. The doctor wouldn't let him drink much, but said that a little in the evening was probably a good thing.

January of 2010 was cold, as usual. I spent more time in the shop with the barrel stove going where Joe and I figured out what needed worked on and what was on its' last legs. We needed a grain truck and we needed a round baler. I had no idea where to find a grain truck, but the consignment auction was the place to start looking for a baler. We planned to go look at the next auction near the end of the month.

When the free newspaper came one day, Kate saw a dog she liked, advertised for adoption from the Animal Shelter. It was a Collie/Shepherd mix that lived up to her picture. Kate did all the paperwork, took her to the vet for neutering and shots, then picked her up the next day. The old lady turned out to be at least as good as Joe for training a dog. Kate wanted a dog that could stay in the house if she felt it was needed. She had heard too much lately on the TV news about home invasions and robberies. Kate was familiar with the pump shotgun that sat beside the kitchen door, but she wanted "something with better eyes and ears than I have". Joe agreed with her.

The new dog was fairly young, and very smart, but she had a lot to learn about the farm. She set to work doing that, and followed us outside everywhere we went. Joe began to teach her voice commands,

using simple words. She caught on pretty fast. Kate was schooling her, too, about house manners and what a dog had better leave alone in there. Kate named her Pat, a nice short name that was easy for the dog to understand. Pat had been given a blanket to lay on in a corner between the kitchen and the old dining room, where part of the old dividing wall remained.

We all talked to the dog, and it wasn't long before she knew us all by name and knew where we were, if Kate told her find us. Her coat was pretty heavy, showing the Collie in her, so she preferred to lay on the side porch by the kitchen door unless it got really cold out. She figured out how the door worked, too, and if it wasn't latched solidly, she could get it open and nose the storm door latch in a heartbeat. Pat would obey any of us, but she made it plain that she was Kate's dog.

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Auction day was cold and had a steady wind blowing from the North that chilled everybody to the bone. The coffee and food stand did a good business, but bidding was not as well attended as usual. The junk stuff sold cheap and the farm equipment prices were mixed. Used equipment had been selling high, Joe said, because nobody could afford new stuff. He paid a good price, \$7,650 for a New Holland 664 round baler, but it wasn't worn out yet by a long ways. It had a hydraulic leak on one of the long hoses that went to the rear bale door, but hoses didn't cost all that much. The tires were good, and the belts looked like they would run for quite a while yet. It looked like it had been kept inside and well maintained. I felt the slack in the drive gear box, but it wasn't excessive. I didn't see anything that showed damage or really bad wear. I dragged it home the next day behind my pickup, taking it slow on the county roads. It took a big part of the day to get there.

Joe didn't want to part with his old square baler yet. It made more sense to use it for baling straw, and that was a necessary part of a cattle operation. I spent some time in February going over both balers to assure they were ready to go when spring came. We ordered some minor parts and several new bearings for the old baler then I put them on whenever UPS delivered them. In between working on the farm machinery, I did enough for several neighbors that I had some pocket money. When Spring came, we were ready for it, but a lot of farmers were not, so I worked long days and a lot of nights doing both our tillage and planting, and fixing machinery for other people. I was learning a lot more about farming than I had ever expected to know.

I picked up some junk farm machinery at the junkyards for patch materials, and had a useful junk pile behind the machinery shed. There had been enough shop business last year that I had bought an acetylene torch setup. This year I bought some extra tanks so I didn't get caught running out of gas in the middle of a job and have to go to town. The shop was getting to look like a professional operation now. There were a lot of things I would have liked to buy, but it had to pay its' own way.

I had learned the hard way that farm equipment work deserves to have a hydraulic press around. I had paid for having bearings and other things pressed in and out too many times downtown, so I looked over what they had real well. I had used jack presses a lot, and they weren't that complicated. During a lull after planting time, I bought some scrap metal and went to work building me a press. The State Highway Department had junked some guardrail posts that looked about right. They were 6" H-beams, 6 feet long. I bought them and some wide, rusty steel channel pieces for the frame and bed, and went to work. Northern Hydraulics sold a 50 ton hydraulic jack, and I salvaged some hood springs off an old Ford Galaxie to pull that big stiff jack back up after you pressed something down with it. I slapped a coat of paint on it and it looked almost like a real one. It worked really well, too.

Joe already had an ancient drill press that worked very well, and would drill a big hole in steel, and he

had a good sized old grinder that worked fine. I did happen onto a junk power hacksaw that got thrown out by the local factory. It took some TLC to get it going again, but not much money. I wanted a metal lathe in the worst way, but I couldn't justify it, or I didn't think so. I had only used one briefly in prison and had a lot to learn about them. That would have to wait.

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## CHAPTER 11

According to what I read on the internet, unemployment was a lot higher than what the TV news said. The private data websites said the government had changed how they figured it, and when done the right way, it had gone from about 12% in 2009 to 22% a year later. Everybody I talked to was crying about it. If there was any kind of a decent paying job around, it was already filled. I stayed busier than ever fixing farm equipment, and had kept track of it for tax purposes. I averaged making over \$15 an hour, and by mid-summer, I'd already made over \$10,000, and that was farming pretty well full time along with it. Ashley made more than enough for our expenses, so what I made was what we used to pay the insurance, and get whatever bigger items we wanted. I didn't really have what most people call a job, but we were making it, and living pretty well. I had even begun to save a little money again.

Saving money bothered me, because while I felt like we had to have some laid back, the longer I kept it, the more prices went up and the less the money would buy. The price of silver showed this, too. It had been staying around \$18 an ounce for several months, with a dip now and then. But in July it started up and kept going. By early October it was above \$23 an ounce and still going. I felt like it was a little late to buy more silver then, but I didn't know what else to do with our nest egg, and the longer I waited, the less it would be worth. I needed to put that money to work, but the banks weren't paying squat for interest.

I did some more reading on the internet. I watched some videos that told how the big banks were doing their best to steal all the money in the country by causing inflation. I had some ideas that I needed to ask Joe about, but I didn't have a lot of hope in it.

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Gloria looked at the prices of onions and potatoes and decided against buying any. She would wait until she went out to visit Wes and Ashley tomorrow. They kept offering her things, but she felt like she hadn't helped that much with the garden and had been refusing. The prices were beginning to bite into her budget, though, so it had begun to look a lot more appealing to take what they offered. She took the few items in her cart to the checkout and noticed that other carts in line weren't very full, either.

Her next stop was at the all-things-a-dollar store, a local independent retailer who carried some cosmetics and hygiene items she liked. After that, she stopped at the newspaper office and gave a dollar for a big stack of notepads they made from their printing leftovers. Then it was off to Goodwill to look for clothing. It was Sunday, when Goodwill did the weekly start of their 'color of the week' tag sale at half off. You had to get there early, because there were a lot of people that pounced on the sale.

The parking lot was crowded, but she found a spot some distance from the door. Walking across the lot, she noticed quite a few expensive cars and SUV's, and a nearly new pickup. Many of the shoppers inside were better dressed than what she had seen there before, and had nice hairdos and makeup. It occurred to her that a lot more people were feeling the pinch of higher prices now.

Sunday was also the sale day on used books, 3 paperbacks for 99 cents, or 3 hardbacks for \$1.49. Gloria did her clothes shopping first, and found a couple good blouses and one nice dress she had spotted on Friday. When she was sure she had all the clothing she wanted that was marked down, she went to the other end of the store and browsed the housewares and books. She chose 3 paperbacks by an author she liked, then found some decorative pillar candles for 50 cents each and bought several. The power had already gone off a few times during winter storms and she wanted some emergency lighting. They picked up a couple packages from a display of cheap batteries, too, and a China-made



flashlight.

In her haste to leave the night of the fight with her husband, she had cleaned out the kitchen and bathroom, but had forgotten to get anything from the garage, or workshop building. Gloria was frustrated by having far more pots and pans than she would ever use living alone, but lacking a number of other things. She had not spent much on herself for months before her life came apart, trying to help stay afloat financially. Now, she needed some new underwear and a heavy winter coat. Goodwill had come through on the coat, and it was even pretty nice. She attributed that to her petite figure, because there were a lot of overweight women digging through the coats, but saw only a few her size in the store.

Shoes had been another problem. She couldn't afford to have problems with her feet. Goodwill didn't have anything suitable for a nurse to walk in 8 to 10 hours a day. Good shoes were expensive, and after she put aside her savings amount, her check didn't go very far. She had solved that the best she could, ordering from an online shoe store and got some professional white nurses' shoes at a \$30 savings over retail price.

Dollar General Store was busy when she got there, too. She found 3 bras on the rack that she thought were pretty good and the price was better than Walmart's. The clerk assured her she could return them if they didn't fit. They had a sale on Tracphones, so she bought one with camera capability for \$20, and it came with some minutes. She'd let her old phone contract lapse a month before she left Bob, and had used a landline phone in the apartment until now, but this was cheaper. There were coupon deals online to get minutes really cheap.

Gloria needed to change oil in her car. She had asked Wes about it, and he said he'd do it, but she was determined to learn how to do that herself. Even the cheap place in town wanted \$15.99 for an oil change, and she was sure she could do it cheaper. Wes said Walmart had the best deal on oil, in the 5 quart plastic jugs, unless somebody ran a big sale, and he said that Auto Zone was the place to buy oil filters. Since she was close, she bought a filter there, and headed home to her apartment.

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Joe was busy on his computer when I found him in his den. I sat down next to him in a big upholstered chair and asked, "Have you got time to help me with a money problem?"

"Sure. I'm pretty tired of working on farm books. The farm did pretty well last year, but it is going to be harder to do that this year with me being out of the game."

"You're not out of the game, Joe. All you have to do is point me in the right direction and I'll take over the work. I just need you to keep me doing the right things at the right time."

"I wanted to talk to you about that. I need you and Ashley to make this place work, or we'd have to sell it, and this is the worst possible time to sell. Kate and I have talked about this. We are changing our retirement plans."

"How's that?"

"We had planned to work the farm until we were full retirement age before starting Social Security. Then, we planned to sell the farm, move to town, put the money in some safe investments, and live off the interest. No way is that going to work now. There's no such thing as a safe investment now; not the

paper kind anyway. The price of land is way down, Kate's not old enough for SS, and it's going to take a while to get my disability going. Worse than all that, I could drop dead anytime."

"But I thought the doctor said you were good to go for a long time now!"

"Yeah, maybe. What he said was maybe, if all goes well and I take real good care of myself. Or, it might not last. Kate knows this. We just take it one day at a time."

"I had a real different take on this. I was planning on you being around a long time, and learning how to farm from you. Mechanics aren't in high demand these days. I wanted to ask you about what to do with the money I have in the bank from selling my folks' house. It isn't making me any money in the bank, and I don't know of a good thing to do with it. We wanted to buy a place of our own, but it doesn't look like that's going to happen now, as bad as things are."

"Listen to what I've got to say, and then we'll talk about that. Like I said, Kate and I have talked this over, and here's what we've done. We put the farm in a "Living Trust". It's a simple legal paper we filed at the courthouse. It says that the farm is owned by the trust, with Kate and I as Joint First Trustees, and you and Ashley as Joint Second Trustees."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"It's better than just a Will, it means that there is no need for the farm to go through Probate Court when we die. It will already belong to you and Ashley as Second Trustees. This is just a way of making it smoother for you two, and it should assure you that you will for certain, inherit the farm."

"Uh, I don't know what to say. I never thought about that."

"Ashley is an only child, and we always told her she gets the place when we die. Now that she's married, this is the way to do it."

"It sounds to me like you just gave me half of her farm. You sure you want to do that? What if Ashley and I had problems... I don't want to think about that. But you..."

"We're not giving you the farm, we're telling you that you will inherit it. It was a judgement call, yes. But the benefits outweigh the risks for us, and for Ashley. It's not a great risk for her, even if you got divorced, because she would probably get awarded the farm in that case anyway. I talked to Ashley about this a little while ago, and she understands. She wanted me to bring you up to speed on it, so I could explain what we have in mind."

"Okay..." It started to sink in finally, but I needed to know more.

Joe went on. "We could have made you a partner, but that wouldn't be nearly as good from a tax standpoint. It will work out better for all parties if you are both employees now, and paid from the farm income. It helps keep the tax man out of our pockets. We need to talk about your pay, and how we do that."

"I don't need any pay. You're letting us LIVE here, for cripes sake! You're mostly feeding us, too!"

"Here's how we saw this working. If you and Ashley know for certain that you are inheriting the farm,

then you have a vested interest to do what is right for the long term. And that is the only way that farming can really work. You have to be committed to it, or you make short-term decisions that are bad in the long term."

"I can see that. Yeah, makes sense to me."

"Now, about your money. If you have a vested interest in the farm, you might want to put some of that money to work here. You get the proceeds from that, of course. Say if you bought a piece of equipment, you would own it, and we would lease it from you. That has a lot of tax advantages, too. I'm not asking you to do anything right now, just giving you food for thought. Let this lay for a while. You and Ashley talk about it. You don't have to put any money into the farm unless you want to, but the opportunity is there."

"I don't get what's in this for you, Joe?"

"Kate's almost surely going to outlive me. I need to do the best I can to see that she's provided for, and this is the best way I could come up with to do that."

"We planned on taking care of both of you, as best we can. We don't have much, but we could help out. I thought you'd know that?"

"Ashley said the same thing. This is a way to make it work out, we think. Let it sit in your head for a few days and we'll talk again, when you've had time to get used to the idea."

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## CHAPTER 12

"Ashley, It makes me look like I married you for the farm! That's not true, but that's what everyone is going to think!"

"Calm down. No, it isn't what most people will think, at least not the farm folks. They all do something like this. Didn't you know that?"

"No, I'm not sure that's right."

"Quit being so prideful! Nobody's going to think less of you! The farm families around here already assumed this. That's just how it is. Oh, there's several ways they do things, but it all amounts to the same thing--the kids get the farm, period. At least, they do if they want it and they aren't total screw-ups."

I let it sink in for a minute. Then it occurred to me that she knew this before we got married. I said as much, to hear what she had to say about it.

"Sure I knew it. That's what Mom and Dad and me have talked about since I was little kid. It's one of the ways that you get taught about life, and looking ahead, when you grow up farming."

"I gotta think about this."

Ashley smiled a little and said, "You really didn't know about this, did you? I mean, maybe you did, a little bit, but you hadn't really THOUGHT about it, right?"

"NO! Of course I hadn't thought about it! That would be rotten, to think about marrying a girl because she's going to inherit a farm! Anyway, I expected your parents to live for ages."

"Mom might live for a long time, but Dad, well, I don't want to think about that. I love him so much, and..."

She teared up and I tried to comfort her. She pulled away after a minute, and said, "But I have to think about it. It means he could go any time, and I don't know enough to run the place."

That scared me. "You grew up here! I don't know much of anything about it, and I'm supposed to be the one who knows!"

Ashley smiled a little and said, "Oh, get off that male-role thing, would you? Farms don't work like that. It takes the whole family to make it work. You've heard Mom say her piece when Dad talks about his plans, and he listens, too. That's how it goes. They talk things over, and do the best they can come up with. It's a partnership. WE can do it together."

I looked at her with a whole new idea of how great this could be. I had gotten really lucky to find this young woman. I told her so.

She laughed and said, "No you didn't. I found YOU!"

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Creekview Care Facility was small by big city standards, which was why Gloria liked working there. She could have made a lot more money if she was willing to drive 40+ miles to Louisville to work, but most of that would have been offset by the cost of driving. Living in Louisville would cost a lot more than here, so it came out about even to live and work in her hometown. Gloria's salary was \$29,500 a year, well above average income for a woman in a backwater Indiana town. Her take home pay was a lot less, after all the deductions, from \$400 to \$480 a week, depending on whether she worked a little overtime, or not, but overtime was rare.

She kept her living costs as low as possible, and was saving money as fast as she could. Her job did provide some insurance, a Major Medical insurance policy, but the coverage wasn't very good, basically an 80/20 plan for hospitalization. There was also a term life insurance available cheap, but she only bought enough to pay for her burial, because she didn't want to be a burden on Wes if something happened to her.

The job wasn't the best she could have found, but she liked the slower pace of it, compared to a big hospital. She had worked in one when she got out of nurses training, and she didn't want to go back to the chronic understaffing, and high pressure pace of the trauma center. The residents in the nursing home were mostly pretty nice, too. There were a few stinkers, but the good ones made up for it. She particularly liked a couple of the old men who were always cheerful and had old stories to tell while she worked.

Her time with each patient was limited, but as the weeks went by she learned a lot of their backgrounds. She knew some of their relatives because small towns are like that. Robert Little was her favorite, a history buff. He was 93 years old and could remember things from when they happened back 80+ years ago. He told of living through the Great Depression of the 1930's, often funny stories, but with a hard edge of realism about the life he'd lived. Gloria spent more than a few of her breaks listening to his tales. He was a tough old survivor whose body was giving out on him, but his mind was sharp as could be.

One day he asked, "Girly, do you keep yer money in the bank?"

"Yes, I have a checking account, and I'm trying to save some money."

"Well, you better git it outa there, I'm tellin' ya. I watch the news, and there is crooked stuff goin' on in them banks now. Ya can't trust a banker. None of 'em! They're no good. They'll steal yer money in a heartbeat, they will, an' run off with it. Happened to a lot of folks I knew."

"Where could I keep money if I didn't have it in the bank? I worry about getting robbed, you know, with crime going up now."

"Bury it somewhere's, er put it in the bottom of the flour sack, er stuff it in the mattress, but don't leave it in the bank, cuz the first time the bank gits hard up, they'll steal it an' you'll never see it again."

"They don't pay hardly any interest on savings now, so it wouldn't be much loss that way."

"I do hope you'll pay attention to me. Most folks think us old people don't know nothin', but we've done a sight more livin' and seen a lotta things. You're really good to me an' I really like you, an' I don't want to see anythin' bad happen to ya. Promise me now, that you'll at least think about that."

"Yes, I will. I've already had some bad things happen to me. Yes, I'll sure think about it. You get some rest now. It's time for me to get back to work."

Gloria left Robert's room and went back out to the nurses' station where she found the meal cart coming in from the kitchen. It was almost time for supper, and feeding time was hectic. There were some patients who had relatives that showed up to feed them, or just to make sure they ate like they should.

One man was reliable as a clock about that, Mrs. Barnes son Larry. He drove a concrete truck for the Ready-Mix plant in town, and always stopped to feed his mother before going home each night. Mrs. Barnes had been partially paralyzed by a stroke, and had early onset Alzheimers'. She could barely manage to drink when someone held a cup for her, but she was grateful for the help. It was heartbreaking to see him when she didn't recognize him some days. He seemed to take it pretty well , but Gloria could see that he felt the loss of his mother as a person.

She knew that his father had been killed in a logging accident some years ago. She didn't know if he had any brothers or sisters, but he was the only one who ever came to see the old lady. Gloria felt somewhat attracted to him, although he was not a handsome man, by any means. On this evening, her shift ended after the evening meal, and she found herself walking out with Larry Barnes.

"We all appreciate you coming every day to help with your mother. She needs more time to eat than what we can give her sometimes. I hate to say that , but there just isn't enough help here to do it all the time, if anything else is going on."

Larry nodded, "I know that. The big city places are worse. You women do all you can. I got no complaints. Mom is always clean and doesn't have any bedsores, and somebody takes the time to brush her hair, and all. I'm just paying her back, for all she's done for me, and it gets lonesome at home, so I like to stop and see her."

He said goodbye and got in his pickup. Gloria decided she'd like to learn some more about him. Her apartment was lonely too, even with Sandy there. His work uniform proved he was back to work, with warmer early Spring weather and construction was starting up again. Why hadn't she picked somebody like that, instead of Bob's nice face and snappy clothes? She mentally kicked herself and resolved it wouldn't happen again like that.

Larry drove out of town and turned on the county road, taking it slow. He was still thinking about that pretty nurse. He was amazed that she spoke to him. Pretty women didn't usually talk to him, and she was a real looker. Light brown hair and green eyes that sparkled. Larry tried hard to get her off his mind, but it wasn't easy.

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## CHAPTER 13

Bob Stowe had finally landed a job, when his brother was ready to kick him out. He was a clerk at the Kocolene gas station in Seymour. At least nobody knew him here. He just couldn't face people back in Salem, since he'd lost everything. He couldn't admit to himself that he'd been pretty arrogant back before his divorce. He didn't even try to think about investments now. It made his head hurt. He still had the Jetta, still titled in his brother's name to keep it out of the bankruptcy. Then he'd lived at the YMCA for a couple months until he could find a room to rent with kitchen privileges. He didn't make much, but he had a lead on a job at the new bank branch opening in town, and he'd kept his good clothes, so with some luck, he'd get some of his own back before long. He had lived well before, and he knew he deserved to live well.

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Donny Whitson waved the driver back to the rolloff container and signaled when he got close enough. This would be the last load until more scrap came in. He had worked his 2 men hard to get the yard cleaned out, and get it all crushed and sold. Now he had a little financial cushion for the first time since '08 when everything went sky high. He'd gotten a piece of that action, and cleaned the yard out then before it fell like a rock over the next two months. Now, it was headed up again and should go higher he thought, but he needed the money. He had that wrecker loan to pay off, and scrap wasn't coming in like it had been. There didn't seem to be much out there now.

He had found ways to make more money off what he got, though. That one fellow that was always buying steel fence posts and used metal roofing had given him the idea. Donny used to stick things in the crusher as fast as it came in, then hold the compacted cubes for sale, waiting for the best price. But he found he could get 2 or 3 times the money by reselling some things just as they came in, and not only car parts. Besides the posts and roofing, now he had stacks of angle iron, pipe, lawn and garden tractors, bicycles, and a big area of salvageable things like pots and pans, kitchen sinks, and some antique items. It was making him money, so he got the real junk crushed as fast as he could to keep some room for his new "retail line". It was getting to be more popular than car parts, and all he had to do was have his men sort it out. He made more money on a pallet of boxed rusty nails than he could have imagined. They had been in a flood and were a mess, but people bought them at \$20 for a 50 pound box.

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In April, 2011, the world was greening up and looked more cheerful, but on the way into Clarksville, Ashley and I noticed a depressing number of empty houses along the highway. We only came to the city for a big shopping trip about once a season, so we noticed some changes. The yards had tall weeds and grass already, and there was the white paper stuck to a bare window, a foreclosure notice. Clarksville showed the signs of hard times worse than I'd ever seen. There were a lot of empty stores now. I paid attention to what kind of stores had closed. The sporting goods places were empty, lots of hair and nail salons had closed, a few restaurants, a big appliance store, and one car dealership were gone.

The Dollar General Stores were booming, and had even built two new stores in nearby small towns. There was a new second hand clothing shop on the main drag in Clarksville, and the Goodwill and Salvation Army stores had lots of cars in their lots. They didn't appear to be getting as many donations now, because they had a lot of new Chinese junk, the wicker baskets, coffee mugs, and cheap batteries.

"OOF! That was quite a pothole, for being in a parking lot!"

Ashley said, "There's grass growing in the lot back there at that big Mall that was supposed to be so great. Not many stores left there now."

"Makes me think, I'd like to stop at Bass Pro and look about some traps, and maybe some fishing stuff." I turned into their huge parking lot.

"You might want to buy a good rifle, too. There's too many stray dogs running around home."

"I'm not allowed to own a gun because of that dope charge. Ex-felons can't own a gun."

"Well, I can, and what other people don't know won't hurt them. Maybe I'll buy one. Let's go look."

I expected the prices to be high in the monster sporting goods store, but they were very competitive with what I'd seen elsewhere. We bought a load of stuff. Ashley wanted a vacuum sealing thing to keep dry beans in canning jars, and one of the heat sealing vacuum things that used plastic bags on a roll. I found a really nice sausage grinder with a stuffer spout, too.

We wandered around the store, looking at the displays of stuffed animals, and live fish in the almost real looking pools. I passed on buying steel traps there, since I had seen them cheaper at Rural King, but the fishing gear was priced better than Walmart, and the variety was endless. I bought some hooks, a few of the styrofoam bobbers, and a spool of the new SpiderWire brand line that wasn't supposed to take a "set" on a reel. I had found a handful of cheap fishing rods with Zebco 202 reels on them at the flea market back in the winter and bought the lot of them for 10 bucks. They came with a dirty old plastic tackle box that I cleaned up. Out of 11 rigs, there were now 4 that seemed to work pretty well after some tinkering. We were in the fishing business pretty cheap, and there were a lot of flood control lakes around that were full of panfish. I splurged and bought a fishing license, too.

Ashley asked what kind of rifle she should buy to kill coyotes, and I told her to look for a Remington bolt action in .223 caliber, preferably with a 4X scope on it. Any more magnification was a waste around home where there was so much cover that you would almost never see anything over a 150 yard shot. There were a lot of suitable calibers, but .223 would shoot flat for that range and was the cheapest to shoot, since the military used it and there were gazillions of them made every year.

I didn't say much while she talked to the sales guy. He was very helpful, answered her questions, showed her a couple, but in the end she said she would wait on it. We paid for our load of stuff and when we got outside, I asked why she hadn't bought one?

"I remembered the gun store that man has by the lake. He has a lot of used stuff in there that should be cheaper, so I want to look there."

That's part of why I married this girl. She'll find the best deal around.

We drove over to Rural King, and I was surprised to find a good stock of sporting goods even though it was located in the city. I bought steel traps, and Ashley bought ingredients for homemade laundry soap, borax, washing soda, and several bars of Fels Naptha soap. There wasn't much else they had that we needed, so we took off for [Sam's Club](#). Last winter, I'd found a deal on a camper top for my truck and put a padlock hasp and a good lock on the door. It was dandy for these shopping trips, so we could stash whatever in the truck and lock it up while we shopped at other stores.



Sam's Club had a few things that made it worth the membership cost. We got peanut butter in some quantity, some pecans, a couple bags of rice, canned olives, and big boxes of teabags. They had a good deal on flashlight batteries, so I stocked up, and we looked at the electronics, but thought we should look at Walmart next door before we bought that sort of thing. It was good we did. Walmart was a little cheaper on "thumb drives" as Ashley called them, and she wanted to download a bunch of books. She got the ones with the most capacity that were cheaper per Gigabyte of memory.

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## CHAPTER 14

It felt great to get dressed in a suit to go to work, Bob thought, even if he did have to shave with a cheap razor and nicked himself doing it. He had started his career working in a bank, and it was good that he had all that on his resume'. It wasn't the kind of money he had been accustomed to making, but it wasn't an entry level job, either, so he could afford to upgrade his life soon. Bob would be starting as a teller, but he would have a small office, too, and set up accounts for new customers. He was confident that he would soon progress to bigger and better things. He had a spring in his step on the way into the bank, for the first time in a long while. He knew that Robert L. Stowe deserved a better place in society.

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When Gloria returned to her apartment, she heard Sandy scratch at the door and whine, so she let her out for a walk. Sandy negotiated the long stairs easily, and barely made it into the yard before she squatted. Gloria felt a little bad about having her inside so much, but she didn't want the dog to wear out the grass in her landlord's back yard. She always followed the dog around and cleaned up her messes, and the old couple thanked her for that. They liked Sandy a lot. She was a lovable sort, and made friends wherever she went.

Sandy rode along on most shopping trips, unless the stops were going to be too long. Gloria hated to see pets cooped up in cars for long periods. When the weather was hot, it was cruel to overheat an animal in a hot car. But Sandy loved to go with her to the bank to cash her paycheck. The drive-thru teller always had a doggy treat for her and got a big grin from Sandy. On longer trips, Sandy got put in the back seat where she could bed down and relax.

After getting her groceries put away, Gloria let Sandy back in. The dog did her greeting thing and settled down beside Gloria at her desk while she read the news on her computer. There was another story about a home invasion in Louisville that made her cringe. The world was not a nice place anymore. Gloria wondered if Sandy was worth anything as a guard dog. She was a very good watchdog and let Gloria know if anyone was near, usually by whining and looking toward what she heard and was willing to go investigate. Whether she would actually protect her master or not, Gloria doubted because of her gentle nature.

Gloria decided she wanted a gun. She had left her Dad's old shotgun at the farm over Wes' protests. He said it would get him in trouble if anyone knew about it, because he was an ex-felon now, but Ashley had put it away in a closet and ended the discussion. She decided to ask for it when she went out there this weekend. The apartment door with its' old fashioned lock bothered her, too. It was time to get a good deadbolt lock. The next day she bought one, and installed it with her landlord's help. He was old and slow, but he was good at that sort of thing. He liked the idea and later got the same locks for his own doors downstairs.

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The corn was planted and the first cutting of hay wasn't ready yet, so we turned our attention to the garden. I had added a lot of cow manure to a bigger garden plot for this year. I had plowed and disked it along with the other field work, so the weeds and grass was starting to come up again. I made several rounds over it with the disc, and that took care of the problem. The soil moisture was just right, so it crumbled up into a good seed bed. I was getting the hang of some things like that about farming.

At breakfast I said something about going to town for garden seeds, prompting Kate to ask what I needed? I said, "Oh, just the usual stuff, sweet corn, green beans, cabbage plants, lettuce, tomato plants, and some seed potatoes."

"Let's look at what I have saved before you go to town," Kate said. "They want a small fortune for seeds and plants. There's some sprouty potatoes left in the cellar, too. You go get them and us girls will sit on the porch and cut them up for seed."

I didn't have to go to town after all. She had everything we wanted, carefully saved from last year. She even had big flats full of cabbage, pepper, cantaloupe, watermelon, sweet potato, broccoli, and tomato plants growing on the south porch that I hadn't noticed. I always went out the side kitchen door, so I never saw them. I vaguely remembered her puttering around out there.

Joe and I walked out to the garden plot. I used the old push plow to lay off rows and Joe dropped seeds. He had a piece of 1" aluminum conduit about a yard long with a big tin can duct taped to the side of it to hold his seeds. That allowed him to stand up pretty straight while he dropped beans or whatever in the row, and the pipe put them exactly where he wanted them.

"Joe, how come you wanted a bigger garden this year? We still have a lot of canned goods left over from last year."

"That's how it is supposed to work. Sometimes you get a bad season, or the bugs lay waste to something, so if you don't get much of a crop, you still have enough from last year. Older canned food isn't as tasty, but it beats eating snowballs in January. We got two more people here to feed, so the garden gets bigger to make sure we have enough in case of a crop failure."

"You always think ahead, don't you?"

"Grampaw told me that if I want to make sure I keep my pants up, I better wear a belt AND suspenders. I don't, but HE did. He did everything that way. That idea rubbed off on me, I suppose, so I try hard to keep my behind covered."

I went on laying off rows and thought about that. We had agreed that we'd take care of Joe and Kate, and arranged things like he had suggested. I had already put some money in the farm, buying wire for new fencing for the back half of the 120 acres next to the woods, a new roof and metal siding on the barn, and fresh gravel on the driveway and farm lane. We had talked about trading in the tractor, too. That made me ask him, "What do we need to buy to have some backups for other things around here?"

Joe frowned and said, "That pond on the east side needs cleaned out. We don't have to pasture that field this summer, so it would be a good time to do that. The west pond is okay. We could sure use a grain truck, but only if it's a real cheap deal. Let me think on it."

"I'll keep looking for a deal on a truck. I hate to have to pay somebody to haul it to the elevator when we sell corn, and we could haul our own fertilizer with it, too."

Joe nodded. "Yep. And I've been thinking about cutting some trees for logs. That corner 'way in the back has a lot of good red and white oak in it, and it's ready to cut. I think there's some sawmills that would cut it up for us now that the price of timber is so low."

"You're not going to sell the logs?"

He shook his head. "We're way ahead to have 'em sawed and use the lumber. It cuts out the lumber yard as the middleman. We'll need some lumber to fix up some of the old buildings. I should talk to that guy down in the valley that has a portable sawmill. It's one of those bandsaw rigs on a trailer. He comes out to the farm and saws it up for you, so you don't have to haul the logs to the mill."

"I've heard of bandsaw mills, but I didn't know they were portable."

"Yeah, they come with trailer wheels now, if you want 'em. Grampaw said they used to move sawmills all the time, back when they used a steam engine. It was easier to move the mill to the next woods than to haul the logs to it. It was a lot bigger job to move one then. Now, this guy pulls it with a truck and has it set up in less than half a day."

"I know the hog house needs some work. What else you got in mind for the lumber?"

"If you are willing to work hard on the place, there's a lot we could do. Build a pole barn to store those round bales, maybe expand the hog operation. What do you think, Wes?"

"I'm game for it. You show me what to do, and I'll make it happen. I'll need some help on buildings. I don't know much about that."

"Just go look at the one on Les Baker's place up the road. That's what I had in mind. Take some pictures, and I'll tell you how it's done. I think there's enough big cedars to cut the poles for it, and the band mill can square 'em up and get the white wood off that rots easy. Don't need to be too tall, because we can't stack those round bales more than 2 high anyway. Lots of work cuttin' all them trees, though."

We finished planting all the seeds, then Kate and Ashley brought out the potatoes. I fetched the tractor with Joe's homemade shovel plow on the 3-point hitch. Kate had me plow four long, deep rows across the garden, and we began to drop potato sets. It was a slow job, and it was getting hot, so Joe went to the porch and sat in the shade to watch. I should have known that his mind was still working just fine, and he was busy using it.

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## CHAPTER 15

I got tired of cutting trees and trimming off limbs long before I got finished. The bandsaw mill was set up and running before I got enough cedars cut and dragged to the patch where he set up. He was busy working on sawing red and white oak for framing and poplar for roof stringers. Joe had him cut a whole mess of sticks for spacers between boards while they air-dried. He was picky about the size of them, which I thought was odd until he told me he planned to sell them for tomato stakes after we got the lumber dried.

Joe had made a list of what he wanted for the hay barn. There would also be a lot of 2 x 4's, 2 x 8's and 1" thick planks we would store in the barn loft for future use. He had me cut a bunch of spare cedars, too, for making more shed posts than we needed. I figured right that he had more plans in mind.

The sawmill ran constantly for several days, and the stacks of lumber grew. The cedar was drying fast in the hot sun. Joe said that when the posts got dry in a couple weeks, he wanted me to paint the bottom 4 feet of them with used motor oil we had in a barrel. It should make them last longer.

When the sawmill man was paid and had left, we had a monster pile of sawdust and another pile of wood slabs from trimming the logs square. The slabs would become firewood, and the sawdust would be litter in the barn and henhouse, but they could stay where they were for now. I had a lot of hay to cut and bale.

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After the hay was all rolled up into big round bales, I left it in the field for now. I didn't want to move it but one time and that would be into the new barn when it was finished. I bought a power post hole auger for the tractor, for 2 reasons. One, I had no yearning to dig 4 dozen big postholes 4 feet deep for the hay barn, and two, because there was a lot of old fence that needed rebuilt, with hundreds more postholes to dig. With just me working on it, I would need all the help I could get from the tractor.

Fumbling through getting the first 12 foot tall post set for the building convinced me I needed to hire some help. With Joe's help, I got the locations marked for the other 43 posts, and the holes dug with the post hole auger. But manhandling all those posts was more than I wanted to do, so I took Joe's advice and made a trip out to the Amish community. I finally found the man who ran a construction crew there, a young fellow who had built a lot of pole buildings. I told him what we had, and asked him to come look it over and give me a price for finishing the building. He brought one of his men along and they concluded that the fairest way to do this was to pay them by the hour. They were short of work and could start the next day, so we shook hands on it.

A neighbor of the Amish man drove them to their jobs in his van and picked them up after work. The crew of 5 men were there at 7:00 AM the next morning, and had the posts all set and braced in 2 days. I had to hustle to get the metal siding and roofing delivered by the time they were ready for it. It took them 11 days to get the building framed and the metal put on. I was paying the men \$100 each for a 9 hour day, or \$500 a day for the crew. I was glad to give them the \$5,500 at the end of it. They really did a job of it, and they were fast.

The sawmill man had cost us \$250 a day for 6 days, and he paid his helper out of that. I thought it was cheap for the amount of lumber he made. He told me he had cut his price trying to get work, but there wasn't much to be had. So, we'd gotten a bargain. The stacks of lumber in front of the old barn were impressive for the \$1,500 price. It was going to be a job to get it put away before the fall rains began,

but a lot of it got used for the hay barn.

The metal roofing and siding material was running about \$80 a 'square', or 100 square feet, but we had found a deal on that at a place that handled over runs and mismatched colors for half price, and they had a man who delivered for them. I bought 6200 square feet of metal, and had very little left over. The Amish guy had figured pretty close. The bill was just under \$6,200 delivered, so I'd spent \$13,200 on the barn and the big stack of lumber we had left. The lumber alone would have cost more than that retail.

The new hay barn was 24 feet wide, with 4 posts spaced 8 feet apart that direction. There were 11 rows of them, making 10 spaces 12 feet wide between rows. That made the hay barn 120 feet long. That is about the size of 2 average houses. It took some care, but I could get round bales stacked 2 wide, 2 bales high, and 4 rows like that, or 16 bales in each bay. If it was full it would hold 160 round bales at about 1,200 pounds each. That's a lot of hay.

We would never have enough cattle to eat that much, but we would have more next year, and part of the barn would be used for equipment. Joe's plans were flexible. If we decided to expand the cattle operation, we could max that out by buying some hay when it was cheapest, right out of the fields, and use our farm mostly for pasture. Or, we could even get into dairying again, if that looked good at some point. Presently, it did not, having too much government interference and foreign competition for the cheese market. Joe even mentioned the possibility of a big vegetable operation. That would require some big tube style greenhouses, and then the new hay building could be used for sorting, packing, and storage.

It all depended on the markets, so the key to making it in a farm operation was being ready to take advantage of the changes as they came along.

I had put \$18,000 of my money in the farm so far, but we had a lot to show for it. New fences, when I got around to building them, the new hay barn, and enough lumber to fix all the other buildings on the place. There was enough slab wood for at least one winter's heating, and if we could sell the drying spacers for tomato stakes, that was gravy. I liked the way Joe thought about business, and I was learning fast.

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Things had progressed between my sister Gloria and Larry Barnes. I had seen him around town, but didn't know him until she brought him out to the farm one Sunday afternoon to pickup Dad's old shotgun. He had bought some hunting loads for it on sale at Walmart so she could do some practicing and learn more about how it worked. She had shot it a few times as a teenager, but didn't have much interest then. She still wasn't much interested in hunting, but wanted it for security at home. They spent the afternoon and Gloria was handling the gun safely and effectively by the time they left.

Dad had been choosy about what he bought, and got the best he could afford. The shotgun was a 12 gauge Winchester Model 12 with a full choke barrel, one of the best pump guns ever made. It showed a little wear on the bluing, but nowhere else. It had been oiled and put away in the closet after each use and was in like new condition. He never hunted that much, so I doubt if he had shot more than a couple hundred rounds in it's 60 year life. It was a little long for home defense use, but having the dog to warn her of any intruders would help.

Ashley had gone to the local gun shop and came home with the one I'd recommended. She came home

with a good used Ruger 10/22, an old Ruger .22 pistol with the heavy barrel, 6 bricks of .22 ammo, and an old Remington 870 12 gauge shotgun with the slug barrel and a big box of slugs, buckshot, and #6 shot.

For her personal rifle, she bought a Remington 700 BDL, chambered for .223 Remington, which is the same as the NATO 5.56. It was used and had a couple scratches here and there, but it was in good shape and came with a Redfield 6X scope mounted on it. She'd bought a 1,000 round case of import ammo in the deal, so we went to the back pasture and tried it out. Laying it on the hood of the truck with an old jacket for padding, I could put 5 rounds in a spot the size of a quarter at 100 paces, and the scope was pretty well dead on. Ashley did better. Her 5 shot groups were about the size of a nickel. With the wooded land in our neighborhood making for limited ranges, that meant that if she could see it, she could hit it.

That proved to be right when she saw some coyotes at the edge of our woods about dusk one evening. Two of them didn't get to the trees in time. I counted steps and got the distance at about 260 yards. The bad part was, she'd seen a bunch of dogs running with the bunch. That meant they were breeding with stray dogs, and the offspring were not afraid of people. We could have a problem if they were not controlled somehow. Coy-dogs were known to take down calves in the Spring. I decided to do some trapping next winter when they got hungry, and before our cattle started dropping calves in the Spring.

The next week she picked up a used Ruger Security Six in .357 Magnum and an old Smith and Wesson, also in .357. The gun shop had some white box .38 Special target loads pretty cheap so she bought ten boxes of those and another ten boxes of hand loaded .357 ammo for about half what new stuff cost. It had 150 grain Speer hollow point bullets and was supposed to be loaded a little on the hot side. I asked if she was going to apply for a concealed carry permit and she said, "No. I bought all the guns from private owners, so none of them are papered, and I see any reason to create records of any kind. Not a good idea with your background, right?"

I thought about it and decided she was right. As usual, she had been thinking about this. She had a cardboard box full of cleaning supplies, too. I kept thinking about how lucky I was to have a wife who used her head.

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## CHAPTER 16

Several loggers around the county had given up and quit because the market for hardwood was so bad. I ran into Jack Duggins in the grocery one day who said he was retiring from logging. Had all his stuff up for sale, and was going to start taking Social Security, because he'd had a downed tree roll over on him and his leg hadn't been the same since. I asked about his log trucks, and he said the one with the hydraulic loader thing on it was sold, but he had the other one still. The cab was rough, but he said the drive train was sound. It was a tandem axle 1984 GMC General with a Detroit Diesel in it, 13 speed box, 18,000 lb. front axle and 38,000 lb. rear axles.

I told him I wanted a grain hauler for the farm and would have to buy or build a box bed for it. Jack said he'd bought the truck with a box bed, and taken it off. It had been sitting for years, and was rusty, but he could put it back on for me.

I asked him, "How much money are we talking about here?"

"I'd like to get \$8,000 out of it. That's a little under the market with that bed on it, but I want to get it sold. The rubber ain't too bad on it. It'd run you for a while. As far as I know the old truck is in pretty good shape. You come take a look at it and see what you think. I already sold the log bed frame, so it's a bare chassis right now. Wouldn't be that hard to set that box back on it."

I got his phone number and directions, and told him I'd be out that evening to look.

When I got there, I found he was right about the old box bed being rusty. I looked it over good and decided it would have to get cleaned up and painted, or it wouldn't last many years. That became a bargaining point, along with the less than wonderful cab. It started and ran really well, though, and idled nicely when it warmed up. He had come down to \$7,500 pretty quick, so I looked it all over and drove it down the road a short ways to feel the gears, the steering and the brakes. It seemed all right, so I asked him if he could do a little better if I paid him in money?

"\$7,000, and I put the box back on it. That's as far as I can go."

"You got a deal. I'll be by tomorrow night with the money."

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Back in late April or early May, the price of silver had gone up around \$45 an ounce, but I had held onto mine, hoping for more. It dropped to about \$40 and had stayed there all summer. I decided to sell it in case it went lower. At least I would be putting it into something to make a buck. I sold the four \$250 bags I had for \$26,000 back to the same coin shop where I bought it. Joe's tax accountant said I had to pay 28% tax on that for some reason, and it would add to my income tax for the year.

Anyway, I had about \$18,000 left, and figured I should put a lot of it in that old truck. The front tires were nearly new, but the back ones were worn down. I took the truck to the sandblaster guy and had him take the box off to do separately. He cleaned the frame and rear axles first and shot primer on that. I took it home and painted all that with black paint and a brush. I had it up on blocks, so I took off the rear brake drums and cleaned all that out and lubed it all. I hauled the rear tires in my pickup, 4 at a time, to the tire shop for a set of recaps.

I had the sandblast man spray the box bed with primer, then 2 coats of red tractor enamel, because there



was no way I could handle that bed at the farm. While he was doing that, I sanded down the cab and bought a big air compressor a spray gun we had been needing. For being my first time, it came out pretty decent, I thought.

When it all got back together, the old truck looked pretty good with a white cab, red box and black undercarriage and wheels. The recapped tires looked like new. The inside of the cab was still trashed, though, so I spent some time on that. New floor mats helped a lot, and I got by with a seat cover job done by an upholstery shop. The rest I just scrubbed until it was clean.

The retread tires cost me \$1,100, the sandblast and paint work was \$1,400, and I spent \$800 on a compressor and painting stuff. I spent \$780 on new U-joints and some exhaust repairs. Oil and filter changes ate another \$90. The truck had saddle tanks on it that held over 100 gallons, so a fill up cost me \$310. I hadn't bought farm tags and insurance on the truck, but I had only spent \$11,500 and I had a farm truck that would haul 600 bushels of grain. A lot of people spend twice that for a car that has trouble hauling a week's groceries. I knew it would eat money, for a new batteries, coolant, air filters, and other maintenance. Trucks are expensive to own and operate. But trucks can make you money, too, and cars generally don't.

The first job for the truck would likely be hauling home some farm equipment, though. I planned to go to some auctions soon.

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We had just walked out of the new hay barn when Joe told me, "You did pretty well getting this built. The Amish crew was a good idea, and you kept the cost down. You've been through a planting and a harvest season now, and you know how the farm accounts work. You're coming right along, for a city boy!"

He had grinned when he said that, so I did too when I answered.

"Some of us city kids ain't so dumb after all, huh?"

"If I thought you were dumb, I wouldn't have let you marry that stubborn daughter of mine."

"She might have had something to say about that."

"Yeah, she's got an opinion on everything. Say, if you're going to town anytime soon, we need some...."

He stumbled and fell slowly to the ground without saying any more. His eyes were open, but he wasn't breathing that I could tell. We were just a few steps from the kitchen door, so I ran inside and yelled for Ashley to call 911. Kate heard me first and was doing it when she looked at me and said, "JOE! What happened??!!!"

"He just passed out and fell down! I don't know!"

Kate told the dispatcher her husband had a heart attack or a stroke, and to get there fast.

They did, but it wasn't any use. They told us Joe was probably dead when he hit the ground. They did all they could, but he was already gone. He was listed as DOA at the hospital, of a massive stroke.

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Kate was pretty calm, I thought. Ashley cried a river, but her Mom told her softly they were lucky to have him for that long, and try to be at peace about it. I kept expecting the old lady to break down about it, but if she did, it was when she was alone. She looked as sad as anyone I had ever seen, though. She and Ashley made the arrangements at a local funeral home and we all went through the next 3 days like it was unreal. I took care of things at the farm, like I had when Joe was in the hospital.

I did my share of crying while I fed livestock, and tried to comfort the dog. She was looking for Joe to come home, staring out the driveway. When Ashley and Kate came home at night, the dog kept looking and sniffing around the car for Joe. Me and Pat did some of our grieving together. I think that helped me and the dog get a lot closer, although she would always see Kate as her master.

I tried to comfort Ashley as best I could, but I had learned that people have to do their grieving, and you best let them do it their own way. She did spend some time crying on my shoulder, and it seemed like that was the best I could do for her.

Both women had a pretty stiff upper lip for the next month, but their grief began to get sidetracked by the garden harvest. Close on the heels of that was corn harvest coming soon with cooler weather. I spent some time chainsawing the slab wood into firewood lengths and stacking it in the woodshed. "Chop wood and carry water", was the advice of some old people for when you're really out of sorts for any reason. It works. Simple jobs give you time to work through things in your mind, and it keeps you from doing something silly, like drinking or eating too much. The exercise calmed me down, and gave me time to let it soak in that I had responsibility for the farm now, and didn't have Joe to show me the way. Inside, I was still a mess. I had no clue how to manage a farm, as in when to expand the cattle herd or not, how to know when and what price to "hedge" our corn crop by selling a commodity contract, or whether we should get into raising broiler chickens, or a dairy operation. I had seen Joe make such decisions, but I had no confidence in having to make them myself. I was scared spitless about all that, and I had just lost a really good friend.

Kate and Ashley changed my thinking about that real fast. They had ideas about what to do, and even though I felt like they were bossing me around some, it helped me sort things out, so I didn't fuss about it. I wanted all the help I could get.

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## CHAPTER 17

I would have depended on Joe as long as he would have let me, I suppose. As it was, I felt like I'd been dropped in cold water about running the farm, and into the deep end, too. Kate was supportive of me, and let me pretty much do what I thought was right. I said something about that to her, and she told me that Joe had pretty much been letting me run the place anyway, so not to worry so much. I worried anyway, but it was nice of her to say that.

It seemed like Ashley wanted a bigger say in how things were done now, and I was really glad of it. She knew the place like her own skin, and noticed things I overlooked, like the gates that wanted attention, and a cow that didn't look just right and might need a vet to look at her. We began to spend more time together on the place because her hours had been cut back at the grocery. It cut our income a little, but I needed her at home. The corn was getting dry early this year, so in a couple weeks it would be time to get the combine out there and turn some of that standing corn into money.

Ashley said she'd rather learn to run the combine than try to drive that big truck, so I started getting her acquainted with it. She was thin enough to get in some places to grease things that were hard for me, so that was a good place to start her education. That's how Joe had taught me about the machine, describing the function of each part every time we greased it. Then I got to climb all over the thing and replace bearings and other parts. Ashley didn't mind the maintenance, so we went over the machine in detail, and what could go wrong in operation.

"We shouldn't have much trouble this year, because it is so dry. That will keep the fodder flowing through the head and the ear will shell easier. With any luck, you shouldn't get it stopped up like we did last year."

She asked me, "What do you mean by stopped up?"

"The threshing cylinder can get packed up with green fodder and cobs and corn shucks, then it stalls the machine. You have to kick it out of gear, or risk burning up a belt or breaking something. I'll ride with you a while to show you what that sounds like when it is getting overloaded, then you back off the ground speed a little to give it time to digest what's in it."

"Okay, I've heard it do that, I think. If it got clogged up, Dad got mad because he'd have to dig stuff out of it. Is that what you mean?"

"Yep, that's it. If there's a lot of green weeds in the field, that can clog it up, too, but the corn is pretty clean this year, and that will help. It should run good."

"I never wanted to drive this thing because it is so HUGE! I was afraid I would run into something and wreck it."

"It's pretty controllable, and you don't go any faster than a fast walk, anyway, so you have time to watch where you're going. You can drive it around the yard here where there's lots of room, and get the feel of it. Then, I'll run the outer rows and get some room opened up for you. I figured we would load the truck first, so I can have the fields opened up good for you and have some room to maneuver out there."

"Yeah, I saw Dad doing that. Once some of the corn is picked, you have a lot of room to drive around."

"I'll get it out of the building and you can get acquainted with the gears out where there is lots of room, and the internal stuff won't be running, so the noise won't be driving you nuts while you learn. The cab is up high, so you can see around it really well, except in the back. You just gotta learn to estimate how big the butt end of this thing is. I'll start you in low gear, so it will go really slow while you get used to it. It's different about steering, because it steers in the BACK end!"

"I can back up a wagon, so I'm not scared of that. I can do this."

The combine was an old 4 row Allis Chalmers Gleaner and only held about 80 bushels in the bin, so Ashley would have to dump her bin often. Kate was going to drive the tractor like she had for years, hauling gravity wagons of grain to the grain bins by the barn. If we all worked at it, we could probably move the grain fast enough to keep Ashley going in the combine. We had 3 gravity wagons to rotate from the field to the grain bins, and each wagon held about 200 bushels. It was a full time job getting the shelled corn from the field to the bins, then dumping them in the elevator to the bins, then back to the field before the other wagons were full again.

Joe had contracted 5,000 bushels of corn to the local farm Co-op, so we had that contract to fill first. I kept the truck on the road for a few days, until I'd gotten 10 loads of 600 bushels each delivered as Ashley got it harvested with the combine. Most days, she had plenty of time to grease the combine in the middle of the day, take a long lunch, and still keep her Mom busy loading the gravity wagons while I made a run to the elevator. I'd get back in time to get another load on the truck before the evening humidity made the stalks too tough to run good. That way, I could leave early in the morning for town and get the trip done. Otherwise, I was helping here and there unloading wagons into the farm grain bins, checking over equipment everywhere, and keeping fuel hauled to Ashley in the field.

We stayed busy for a couple weeks, but at the end of it, we had sold 5,000 bushels of corn for the contract price of \$4.06 a bushel, and another 1,000 bushels for \$5.85. I was told this had almost never happened, to have the harvest time price so much higher than what futures prices had been the past Spring. I talked to a few people and they said it was a good thing, because everything else was going up, too.

This put \$29,000 in the farm account, so we had a good start on income this year. The cattle that Joe had sold earlier, 22 head of feeder calves, amounted to \$13,400, so the farm did okay for the year. \$42,400 may sound like a lot of money, but the farm expenses came out of that. That had to support all 3 of us, plus pay upkeep on a tractor, a combine, a big truck, and a lot of implements and buildings. Yes, Ashley's job provided our spending money, and I made some on the side doing some welding and wrench work, but it wasn't all that much, and prices were getting higher on everything.

Farming does have some fringe benefits, but it isn't free insurance or retirement money. You get to work like a dog for the "benefits", such as a garden, raising livestock and hunting wildlife for meat, and cutting firewood for heat. Mostly, what those things do is cut expenses. When your income is limited, you need to work pretty hard at cutting expenses. It's no wonder that most farmers are as tight as a wart on a pickle. I did have some money in savings from the sale of Mom and Dad's house, so I needed to invest that as smart as I could to produce an income later on. I was still thinking about that, and it had my brain in a knot.

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Things were busy at the nursing home for different reasons. Gloria learned that the owners had given the staff a directive to cut their expenses by 15%, across the board. It meant lesser quality food, less heat this winter, less frequent laundry of bed linens to save on utilities, no outside cleaning crew, and one of their 6 employees was laid off. The rest had to take up the slack, so care suffered while the remaining staff was overworked. The couple that owned the place were doing all they could personally to make it happen. They were there in the morning when the day shift came in, and they were there at night well into the second shift.

Gloria was really glad to see Larry Barnes when he was free to come by and feed his mother, for more than one reason. They spent some time together away from the nursing home, but it was limited by their jobs. The ready-mix plant was still somewhat busy, but like the nursing home, they had laid off 2 drivers to cut expenses. So, Larry and the other 3 remaining drivers were running 10 to 12 hours a day to keep up. It was cheaper for the company to pay them some overtime than to pay an extra man with his benefits cost.

When he had to work late, he still stopped at the nursing home to see his mother, but mostly to see Gloria. Mrs. Barnes' Alzheimer's had progressed enough that she seldom knew Larry now. He had done his grieving for this as it happened, and was resigned to her really not being there anymore. He helped give her meds, and turn her in the bed, and helped her to the bathroom before he left for the night, since her stroke had left her partially paralyzed.

The days when Larry got off work in time to be there early made up for it, because he could leave with Gloria at the end of her shift. They often went to her apartment for the evening meal, and sometimes talked into the evening. Gloria had been to Larry's place out north of town about 5 miles and she liked it. He lived at his parents' place, 40 acres of wooded hillsides and bottom land that allowed him to keep a few beef calves on pasture in the summer. His day job kept him from doing any more than that, and there wasn't enough tillable land to do much farming.

Larry's home was old and small, a 1930's era bungalow with one bedroom downstairs and a couple small ones upstairs. He kept the place neat and clean, but it looked old fashioned so he had been reluctant to take Gloria to see it. Larry was well aware of how Gloria had lived before her divorce. It was a small town, and word got around.

She surprised him when he finally took her out to see the place that October. The leaves were just beginning to turn their bright Fall colors, the pasture was still green with 5 fat beef calves in it, and the weather was a perfect Indian Summer day.

"I love it! It's so pretty out here!"

Larry said, "It's not so pretty in winter, when the leaves are gone and the roads get bad with snow and ice."

"It's like that everywhere in winter. And it's quiet. No traffic noise, no smelly trucks. OH! I want to look at that garden. "

She walked off behind the house to inspect it with him following.

"It's got some weeds now, but I'll clean it up after I get the last of the cabbage out to make sauerkraut and pick those dry beans. It's time to do that, but I've been busy. Now that work has slowed down some

"I'll get the tractor and disc in there and clean it up. I want to sow it in wheat next week for a cover crop this winter."

"Let's do it now! I know how to make kraut, and we can just pull the bean vines up and pick all of them. You have a bucket or a basket to put them in?"

They spent the morning in the garden and had a simple lunch of sandwiches and fresh coleslaw she made. They shredded cabbage into crocks after lunch, adding salt to each layer, then covering the filled crock with wilted cabbage leaves and a towel. It would take a few days to ferment.

"I'll come back and help you can the kraut when it's ready. I always enjoyed canning. Do you have a pressure canner?"

"Yeah, Mom had one. I've used it a lot and it's fine, but I need to get a new gasket for it. It leaked some when I did the sweet corn. I'll pick up one next week."

They sat in the yard relaxing when the work was finished, enjoying the sunset.

"I would have never thought you'd take to country life," Larry told her, as he began to have a glimmer of hope.

"We grew up at the edge of town and we always had a garden. I liked animals, but all we ever had was cats and a dog and a few chickens when I was little. I thought it would be nice to have a big farm with room for a pony and some cows. I liked to watch the farmer behind our lot when he plowed and planted, and later when harvest time came. That was all a man's world, but I thought I could do those things, too."

Gloria sat with a yellow farm cat near her chair, getting its' ears scratched. Larry's bird dog got jealous and came by for his share of attention. Larry thought it might be more than she wanted, so he called the dog away from her.

"Oh he's all right. I like dogs, and hunting dogs are really sweet," she told him. "Sandy is a retriever, you know. She doesn't know anything about hunting, though. Do you think you could teach her? She's only a little past 2 years old."

"Hmm, it's late to start, but she listens to you really well. You could try with Butch around and we'll see how it goes. You want to try for ducks this year? We have some wood ducks that land on our pond every year."

"Yeah! That would be great! We might even get Sandy to go fetch them out of the pond!"

Larry took her home later that evening and drove back with a smile on his face.

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## CHAPTER 18

Inflation sneaks up on you. There are lots of prices that go up when you aren't looking. You don't buy some things very often, like tires, a refrigerator, or new underwear. Then when you go to get something of that kind, the price about knocks you over.

Ashley's car needed the alternator replaced, so I took the old one off and took it in to exchange for a rebuilt one. The last one I had bought for my previous truck cost me less than 30 bucks, so I had that in mind. This one was almost \$100! I didn't have that much money on me so I wrote them a check and hustled on back home to get it installed.

I kept thinking about how much it cost the rest of the day, wondering what else had gone up in price lately. Farming had been keeping me busy all summer, so I hadn't spent much time on the internet. I logged on to my favorite homesteading forum that night and found everybody complaining about the high cost of everything, especially food. I never paid any attention to food prices because we raised almost everything. Ashley got a small discount at the grocery where she worked and she bought most of what we needed there, so I never did much grocery shopping.

I logged off and asked her, "Have you noticed grocery prices going up lately?"

She gave me a look like I was an alien life form and said, "Oh yeah! Pretty steadily for the past year, in fact. I guess you haven't been paying attention."

"Well, no, I haven't, but that alternator cost me over \$96 today, and the last one was a third that much, just over a year ago. That got my attention. I was just reading on a forum and everybody is griping about food prices. I wonder what else has gone up when I wasn't looking."

"Pretty much everything I've seen is going up. Not 3 times the price, but a lot of stuff is near double what it was a not that long ago. Have you talked to the fertilizer guy lately? I bet we are in for a shock there."

"No, and I need to see what is going on now. I better check on some other things, too, like contracting diesel fuel for next year and filling our LP tanks for cooking."

We left it at that, and I got to thinking about what it would cost to put out next year's crops. Then there were the maintenance things. Motor oil was bound to have gone up even with the hefty quantity discount I normally got buying it by the 55 gallon barrel. We used a lot of oil, with a big tractor, the combine, my pickup, the grain truck, and Ashley's and Kate's cars. A couple of the grain wagons had some bad tires on them and the combine was due for major servicing now that the corn was in. This was going to add up. After thinking it over the next morning, I mentioned my concerns at lunch.

Kate said, "I've been thinking about this, too. At the rate things are going up, we need to work on our farm expenses, and everything we spend, I guess. I don't want to spend too much now and have to borrow money to put crops in next Spring. Me and Joe scrimped for years to get to where we had the money saved ahead for planting, and I don't want to have to do that ever again. The interest eats you up"

I put my oar in the water then. "I have some money left from the sale of my parents' house and I've

been wondering how I should best invest it. It looks to me like I should buy some stuff ahead of time, so if prices are going to keep going up. The longer it stays in the banks, the less buy. And what I read on the forum last night said that the Federal Reserve has been creating money out of thin air and giving it to banks, and they speculate on commodities with it and make prices go up. So this might go on for a while. I'll look around the farm and start making a list."

Ashley said, "I'll make a list of things I buy regularly and we can stock up on those things, too. Like some things I buy at the store and what we normally buy at Walmart and the pharmacy. Things like those mega vitamins Mom takes have gone way the heck up. Household supplies, and whatever."

Kate said, "We won't ever need any dishes or kitchen things. I inherited my Mother's things and they are still all packed away in the attic. There is a lot of stuff up there, so better let me see your lists before you go spending money on anything."

We both agreed to that. I finished eating and headed back out to work as the women cleaned up the table.

After going through the numbers, we decided to try open pollinated seed corn next year, because we could save the seed from year to year, and not have to pay outrageous amounts for hybrid seed. It took a while to find it, but I got 500 pounds of seed ordered. The small fields of wheat and oats we grew were already standard open pollinated varieties so saving the seed from them was standard procedure for us. The smaller grain bins already were filled with this year's crops of those. It was fertilizer that worried me, because it doesn't store very well, is corrosive as the very devil, and the nitrogen component tends to degrade pretty fast if not stored in very good conditions. I decided that the best way to store fertilizer was to put it on the ground NOW and plant a cover crop to hold onto it. The bulk dealers were all out of stock, but I found several tons of bagged fertilizer available about 50 miles from us and planned the trip to pick it up. It cost more per ton, but not nearly what I had heard the price was estimated to be next Spring.

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Gloria came out one day to help can the last of our garden. There's a lot of time to talk when you are snapping green beans. She told about the old man at the nursing home who convinced her to take her money out the bank. I asked what she planned to do with it?

"Larry Barnes and I are getting married, and we are buying some livestock for the place, and then..." Kate interrupted, saying, "You ARE? Well, you'd have to look hard to find a better fellow. I like him a lot. Now you have to tell us how we can help with the wedding!"

Ashley had seen this coming for a long time, but she enthused with her Mom about the prospect of a wedding. That kept the women busy talking all afternoon. I sat there snapping beans and thinking I needed to know more about what was happening to banks. I read on the internet late that night and went to bed thinking that I had better do something with our remaining \$25,000 or so that we had spread around 4 different banks.

The next day Ashley and I talked about this and got Kate involved, too. I said I wanted to use the money to make the farm as financially sound as we could. Kate said, "We could pay the taxes for next year. They will take payment ahead of time. We've done that before when our crop money came in."

Ashley said, "I like Gloria's idea of livestock. We have a lot of feed on hand, and that would pay off."



I agreed. The farm could produce more than what we had been doing, but it would be more work for all of us.

Kate said she would like to have a real dairy cow, and make cheese. We made a list and got busy on it that day. Things happened pretty fast, and we had to work out a new chore routine because within a month we had chickens in one corner of the barn, a beautiful Jersey cow that needed milked, a dozen brood sows and a boar hog to house and feed. It took some hurried work on pens and stalls, but we got them all housed. I bought a really good hammer mill at the consignment auction, a couple tons of feed supplements, salt and minerals. I traded off the tractor for a younger one with low hours on it. It was the same model as the old John Deere, so all the equipment and maintenance supplies worked for it.

It was just after Thanksgiving Day before we filled Ashley's and her Mom's lists and I got the farm supplies in place. Fuel tanks were topped off, I had fertilizer spread on all the cropland and what pasture and hay ground needed it, and the pantry was full. The shop still had stacks of boxes that wanted new shelves for them, but at least it was bought and paid for, and on hand for use. We had almost \$4,000 left that I took out in cash, leaving only a nominal amount in one bank and the other accounts closed out. It wasn't much money to have on hand for a working farm, but we had enough on hand now to run the farm for at least 2 years, maybe more if we stretched things, and we could always sell grain or livestock if we needed ready money.

All that made us feel a lot better, but every time we read the news online we all wondered how long things would stay together.

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## CHAPTER 19

We didn't have long to wait to find out. Kate answered the phone one cold day as I came in for lunch. She said, "What? No, I don't know of anything we need from town. Why is the store closing early?"

Pause.

"Won't they get the computer fixed pretty soon?"

Pause.

"Why are the banks closed?"

My ears perked up and I was full of questions by the time Kate handed me the phone, saying, "It's Ashley, and she says all the banks are shut down!"

I picked up the phone and asked, "What's this all about?"

She said, "All I got was a news report on the radio at the store that was talking about China dumping US Treasury bonds, and that caused a panic in the banks. The President shut all the banks down to stop a panic. Credit cards don't work so most businesses are closing for the day, or just taking cash. A customer said the ATM at our bank doesn't work, either. I needed some gas, but the only station that is open is Cowboy's and they have jacked up the price to \$10 a gallon and cash only!"

"You'd better come straight on home. This sounds bad. Where are you?"

"I'm at Cowboy's station on Highway 60. There are some people getting pretty mad inside, it sounds like, so I'm outta here."

"Stay on the phone until you are out of town at least, okay?"

"Yeah. I'm on my way home now. Lots of traffic headed for town it looks like."

I stayed on the phone with her until she was close to home. In a few minutes I saw her turn into the farm lane and breathed a sigh of relief. I told Kate she was home and we both went outside to meet her.

Kate got on the computer and pulled up the Zerohedge website. Just the headlines told enough of the story to get the idea.

"CHINA DUMPS US TREASURIES--DOLLAR PLUMETTING"

"GOLD, SILVER AT ALL TIME HIGHS"

"US MARKETS CLOSED, BANK HOLIDAY DECLARED UNTIL PANIC SUBSIDES"

"COMEX CLOSED"

"LONDON MARKETS CLOSED AMID PANIC IN EUROPE"

"BERNANKE CALLS EMERGENCY MEETING OF THE G20"

"US CURRENCY SWAP LINES ABORTED BY ECB"

"BERNANKE VOWS TO SUPPORT US BANKS"

We all read this news without comment, then sat down to think. Kate was the first to speak.

"I think we had all better stay home until we know what is going on out there. From what Ashley said, people are pretty upset by all this, and I don't want to be any part of that."

Ashley said, "I've never seen people behave like that! I'm not going anywhere until I know things have

calmed down."

I nodded and said, "That's what I think, too. I need to call Gloria and make sure she is okay, though."

Gloria answered her cell phone, but the connection wasn't the best.

"This is Wes. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I moved in with Larry and gave up the apartment. He came home from work and said things are crazy in town, so I called into work and they said they need me. Larry said he would go with me to make sure I'm okay. He's going to try the grocery while I'm at work and will pick me up later."

"Okay. If you need anything, let me know, all right? This could last a while."

"Yes, but we 're fine."

"Okay. See ya Sis. Love ya."

"Love you too. Bye."

Then the lights went out in the house and Wes said, "I wonder what caused that?"

It was Monday, December 5th, 2011.

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End of Part One

## FROM THE BOTTOM UP Part Two

### Chapter 20

2010

Ed Wilson knew he was getting old. Since he was a kid he'd had a trick knee that was easy to dislocate. It creaked a bit now, so he was careful with it. Sometimes arthritis in his hands made it harder to do the hobby woodworking he enjoyed. Too many hours around loud factory machinery had damaged his hearing, causing a constant ringing noise. Hearing aids helped that, but he couldn't wear them around noisy things. Since he was 40, he had become more farsighted and needed bifocals. By the time he was just past 50, he elected to get dentures to end the problems with his teeth.

The dentures were getting more comfortable now, but were a bother. Ed came out of the bathroom and said to his wife, "I'm just about a bionic man now, Hon. It takes me half an hour to put myself together in the morning." He was adjusting his hearing aids to suit the kitchen noise level.

His wife Sheryl said, "Happy sixty-second birthday! Come here. I've never kissed a guy that old before." She pecked him on the cheek. "I have a pecan pie started for your birthday."

"Hmph. Don't be ragging on me about my age. You're a lot older than I am!"

"RIGHT! Three whole months. When are you going to retire and get out of that factory? I had the good sense to retire 3 months ago!"

"How about today? I've been threatening them with it for months now and nobody believes me, but I signed up for social Security, and it starts next month. We don't need my company pension to make it. I can get that started in a month or two, so I think I'll give 'em the good news today. The General Foreman has been griping about holding costs down for months, and I've been telling him I can retire soon and he can take my salary out of his budget. He says I can't retire because they don't have another foreman trained yet. I asked him whose fault was that?"

"They'll miss you when you're gone. I've heard all the stories."

"It's time to get out of there before the place goes under. Business has been down since the 2008 car model year started because of the bank mess. Lucky for me, our pensions aren't tied to company stock like some are. Car company stocks are in the toilet."

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Human Resources had some forms for Ed to sign to start the retirement process. It would take a month for the pension checks to begin, but his insurance would stay in effect, and transition to a Medicare Supplement next month. By lunchtime the word was out that Ed was retiring, and he got his share of teasing and congratulations. At the afternoon break, somebody had fetched cake from the bakery and the General Foreman and Plant Manager gave him a roasting with tales from years before. Roaring laughter followed, but Ed was ready for them. He had brought his old wind-up alarm clock to work and followed his workers back to the Press Department.

"Hey! Wilbur! I need to use your 200 ton press for a minute!"

"Huh? What for?"

"No parts in it are there?"

"No, boss. I always clear it before break..."

"Fine! Put this damned alarm clock in the die and mash the button!"

KACHUNK! Ed's alarm clock vaguely resembled an alternator bracket when he pulled the remains out of the die. Ed found a piece of wire and hung it on the doorknob of the General Foreman's office. He smiled and waved goodbye, and walked out of the plant with his lunch box for the last time.

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Ed and Sheryl had talked about what to do with themselves after they retired. He liked to fish, hunt squirrels, and generally be outdoors, things he had promised himself he would do when he had the time. She liked the peace and quiet of the country and enjoyed visiting their son Mike and his wife Laura at their off grid homestead. She wasn't sure she'd want to live the way they did. Cooking on a wood stove was time consuming, hot, and something of an art as she remembered from childhood.

On the way home from visiting their son and his wife, Ed said, "I'd like to camp out there for a week at a time. It's my kind of place. Reminds me of when I was a kid on my Dad's farm."

"If you're talking about a camper, I'd like it. No tents for me, though."

"With the economy down, I bet we could find a deal on a camper", Ed said.

"I'll talk to Mike and see if that is okay with them. We could put it away from their house so we wouldn't be in their way. Maybe by that overlook where you can see the valley below."

Mike and Laura were agreeable. They didn't use the wooded area except for hunting mushrooms and cutting a little firewood.

An ad on Craigslist got Sheryl's attention. An older camping trailer that they could easily afford looked to be a good deal. She shopped online and compared prices. They got a look at it and learned the owner needed to sell it fast to make car repairs. For \$1,900 he not only delivered it, but threw in a decent TV and a generator on the deal. Ed had him park it at the back of their driveway and set to work fixing it up a bit. Sheryl did some sewing for new curtains and upholstery on the somewhat tired interior.

Ed redid the wiring for LED lights, repaired the plumbing, and fixed whatever it needed. By late summer he thought it was ready, so they did a trial run at home. Ed filled the water tank, Sheryl filled the cabinets and the fridge, and they sorted out enough spare clothing to live for a week. They moved into the camper for a few days and learned they had overlooked a few things they needed to buy, some spices, a longer extension cord for the generator, and a few things in the bathroom.

They had a neighbor with a heavy 3/4 ton truck move the heavy trailer to Mike and Laura's place. After several trips that summer, they liked it well enough to put in a septic tank and avoid the problem of emptying the holding tank. That Fall they put in a concrete parking spot for it to have a paved patio. Ed

added some solar panels so they didn't have to run the generator so much, and had a water line run from Mike's house back to the camper. By midsummer, it was shaping up nicely and they spent most weekends there, taking only their big white cat Charlie when they left home and clothing they had washed from the last trip. Ed had bought a prefabbed shed and had it moved to the spot. That gave him a place to park the old lawn mower and tools to make minor repairs. The twilight over the valley below was lovely when they sat on the patio to enjoy one last cup of coffee after supper.

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## CHAPTER 21 Winter, 2011

Ed felt like he was sweating bullets when he learned his wife was diagnosed with cancer. It was a dark time for them. She was terrified of a lingering, painful death, but tried to keep most of her fear inside. Ed drew the feelings out of her with carefully chosen words so she could talk about it. He could see that she was distraught and ached with frustration at being unable to make it go away. She told him it helped just for him to be there.

Despite their fears, the surgeon did an outstanding job and said she got all the offending tissue. The cancer was removed and did not recur. As the months went by, their confidence grew that it was gone. They had a reprieve.

Sheryl recovered so they could go camping again by late winter. She was much more aware of her own mortality and a little depressed about that, but looking out the camper window at a new snowfall, Sheryl thought of her favorite poem by Robert Frost, and the lines, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep." She decided she would live whatever time she had left as fully as she could. She told Ed about it when he came in with his .22 over his arm and a fat rabbit hanging from his belt. Soon Sheryl got back into her hobbies of sewing, canning the food that Ed raised in the back yard, and reading, especially history. She browsed the auctions and antique places where she found a few pieces she liked. They got back into some activities at the Senior Center in town with some old friends.

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Early Spring was warm and wet for a while, but there were a lot of sunny days. Sheryl and Ed planted a big garden and kept their yard mowed and looking better than last year when they had been gone so much during her illness. When Sheryl was busy with her interests, Ed worked on building a shelter house for the camper trailer and moved the solar panels up to that new roof. He had repaired the trailer roof when it had leaked a little, but he knew it would last a lot longer if it was covered. A few weeks later, he had it finished. They hiked to one of the flood control lakes in the nearby forestry where he caught some panfish for supper.

Shirley complained of a bad headache the next night when they got back to their home on the edge of town. She took some Tylenol and went to bed. Ed turned in early, too, tired from the outing. He awoke when Sheryl got up early the next morning and took more Tylenol. It was better by lunchtime, but came back in the afternoon. Ed was concerned.

"You'd better call your doctor and find out what is causing that headache."

"I'm tired of doctors. It will get better."

She took a couple more pills and laid down on the couch. Ed called her doctor who said to come see her right away at the emergency room. Sheryl protested, but got in the car and went with him. The doctor checked her blood pressure and found it very high. Prescription in hand, they headed for the pharmacy to get it filled, but Sheryl collapsed before they got out of the ER. Ed followed the nurses and doctor back into a treatment room where they shoed him out. An hour later he was informed that she had passed away of a massive stroke.

Ed had never felt so empty and alone. He went through the motions of living, numbly doing what had to be done to have her cremated as she wished. He notified Social Security of her death, called the

various insurance agencies to claim her life insurance, and gave the necessary information to the funeral director for publishing an obituary. After her brother and sisters came for the memorial service at the funeral home, he doubted if he would be seeing any of them again, since they lived some distance away. It felt like he was losing a lot of old friends along with his wife.

She had told him to scatter her ashes where he wanted to plant a tree, and she would nourish it for him. He thought a fruit tree was the right choice, and planted a pair of Winesap apple trees below their camp site on the south slope. They took off and grew well that Spring. Ed carefully pruned them the next year as they grew for the proper open shape.

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He was getting out of shape and he knew it, but he was too discouraged to do very much. The more he thought about it, the less he was inclined to stay in their old home. It was just too empty by himself. He was tired of mowing the big yard, too. Seeing Mike and Laura on Sundays was the high point of his week now. He decided to sell their old home and move to the camp site. He didn't need much room for just one person, and the money from the house could be important in his old age.

Old work habits helped him get moving again, now that he had some sort of goal. On his job, his innate stubbornness made him follow things through to completion. Once begun, he would see it through. He began with cleaning up the property, hauling off a couple loads of accumulated junk. Next, he cleaned out Sheryl's closet and gave a lot of her clothes to her sisters. Laura took a few things, but a lot remained to donate to the Goodwill store. He sold Sheryl's car with an ad in the newspaper and gave the woman who bought it the spare parts and filters he had in the garage.

He cleaned out old flower beds and replanted them with cheap annuals for some bright colors, painted the house trim, and had a fresh layer of fine gravel put on the driveway. He tilled the garden to get rid of this year's crop residues. He took extra trash cans, a lot of his workshop things, the charcoal grill, and some lawn furniture to the camp site. The garage was pretty well emptied of junk from the past, so he scrubbed the floor with detergent and TSP.

Ed had a week long yard sale and got rid of a big pile of extra clothing and inherited junk. That helped clear out the garage of boxes of dishes, pots and pans, and other junk. He made enough money at that to buy a big roll of screen wire for enclosing the camp shelter. His old S10 Chevy pickup was on the road a lot, hauling things to and fro, but the old house was looking good. He painted the interior walls and trim, then rented a carpet steamer and had the inside looking almost like new. The house had been a bit crowded with furniture, some of which he sold to improve the appearance. The antiques brought enough to be worth his time.

The place looked a lot better when the realtor put out a For Sale sign. He gave the woman a key to the house, and spent some time sorting out and hauling things to the campsite. The first couple that came to look at the property bought it. They were retired and wanted to move out from the city and rent out their old house for income. The deal closed on a Thursday. Ed counted himself lucky to have sold it so fast when real estate was hardly moving at all. He deposited the cashier's check for \$140,000 in his savings account and sold the rest of what was in the house to a used furniture dealer. In less than a week he loaded Charlie into his cat carrier and moved to the camp site.



## CHAPTER 22

Summer sunlight filtered through the leaf canopy, flashing on the truck's hood as Ed drove slowly along the winding gravel road toward his son's place and his camp site there. He was in no hurry. Since his wife died, he had been loafing from one day to the next. Selling their house and moving out here had kept him busy for a while, but that was accomplished now. Sheryl had been his love for 43 years. Without her, Ed didn't really care much about what went on around him. He had wanted to move to make his life less complicated and have something of a fresh start.

The curves kept his attention. Steep drop offs could be seen on first one side of the road then the other. It was a long ways to the bottom, too. The gravel rolled under his tires, letting the truck drift slightly in the turns. It had been recently graded and the loose stone rolled like ball bearings under the tires. He had to go slow to stay on the road. It reminded him of when he learned to drive well on the local dirt track as a teenager. A friend had let him drive their race car, and he proved to be good at it, but he quickly saw how expensive racing could be and walked away from it. A poor farm kid couldn't afford it.

He had gone from one job to another until he landed at the auto parts plant and stayed there for the next 32 years, working his way up to a Foreman's position. That job had paid for raising a family with his high school sweetheart. With her gone, the bottom had fallen out of his life. He had read about grieving, and some of what they said he had found to be true. He was trying to keep the grief from causing him to do anything foolish while he wasn't thinking clearly. The logic of that was fine, but it didn't make him feel any better. Ed sighed and tried to think about his future, but there didn't seem to be anything out there.

Mike and Laura's driveway came into view, so Ed downshifted and expertly bent the small pickup around the turn. Back the lane 100 yards from the road he could see their SUV was gone, so they were still at work and there was no need to disturb the dogs in the house. Still, they barked at the truck's sound. They knew him well, but he didn't want to push it without their masters being home. They were serious guard dogs, a Rottweiler, a Husky/German Shepherd cross, and a German Shepherd/Coyote cross. Ed left them alone and drove on back another 100 yards to his trailer. He carried Charlie inside and they made themselves comfortable, Ed on the couch with a cup of coffee, and the big white cat sprawled beside him shedding white fur on the cushions.

Mike's place laid on the top of the ridge and extended over the edge at the back where it dropped about 300 feet to the valley below. Erosion gullies the size of small canyons began at the road and dropped off deeper toward the back, but the flat land on top got wider the farther back you went until you got to the bluff. A second gravel road meandered along the valley floor below. The flat land was partially cleared on top, but the rest was all forested. At the edge of the cleared land was where Ed's trailer sat, hidden to all until the leaves fell in autumn. It was just off the crest of the ridge, so it was not visible as part of the skyline even in winter.

The south slope in front of the trailer was gentle for 70 yards before it fell off into the gully on that side that ran roughly parallel to the deeper one on the north. Sometime before 1950, this whole ridge top had been cleared and farmed, but now only a few homesteads dotted the 3 miles of dead end road he travelled today. It was not a prime real estate area. The last 3 homes on the road were off grid. Power lines had never been extended that far, although the county water lines did go to the end of the road. It was as remote as could be found in Indiana and surrounded on 3 sides by State Forest, with small flood control lakes here and there.

The residents were mostly poor, or retired, which was much the same thing. Two older couples had come from Chicago to get away from the city, but the rest were locals. Old vehicles and older mobile homes were all most could afford. Property taxes were low and road maintenance was at a bare minimum. There weren't any school age children beyond the first half of the 3 mile long road, so the school bus never came back this far. The only traffic was 3 neighbors beyond him, and two of those couples were retired. If you paid attention, you could identify all the vehicles that passed his place.

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Today Ed had brought his 4 chickens to their new shed near the trailer. He opened the antique wood transport coop, lifted them out, and into the small shed. They looked somewhat confused, but one soon wandered to the feeder and began to eat. The others joined her and they were settled in their new home. A few years of experience had shown 4 to be just about right to supply his and Mike's homes.

The henhouse had a small shed roof extending from the back he'd built recently. It stored a barrel each of wheat and shelled corn, and a third barrel with feed supplement. There was a shelf over the barrels with bags of mineralized salt, crushed oyster shells, and crushed granite grit to feed the hens. He had converted his feed grinding burr mill to use a small gasoline engine. It stood on it's stand amid an assortment of feed and water buckets, and a covered metal trash can for storing the ground feed. The garden tractor finished filling the space. It was only enclosed on 3 sides, but he planned to make double doors for it soon. Rain water from the whole roof drained into a rain barrel near the hen house door, so he didn't have to carry water very far for the chickens.

The past few months he had accumulated more eggs than they could use, so he had dehydrated quite a lot of eggs and vacuum sealed them. He had been keeping them in the freezer, but even when thawed they would keep for several more months.

The only freezer he had now was in the tiny refrigerator. It made enough ice for Ed and kept some bacon stored for his breakfast. They never kept much food here when they were camping, so Ed thought about how he would live and keep more stored food with limited electricity. A big freezer was out of the question, but he had read about canning bacon on the internet and decided to look into that. He believed in keeping a stock of food stored like his family did when he was a child. It had been a big help when he got laid off one time, and several other times in bad weather when they couldn't get to the store reasonably.

He and Sheryl had always bought meat in bulk when it was on sale and kept it frozen, although lately she had canned a bunch of pork loin, some beef, and a lot of chicken. He wouldn't have to go to the grocery for a year or more, if he didn't want to. It was just the way they had always lived and the way he thought. He had kept her All American pressure canner and knew how to use it. He had bought materials to build a solar dehydrator, too, but had never got around to getting it built. He had moved the old refrigerator he'd found to use for drying racks in that project, along with the plastic screening for trays and some vent tubing. He could work on that this winter when he got bored, he supposed. He had the old fridge parked under the shelter by the back end of the trailer.

They had made their own soap for most of their married life because Sheryl was allergic to the detergents in commercial soaps. Likewise with laundry soap, lest she break out in hives. Ed liked it because it made his skin feel better, too. So, they had saved bacon grease and beef tallow for the purpose and he still had a few plastic bottles of lye. They seemed to have more fat than was needed for this, so Sheryl had canned cleaned bacon grease in quart jars. He had moved a couple dozen of the jars into his storage shed. The trailer didn't have room for storage so he was glad now that he'd bought the

biggest storage shed he could find, an 8 ft. x 20 ft. with a barn style roof. It sat down the slope from the trailer and off to the southwest, with the chicken coop being just beyond it. He already had the loft of the little barn full of stuff he had moved from the old house.

Ed decided that he needed a root cellar to store the canned food he had moved out here. There was a lot of it. He had filled the trailer bedroom shelves to overflowing and the rest went into Mike's root cellar, mostly on the floor in stacked boxes.

Being past age 60, or 62, he couldn't remember which, meant that he didn't have to pay as much tax on the money from selling their house, so the accountant had told him. After his taxes were paid for the year, he would have about \$120,000 left from that. They had paid for their both their funerals several years ago, to assure that Mike didn't have to pay for them. Sheryl had cheap life insurance from where she worked for \$50,000 and there were no taxes on that money, so Ed had a little over \$210,000 in the bank, counting their previous savings.

It worried him what to do with that money, more than he'd ever had before. Banks paid almost nothing in interest now, and from what he had seen of prices going up, he needed to invest in something better. There were too many tales of bank problems on the internet, and the government being deep in debt. Some said the dollar could crash and be worth nothing. Ed didn't know what to do with his money, but he was convinced that the bank was not the right place for it.

His coffee finished, Ed absently petted the sleeping cat beside him and said, "Charlie, we have a lot to do here, and you're sleeping the day away. Come on out to the porch and get acquainted with the place." The cat stretched and yawned, got up and slowly followed Ed outside where he found a sunny spot and parked himself on a small table, then promptly went back to sleep.

All his life they had been careful with money and stayed in good financial shape. Ed didn't want to lose it now when he was getting old. He didn't like the idea of buying gold, but he felt like he needed some form of cash on hand. He had been thinking about this for some time, but hadn't found an answer. His living expenses here would be very small, but he still had expenses. They could grow food, but many other things cost money. Gasoline was over \$3.50 a gallon, and everything he looked at was much higher than what he remembered. He decided that whatever he thought he might need, he should go ahead and buy it like he and Sheryl had done. He said something to that effect to Mike and Laura when they got home that day, and planned to go shopping the next day. That evening he put the camper top back on his pickup because he planned to go to several stores and wanted to be able to lock it up.

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## CHAPTER 23

Mid summer, 2011

Bass Pro had a huge store in Clarksville that Ed had never taken time to explore. It would have been more fun if he had someone along to talk to, but he enjoyed it anyway. In the fishing section he bumped in to a young man and said, "Excuse me", then stepped out of the way. He got a better look at the fellow and asked, "Don't I know you? I think you fixed the head gasket on my truck at John Wilson's Garage, didn't you?"

Wes thought a minute and said, "I think so, I'm Wes Blake".

He offered his hand and Ed shook it. "This is a long ways to go to see the neighbor's. I haven't seen you at Wilson's this year. What are you doing now?"

"I'm farming. Joe Kemper's old place. I married his daughter Ashley here." Wes indicated his wife beside him. "Is your truck running okay?"

"Oh yes, it's just fine. Did you quit doing mechanic work then?"

"I do a little at home now, mostly farm equipment for the neighbors."

"That's good to know. It's hard to find a good mechanic. I don't need anything right now, but if I do how can I get in touch with you?"

"The phone is still listed as Joe Kemper, but he passed away recently."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I knew Joe a little bit. He drove a truck for the County Highway Department, didn't he?"

Ashley nodded and said, "Yes, he did that for years, and farmed on the side. We miss him a lot."

Ed said, "Well, I wish you folks the best, and give your Mother my condolences, too. Maybe I'll see you fishing someplace."

Wes said, "We plan to go to the lake down in Delaney Park. I'm pretty new at fishing, but Ashley says it's a good place to start."

"Thanks for the tip. I'm sort of new to it myself and the park is close to me. I live just up on the ridge from there. Catch you later!"

Ed went on down the aisle to select a better reel for panfishing while the young couple went on their way. The Kemper farm was only a couple miles across the highway from the county road Ed lived on , so he figured 5 miles at the most to their place. He'd have to keep the guy in mind. Ed bought an armload of fishing gear, a couple bricks of .22 shells, some 1 1/4 ounce deer slugs for his shotgun, and 5 boxes of .30-06 ammunition for his old rifle. It looked pretty bad, with it's old military stock and it had been years since he shot it, although he took it out and cleaned it occasionally. It was a war surplus thing his Dad had bought many years ago, but it was accurate with the peep sights out to 300 yards or

more if he was really careful shooting.

His next stop was at Rural King, then [Sam's Club](#) and Walmart. The truck was full when he headed home. It took some careful thought to get it all put away in the trailer and his workshop building. He decided he HAD to get a root cellar built for canned food so he could reclaim his bedroom. The next day he went to see Gerald Tomes, the neighbor across the road who had an old backhoe sitting around. He was a good friend of Mike's that did some odd jobs. Gerald agreed to do the job for a reasonable amount, if he wasn't in a big hurry. Gerald had a day job, and would have to do it evenings and weekends.

Meanwhile, Ed had some other ideas. He needed internet service, he wanted a TV antenna so he could get storm warnings, and he thought it would be good to have a CB radio. The junkyard provided a pretty good used TV antenna tower that he took directly to Mike's shop and had them do some minor welding on it, then gave it a good coat of aluminum paint. He bought a few bags of Sakrete and mixed it up in the wheelbarrow to pour a base for the tower. With the help of the backhoe man, he got it set up and guyed to 3 trees with some light galvanized cables. Before they set it up, he installed high quality antennas for the TV and a CB radio. A truck stop provided a 14" TV that ran on 12 volts, and a good CB base station radio. He bought a pair of good CB walkie talkies at the same time. On his high hilltop, he found he could get TV channels from Louisville, Kentucky and from Bloomington, Indiana. The CB base station picked up trucker talk on Interstate 65 halfway to Indianapolis on a good night.

Now he needed internet, and he had an idea how to get it out here in the boonies. It took some negotiating, but after checking out his location, the local internet provider agreed to put up the wireless broadband equipment on Ed's tower. Ed would get broadband service and internet based phone service installed free and only had to pay a reduced monthly service fee. The internet provider got the free use of his tower to serve customers they could not reach before. Ed had to provide a little 12 volt power to run the high frequency radios, but he had that. He left the details to them. Ed was beginning to enjoy doing things again.

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He had a notion that investing in real estate might be an answer for his savings, if he could get an income from the property. After lunch at a restaurant in town, he picked up a free magazine advertising local real estate. After watching the TV news that evening, he read the real estate ads until he fell asleep.

A week later, he had internet service. He got out his laptop and an adapter to run it on 12 volts, and soon was surfing the internet for the first time in several weeks. The alternative news sites were full of worries about banking and finance, and the Euro countries debt problems. He found some homesteading sites that talked about interesting issues. Charlie landed on the keyboard with his front feet and let out a yowl. Ed checked his food dish--empty, and not much water, either. He took care of that and Charlie was content. He went back to surfing and learned some things about currencies and how they really worked. It kept him up late again.

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Two weeks later later he had a root cellar and went to pay Gerald Tomes for the work. Soon they got to talking about higher prices and inflation.

Gerald said, "It's gonna come all unwrapped here before long. We've been seein' this coming for a long time. That's why we put in all those grapes and the catfish ponds. Our place ain't much, but it's paid for,

and we can live on near nuthin' for income now. Took a long time to get it all done, but I feel a lot better knowin' we can raise all we eat, if we have to."

Nodding agreement Ed said, "That's what's worrying me. Prices go up and my income doesn't. I have some savings, but it isn't making me a dime. Banks don't pay any interest to speak of, so inflation is making me lose money on it. I have to find an investment that will make enough to stay ahead of inflation. I've been thinking about buying a rental property."

Gerald said, "There's a little farm just down the road that went back to the bank. A big farmer bought it, but he had some bad luck and couldn't make the payments. You could buy it and rent out the ground if you don't want to work it yourself."

"I thought the price of farm land was still going up."

"The asking prices are up, but there ain't much land being sold. Nobody can get the money with credit so tight. They want at least half for a down payment, and we've had a couple bad crop years, too."

Ed said, "I haven't done any farming since I was a kid. Maybe raising beef hasn't changed all that much, but I'm pretty old to be starting something like that. I don't have any better ideas. Maybe I should look into that place. Do you know who owns it?"

"Yeah, my wife works at First National Bank. They foreclosed on it, but they don't want the farm. They want the money for it. The house burned down years ago, so it's just land and a barn. You should be able to buy it right. It's gettin' kinda grown up in weeds and brush this year because they didn't get it rented in time for a crop, but a bush hog would take care of that. The ground grows good hay and pasture. "

"I'll think about that. Thanks for telling me about it!"

Gerald shook hands with him and Ed decided to go talk to someone at the bank, but first he drove down the road to inspect the place. It was as Gerald had said, rough looking. There was an small old barn and some rusted out fencing around it, but the clear ground was growing a fine crop of weeds and grass, with a few small cedar bushes here and there. The foundation of an old house and the stump of a chimney were surrounded by tall grass and a couple old sheds, one that had probably been a chicken house long ago. Ed went home to think about it.

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## CHAPTER 24

Martin Abstract Company provided him with topographic maps of the area and a plat book that showed who owned what tracts of land. The cost was nominal. From there, he dropped in at the bank and asked to see the loan officer. She sent him to her boss and they got down to business. Ed haggled with the man for a while, asking him if they were going to rent the farm out next year, or continue to let it grow up in brush and depreciate?

The tract was 42 acres in an irregular shape, with less than 30 acres tillable. He told the man the timber ground had been logged off recently so it was of no value, but he thought the pasture land might be worth \$2,000 an acre. He didn't mention the pond that made it feasible to put cattle on the place. They finally settled on \$88,000 for the property, since it had no significant improvements on it, and no utilities available. They did not tell Ed, but this was the amount of the outstanding loan balance. Ed asked for a title search and warranty deed and they set the closing for a week later.

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Ed got busy looking for a small farm tractor and some equipment. He first needed to get his new property mowed so he could learn the details of the land he'd bought. He was still undecided whether to try to work the land or rent it out, but in any case he wanted to get the place in better shape, at least mowed and fenced.

He found something, although it was bigger than what he wanted, on Craigslist. Bigger might be better in this case. A used equipment dealer in Kentucky had a 1981 IH 786, an 80 HP tractor with a front end loader. They were asking \$9,500. It showed 4,500 hours on the meter, and the rear tires were worn out, but it ran well. The dealer swore it had an engine overhaul recently. Ed bought a used 8 foot Bush Hog with it and the dealer delivered it for a total of \$10,900. It arrived the day after he closed on the farm deal.

Ed changed the oil, oil filter, and fuel filters, flushed out the radiator, and refilled it with coolant. There were some hydraulic leaks, so he replaced some hoses and couplers. He found an empty fuel tank and stand advertised in the free weekly newspaper and had the man deliver it for \$150. A new hose and filter for it cost him another \$70. The Co-op filled it with 300 gallons of off-road (untaxed) diesel for \$2.95 a gallon, but that still came to \$885.

Mowing the farm went pretty well, going slow and watching for obstructions. He did hit a few limbs that had blown down around the edges, but all that did was make a lot of noise. The fences he found were rusty, but in tolerable shape. A few posts needed to be replaced, and there was no gate to be found. Ed spent a few days cleaning up around the place and used the loader to haul trash to a gully where he buried it. The barn lot cleaned up pretty well, but it also needed a new gate and the barn itself mostly wanted something done about the siding. He hired a crew to paint the roof and paid Gerald Tomes to cover the siding with metal.

He bought a hay spike to handle round hay bales and hunted for hay to buy. The pasture was looking much better after some early Fall rains when he bought 15 head of feeder calves averaging 600 pounds each for just over \$12,000. He put a mineral feeder near the barn and counted himself lucky that none of the calves got sick from being moved.

It was an old man's farm operation, not needing much work that he couldn't do with the tractor, moving hay bales and scraping manure away from the feeding area. Ed thought he could handle this, and it

would at least make a little money for him. There was just enough room in the barn driveway to squeeze the big tractor in where it was out of the weather. The battery acted a little tired, so Ed bought a new one, figuring he would have to start it in cold weather and that wouldn't be easy. It did have ether on it, though, so if it would crank, he could probably get it running when it was cold out.

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The internet was full of Greece's financial troubles, and other dismal money news. Ed felt a lot better about his financial position now. He had invested over half his savings in the farm, but still had to do something with over \$95,000 he had left. He called Wes Blake about fixing up his tractor.

"Hello, could I speak to Wes, please? This is Ed Wilson about some tractor repairs."

"Just a minute. He's outside."

Pause.

A little out of breath, Wes answered, "Yeah, this is Wes. Whatcha need?"

"I bought an old International 786 tractor and I'd like for you to check it over and see what it needs done to make it reliable. Are you interested in doing that?"

"Yeah, I'll do that. How do we get it here?"

"If you'll give me directions, I can drive it there. I don't think it's too far."

The next day was hot and clear, so Ed drove the tractor to him. Wes took him home and they exchanged cell phone numbers. Ed told him, "When you need parts, let me know and I'll pay for them so you don't worry about that."

"That will help me. It's easy to get a lot of my money tied up otherwise. What do you think it needs? Have you used it?"

"I changed the fluids and filters and did some bush hogging with it. The right brake needs adjusted or something, and the clutch pedal is pretty shallow. It may need a clutch. I'd like for you to check compression, and also see about an exhaust leak where the manifold bolts on. "

Wes was making notes as he talked.

"The rear tires are about shot, so I want some new rubber on it. Can you get that done? I don't have any way to dismount wheels."

Wes nodded. "Sure can. I'll call around and get some tire prices for you. D'you want fluid in them?"

"Yes, better do that, and make sure the wheels are okay, because the man said they have fluid now. It tends to rust the heck out of wheels."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Just a general going over and see what you find. I want it to work this winter when I need to feed cows."



"Will do. I'll call you as soon as I know more about what it needs. I won't do anything without asking you, all right?"

"That'll work. I appreciate you doing this. And thanks for the ride home!"

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Wes learned that it needed front wheel bearings, steering bushings, a brake job, a clutch, some wiring on the lights, and the new tires, but the engine was in fine with good compression and oil pressure. The loader needed new seals in the lift cylinders and were going to a hydraulic shop for that. Ed took him some money to get started and went on to other things. He told Wes to go ahead and put new tires on the front, too. He knew that loaders were hard on front ends and he planned to use that loader bucket.

Ed began to go to farm auctions and learn equipment prices. He quickly bought a flat bed wagon and a heavy log chain he could get home with his small pickup, but kept watching prices at several auctions on more expensive items. While he was learning he stocked up on engine oil, trans hydraulic oil, and filters. He took Wes new radiator hoses and whatever else he asked for.

The feeder calves were doing well on pasture, but they would need some grain in winter to really gain weight. Ed began to look for some way to store grain. Meanwhile, he had Gerald clean the cattails out of the pond and dig out some of the accumulated silt. The water cleared up in a few days and when rains came later it held a lot more water.

By the time Wes brought the tractor home, it was in good running condition and had some new paint on it. Wes got \$2,400 for his labor, and the parts and tires totaled \$2,200, which was cheap enough, Ed thought.

Ed parked the tractor in the barn and put up a couple game cameras on trees that would take pictures of anyone who entered the farm gate or the barn. From his trailer he could see the farm through the trees, since it was at slightly lower elevation. On the next trip to an auction, Ed found a pair of grain wagons that were cheap enough, and fetched them home with the tractor. The 10 mile trip didn't take all that long. He parked these by the barn and began to build a metal roof over each one with a trap door on the top for filling them. They would not only haul grain home for him, but would also store it. They were cheaper than a grain bin and more versatile for his small operation. He made a deal with Wes to bring them over for him to fill when he picked corn.

As soon as he found a feed grinder, he would be ready for winter. That came at the next quarterly consignment auction, for \$3,200. He didn't feel like he was ready for winter until he had put shelves in the root cellar, moved the canned food there, and had a 1,000 gallon LP tank set and filled for his trailer. If the winters weren't too cold, that should last for a couple years, at least.

Ed scratched Charlie's ears while he thought about his progress. He had completely transformed his life in less than 6 months, and he was liking it. He still had over \$80,000 in the bank and he hadn't decided what to do with it yet. Maybe some more solar power would be nice, and then he could have a food freezer, he thought. He could set it on his "porch" under the trailer shelter. Hmm. He might want some more farm equipment, too, if he decided to raise some corn. He got busy ordering those items.

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## CHAPTER 25 November, 2011

Mike Wilson was worried about what he had been reading on the internet homesteading sites. Too many of the old reliable posters were getting upset about the dollar and international finance troubles. Because they were off grid he didn't have internet at home, so he only had access at work, or at his Dad's, now that he had gotten broadband hooked up. It meant not much time to spend online, but he saw key figures on many sites talking about this.

His own feeling was that the US economy had been on life support since 2008, and it would not get better with what was being done. He thought that confidence in the dollar would continue until some event rattled the system. The Chinese were making a lot of threats. They always did, but they sounded more strident now. Maybe it was time to crawl in the financial foxhole, just in case. His Dad said he didn't want to wait for the dollar to crash. He had been spending money like mad this summer.

The problem for Mike was, it would be hard for him to do business without a bank account. Still, he didn't have to leave very much in there. And there were some things they needed and simply had not had time to get them. Mike resolved to take a day off and take Laura shopping. He saw a light still on in his Dad's trailer, so he told his wife, "I'm going down to Dad's for a while. I want to order garden seeds early online. I think we have some major trouble coming up from what I can tell."

She was pretty much up to speed on the subject and said, "Think the dollar bubble is going to pop?"

"I think there is a good chance of it. I know Dad has bet most of what he has on it."

"Make sure you get enough, both kinds and quantity."

"Right. Be back after while."

"I think I'll go with you."

---

Ed saw their flashlight coming and opened the door. "Hi there. What are you all up to tonight?"

Mike said, "We need to use your internet for a while. What was that seed company you liked so well?"

"Google Mountain Valley Seeds and that should find it."

Mike entered that, and then clicked on "[mvseeds.com](http://mvseeds.com)" and got the catalog. It was impressive. He browsed for while, getting used to the site, then began to select things for his order. The coffee was hot by then and Ed sat a cup on the table for Mike and one for Laura.

"What are you getting there?"

"Well, I plan to get enough to last a couple years, and all of it the old varieties so we can save seeds. I'm getting worried about this money thing, too, and I want to be sure we can plant a garden."

Ed frowned and said, "I don't know why I didn't think about that. I should have. I need to get some fertilizer and lime, and I don't know what all. Say, how about we combine orders here? I want to buy some bigger quantities of things, in case I might want to sell some later. It would make excellent trade

goods, wouldn't it?"

Laura said, "If money goes bad, then seeds will be like gold. Business can't operate without the money system. Seeds don't cost all that much and they store well, so yeah, I think it is a good idea."

Ed said, "They do have large quantities. They have green bean seed in 50 pound bags! I don't want that much, but I would go for 5 or 10 pounds on speculation that we will need them before they go bad."

They pored over the order for a couple hours, and finally got it together. Ed put the order in his name and they would share it out when they got it.

Something inside him said things were not right, and he didn't have much time.

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Ed called the fertilizer company the next day and ordered lime for his pasture, to be put on right away, and also some fertilizer to be spread soon after that. He took his truck and picked up several bags of Urea nitrogen fertilizer and when that was stowed away in the barn, he went back for an assortment of chemicals--Roundup weed killer, Rotenone for the garden, some Sevin for bugs, and an assortment of rat and mouse poison. He bought Kentucky 31 Fescue, Red Clover, and Ladino Clover seeds, and a hand cranked broadcast seeder.

He got to thinking that if the dollar went bad, the US would not be able to buy imported items, and that started him off on another shopping spree. He laid in a big supply of coffee, tea, and spices. Then a gasoline tank was next on his list. He had the Co-op bring him a farm tank and fill it the day the UPS man brought the seed order. He left and went to farm stores in 2 different towns to buy vet supplies and medicines.

Wes Blake had filled his grain wagons, so Ed drove the tractor over to his farm and brought them home, loaded down with corn. He took the pickup back to Wes' place and had him fill some barrels with wheat.

Ed had another pre-fabbed storage barn delivered, and filled it in a week with items that wouldn't freeze. By now, all the neighbor's were used to his little truck going past. They knew he was getting that old farm in shape and thought nothing of it. Ed spent a lot of money, then he made a trip to Louisville to a coin shop and spent a lot more money on silver coins.

A dealer in surplus building materials delivered a big load of roofing metal, plastic buckets of nails and screws, and some treated posts and lumber. Ed showed him where to unload it all back in the old logging road past the trailer, and paid him with a check.

He went to the bank a few days later and drew out \$7,500 in cash, too. There was some left in the bank, but not a lot. He stopped by the plumbing supply place and bought some thick 4" PVC pipe and several caps for it. Then he went home and dug some post holes to put them in. He told Mike and Laura where they were and what was in them, in case anything happened to him. He bought a lot of barbed wire and fencing supplies for the farm, and stashed it in the barn.

He set the last new post for the fence around his trailer on December 1st, 2011. Ed thought he was in pretty good shape for anything, but he still got a sinking feeling 4 days later when the evening news on TV said that the banks had been closed until further notice. He watched reporters run away from a riot

at Walmart in Clarksville. He was pretty shook up, so he went out to tend the chickens and gather eggs before he walked up to Mike's house for a conference. They were both home. That was a good thing.

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End of Part Two.

## FROM THE BOTTOM UP Part Three

### CHAPTER 26

November, 2011

Melvin Sawyer was not happy. Somebody had plundered his tool shed and stolen his chain saw and weed eater. The lock was busted off the door, and he had a good idea who might have done that. He didn't bother with the shed right then, but walked out through the trees and got down his motion-activated game camera. It was a new one that had a memory card. He pulled that out and went inside to the computer and plugged in the card.

Soon he was looking at pictures of that worthless Duncan boy, Mark, from down at the end of the road, carrying his stuff out. He had just got out of the state prison on "Shock Probation", which meant that the State didn't have the money or space to keep drug heads locked up. So, he was on the loose again and running wild. The kid had been in trouble since grade school, and it wasn't the first time Mel had crossed paths with him.

The last time he had gotten out of Juvenile Detention, his mother had convinced Mel to hire him for the summer to help clear some ground. Mel figured any dern fool oughta be able to drag brush and pile it, but not so, when he was higher'n a kite on dope. It was the second day when the boy disappeared after lunch and didn't come back. When his Mom got home from work she found him passed out in their kitchen with a bottle of her painkiller pills. They had his stomach pumped and saved him. More's the pity, Mel thought. The next time he got arrested with dope, she lost her house when she put it up for bail and he ran off. He didn't know where she lived now. A nice couple from Chicago had bought the house.

Mel debated what to do. He took the card out of the computer and cleared the pictures from memory. He needed a chain saw and he was sure the boy had already sold it since last night when the picture was taken. He figured he was too old to try to thump the boy's head, although it would give him great satisfaction. An old retired guy shouldn't be getting in fights anyway. For now, Mel decided to go buy himself a chain saw tomorrow and not say anything about it. He might turn it in on his insurance later.

---

A little early snow was on the ground, just a dusting of it, when Mel noticed tracks outside his mobile home one night. It had only been snowing for a few minutes, so they had to be fresh. Mel went back inside and got a heavier coat, some leather gloves, and stuck his .38 in his belt and some extra shells in his pocket. He put a flashlight in his coat pocket and went back out to follow the tracks. He wouldn't use the light unless he had to. When his eyes adjusted to the moonlight, he easily followed them first to his truck, then the tool shed (with a new lock), then through the woods and over the hill to the next county road.

A little way down the road sat the Duncan boy's car, with him in it fumbling around in the seat for something. Mel crept up quietly to the open car window and stuck the .38 behind the boy's ear.

"Don't move dumb sh!t, or it'll be the last stupid thing you do today!"

"D-D-D-Don't-Don't Shoot! I didn't do nuthin'!"

"Not tonight, but you tried, didn'tya?"

Mel eased the door open, still holding the gun on the boy and stood beside him.

There was a plastic bag of pills on the seat beyond him.

"What's in the bag there boy? That dope?"

The kid stammered something and with some prompting from the gun barrel, admitted that it was.

"You like that stuff? Is it pretty good?"

The boy mumbled something unintelligible.

"Well, don't let me get in the way of enjoyin' yerself. Go ahead and get yerself some. Go on!"

Mel gouged him hard in the ribs with the gun, and the boy picked up the bag.

"Now. You open that sack REAL careful, and pour 'em in yer mouth. DO IT NOW!!

The boy did it, pouring a couple dozen capsules in his mouth.

"Swaller 'em down boy! All of it!"

Mel stuck the gun in his ear and waited. The boy choked the pills down, swallowing hard.

"Now, fasten yer seat belt boy. Yer gonna need it."

He did as instructed and sat there. Mel reached in the open door and with one hand behind his head, slammed it forward against the steering wheel as hard as he could, twice. The boy was out cold. Mel started the car and put it in gear, letting it idle until it ran off the road, down a bank and into a tree. The car was still running when Mel stepped back into the woods. He didn't see much in the way of tracks on the gravel road. It was still snowing a few flakes when Mel got home, but the sun came out early the next morning and melted it all away.

He read in the paper a couple days later that the boy had been found dead of an apparent overdose of drugs.

---

The first day of December, Mel was checking his trapline and saw Mike Wilson drive in his lane with a pretty good load in the back of his SUV. Mel walked over to visit. He liked Mike a lot.

"Hey, Mel! How're ya doin'?' You catch anything today?"

"No, I just got my feet cold is all. You need a hand with any of that?"

"I can get it. If you want to, you can carry in some those canned goods."

"You're stockin' up fer bad weather, looks like."

"Yeah, you probably got that done a'ready, with that big garden last summer."

"It did pretty good. I got the pantry full of what I canned."

Mike thought about it, then told Mel, "It's lookin' like we could have some real trouble with money. China is sayin' if we keep printing money they won't put up with it and they'll do something about it. They own alot of US Treasury Bonds and it's costing them."

"Yeah. That could blow up any time. Dam fools won't quit givin' away money they don't have and printin' it to make up the diffrence. Now that the Duncan woman is gone, most ever'body else back here is in purty good shape, I think. I hope yer Dad's all fixed up. Looks like he's got that old farm goin' again."

"Yep. Dad is the one set me off to stockin' up lately. He'll be okay. He said if anybody around here needs to use that big tractor of his, just say so. He got it mainly to clean up some new ground over there, and he won't use it much. "

"I wondered about that. It's a whopper for that little place. "

"He said it was cheaper to get the tractor and clear what he has, than to buy more ground."

"That makes sense. I might want to use that loader sometime. Maybe I can do somethin' fer him, too."

Mike remembered something and said, "You hear about that Duncan boy?"

"What'd he do now?"

"Nothin'. He took too much dope, I guess. They found him dead about half a mile over on the next road."

"Hmph. I guess I won't miss him much."

Mike laughed and said, "No, I don't think I will either. Want a cup of coffee?"

"I guess not. I better get home and do some things. Tell your Dad if I can help him I'll be glad to."

"Sure will. You take care Mel."

---

Ed had noticed that somebody had been poking around his barn. There were footprints, a door left open, and things had been moved. He didn't miss anything, but he never left anything in the barn that most thieves would want. He checked his game cameras and found pictures of a young man coming and going. A couple weeks later, he recognized the mug shot in the newspaper of some local kid who died of a drug overdose. Later he learned from Mike that the boy had once lived at the end of the road and knew the area.

Maybe the problem has been solved, he thought.

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## CHAPTER 27

Gloria had been busy since she moved in with Larry Barnes. They seemed to work together really well. It was fun for a change to have someone she could talk to without his ego getting in the way. And Larry treated her like a queen. They had talked about what the old man at the nursing home told her, about getting her money out of the bank. Larry had talked to the old man, too, and respected what he had to say.

Neither of them had much money saved, but they didn't have any debts, either. Their vehicles were in good shape, and Larry had the house stocked with food he had raised. They decided to take almost all of their cash out of the bank and put it to work on the little farm. Larry bought 4 feeder pigs, one of them a boar, and 2 dozen year old hens from a woman he knew that was getting out of the egg business. Gloria found some goats for sale and bought a young one that was milking now and one that was pregnant. She had milked a cow before. Goats couldn't be that much different.

While Larry stocked up on feed and grain, and Gloria looked over the pantry for what they might need. She made a trip to [Sam's Club](#) with Ashley to fill things out. Ashley went to Walmart next door to stock up on birth control items, and they both got extra feminine needs. Gloria had learned that she was infertile several years ago, something she faced with mixed emotions.

They still had a little money left, so Larry filled the LP tank they used for cooking and to heat the house, then filled a couple barrels with gasoline, bringing it home 20 gallons at a trip in 5 gallon cans. It was sitting in an old outbuilding, and he would have to siphon it to get it out, but he could at least run the tractor and chainsaw for a long time with that. They kept what they had left in cash at home for emergency needs. Gloria didn't have a credit card, and Larry didn't use his except rarely for some mail order or online purchase.

When Wes and his family butchered this year, they had bought a quarter of beef from them and put it in the freezer, except for what Gloria was learning how to can for making soups and stews. She had a canner load of beef on the stove when it occurred to her that they hadn't found time to get married yet. She decided that it wasn't important. They had a lot to do that WAS important. She had forgotten to pick up a spare gasket for the canner. She'd do that tomorrow, and look for more jar lids, too. Maybe she should get a LOT of jar lids.

---

Bob Stowe was carrying his head higher now. The bank job had the dignity that he felt he deserved and paid well enough that he could live better. He had moved to a new apartment that was nicer and spoiled himself a little eating out at good restaurants, basking in recognition by a few well to do customers that recognized him. He bought a new winter coat, a London Fog that fit him well, and got a good haircut. He was feeling much better, and did his best to forget about the past.

Bob had been in his office all day, not talking to anyone and skipping lunch to complete the work on his desk. By mid-afternoon he had just about finished his monthly report when his boss burst into his office.

"Bob, we are closing the bank today. You can go home."

"What's the occasion? I didn't think it was a holiday..."



"No. The BANK is closing. As in permanently. The President declared a bank "Holiday", but the dollar has been crashing all day and our derivative contracts and interest rate swaps have all gone to hell. It's over Bob. The bank is insolvent. We won't be getting paid this week. Take whatever is yours and go on home. That's what I am doing."

"But... It CAN'T be... "

"Go home Bob." His boss turned abruptly and went out.

Bob sat there for a long moment and looked out into the main lobby. Tellers were locking their drawers in the vault and going through the normal day closing procedures. Bob walked slowly out and asked the head teller what was going on. With tears in her eyes, she said, "We're all out of a job, THAT'S what's going on!" The bank president's office was dark and locked. The Vice President walked past and told Bob to hurry up and clear his office, because he wanted to lock up soon.

Bob was in a daze, but he followed orders and pulled his meager belongings out of his desk into a trash bag. It was all he could find. He put on his new winter coat and walked stiffly out of the bank, being hurried by the VP, who locked the door behind him.

He could not believe what had just happened, but he was standing in the parking lot and a cold breeze got his attention. He got in his car and drove slowly back to his apartment. He didn't know what to do next, so he turned on his rent-to own big screen TV and found all the channels had breaking news stories about the dollar crash. There was a lot of talk about "supporting the banks" and a "strong dollar", but also reports of riots in cities where credit cards and ATM cards had quit working and EBT cards as well. Semi trucks were said to be stranded when their fuel cards wouldn't work. He saw videos of riots in Walmarts and other stores. He sat there stupefied until late that night, and fell asleep with the TV on.

The next morning, he awoke with a dry mouth and hungry. The TV was still chattering away about all the financial woes. He went to the refrigerator and got a glass of milk, noticing that there wasn't much left. He needed to shop for groceries today. Hell, the BANK was closed. It began to sink in that he was in very big trouble. He'd have to go see his brother again. There wasn't any other choice. He put on his coat, got in his car and started it. He saw the gas gauge was below a quarter tank. He hoped it would be enough to make it back to his brother's house.

Bob's brother stuck a gun in his face and told him to go on down the road. He had his own problems and couldn't support him anymore. He was still cursing him when Bob closed his car door. Bob knew where Gloria had gone when she left him. It was to that farm where her brother lived. He had been past it a few times and knew where it was. He probably had enough gas to get there. She would HAVE to help him. After all, it was HER that got him into this mess, and she would have to make it up to him.

He was still creating delusions as he sped down the county road to the farm. He forgot that sharp turn, and went head on into a power pole. In his mind, Bob was too dignified to use seat belts. The air bag in the old Jetta failed to deploy. He died instantly, half a mile from the farm.

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The cook at the Nursing Home told the owner that they were running low on food, and would have to resupply today or tomorrow. She handed him a list. The owner, Pat McClain, said he would see to it. But when he tried to call their food supplier, he got a recording that said they were closed until further

notice. Last week's order, however, showed up on the truck in just a few minutes. Pat went to see the driver.

"What's this about you being closed until further notice?"

"Huh? I don't know about any such thing. What are you talkin' about?"

"That's the message I got when I called the office just now."

"That's crazy. I'll call and see what's going on."  
He pulled out his cell phone and hit some buttons.

"Yeah. June, this is Rob. What's this about being closed? A customer told me that..."

He listened for a minute and looked shocked, saying nothing.

Pat overheard some of the conversation. "No banks, no business. That's....."

The driver looked dumbfounded when he said, "Yeah. Okay. Bye."

He looked at Pat and said, "The whole world must be nuts. They closed all the banks in the country. Nobody can do business now."

Pat said, "WHAT???!!!!" "What are you talking about?!"

"That's what she said. She's my sister, and she wouldn't lie about anything like that. She said I could take the truck home and whatever is left in it. That I'd need the food on the truck because there wouldn't be any more coming in. She said it was on TV. The President closed all the banks."

Pat thought furiously, then said, "Come inside with me and we'll find a TV."

They did, and did not like what they saw. It was less than an hour later when Gloria arrived for her shift with Larry driving. Pat told him he needed to talk to him, and broke the news about the food.

"We won't be able to feed our residents very long if we can't get something at the groceries here in town," he told them. "I might have to send your mother home with you. Let me do some checking."

The nursing home was on the North edge of town, so Pat knew nothing about the chaos there yet. Gloria told him, "You won't get anything there. They are all closed, from what my brother told me."

Larry nodded and they went inside. Gloria told Larry, "If we can get some canning lids anywhere and a spare gasket, we'd better get it now."

He thought for a second and said, "Let's try the hardware store."

Jones Hardware was on that side of town and they found Orville Jones inside, alone, watching the TV. They grabbed what they needed as fast as possible and went to the counter with it. Larry handed him some money and he checked them out.

Orville looked at them and said, "This is crazy! Have you seen this stuff on TV?"

"We sure have and that's why we're here. I got my Mom in the truck because the nursing home can't

buy any more food. We need some other things if you are willing to sell for cash."

"I always take cash! Go find what you want." He went back to watching TV.

The couple made a mad dash around the store and got a basket full of things, cans of lye to make soap, bug spray, some garden seeds, mouse and rat poison, and a lot more. They had to pool their money to cover it. Orville was overjoyed at the big sale when they left.

An hour later they had Mrs. Barnes back at her old home. She perked right up and said, "I've been needing to come home. I have a lot to do here..." Then she faded out again and was wondering where she was. They led her to her room and turned down the bed for her. She decided she was tired and wanted to take a nap.

Gloria and Larry held each other for along time and cried together. Gloria found herself wishing it wasn't so far to Wes and Ashley's place. The 5 miles would be a long ways if they didn't have gasoline, and every station she had seen on the way out of town was closed.

---

The old fellow that had advised Gloria to take her money out of the bank was sitting in his wheelchair in the day room of the nursing home, watching the TV gleefully. Pat McClain went past him, going somewhere in a hurry.

The old man called after him, "I TOLD ya it was goin' ta hell, now, didn't I? An' you all thought I was crazy! Now what d'ya say, huh?" He laughed heartily as Pat gave him a blank look. He relaxed after a while watching the TV and dozed off for a nap. He passed away a short time later in his sleep.

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The larger businesses in town began to close when they were unable to process credit, debit, and EBT cards. Headquarters for major retail chains called their stores and told them to close until the banks reopened. Smaller locally owned stores stayed open for a while, selling only for cash. Their prices ordinarily tended to be a little higher. As the more astute ones quickly figured out the implications, they either set prices at double or more, or, they closed and locked up. Most people were in shock, wondering what would happen next. Without knowing what to do, most went home and did nothing that day.

The President and others were on TV with lots of speeches about how this crisis would be resolved quickly, and to remain calm. The banks would reopen soon and all would be well. As the speeches were being delivered, orders went out to call up the National Guard for aiding Homeland Security in maintaining order in the major cities. The word of that spread like wildfire on the streets and added to the sense of panic.

The second day into the crisis with the dollar losing value in other countries and no way to clear payments, international trade was stalled. Ships sat in harbors with their cargo in the holds, pending orders from their home ports before they would unload. Trucks sat at truck stops unable to refuel, some with perishable goods going bad for want of diesel fuel to run the reefer units. The Walmart hub in Seymour, Indiana had been ordered to close up and send waiting drivers home. Gas stations were closed, almost without exception. Traffic volume was reduced to a trickle on most highways, and roadblocks were set up on major highways as a National Curfew was ordered and a State of Emergency was declared along with Martial Law.

At the Walmart store in Seymour just blocks from the shipping hub, a crowd of people waving EBT food stamp cards were getting unruly and police were called. By evening, some other stores had been broken into and looted. As darkness fell, small riots broke out in most major cities around retail stores. Police were soon overwhelmed and could only watch as some stores were looted that night.

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## CHAPTER 28

December 7th, 2011 (Pearl Harbor Day)

Wes went to the barn to feed pigs while Kate was cooking supper. Ashley took the dog out to fetch cows in, having decided she would feel better with them closer to the house with all the craziness she had seen in town. As she topped the rise in the middle of the 40 acre pasture, she noticed a wrecked car down the road at the curve. She had brought her rifle in case she saw some coyotes, and brought it up to her shoulder to have a look through the scope. The 6X Redfield brought the scene up close enough to see a dark blue car with a utility pole on top of it. There was no one around the wreck.

She stared at it for a minute until her arm tired and wavered some, then let the rifle down. She thought to herself, "Looks like that's why we lost power. Hope they get it fixed soon." Then she realized that it might not get fixed soon with all the trouble going on. No telling what this bank thing might do to us. She and the dog got the cattle up and moving toward the barn.

As Wes came out to help her herd the cattle into the barn lot, she told him what she had seen. They stopped by the house to tell Kate they were going to investigate, then took Ashley's car to the scene. It was a mess. Ashley turned pale and then looked away. Wes felt his stomach roil and forced himself to look at it. Bob's head was crushed by the utility pole falling on the car and there was blood everywhere. Wes looked at the power lines laying on the pavement and decided to stay well away from the scene. The wires were broken on the side toward their farm, explaining the power outage, but they were still unbroken on the town side of the pole.

Both got back in the car and Wes drove home. Ashley was still a little green when they told Kate what they saw. Wes said, "It looked like it might have been Bob Stowe's car, but he was too messed up to be sure it was him. We need to report the accident in case nobody else has done it yet."

Kate got on the phone and called the Sheriff's office. The girl acting as dispatcher told her there were no deputies available to go to the wreck. They would have to deal with it the best they could. The Sheriff was in a meeting with a man from Homeland Security, and not available to talk to them, but she would have him return their call later.

"Well. That's something," Kate said. They don't have any deputies that can come out here! Said we would have to deal with it!"

Wes said, "Call REMC and tell them they have a pole down. I bet you get some action there."

They got a recording at the electric CO-OP, and they would get a return call later. They sat down to the table, but Ashley didn't have an appetite. Wes forced himself to eat something. It was after they finished supper that the Sheriff called.

"Yeah," Wes said, "We have a car wrecked on the county road, just South of us half a mile or less."  
"Yeah, it's totaled, and the man in it is dead for sure. Power line is down and on the car, but REMC didn't answer my call. I'm sure that wire is hot, too."

"No, I'm not messing with the wire. We'll wait for the power company to fix it."

Wes hung up and said, "He only has one deputy that is still there. The other 3 have quit and gone because Homeland Security told them they had to stay in town and do what they say now."

Kate asked, "What has Homeland Security got to do with anything?"

"They showed up and said they are in charge for the duration of the emergency. The Sheriff says he takes orders from them now that Martial Law is in effect."

Wes tried the power company again and got an answer this time. The woman told him that they had been "Nationalized" by the government and most of their people quit on the spot. They wouldn't be able to get anyone out there for an undetermined length of time. When he told Kate and Ashley this, Ashley said, "That power line is touching our pasture fence. Anything that gets close to it is going to get electrocuted. We have to do something about that."

Wes thought for a minute and asked her, "How good are you with that rifle of yours?"

She was good enough, they found out, even in the twilight to shoot the wires off of the next pole toward town. It made a CRACK and big sparks when the wires were cut by bullets, but they were now down in the road and disconnected. Wes began to roll up wires and Ashley went to the house to get the tractor. She backed it up to the end of the broken pole and Wes tied a chain to it. She drove to the barnyard with the broken pole. The road was now clear and safe, but the wreck was still there.

Wes reported this to the Sheriff's office and was told by the dispatcher that if the wreck got cleared, he would have to do it. No wrecker nor ambulance service was available. The Sheriff came on the line and said for him to bury the body as he saw fit, but don't bother him about it. He could not do anything for them at this time. He would make a record of this order to protect Wes, but get that guy in the ground somehow, and soon. He told Wes he could have the wrecked car for his trouble.

The family couldn't believe what Wes told them. Wes sat there for a while and let this soak into his mind. He decided that if he had to bury the man, he'd better get started. The tractor had the loader on the front and the post hole auger on the back, from the latest fencing project, so he drove it to the rough corner of the North Hay field and began to drill holes in the ground as close together as he could. When one hole was dug, he used the loader to push the dirt aside and began another one. After an hour's work, he had a big pile of dirt and a rough grave begun. He drove to the house for help. He and Ashley dug the rest of the dirt out with shovels using the tractor headlights to see, and had a grave about 3 feet deep.

Wes dragged the car home with the big tractor, slightly supported on the front end by the 3 point hitch lift, and took it to the gravesite. With a chain tied to the front end loader, he managed to pull up the top of the car enough to drag the body out and roll it into the grave. He had emptied the man's pockets and gotten his wallet with a drivers license in it and his personal effects. it was Bob Stowe all right, but nobody could have recognized him. Wes dragged the car to the barn lot and turned the hose in it they used for washing down the hog pens. It wasn't a perfect job, but the smell was mostly gone when he finished. He dragged the car out sight from the house in a low spot behind a thicket.

The tractor made short work of refilling the grave and packing it down to keep coyotes or other scavengers away. Wes drove the tractor to the barnyard and gave it a bath with the hose, too, then parked it back in the machine shed about 10:00 PM that night. He went in the house where Ashley and Kate very quietly said, "Thank you."

Wes went to the kitchen cabinet and got the quart of whiskey there. He sat down at the table and poured himself a glass full, then began to drink it. Ashley finally went to bed and found him the next morning doing feeding chores when she got up. He didn't want to talk about the day for a long time after.

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## CHAPTER 29

Kate told Wes at lunch the next day that a State of Emergency and Martial Law had been declared, and a National Curfew was in effect. People were supposed to stay in their homes after dark. Homeland Security would enforce this with the aid of local law enforcement and the National Guard.

Wes said, "Yeah, sure. This is a working farm and I plan to work it. Some of that work is going to be after dark. They can kiss my country ass."

He fetched Joe's old .45 Government Model from the kitchen drawer, checked it was on safety, and stuck it in his pants. The extra magazine went in his hip pocket. Not saying another word to anyone, Wes went out to go to work.

Kate watched him go and said to Ashley, "Remind me to never make him real mad at me."

Ashley said, "Yeah. He's different now."

"I didn't want to tell him about the curfew last night, " Kate said.

Ashley shook her head, saying , "Me neither."

Kate sighed and said, "We better cook the rest of what's in the refrigerator before it goes bad. Maybe we should make a big pot of soup. I can reheat it a couple times a day and keep it good for a few days that way, like Mom used to do."

Ashley said, "I better go help Wes. It's a job carrying all that water for the pigs with no electricity to pump it. Wes had the generator going last night to wash up the mess, but we need to save gas."

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Mel Sawyer walked to the door of each home on their dead end road and told them he was having community meeting in his garage the next day at 5:00 PM. Everyone was invited to talk about how they could help each other get through the trouble going on. He had some questions and ideas for everybody. He said he hoped all the others would bring the latest news they had and help anyone they could. He was going to make a big pot of ham and beans, and it would be a pitch-in supper, so bring whatever you liked. Because everyone was short of gas, he suggested they walk if they could. Everyone said they would come.

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"Making cheese isn't all that hard," Larry said as Gloria drained the curds using an old muslin pillow case. She didn't have a strainer big enough, so this would have to do.

"The pigs will like the whey with their feed tonight," she answered.

They heard Mrs. Barnes stirring in her room, so Larry went to check on her. She was always wanting to come out in the kitchen and do things, but she was liable to cause no end of trouble there. They had her with them as much as they could, but somebody had to watch her all the time.

Gloria thought about what Larry had said about the electricity going off, if things didn't straighten up soon. She guessed it was something to be ready for, but she didn't know much about how to deal with



that and it worried her. Gloria was worried about the TV stations playing reruns and old movies all the time. They didn't get any real news now, except talking to people they knew and that was all local. The TV news was so obviously all written by the government now. She wondered what was really going on around the country. The internet was down now, and that was a blow, but she had heard that was a local problem and might get fixed.

The last they had heard was from a neighbor who said their son was in the National Guard and had gotten word through a friend that Louisville was locked down at all the major highways and bridges. Nobody could get in or out, and there were some big fires burning in the city. Larry had chanced going to town and seen that there were either cops or soldiers all over the place, so he came back home without learning much. The mail hadn't come for a couple days, either.

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The Cabinet meeting was called to order and with, "We are assured that the new currency will be ready and distributed to most major banks within 2 weeks. That will restore confidence in our money system and we can get commerce going again. Until that is accomplished and order is restored, we must keep the electric grid running at all costs. Accordingly, I have used my authority by Executive Orders under the Emergency Powers Act, to nationalize all public utilities and assume authority for oversight of their operations. I have done the same with the domestic petroleum industry, to assure supplies for the greatest needs first, being the military, freight transportation, and agriculture.

I have delegated this authority to the appropriate agencies, and will not accept anything but success in this endeavor. Are there any questions?"

He waited for a minute and then said, "Very well, you have your orders. You are dismissed." Nobody said a word. It was widely known that he never did like questions, and was more touchy about them now. The meeting was therefore cut short and everyone filed out.

In the hallway outside, there was some quiet talk among the Cabinet members, relating to how long diesel fuel would be available for rail transport of coal to generating plants. The refineries were reporting that more than half their workers were absent and some were being shut in because of it. It was going to be an iffy situation, and most saw it as hingeing on the ability to keep food and fuel flowing to the nation.

When he thought it was safe to do so, one individual had the cheek to stick a finger in the air and say, "So it shall be written! So it shall be done!" These older officials all remembered that line of Pharaoh's from the movie long ago and silently thought it was appropriate. They agreed with the priorities, but they were concerned about how it was said.

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The nursing home was closed now. Pat McClain and his wife had done all they could to find homes for their residents, but not all had family to take them. Those who did not were a real problem, but they had been mostly sent to the hospital, which the government was forcing to stay open. Somehow they managed to get food there, and there were attempted abuses of that fact when people ran short at home. Pat's big problem now was how to feed his own family and provide heat for the winter. It was getting colder at night, their pantry was running very low, and Pat didn't have any answers.

Two big poultry producers in the area had donated their chickens and turkeys to the government aid program. They didn't want to do that, but they couldn't get any feed for the birds so they were going to

be lost anyway. That kept some meat coming in for a while, but that supply dried up. There was still quite a stench in the air from the slaughter of those birds, done in less than ideal conditions.

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Bert Hollister, the Sheriff was ready to pull his hair out in frustration at the orders he was getting from the Federal guy. He had no idea how a small town worked. His ideas might work in a big city, but this was Mayberry country, and big city thinking was not going to fly here. He wanted to have farmers bring grain and livestock to town to be trucked to a bigger city somewhere for central processing, then trucked BACK here to be distributed. Minus what the big city wanted, of course.

He finally convinced the guy to go with him to the fairgrounds, where an impromptu farmers market had sprung up with farmers trading poultry, hogs, shelled corn, and wheat for whatever the customers had of value. A tractor and hammer mill was set up nearby to grind cornmeal and flour. There was a guy with a huge wood fired smoker doing a booming business cooking freshly killed hogs. Another farmer had 2 wagons loaded down with firewood cut into short lengths and split small for outdoor cooking fires. He was trading for gasoline, oil, and diesel fuel. It was working smoothly and trade was brisk.

The HSA guy's name was Harlan Pell, to be addressed as AGENT Pell. It took some convincing to get him to the fairgrounds, but after he'd got a taste of smoked, pulled pork barbecue, he began to loosen up a little. Bert invited him to just walk around and see what was going on.

Agent Pell wanted to know, "Does this food preparation meet FDA standards?"

Bert said, "It has passed our State Health Department inspections for several years now when we have a County Fair."

Pell had noticed that there weren't nearly as many people at the high school as he expected asking for government food. This must be the reason, as Bert had pointed out. Bert talked to a few people as they made their way back toward his office. Pell didn't say much until they were almost there, when he said, "So you want me to let these people fend for themselves, is that it?"

Bert nodded. "Pretty much," he said. "If it ain't broke, don't try to fix it."

"So you think your county is self sufficient and doesn't need any help."

Bert said, "I didn't say that. We need a source of fuels and electrical power and chemicals for the water treatment plant, and a lot of other things we normally buy. But we can grow food and we do. And we have a surplus to trade, if we can find someone to trade with. That commerce used to be done with money, but money isn't working now, so we need a way to get those things we need and sell what we have. Can you do anything with that?"

Pell spent some time thinking. "Maybe I can. Can you get grain to the old rail depot here?"

"Sure, if the farmers can expect to be paid for it some way."

"How about being paid with Diesel fuel and gasoline?"

Bert smiled for the first time in many days. "You get to do your own haggling for the trades, but, Yep!

That'll work!"

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## CHAPTER 30

December 1st, 2011

It was hard to see with the windshield fogged, so Ronnie Nichols opened the truck windows just a crack to clear it. The cold air made him shiver, but missing a turn on the ridge road could land him 300 feet down a steep hollow, so he endured it until he could see to drive again. Chevy didn't have a very good heater in 1953, and the defroster was worse. But he had lovingly restored the truck to like new condition over the past 12 years. The only thing really modern about it was the bed mounted tool box that contained his mechanics' tools and spare parts for the truck. It was bolted down and locked, because he had been living where thievery was common. The bed tarp covered the rest of his belongings, except for two duffel bags in the cab with his clothes.

He'd converted the truck from 6 volts to a 12 volt system, replacing the starter, battery, head lights and other bulbs, ignition coil, voltage regulator, and replaced the old generator with a rebuilt Delco alternator. It started like a new one, the headlights were bright now, and the battery stayed charged. A complete new exhaust system made it quiet as could be. All the seals and rubber parts were new, along with shocks, tires, and all the wear parts in the suspension. The rebuilt engine was not original. It was a much younger 250 six cylinder with transmission and rear end to match. For all practical purposes, it was a new truck, and the black paint job looked like it.

He had been out of work for several months and had finally gone to his mother to ask if she could help him find a job, and maybe give him a place to stay until he could find something. That was the last thing he wanted to do, because he didn't get along with his step father. But after the County Road Department had laid him off at the end of last summer, there were no jobs to be found, and unemployment would hardly pay rent on his room and buy food. He had been eating really cheap so he could put some gas in the old truck and look for a job, but expenses still ate into his meager savings.

It did not go well at his mother's house. Paul was there, and berated him for being a bum. Again. Paul had been drinking some, and made it clear HE would not support her "worthless son". That had provoked a major fight between Ronnie's mother, Joann and Paul. Ronnie saw this was going nowhere and apologized to his mother for causing a problem. She wanted him to stay, but he knew better. Ronnie left and went back to his truck. All he owned was in it, having given up his weekly rate room downtown. Ronnie decided to go see his grandfather.

He hadn't seen Grandpa Ames for a couple years, but he knew he'd be welcome for a visit. He hated to ask for anything from the old man, who was poor as a church mouse.

At the gas station Ronnie had filled his truck with gas and also filled 2 plastic jugs with gas, and one with kerosene. He bought some motor oil, too, then went to the grocery. He spent most of what money he had left on food that would keep, knowing what the old man normally bought. Mostly, he raised his own food, so it was flour, sugar, coffee, salt and pepper, some chili seasoning and other staples he bought. He stopped at the Dollar Store and bought a few first aid items and some canned meat and fish that was on sale. He bought half a gallon of milk. The old man didn't have electricity nor a refrigerator, but it was cold enough out to keep the milk from spoiling. It wasn't a very big box of food, but he thought it was the least he could do if he was going to ask to stay for a while. He dropped in at the local hardware store and bought a brick of Remington .22 shells. He knew Grandpa would appreciate that. That about cleaned out his remaining cash. There was still his last resort money in the back of his wallet, three \$100 bills behind the liner.

Ronnie didn't know all the people on the ridge road now, just the ones who had been there for a long time. As he passed Mel Sawyer's place, he waved at the old man who was in his garden pulling some turnips and greens, it looked like. Mel returned the wave and went back to work. Some distance down the road Ronnie saw that an old farm had been cleaned up and had some cattle in the pasture. There was no house there, so he wondered who owned it now. He drove slowly on, seeing other changes since he had been out here, smoke from the chimney of a new metal building that looked like a house, and some well tended yards by a couple mobile homes.

He finally came to the end of the gravel road and turned onto the dirt track that led to his grandpa's cabin. The ground was fairly dry, a good thing on this rutted lane. In low gear, he negotiated the slight grade down to the cabin, past the old slat corn crib, now 2/3 full of ear corn, and then parked by the old barn, near the rock fence that kept livestock out of the yard. A little smoke was coming from the chimney, and the old man's pickup was in the shed. Soon the old man stepped out on the porch, shotgun in hand. He recognized the truck and set the shotgun down against the house wall, then walked out to meet Ronnie.

"Long time no see. Ya doin' alright?"

Ronnie smiled and shook his hand. "Yep. Well, I ain't gonna lie to you. I need a place to stay for a while. I haven't been able to find any work since last summer, and I ain't going to live with Paul. You know how he is."

The old man nodded with out speaking and looked down at the ground. Then, he looked into Ronnie's eyes and said, "You're welcome here, anytime. C'mon in." He turned toward the house.

"I brought some groceries. I'll get 'em." Ronnie began to move things to the porch. He noticed then how quiet it was out here. The old man took his gun inside and came back to lend a hand. In a few minutes, he was moved in.

Harlan Ames said, "I got to go to the spring for water before it gets dark. I'd better do that."

Ronnie said, "I'll get it. This bucket, right?"

Harlan nodded and they both stepped outside. Ronnie said, "I'd forgot how peaceful it is here."

"It's peaceful all right. Just not much else to recommend livin' on a poor farm."

"I don't know about that," Ronnie said, "Peaceful can be important, and hard to find."

"I'll feed the stock and we'll go make some supper." Harlan went toward the barn while Ronnie headed over the hill to the small spring.

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"I got to go see Mel Sawyer today, and see when he wants the pig I sold him," Harlan said over breakfast. "I done milked the goats and put the milk in the spring to cool."

"Wanna drive your old truck?"

Harlan got the message that Ronnie wanted to show off how he'd restored the old truck and said, "Why not? I been wonderin' what all ya done to it. Sure looks nice now."

Ronnie grabbed the breakfast dishes and pit them in the dish pan of suds on the wood cook stove to soak clean. He said, "I'll refill the water bucket and we'll be about done here."

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Over a cup of strong coffee at Mel's place they visited for a while before getting down to business. Mel was in fine form, saying, "I tell you that Chinese head honcho ain't gonna take much more crap offa the United States before he clamps down. He's said he'll get back at us for printin' so much money that makes them lose value on the Treasury bonds they bought. If he dumps all their US bonds on the market, the dollar will sink like a rock. If you got any money in the bank, it's time to get it out and do something with it. The idea of havin' money in the bank ain't what it used to be. You're better off to buy somethin' with it, anything that will last and be worth somethin' later."

Harlan said, "I don't know anything about investing money."

"Investin' ain't no good now. You're a hog farmer, so buy some hogs! They'll grow and make you money. Lemme say that diffrent. A hog will still be worth a hog next year, even if a dollar ain't worth a dollar, y'see? A dollar is just PAPER, an' pretty soon that's what it'll be worth. Paper."

Harlan had heard of such things from his wife's mother, who had lived in Germany when their money went bad. People had starved to death there, but she said the farmer's did all right. Mel was ranting on about the stock market and other things being fake, but Harlan only half understood him. He was still digesting his memories from that old woman who would never put money in a bank. Harlan said, "I reckon you're right about that Mel. We got some work to do right quick, I suppose. We better get goin'. When d'you want me to bring you that hog?"

"How about day after tomorrow? I got some things to do myself, and I want to butcher that hog as soon as I get him. That all right?"

"That's fine with me. I'll see ya then. Me an' Ronnie needs to go to town today, so we better move along."

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"I thought we were going to town?"

Harlan had turned back toward his farm. He said, "I got to get the old stock racks on this thing, and get some other things."

They dragged the old wood stock racks out of the barn and had them on the truck in a hurry. Ronnie looked for the corner bolts and Harlan handed him a piece of wire, saying, "We'll get some new bolts in town. This'll do fer now."

The old man went in the house and soon came out with a fat envelope in the coat pocket and got back in the driver's seat.

"Boy! This thing sure runs good now! Just like it was new. And it drives good, too. It wallered all over the road when I gave to you."

"I made some changes, Grandpa."

"I'll say you did. The back springs was pretty tired, but now it sits high like it should. Ought to haul a good load now, I'd say."

"It's got the whole drive train from a late model 3/4 ton under it now. It will haul all you can put in it."

Harlan grinned and said, "Let's find out. I'm goin' to the Feed Store."

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They made a couple loads with feed, seed and fertilizer, then another trip with fencing wire from Brownstown's Farm Co-op. over the next few days, the truck was on the road a lot. They saw Ed Wilson with his little truck loaded down a couple times and waved at him. Harlan explained that he was the one who fixed up the old farm with the cattle.

Harlan had written checks for most of what he bought, then used cash from his envelope at the sporting goods store where he bought a variety of things. The Co-op truck driver always complained about Harlan's lane, but he delivered gasoline and filled his tank, saying he had another stop to make back here anyway. Harlan had him leave a couple 5 gallon buckets of oil and hydraulic fluid, and wrote him a check for it all.

they made a stop at the bank where he drew out some cash, not leaving much in the account. They stopped for lunch at a fast food place, then the old man turned west.

"I need to see an Amish man about some pigs. "He said he had some last month, and they oughta be ready to wean now."

It took 2 trips to get them all, including a boar pig from another farmer down the road. On the way home with the last load, Ronnie asked, "Grandpa, how come you never got electricity at your place?"

"Never needed it. An' the REMC wanted the price of a farm to run it way back there. When Louise was still livin', she said she was used to the old ways and didn't particularly want it. Same with a gas stove. She was used to cookin' on the wood range. After she died, I never saw a need to change. That's why I got money for what I want now. Think I better get some parts for the tractor, too. I been puttin' that off."

Ronnie was rethinking about his grandfather being poor like his mother and Paul always said. The old man was full of surprises.

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## CHAPTER 31

December 12th, 2011

"You could at least have bought something to EAT!!" , Joann said. "But no, you had to get DRUNK!"

Paul Taylor was belligerent. "If you don' like it here, you c'n go someplace else!"

He was confident she would shut up at that, since he knew she had no place to go. He smiled to himself. Joann saw the smirk and told him, "I think I'll just do that."

Paul chuckled softly and passed out on the couch. Joann stood there fuming. She went to the kitchen to get a drink of water and take an aspirin for her headache. She sat down at the kitchen table and rested her head in her hands. Since her husband died, things had gone from bad to worse. By the time she paid for the funeral the life insurance money was gone. She got a job at the drug store finally, but she couldn't make the house payments and the bank had the Sheriff kick her out after a few months. Paul was good looking and she had fallen for his line of comforting words, followed by his invitation to move in with him. It had been all right for a little over a year. But he had let her believe he owned his home, only to find out later that he rented it. She learned other things he'd lied about. She had made a classic mistake of the newly widowed.

The rent was due a couple weeks ago when Paul got laid off, then the drug store closed when the banks did. The home office said it was only until the banks opened again, but nobody knew when that would be, if ever. Nobody believed anything the government said on TV now. She had no place to go, either. She couldn't bring herself to face her Dad. He would never change, and that had made life hard in high school. She was the butt of jokes and called white trash and other less complimentary things just for being poor. She had vowed to herself she would get away from that old poor farm and never come back to it again. Her husband had been a good man and they lived pretty well on his factory wages. Joann had finally been able to hold her head up and dress better than those who had called her trash in school. Now, at 52 years old she had nothing and had been living with that piece of crap that snored on the couch, passed out drunk.

The government was handing out food at the high school, but Joann would rather starve than be seen there as needing charity. Her headache wasn't any better, but she was thinking hard despite that. After an hour she came to a decision, and went to look for cardboard boxes in the garage. Methodically, she emptied the kitchen cabinets of food and her tableware. Next was the bathroom cabinets. She toted boxes to her car and packed them in tight. Clothing was next, and went into trash bags she packed into the back seat. She took some of Paul's work clothes, too. He owed her that much and she would need them. They fit tolerably well, although the shirts were a little big. The car wasn't all that big, so it took all the room it had. It was past sundown when she started the car and headed for her Dad's old farm on the ridge road north of town. At least she knew he would have food to eat. She hurried to get out of town and beat the curfew. She only saw one other car moving in town and it looked like an unmarked police car headed away from her. There were no other cars on the highway. She noticed a lot of houses that were dark and wondered what that meant. She hadn't been north of town in quite a while, so maybe they had been foreclosed.

Joann was pretty sure her son Ronnie had gone to her Dad's place. The boy thought the world of him, despite her trying to motivate him to do better than that. Her Dad had given him that old junk truck of



his, then Ronnie had spent all his money and time making it like new. Why he wanted a 60 year old truck, she had no idea, but she couldn't talk him into buying a newer one. It still looked like a piece of junk even after he had spent thousands of dollars on a new engine and all that. When he moved out to live in an apartment, she was glad the eyesore of a truck was gone. He had been working on it ever since then for ten years. She knew he had dated a few girls, but it had never gone anywhere. She had hoped he would find a good job somewhere and settle down, but jobs had been hard to get. He had been supporting himself. She had to give him that much credit, although now he was hurting like everybody else.

Once she got off the highway, she drove slowly on the crooked gravel road. There was quite a gathering at old Mel Sawyer's place, with lights on in his garage. Then she spotted Ronnie's old truck there and on impulse she stopped and backed up to get in the driveway. The first person she saw was her Dad standing just outside the garage door.

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"Hello Dad."

"Hi Joann. What brings you out this way?"

Joann's mind raced, trying to think of what to say to him. It wasn't easy to begin, but then the words came tumbling out.

"I'm sorry Dad. I didn't understand. I got so.... so taken up in the world and I had to get away, and then it all went to hell and I don't have any place to go." The tears came running down her face as she stood there shaking as she cried.

"You've always got a place to go," Harlan said and reached out for her hand. They held each other while tears ran down his cheeks, following wrinkles that made it look like old wet leather in the light from the open garage door.

From inside, Mel yelled out, "You all come on in and close the door, and we'll get down to the business of eatin'. I think better on a full stomach, and you all prob'ly do too."

To Joann's surprise, the people who knew her smiled at her and pointed her at the food and utensils. There were no questions. She realized she was still part of this community. It was an important discovery for her. She spoke to those people, but otherwise remained silent, sitting with her Dad on one side and her son on the other as they ate. She softly asked her Dad what was going on here?"

"We're havin' a meetin' to figure out how we can all best get through this trouble. Some folks here don't have any heat, an' others need food and such like. We're here to see what we can do about it."

Joann didn't answer. She hadn't seen anything of the sort since she was child out here. Her life in town had been very different.

People began to stack plates and tableware on the front table, so she followed there example. Mel stood up and asked for their attention.

"We all have some troubles and we're here to see if we can help each other out somehow. Some need heat, others need food, and we all know that money is about worthless, if you could find a store that's

open, or if you even have enough gas to get to town. Let's each of us tell what we have to offer, and tell what we need. Some of you might think you don't have anything, but others might need what you can do, so tell us what you're good at doin', too. Ed Wilson, how about you start it off?"

Ed stood up and said, "I'm okay for most things, but I'm getting pretty old to be startin' to farm, so I'm going to need some help now and then. I have some beef cattle I could sell and feed some people. I'll need help making hay, or buying it some way next summer. I've got a big tractor and enough fuel to do some things for a while. I need to clear more pasture and hay ground, so I'll need help doing that. Oh, and I'd appreciate any news anybody has about what's going on in town and around the area. We'd have to can the extra until we could eat a whole beef, but that could be done. I have a hammer mill, too, and can grind cornmeal and flour. I have some corn, but no wheat, so If somebody can come up with wheat, we can all have flour. You ate some of my cornmeal in that cornbread, so judge by that if it suits you."

Mel said, "Thanks for that, Ed. Who's next? I know there are people without heat, so speak up. We might be able to help that. Who needs help baking biscuits and bread? My old wood cookstove ain't beautiful, but it bakes real fine, an' I got lots of wood."

Lennie Hoskins said, "I'm living on borrowed time, and I know it. I have a pace maker and if I don't get the battery changed in about 2 months, that's it for me. Somehow I doubt our insurance is any good now, even if the hospital here could do it. I always got it done in Louisville at Jewish Hospital, and that was on fire the last I saw on TV. My wife has to drive me there and we don't have much gas in the car. I heard the gas stations are closed."

Mel asked, "What does anyone know about hospitals? Are any of them around open?"

Mike said, "The one in Salem is open. At least I heard that they took some folks there from the nursing homes, and the government is sending food there. I think it's heated with natural gas, and they are keeping the gas and electric going. It's small, so I don't know what they can do there."

Charlie Allen spoke up. "I got some gas at the Co-op station in Brownstown, but I paid dear for it, and that was the day after the banks closed. It about cleaned me out of cash at over \$8.00 a gallon, and he said their truck wasn't coming on time, so they may be out now. There might be some gas in Salem, but I haven't heard. I didn't go to town after I heard about the Martial Law thing. I don't want some fool soldier to shoot us."

"I'm milking goats," Harlan said. "I could wean some kids and have milk from all four right now, if somebody needs milk. We cool it in the spring water, an' it's cold enough out now to keep it for a day or two. I don't know what to ask for in trade, but we can prob'ly work out somethin'. I got some hogs we could butcher soon, in fact you ate some of one tonight that I sold to Mel. We can salt cure and smoke some of it an' make good bacon and hams. I always sold the hogs for money to live on, but I don't know what to do hardly, with money bein' no good. But I ain't goin' to let nobody starve when I got food. If you're willin' to work, I'll see that you get enough to eat."

Mel said, "Thanks a lot, Harlan. Can't nobody find fault with what he said. But he brought up something important here. What can we use instead of money? It's gonna get real complicated tradin' around. You might need milk and not have what Harlan needs, or Ed there has a beef cow, but we need to share that amongst us all, but how do we pay him?"

"Why don't we just write Ed an IOU from each one who gets some beef," Gerald Tomes said. "Then we

can add up the IOU's and settle up with some trade later? My gran dad said people done that back during the Depression when they closed the banks. We all know each other here, so we can surely trust each other that much. I mean, if we didn't pay Ed for his cow, he wouldn't sell us any more, would he? So we all have to treat each other right. I don't see why it wouldn't work."

Ed allowed that would be okay with him and a few others nodded. Then Vickie Hoskins said, "We're not in good health, neither me nor Lennie, so we can't do farm work to pay for what we need. But we do have some silver coins, if anybody would be willing to take those at some fair price for food."

Harlan and Ed said they would do that, and Gerald, who raised catfish said he would, too.

Vickie continued, "We are going to need some way to heat the house before winter is over because our tank of LP won't last all winter. Then we won't be able to cook, either. If we could get a wood stove soon, we could save the gas to cook with for a long time. Could anybody get us a wood stove and put it in?"

"I don't HAVE a wood stove, but I have some steel plate and can make one as long as the electricity stays on," Mike Wilson said. "The government said on TV they were taking over the power companies and would keep 'em running, but I worry about that. If we are going to make something, I have to have my welder going. We'll find some way to get it put in your house. You have a chimney?"

"Yes, there's a chimney," Lennie said. "The house had a coal furnace years ago, so they used that chimney to vent the gas furnace."

The meeting began to break up into small groups of people working out needs, who had what, and how they could arrange payment. After an hour of that, Mel stood up and said, "If it's all right with the rest of you, how about we do this again in a couple weeks? In the meantime, don't be strangers. If you need something TELL somebody and get it figured out. I think we can make it. What do you all think?"

Several folks thanked Mel for getting them together and began to wander off toward their homes. Not everyone had done much talking during the meeting, but they did a lot of it afterward. The word "neighbor" was taking on a whole new meaning.

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## CHAPTER 32

December 25th, 2011

The Sheriff had turned the grain for fuel deal over to the Mayor's office, and apparently they had done a pretty good job of working with Agent Pell and the farmers. The fuel would be delivered by tank cars today, and farmers were to bring grain in and dump it at the grain elevator for weighing and storage, just like usual. They would have the amount recorded and the fuels would be assigned to each seller whatever amount they were owed. They had 2 weeks to move the fuel from the tank cars to some storage of their own. City Police would guard the tank cars until the fuel had all been dispensed. Some other deal had been reached with a gas station in town, where fuel sales would be rationed and sold by the government. Nobody was happy with the results, but nobody had money to buy much gas or diesel fuel, so the rationing was a moot point. Other stations would get supplied with fuels as soon as possible, but there were problems with that.

Banks had reopened the day before, after being recapitalized by the Federal Reserve Bank with "New Dollars". The old coins would be honored for their original portion of a dollar, but the paper money would be exchanged, 5 old dollars for one New Dollar. All bank accounts would be recalculated to reflect the amounts in New Dollars. Businesses and individuals had a month to turn in their old paper dollars for New Dollars. There was a shortage of printed New Dollars, so all transactions were encouraged to be done electronically.

The price of gold in New Dollars was first decreed to be 1/5th of the last Spot Price, but the US government had done nothing to change their budget and spending, except to divide every number by 5. The result of that was the New Dollar price of gold immediately being traded only with high "Premiums" over the decreed spot price, and likewise for silver. The news of the Federal Reserve recapitalizing banks with money created from thin air was taken into account on all trading in Dollars. Prices of goods sold in New Dollars were not 1/5th the old amounts, but more like 1/2 the old amounts. Oil was worse. It had been trading in a range from \$135 to \$145/barrel and was expected to decrease to 1/5 of that, or \$27 to \$29/barrel. Instead, oil went to \$58 then \$66. That effectively made it cost double what it had before the new currency was issued.

The announcement on TV, radio, and internet resulted in some other problems. Within 24 hours, most vending and change machines in the entire country had been robbed or stolen, since change was worth it's original value and paper money had been devalued to 1/5th the old value. Businesses were trying to assure they could resupply their stocks, so they kept prices high, because imported goods were either very high priced, or not available without payment in some other currency. The New Dollar was already trading foreign exchanges at well below its' stated value.

Some businesses reopened under pressure from Federal officials, but the prices were high, and shortages were showing up in everything. The average person had his buying power cut in half, IF he still had a job, and IF he could find anything he needed to buy. When SNAP cards were refilled, the recipients were shocked at how little their allowance actually bought. Rioting began again, despite continuing Martial Law and curfews. Crime rates exploded as the poor began to steal anything they could get their hands on. Police were overwhelmed and didn't even respond to burglary calls, so people began to take matters into their own hands. The murder rate soared in cities. Life in the US began to resemble that in other very poor countries around the world.

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The grain for fuel deal had been good for a few farmers, providing some assurance they could plant a crop the next year, with only the market being an unknown. That grain was sent to food processors under government control to be made into basic foodstuffs. Some Federal assistance had been available to city residents, but the predictable result was too little, too late, and inflation to follow as the government spent money it did not have.

The free market, what there was of it, was at least half black market, or direct barter. Some farmers and opportunists did very well at that. A few got caught in violation of new Federal mandates and sentenced to prison, but the prisons were a revolving door now, the government being unable to feed and supply them. Long sentences were either commuted, or given probation after only a few weeks, or days. Many long term prisoners had been released during the emergency. Some State prisons were virtually emptied for lack of food.

Most of the released prisoners, finding the conditions in cities, began to work their way out to less populated areas searching for food and shelter. Home invasions were commonplace and shootouts were the norm. What police were still on the job began to mete out justice as they saw fit, aided by National Guard and Regular Army troops, with less than perfect results. Most cities were bankrupt and depended on Federal assistance to pay their employees, so the number of police and other emergency employees had decreased rapidly.

Garbage collection was done only in more prosperous areas, if at all. The water was undrinkable, many old homes and other buildings had burned to the ground, and sewers backed up. Vermin invaded the trash heaps. Disease wasn't far behind, and hospitals were woefully understaffed with little medication available. City life had degraded from miserable to intolerable.

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Laura was planning a Christmas party.

"I can make popcorn garlands and I have some Holly berries for color. There are some old ornaments in the loft bedroom. Can you make some wreaths? There is some pine growing over on Gerald's place."

Mike said, "Yeah, I can do that. I have to finish this batch of dog food first. If I don't keep stirring it will stick and burn in the bottom."

"I'll be glad when it's done. That is not the best smelling kettle I ever had in the kitchen. What is IN there? Or maybe I don't want to know..."

"It's just some leftovers from butchering that pig, and some cornmeal. Not the most perfect diet maybe, but the dogs are interested. There. That will thicken up when it cools off. Should be fine."

He set the aromatic kettle off the wood range and carried it outside where he put it on the shed roof to cool. No need to let the wildlife get into it, he thought. Mike went back into the house and grabbed his pistol, his folding Buck knife, and his winter coat.

"I'll be back before long. I might go say Hi to Gerald on the way and see what they are doing."  
"Okay, you be careful."

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"I don't have any idea what we should do with the farm next year," Wes said.

Ashley thought he looked pretty grim and said, "With the way prices are in the new money, there is no way we can keep up like we have been doing. We can't make expenses. We'll have to cut way down on the use of machinery. No way can we feed that big truck getting 8 miles to the gallon when diesel is over 6 New Dollars a gallon and corn is only ONE New Dollar a bushel."

Kate said, "Well, they said fuel would come down when the refineries get back up to speed, but I don't believe it. I've never seen fuel go any direction but UP in my lifetime. We have to figure out how to make a living without much fuel."

"I won't be using any gas now, with no job. I doubt if the job would pay for the gas now anyway," Ashley said.

Wes was racking his brain for ideas, but none came. Nobody knew if there would be a market for corn next year, or what the costs would be to produce it. He said, "We still have about 3,000 bushels of corn in the bins, but what should we do with it? It was a good deal to sell 600 bushels for diesel fuel, because we got 300 gallons for it. Even trading a hog for the spare tank from that guy was okay, 'cause now we don't have to worry about fuel. But there is no way to know what we can make on corn next year, or hogs either if we feed some of what we have."

Kate said, "Don't do anything with it. We can sell it next spring for SEED!"

Ashley and Wes looked at her and then it began to sink in as Kate said, "Hybrid seed corn cost near \$200 a 50 pound bag last year. That's why we went with the open pollinated kind, even though it was hard to find. The way things are, I wouldn't bet there will be much hybrid seed available next spring with businesses closed, and the money all messed up. That 3,000 bushels will plant about 6,000 acres, and people are going to want it."

She added, "Come to think of it, I'm glad I always saved garden seeds, too. Might be hard to find some next spring. And I had a bumper crop of seed from green beans, sweet corn and some other things. We can keep the neighborhood in garden seed next year, too."

Ashley smiled and said, "You always think of the strangest things, Mom, but it's a great idea!"

"It's brilliant!" Wes was impressed. "It's so simple, and so good. So, if we are going to sell corn, we need to be selling some hogs for now, and cut back on how much grain we feed the cattle. They can get by on hay, and we don't have to push 'em to be ready for market, with no market open now. I think that is going to be the greatest idea you ever had, Kate!"

Kate smiled a little and said, "Maybe that makes it worth celebrating Christmas? You want to make a pumpkin pie, Ashley?"

"Yeah, Mom, and I'll be saving all the seeds out of that pumpkin, too!"

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"It's crazy, Todd! What if we get caught with guns by the Army?"

"What difference is there if we get shot by Army troops trying to cross the bridge, or if we get killed by some punks invading our home? Some gang just raided the shopping center in Okolona and set fire to

it. We've stayed too long. We need to get to Indiana."

Todd Reynolds put his breakfast dishes in the sink, and helped his wife clear the bar.

"They have soldiers at the bridges. They check everybody for guns and stuff, the TV said."

"Don't worry, I don't think it is that bad yet. Let's get the trailer hooked up and go now. We don't have that much left here to worry about. Alicia, this is why we built the retreat, remember? We're not going through downtown. I plan to take the county roads to Brandenburg and cross there. Not much going on out there, from what I've seen on the news."

His wife nodded and called, "Christopher! Come here, please."

The boy clomped down the stairs like a typical 12 year old and asked, "What's up Mom?"

"We're going to Indiana to the retreat, okay? So get your stuff together. Pack some clothes because we are going to stay a while."

"How long are we going to stay Mom?"

"It might be a long time. We've decided it isn't safe here now, so we are going to lock up the house like we practiced, okay?"

"Yeah Mom! This will be so cool!"

His face brightened and he rushed back upstairs to his room. Todd turned to the back door and hooked up the cargo box trailer to his Ford F-350 Super Duty. The fiberglass camper top had tinted windows and was packed with only a small amount of room at the back. That got filled with the family's duffel bags of clothing, Christopher adding his 2 in last. The sun was up and it was a bright and clear Sunday morning in south Louisville as they rolled out of the rather exclusive subdivision. Todd drove past several other big homes on large tracts of carefully selected wooded land and headed west.

The bridge crossing was anticlimactic. The National Guard soldiers there stopped him and asked what was his purpose for going to Indiana? He told them the truth. They were moving to their country home until things settled down.

The soldier nodded and said, "We've seen some of that going both ways lately. Drive carefully and have a good trip."

Todd told his wife, "I think they are looking for suspicious characters. If it was an old car filled with young punks, they would have a lot more questions."

Alicia breathed a sigh of relief and they continued across the bridge and up the steep grade into Indiana. The diesel growled as Todd downshifted and poured on the power up the hill.

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Mel heard the diesel truck long before he saw it. He stuck his .38 in his pants and sat down on the porch in front of his mobile home to watch. The dark green Ford rolled slowly past pulling long white box trailer. The truck he recognized. It was that rich couple from Louisville that owned the Lincoln

Log cabin up the road a piece on the other side. It even had a green roof just like the Lincoln Log kids' toys. They hadn't been out here since late last summer and the weeds were grown up some around the cabin. They must be moving out here now, from the looks of it, he thought. Mel decided to walk over and say hello.

Todd had the trailer backed up into a graveled parking space and they were taking bags out of the back of the truck when Mel walked up and said, "Hello neighbor! Merry Christmas!"

Todd and Alicia stopped moving. It took them a second to remember that today was Christmas Day. Then they both smiled and said, "Merry Christmas to you, Mel!"

"Looks like you're movin' in. Need a hand with things?"

"Uh, well, yeah, can you get that cooler inside? We emptied the refrigerator into it. We're just taking in clothing for now. The rest can wait. I have to get a fire going in the wood stove and turn things on."

Mel carried the cooler inside and said, "The Wilsons are having a Christmas dinner this evening, if you want to come. Ever'body on the road is invited. They butchered a hog last week and got some fresh tenderloin. I'm takin' cornbread and some greens, and ole Harlan will bring fresh milk. Gerald's bringing some of his home made wine and there'll be plenty to eat. Good chance to see ever'body and relax for a while."

Alicia said, "I don't know what we can bring... Oh, there's some things in the cooler. I'll find something."

"Don't matter. Come on over. We're gonna eat about two o'clock, but come anytime."

Mel started for home. He noticed Mike coming out the woods with an armload of pine limbs, headed toward the Reynolds' cabin.

Christopher saw Mike first and said, "Dad, Mr. Wilson is coming down the road."

Todd took the armload of firewood in the house and came back outside.

"Hello there! I heard your truck when I was in the woods, so I thought I'd come invite you to Christmas dinner this afternoon. Laura's cookin' like crazy and we'll need some help eatin' all that, so bring an appetite."

Todd stepped forward and shook his free hand. "Thanks. Mel just came over and invited us. We'll be there after while. I have to get the place warmed up, but that's all we have to do today."

"You all goin' to stay a while? Things are kinda rocky in the cities, I hear."

Alicia walked up and said, "It is a nightmare in Louisville. We were afraid to send Chris to school even before they closed down. The city doesn't have fuel for the buses, and the gangs are running wild. We had to boil our water. It's terrible. We saw smoke in the downtown area, so we went through the back roads to Brandenburg and came up that way."

"Any trouble at the bridge? I heard they were stopping everybody."



Todd said, "Yes, they stopped us but no problem there. I think they are just watching for troublemakers."

Christopher said, "Yeah! There were soldiers and they had guns and everything. There weren't many cars, just some big trucks, but not many on the way up here. It was kinda spooky, with no traffic. And there were some soldiers at stop lights in little towns and at the square in Salem, too. This is all weird."

Alicia held her husband's hand and said, "A quiet Christmas dinner is just what we need, I think. We'll come over later."

She gave a tentative smile at Mike, who said, "Okay. I have to get busy decorating, or I'll never hear the end of it. See ya!"

He picked up his armload of pine branches and walked off.

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Joann was washing up kettles and buckets after draining cheese curds, a noisy process, so she didn't hear anything else. Near the corn crib, Ronnie was in line with a hollow that led up behind Gerald's property, so he easily heard the diesel truck drive in and then maneuver the trailer. Harlan was cleaning some stalls and putting down fresh bedding for the goats, so when he came out of the barn Ronnie asked him who had a diesel truck out here.

"Hmm. Oh, those rich folks from Louisville drives a Ford diesel pickup. Mebbe they showed up. Makes sense, Louisville bein' what it is. It's likely they got a bellyful of city an' decided to come out to their 'retreat', as they call it. That's the log cabin down by Mel's. They're young folks. Got a boy about half grown."

"Wonder what they are like, snooty maybe?"

"Not really. They just don't know much about livin' in the country is all. They got all kinds of fancy stuff there, with solar panels an' batteries to run the water pump an' lights an' such. They had some contractor from the city to put up that cabin, a year ago last summer. It's one of those kit houses that's all cut to fit and come in on a truck. It's pretty nice. Got a wood stove. They done that much right. Not much firewood cut, though. What you'd expect from city folks."

By this time they had walked to the house and went in to clean up for dinner at the Wilson's.

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Ed had been in the woods west of his trailer and noticed the truck arrive, but he was busy pulling down a wild grapevine from a tall tree. Laura wanted some thin vines to make decorations, so he used his folding belt knife to cut off the small vines from the main stem, leaving it in the woods.

He couldn't see the log house from where he was, but on the way to Mike's he saw smoke from that direction. He assumed that the people from the city had come out and were getting the wood stove going. It was cold out, but not bad now that the sun was up. There had been heavy frost when he got up, but the ground hadn't frozen yet. If it didn't get too cold for a while yet, maybe he could get some more fence built. He wanted more pasture ground cleared, but he could cut trees after it got really cold. You can't hand dig post holes in frozen ground, though, so that had to come first.

Ed saw Mike trimming pine branches and shaping them into a wreath.

Mike said, "Just in time with those vines. I'll use them to wrap the wreaths so I don't need to use string." Ed sat down to help with the process. They made a big one for the front door, and a smaller one that they hung on the outhouse door around the traditional crescent moon cutout. Just for grins, Mike said. Laura came out with some Holly trimmings and poked them into the wreaths so the red berries would show.

Food soon covered the dining table as people arrived and added their contributions. Mouths were watering as Lennie Hoskins said a Christmas prayer. He made it short and soon everyone was shuffling around the table to load plates and then find somewhere to sit. They sat on anything and everything, small tables, borrowed chairs, and some just leaned back against the kitchen counter to eat. Fresh cold milk and a big pot of coffee helped wash down the meal and the pumpkin pies that followed.

Christopher Reynolds said, "I've never been so full in my life! That was GOOD!"

Laura said, "Thank you! I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"Did you cook it on this stove? What kind of stove is that?"

"It's a wood stove. There's a little wood fire in that door there, and it heats the whole stove top and the oven, if you want. I baked the pies in there."

"We have an electric stove at home. Our cabin has a wood stove, but it doesn't look like this one. It's just to keep the house warm. I guess maybe we could cook on it, too."

Laura took time to explain to the boy that her stove was made to just get the top or the oven hot, but not heat up the house so much. "It still makes the house warm, but the fire doesn't last long without feeding it often."

He was thinking about it, and said, "So, you don't have to buy gas for it, or electricity. Dad said that gas cost a lot now, and might be hard to get. He said we have plenty to last a long time, though."

"Yes, a lot of things are hard to get now, with the money all messed up."

A few men went outside with their after dinner glass of wine to smoke and visit. Talk turned from what the government might do next (nothing good, they were sure of that) to what needed done next in the neighborhood and how they could accomplish those things.

Similar talk went on in the house as men helped the women clean up after the meal. All the food was portioned out so everyone got to take home some of everything. Alicia couldn't believe they had fresh coleslaw, fresh beets, and fresh kale greens.

"Fresh vegetables just can't be found in Louisville. Where did you FIND those things?"

Mel was drying dishes and said, "I cut the greens out of my garden this morning. I don't know who had the cabbage and beets, but they store real good right in the garden if you cover 'em up with something to keep 'em from freezing."

"We had the beets and cabbage," Laura told her. "Everybody has a garden out here."

Alicia had a firm look on her face and said, "Todd bought some garden seeds in cans. We will be having a garden next summer. I suppose we'll have to find a way to dig it to plant it, but he can do that."

"Why don't you have Ed plow it up for you? It's not very far to drive a tractor and he can have it done in no time at all."

"Todd got some cash exchanged, but they only let us take out a small amount. We have to be careful of what we spend until things get back to normal."

Laura looked at her and said, "Most of us out here just trade work instead of paying money for everything. Let Todd work it out with Ed."

Similar deals were being struck among several people. Ed needed help to build fence and clear ground. Gerald and several others wanted to buy a beef calf and split it up among them. Harlan had a daily supply of milk and eggs, and he would trade for silver coins, kerosene for his lamps, or gas for his tractor. Mel had quite a bit in his garden still, and he wanted some fresh meat, too. The next month's business planning got off to a good start that day.

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## CHAPTER 33

New Year's Day, 2012

Wes answered the phone and his sister said hello.

"Hello, Gloria. How are you and Larry doing?"

"Oh, we're fine."

There was a long pause. Wes heard his sister crying softly, and asked, "What's the matter, Gloria? Are you sure you're okay?"

"Larry's mother died in her sleep last night. It was a merciful thing, I guess. But we don't have any money to bury her, and the funeral home said we'd have to dig the grave, and she doesn't have a cemetery lot. The funeral director said we could bury her on the farm, 'cause the government passed this "Exemption Law" 'cause there's no fuel and we have to do something."

Wes didn't know what to say. He let Gloria cry for a minute, then asked, "So you can bury her on the farm?"

Gloria forced herself to go ahead. "Yes. I mean, the law says we can, but we don't have any way to dig a grave. Larry had some wood and made a casket today, but we have to bury her quick. Like, tomorrow at the latest. I mean, she's not embalmed or anything, and..."

"Okay, I have diesel fuel, and some gasoline, but I don't have a backhoe or any way to dig much. Can I talk to Larry?"

"Yeah. Here."

"Hello Wes. It's a bad time here."

"I'm sure it is. What can I do to help?"

"We need to get a grave dug, and the ground is frozen a couple inches down, maybe more. I tried to use my tractor and plow to break through the crust, but I can't get the plow to go in the ground. Do you know any way to do this? It would take forever to do it by hand."

Wes was thinking furiously. "I think I might. I've got that subsoiler and I think our tractor would make it work. I'll give it a try and call you back, okay? If it works, I'll be over and we'll get to work."

"Thanks Wes, I really appreciate this."

An hour later Wes called back and told Larry it was working, so he would drive the tractor over.

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Ashley rode with him in the tractor cab, and brought a pick and a shovel. The subsoiler easily cracked the frozen crust and ripped out chunks of soil. Wes went over it several times as deep as it would go.

Larry followed him with his tractor and plow to break up the dirt more. That got it 8" deep and they repeated the process. The third try, the tractors were unable to go any deeper without tipping over in the hole. Then they started the hard work of shoveling by hand.

It was getting dark by the time they had the grave about four feet deep. They decided to stop then and get something to eat. They were all exhausted. After the meal, Gloria told Wes and Ashley that she and Larry had cleaned up his mother's body.

"In all the years of nursing, I never had to clean up a dead person. They, uh, mess themselves, you know. The funeral home always did that. It's a lot harder when it's family."

Wes reached for her hand and told her he could understand. Gloria realized then that he had done it all with her ex-husband Bob. She shut her eyes tight and said, "Thank you Wes," then cried again. When she finally stopped, the crying had done it's job and she was more relaxed and calm.

Larry said, "We dressed her in nice clothes, and we put her in the casket I made. If you don't mind, I'd like to get this over with."

They all got up and got their coats on, then proceeded to carry the casket outside. It was a quiet group that carried the simple casket to the gravesite on the rise behind the house. Larry fetched some rope so they could lower the casket into the grave. He bowed his head and asked Gloria to say a few words. She said a prayer and bid the old lady goodbye.

Larry threw in the traditional first handful of dirt, and Gloria also threw a handful. Wes said, "I'll take it from here. You all go on back to the house."

When they were inside, Wes started the big tractor and used the loader bucket to refill the grave. He ran over it with the tractor to compact the soil, then smoothed it with the bucket and mounded the leftover dirt on top.

It was going on 2:00 AM when he and Ashley got home that night.

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Charles Allen's niece, Tara Robertson, had moved in with him and his wife Denise the last day of December with Tara's 14 year old son, Matthew. Her hair showed a lot more gray than he thought it should at 39, and she looked half starved. Her husband, a used car dealer, had died of dysentery after drinking un-boiled water by mistake. Her job at the auto license branch had ended when the new money and devaluation happened. Her husband hadn't sold a car for a long time and they were broke before he died. He was the last person the County paid for burying as a pauper.

They had been living on what the government handed out at the school, but it wasn't enough and there hadn't been any delivery of food there the past week. Her husband had siphoned all the gas from every used car on his lot and put it all in their car. She still had half a tank when she got there. All they brought was their clothes and some household things. Everything edible in their house was gone.

Charles left for work at Ed Wilson's the next morning, wondering how they were all going to eat this winter. They had enough canned food from the garden to barely make it before Tara showed up, and the teenage boy could really eat. As he walked down to Ed's farm, he decided he'd better ask if he could be paid in food of some kind.

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The post hole auger had managed to screw itself past a rock or a root, and was stuck. Ed had a big pipe wrench on the shaft and was turning it backwards when Todd Reynolds and Charlie Allen walked up. Frost was still on the ground in shaded places, but the sun was warming and thawing the ground. It promised to be a nice winter day.

Ed said, "I had hoped to have all the post holes dug when you all got here. This is the last one, but it's not cooperating. There's rock or something down there that gets it hung up. Have to finish this one by hand."

Charlie Allen went to the farm wagon that was loaded with fencing tools and wire. He brought back the post hole digger and waited for Ed to move the tractor. Todd was obviously lost about the process, but he watched Charlie for a while and caught on to how the digger worked.

"I can do that, Charlie. You know more about what to do here, so let me do the grunt work."

Charlie smiled at him and handed him the digger. "You might be sorry you said that. That looks to be a big rock down there."

They worked setting corner and gate posts, Charlie and Ed putting posts in the holes, while Todd filled dirt around them and tamped it solid. Todd began to understand why braces were put in the way they were, and soon was anticipating the next task as they completed a corner post, brace post, and brace pole.

Charlie told him, "You'll make a good hand at this before the day's out," getting a smile from Todd.

About noon, Ed invited them to his place for lunch. It was a quiet walk of about a quarter mile to the road and back to Ed's trailer. In half an hour Ed had a pot of ham and beans heated up, and warmed a pan of cornbread by sitting it on top of the bean pot. The men ate heartily. Fresh ham and chopped onions in the beans tasted good after a morning working in the cold air. Todd ate twice what he normally would for lunch.

Ed agreed to plow and disc half an acre for Todd as soon as the ground was fit to work in exchange for two day's work on fencing. Ed would also mow his 8 acres of flat ground with the Bush Hog, for another day's work. Charlie wanted some of the dry beans and ham, and some cornmeal for his pay. Ed agreed to throw in some freshly ground flour. Both men would bring some containers to carry home their pay the next day.

The second day of fencing saw the new gate hung and barbed wire beginning to be strung from tree to tree around the wooded slope. It would enclose almost 5 more acres of land, most of it covered with small scrub brush. Ed told them there would be more work to do this winter clearing the brush out if they wanted to work on it with him. The third day they worked a little later and finished the new fenced area. Ed gave them extra food and thanked both men for work well done. They agreed to take a break for a couple days to do work at home, then begin the brush clearing.

Todd's feet were dragging on the way home that third day. He told Charlie, "I never worked harder in my life, but I've enjoyed it. It's good to see something standing there that I helped build."

"What did you do before you moved out here?"

"My life has been desk work taking care of investments. My Dad was one of the first big investors in Humana Corporation. He left me a lot of stock when he passed away, then I diversified into other things. When the new health care bill passed, I knew it would hurt the medical field and began to search for other investments. That led me to looking at silver and gold. I found some information on preparedness and it all came together for me at once. I Googled like a madman for a week, and it made me realize how vulnerable we were depending on our investments. I decided to change that. Good thing I did, too. This property is probably the best investment I have ever made. The stocks may not be worth much for a long time, if ever again."

Charlie asked, "That when you bought property out here?"

"I had to search for it, but yes, I bought the 44 acres. I had read about cities crumbling, and Bug Out Bags and saw immediately that was a bad idea without having a destination, so having a retreat was first on the list.

I got a contractor busy putting the cabin on it. I probably paid too much for him to do it all, but I was in a hurry and had other things to do. He built the house, and subcontracted the well, septic system, and solar electric system. While he was busy doing that, I researched long term storage food and a lot of other things. The storage building I had built by a local contractor that beat the other one a lot on price. He did a good job, too.

The truck was next, and I can see now that it would have been better to spend more on the property and have things already in place than to move so much at the last minute. We did okay, I guess, but I wish we had sold the big home in Louisville and moved out here. I could have done business from here as well as from there, but my wife didn't have it figured out yet. She does now, and she had begun to see what I was talking about, but not fast enough. She's trying to learn now about canning food and other things we will need to do. The satellite internet is slow, though. At least it still works. I wish I'd had time to learn more about raising food, but it didn't work out. I did buy some garden seeds and tools for gardening. We had time for a few trips out here to stay for a week or so. It was all a big adventure for Christopher. Then I ran out of time."

They were approaching Todd's driveway. As they parted company for the day, Charlie told Todd, "It looks like you did pretty good in the time you had. Don't worry too much about how to raise food. There's lots of folks around here can show you how to do that."

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Charlie was about 100 yards down the road when he heard a gunshot, a yell, and another shot. He was torn about what to do. It had sounded like a shotgun to him. He had no gun with him, but Todd might need help. He decided to go back toward Todd's, but stay out of sight until he knew what was going on.

From the brush across the road, Charlie saw Todd standing over a dead dog in the yard, a big woolly black dog. He yelled at Todd to let him know he was coming and walked closer.

Todd said, "He came after me! I was just going in the back door and he ran toward me growling. I ran in and got the gun, and he was sneaking out toward where Christopher was playing. I never saw a dog try to attack people like that!"

Charlie got close enough to get a look at the dog. "Looks to me like he was pretty hungry. Ribs showing all over and rough coat. Looks like he hadn't got a meal in a long time. Mebbe we better start

carryn' a gun outside."

"You got that right," Todd said, "I'm not taking any chances."

"There goes his buddy. Over there in the weeds."

Todd saw a thin, brown dog sneaking away toward the woods behind his field.

Charlie said, "I know you're tired, but we better bury him tonight, 'cause if there's more around the blood smell will draw 'em in."

Todd looked at him and said, "That's probably right. No. I'm NOT going to bury him. I'll leave him right where he is, and go have supper. Then I'll watch out here from the upstairs window. If more of them show up, I'll thin 'em out."

"You want some help?"

"No. I've got a big flashlight that clamps on this shotgun. I'll just sit upstairs tonight and see what happens. You go on home, and watch out for dogs!"

Charlie agreed and walked home wasting no time. He had a belt knife he always carried, but that wasn't his choice to have for a dog fight. Late that evening after Charlie and Denise had gone to bed, he heard several shots from Todd's direction. Charlie had already dug out his pistol, a Smith and Wesson 9mm and its' holster. He laid it on the nightstand with a couple spare magazines.

Alicia was worried sick about her son being attacked by dogs. Todd told her that he had killed 3 more, and would watch the rest of the night in case others showed up. Chris was scared, and said he wanted a gun of his own. Alicia wasn't having any of that. Todd wasn't so sure. None of them got much sleep that night.

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Mel had heard the shooting and walked down past Lennie Hoskins' to Todd's the next morning about 9 o'clock. He saw the dead dogs behind the house, it being a little lower than the road. Todd was in the building behind the house, making some noise. He came out with a pick and a shovel. He was wearing a pistol in a belt holster. Mel yelled at him from the road, to make sure Todd knew who was coming.

"Hi Mel. It's been a long night, but I got a bunch of 'em. That black one tried to attack me, then when I went in after the shotgun, he went after Chris. I'm killing every dog I see."

"I'd say that's a good idea. I make sure mine stays home, and ever'body else better do that, too."  
"I don't want to shoot a neighbor's dog, but I'm not having these strays around."

Mel got closer and took a look. "I don't see where any of 'em was slobberin' like they had Rabies, so that's a good thing. This'n here's got a collar on. Somebody's pet that they quit feedin', most likely. Just starvin' it appears. We'll have to be watchin' for 'em now. Think I'll take to keepin' my dog inside at night. Won't have to feed him as much, it bein' cold out. An' I don't want him tied out there if a bunch sneaks up on him. Here, I'll help you with this. Where you gonna put 'em?"

Todd said, "Back along the edge of those trees. There's a low place there and I won't have to dig so



deep. I'm glad the ground thawed out, or it would have been hard digging."

The next morning Todd took up his belt a notch tighter than he normally did. He was losing some of his excess belly, he noted with some satisfaction. He cut firewood that day and noticed that he got more wood cut and stacked than he ever had before in one day.

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## CHAPTER 34

Mid January, 2012

When Ed went to pick up his gallon of milk, Joann smiled at him and said, "The men are off cutting fence posts today. Come in and rest a while. I baked an apple pie, if you want some."

"That sounds good after a day grubbing out brush. I'm tired and it's still a long walk home and I need to clean up the kitchen."

Joann thought about that and made her decision. She said, "I'm a good housekeeper, if you're needing one. Done it all in my time, cooking, cleaning, canning and gardening. I hate to be so bold about it, but I feel like I'm a burden to Dad."

"I'm sure you earn your keep," Ed told her. He added, "Don't they depend on you now?"

"Harlan and Ronnie don't need me here, except maybe making the cheese from the extra goat's milk. I could come over and do that, and probably their washing. They would wear the same clothes for a year if I let them."

"I don't have much room in the trailer. Would you mind that?" The idea of having someone at home was an appealing thought to Ed. The place wouldn't seem so empty.

"I don't take up much room," Joann said, and Ed laughed.

"No, you don't! You're no bigger than a minute," he said with a smile.

"I don't have much of anything but my clothes, so I wouldn't crowd you much."

"It sure sounds good to me, if it's all right with Harlan and Ronnie."

"Ronnie has been paying a lot of attention to that Robertson woman that moved in with the Allen's. I expect this place might get crowded pretty soon. Truth be told, I think if I wasn't here now, he'd be having her move in, boy and all. She's been walking all the way down here to get milk and eggs, and I can see it isn't just to do her relatives a favor."

"I like the idea a lot. But I think I should let you talk to Harlan and Ronnie. Whenever you work it out would be just fine with me. I'm pretty tired of my own cooking, you know."

The next evening, Joann gathered her few things into her car and drove over to Ed's. He had supper ready, but it didn't take more than a few minutes to get her moved in. Ed had some twinges of feelings about his wife, but put them in the back of his mind for now. Life had to go on, and he said as much to Joann. She agreed, and said she had no doubts they would be good for each other. It was a one bedroom trailer, but that wasn't a problem.

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"Ashley, I don't think it's a good idea to go to town yet. The TV said Martial Law is in effect until further notice, and you saw what Louisville looked like on the news."

"Mom, we need to know what is going on here. I can't believe that things are nearly as bad in Salem as they are in Louisville."

Wes said, "I'm in favor of going to look things over. The Blevins said they were trying to get more people to bring things to the Farmers Market. It might be a good time to sell something, or do some trading. But we need to know what store prices are, too. I've seen all kinds of prices on the internet."

Kate said, "I know all that as well as you. I just want to keep us out of trouble, is all."

They put a little gas in Wes' truck and all 3 got in. Wes had hooked the battery charger to it last night because it hadn't been started in so long he thought it might not want to go, but the old 6 cylinder fired right off. At the stop light they saw a pair of National Guard troops standing next to the gas station. There was one car beside a pump getting gas. When Wes looked at the price sign on the corner, he understood why there was only one customer.

"WOW! Six bucks a gallon for gas! That's like \$12 of the old money. I wish we had bought a lot more for the farm."

Ashley said, "I don't see anybody at the drug store, either, but the lights are on. We could use some things from there."

Wes pulled in and parked the truck. They went inside, kind of surprised to see the place open. One clerk was dusting merchandise, and there was someone in the pharmacy, but no one else was in sight. It was very quiet in the store as they browsed for first aid items. A hand lettered sign at the end of an aisle said, "WE SELL SINGLE UNITS OF MOST ITEMS."

Kate said, "I've never heard of selling just one band-aid, but when a box of 50 costs four New Dollars, I guess they can't sell many full boxes."

Ashley said, "There's a lot of things out of stock. The shelves of toys and gadgets are still full, but it looks like they haven't restocked the common cold medicines and first aid things. And it's cold in here."

Wes said, "I've seen enough. We can't afford to buy anything unless it is a real necessity. Let's go. I want to see the grocery stores and we need to go to the bank and take out whatever they allow."

That turned out to be \$200 per week. Kate said that nobody could buy enough to eat for a week with that amount. When they passed a liquor store, there was a light inside and a man standing inside with a pistol in his belt. A sign said, "One customer at a time allowed inside".

The discount grocery where Ashley used to work had an "Out of Business" message painted on the glass door. Sav A Lot grocery was open, but the meat case was practically bare. There was no fresh produce, and only a small amount of dry staples, like sugar and flour in beat up bags. The prices ran about twice what they had been before, and that was in New Dollars. The public bathrooms had Out of Order signs on them. Wes asked the single clerk about that and was told the city plant was unable to treat the sewage and had made all the stores close their bathrooms. She said Indiana had allowed the use of outhouses during the emergency for homes, since water treatment chemicals were not available. Going to the truck with their few purchases, they noticed a distinct odor in the air.

They saw smoke from chimneys here and there, but many houses looked deserted. They saw very few

cars on the town streets and only one other pickup on the highway. It was loaded down with furniture covered with blankets, headed west out of town. When they passed the high school, there was a sign that said, "Food Relief Delivery Friday at Noon". It was Saturday morning, and there was no one in sight.

On the way home Kate said, "I have never seen stores so bare, or prices so high."

Ashley said, "All I saw were half empty shelves, high prices, and dirty people with beards and bad haircuts. I didn't see anybody that looked like they'd had a good meal recently, except those soldiers. This trip was a waste of time and gas."

Kate said, "At least we found some canning jar lids."

"Yeah, but at \$2.99 a dozen! That's 3 times what they used to be and our bank account got cut in half with this New Dollar crap. How the heck are people going to live with these prices?"

Wes had been quiet until now. He said, "We have to find better ways of doing business. Trade directly with people for everything we can instead of going to stores. The more we can do that, the better we will come out. And whatever we have now, we'd better take real good care of it."

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## CHAPTER 35

### January Meeting

Mel had contacted all the residents along the ridge road for a meeting and Todd Reynolds had offered to host it in his storage building. Todd had stacked his boxes and plastic totes of goods against the back wall and left 2/3 of the big building open. He and Mel had carried Mel's picnic tables over and they had a fire going in the wood stove Mike had built. When everyone settled in Mel asked for the group's attention.

"I mostly wanted to get together to share what's going on and see what ideas you all have for making things better. As you know, prices have gone through the roof in town, that is IF you can find what you want. A lot of things just ain't there anymore."

Heads nodded and faces took on grim expressions as he continued.

"We've made some progress. Todd cleaned out the dog pack that could have been a big problem. Mike built wood stoves for those of us that didn't have one, so we don't have the worry of how to afford gas or electric for heat. But Mike says that even though electricity hasn't gone up all that much since Uncle Sam took it over, his welding supplier said he has trouble getting welding rods and such, because some had been coming from overseas and the ones made here aren't back running yet."

"I'm afraid we are going to hit some tight spots coming up, even though we've got the food situation in hand for now. While we eat tonight, talk things over with each other and let's get a list together of what you've needed to buy and couldn't afford, or just couldn't get. Then we'll kick around now to deal with those things some other way if we can."

"Okay, I'm hungry and you are, too, so I'll shut up until later. Let's eat."

The people dug into the big kettle of rich stew, heavy on potatoes and onions, but with some canned vegetables and pork added. It was well seasoned and the fresh cornbread went well with it. There was no butter, but Mel had brushed the top of the cornbread with pork grease that made it a stick-to-the-ribs meal. When bowls were collected and put in hot sudsy water to soak, Mel asked for people to say what was on their minds. Lennie Hoskins began.

"As most of you know, I did get a new battery for my pacemaker, and it's doing fine. I got it because my wife Vickie knows everybody at the hospital from when she worked there as a nurse. The bad news is, it was what they had on hand and they told me their supplier isn't able to ship more to them yet, because the batteries are made in China and international payments for things isn't working too well yet. I may get another one next year, or I may not. I live one day at a time, but for now I can do what I need to and get along."

"Otherwise we are doing okay, because we got that wood stove put in and our gas will last now for cooking. We had a lot of food put away, and that's a good thing with grocery prices like they are now. We still get the same Social Security check, but it doesn't buy half what it did last year. We'll have to raise most of what we eat so we can afford to buy some shoes and a little gasoline and whatnot. It isn't going to be easy, but we think we can make it."

"Thanks Lennie," Mel said. "I'm in the same boat, because my military pension is the same deal. If I didn't have food and other necessities on hand, I'd be in trouble now. Who's next? Charlie, how about you give us what you're thinking about?"

"Yeah, okay," Charlie Allen said. "We're doing all right now. We were worried about food for a while until I did some work for Ed and got enough more food to make it until the garden comes in next summer. And I shot a deer that was plundering our winter garden, so that put meat on the table. As long as nothing big goes bad, we can get by. I want to thank Todd for getting some things for us when he went to town last week. He has helped several of us that way."

"What worries me now is prices being so high, when we need new clothes, or anything, it is going to be a stretch for us. I guess that's all I have to say."

Charlie sat down without mentioning that his niece had moved out with her son and taken a load off his household. Everyone knew that, and were glad she and Ronnie had hit it off. Ronnie was thinking about this and stood up next.

"My Mom went to live with Ed, you know, so me and Grandad had to do the cookin' and all for a while, but now me and Tara decided to be a couple and that has worked out good. Matt has been a big help around the farm, and that let me cut a lot of fence posts and get 'em in the ground this month to fence in more goat pasture. That will cut down on how much hay we need next year. The hay business has been worrying me about how to get enough with the farmers all messed up not being able to sell stock on the market yet. And there's talk of the government wanting to take livestock as some kind of tax they call it. I call it robbery. That part ain't over yet."

"But for now, we're doin' okay. I don't know how we'll get seed next year for garden and a corn field, so that could be a problem."

Ronnie sat down and Ed Wilson stood up to talk. He said, "Wes Blake has open pollinated seed corn, do you know him, Ronnie?"

"Don't think so. Where's he live?"

"Joe Kemper's farm. Wes married Joe's daughter, Ashley. Wes and her has been farming that place since Joe died last year. He's got a big bin full of that corn, so we can get in touch with him for seed corn. Now for garden seeds, me and Mike both bought a some amount of them. The only thing we don't have is potatoes and sweet potatoes. We might have enough potatoes left over this year to plant some, but it will be close if we're not careful. Anyway, we can trade you for some garden seeds if you need it."

"I have a half Jersey and Guernsey heifer that should be ready to breed by Spring, if I can find a bull somewhere. She was part of the batch of feeder calves I bought last year. I was thinking about just separating the cream from her milk and making butter. I can't keep milk cold, so that makes the most sense to me. Maybe Joann can make some cheese, too, at least cottage cheese. That way we won't be in the way of what Harlan and Ronnie are doing with their goats, and we can have some butter for everybody. I figured to buy a couple pigs from Harlan and feed them the skim milk and buttermilk."

Vickie Hoskins and Gerald Tomes' wife, Anne, both spoke up and said they wanted some buttermilk when he had it. Anne said, "Don't you dare feed good buttermilk to pigs when we can make biscuits

with it!"

"Okay ladies! I stand corrected. I'll trade buttermilk to anybody that wants it. But it's going to be a year from now before we get that far," Ed cautioned them. He went on to say, "I still need to build a few things, so if somebody wants work, come see me."

Todd Reynolds stood when Ed had finished and said, "First I want to thank All of you for being good neighbors and making us welcome here. We lived in Louisville most of our lives and we hardly knew our neighbors there. This has been really great to live with friendly people. If we can help anyone, let us know how we can repay your kindness."

"I know most of you probably think we are pretty well off, but I need to explain. My Dad left me a lot of stock in Humana Corporation, and we lived off the dividends of that, plus some other investments. That stock didn't pay any dividend this year, and probably won't for a long time, so we have no income now. I did invest in this place and some other things, but I need to make a living now the same as all of you. When we run out of what stored food and things we have, that is all we have. We need to start living like everyone else here, and we have a lot to learn about that."

"We have some ground that could grow things I think, but I don't know the first thing about how to do it, and no machinery for farming. Maybe we can work a deal with somebody to do the farming somehow. Until we can begin producing something, we can pay our way with silver coins, like we have been paying you all for things already. So, anybody that is interested in working our farm land, come see me."

"When the internet works, I have been reading all I can about what is going on with currencies and finance. The government must have shut down a lot of sites, because I can't believe that so many of them would just quit. What information I have been able to find makes me think that we are in this for a long time to come."

"The US has dropped a lot lower in the economic world, and we have to get used to that. Until the US can begin producing more of our own needs, trade will languish like it has been, because the bankers ruined our currency. I would say that we now occupy a spot in the economic world about level with Mexico and some other Latin American countries. I know this isn't good news for those who have been hoping things will get better. But I believe that it is better to know what we are facing so we can make good decisions now. We need to do as much local trade as we possibly can to keep our community and our county and state going. It will also keep all that valuable trade out of the hands of the bankers that ruined our currency and our country."

There were a lot of sober faces when Todd sat down. It was quiet in the room for a while as people digested what Todd had said.

Finally, Gerald Tomes got up last and said, "Thanks Todd. I plan to do just what you said! I brought some more samples of the wine we make to trade, and I have a surprise, too." He held up a jar of amber liquid. "Last year we got 6 bee hives started, and harvested a little honey."

Several heads turned and began to pay closer attention. Gerald went on. "I hope to get a crop of sorghum cane in this year, too. I bought a restored cane press last year and some seed, but we haven't tried it yet. I also bought a cooking pan, but we need to build a [firebox](#) for that and a roof over it. I'll need some help and I can pay you with wine, honey, or sorghum when that gets made. We still have

some catfish in the ponds, too. We have about a quarter acre in strawberries that should produce this year. We'll need help come picking time. I could use some .22 rifle shells, and shotgun shells, if anyone knows a place to get those."

Discussion went on for an hour or more, as the families tried to get their heads around what had been said. People finally began to drift away, but several of them made it a point to thank Todd for his advice, and some said they would be back to talk to him soon about farming his place.

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## CHAPTER 36

March, 2012

Bert Hollister had been living at the jail because he couldn't afford to heat his house. He'd drained the pipes in his house, shut off the gas, and locked it up, then brought what food he had and his microwave to the jail. He hadn't washed any clothes for a couple weeks now. Doing it in buckets wasn't much fun. It was time to boil water again. Thank God for the kitchen at the jail, with its' commercial gas stove and all stainless steel cabinets. He ran two big kettles full of water and put them on the stove to heat.

He'd had to free all 9 prisoners in the County Jail because he couldn't feed them. Three of them had just been Saturday night drunks, two were wife beaters, and the rest were an assortment of DUI's and drug possessions. Not what he'd call hardened criminals and he didn't expect any real problems out of them. But on the way out he'd told them that if they got in trouble again, he'd shoot them on sight. He hadn't seen any of them since then.

He hadn't seen much of anybody, for that matter. People were staying inside to keep warm as best they could. He'd let a few homeless sorts sleep in the jail when it was really cold out, but he didn't have anything for them to eat and ran them out the next morning. He realized he'd lost weight and had to take his belt up a couple notches, but he wasn't starving. The last government food relief had been back in January, and he'd gotten all he could then, but it didn't last long. It was all outdated biscuit mixes and such things, so he'd had to scrounge like everybody else for anything green he could find to go with it. Some people had died from eating house plants, weeds, and who knew what else. The death toll was high, but he didn't have any accurate count because most of them weren't reported to anyone.

Bert ate a meager breakfast of pancakes with no syrup or butter, washed down with freshly boiled water. He was getting low on shortening to fry them with. There was only a part of a can of Crisco left and one small bottle of vegetable oil. He knew he needed a better diet or his health would fail.

If there was anything to be thankful for, it was that the government man was gone. He had been recalled to Indianapolis when the money devalued. They had sent a truck once a month since then with rations for the National Guard troops here, but that was all old MRE's, some of it inedible the boys said. Some of them ate it anyway, weevily crackers and all. They put the younger dated stuff in the armory and locked it up, wondering which shipment would be the last one. The government had Nationalized all the utilities and kept the electric power, natural gas, city water, and sewage departments running. That was their best achievement in this whole disaster. Of course, the water wasn't safe to drink and the sewage plant stunk to high heaven for lack of chemicals and was polluting the river, but at least some people had toilets that worked. Indiana had decided they didn't want the untreated sewage in the rivers and had allowed the use of outhouses, but it was far from effective and a lot of sewage still got to the rivers.

Bert knew there were farmers that were doing a lot better than the townspeople, but nobody had been able to convince them to sell much for the New Dollars. Silver coins, gold wedding rings, some gold jewelry they would take, if they had a surplus of something. There wasn't much of that left in town now. The only thing that was plentiful was corn. There were still some fields standing unharvested, when the dollar crash put some big farmers out of business, unable to sell their crops. Those fields now were the major source of food for some people who had figured out how to pound it into cornmeal and make something like corn cakes.

The poor diet had left too many people vulnerable to illness. Old people, the very young, and those in poor health had not made it through the winter. As people got desperately hungry, some had tried to rob stores, homes, and farms. The violent deaths of many had soon made clear that was a bad idea. Storekeepers now all had guns in plain sight, and somebody hidden to back them up. Farmers had taken to shooting anyone who came on their property at night, so few ventured into the countryside.

In town it had been worse for a short time, but the violence had burned itself out within a few weeks. For a time, all Bert and the City Police got done was haul off dead bodies to bury. One young city policeman had asked too many dumb questions about what happened, and didn't live to tell about it. They found him in his cruiser with a note that said to mind your own business. Nobody in the neighborhood had seen anything.

So far, there had been only a couple fires in town from people trying to cook or heat with unsafe means. Now, there was always the smell of wood fires in the air, from outdoor cooking. That helped to cover the smell of the crude outhouses. Bert thought it didn't even resemble his town now. He was glad he was a widower. He would have hated for his wife to have to live through this. It was more or less peaceful in town now, but it was an uneasy peace.

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Digging in the back of his storage building, Todd found the case he was looking for and brought out 2 new Ruger 10/22 rifles, some spare magazines, and a cleaning kit. The tote under it had bricks of .22 ammunition. He got 2 of those and carried it all out to a table near the front door. Alicia had agreed to let Chris learn how to shoot, after many assurances that it would all be closely supervised. Todd had taken a hunter safety course and still had the literature that he'd had Chris study until he was sure the boy understood it.

Todd's own skills were not the best with a rifle. He was a good instinctive shooter, with pistol and shotgun, but deliberate aim was not his strong suit. Remembering that Gerald Tomes had wanted .22 ammunition, Todd had asked him to come down today and give Chris and himself some lessons.

They spent the morning and half the afternoon with Gerald, learning to safely handle a Ruger .22, how to properly clean it, take the action out of the stock for more thorough cleaning and oiling, and finally how to adjust and use the open sights effectively. Most of what Gerald had taught them applied to any long gun, so Todd thought it was time well spent.

Target shooting was next. Gerald peeled some dry bark off some firewood and rubbed a spot of mud on it, then propped that against the bottom of a fence post about 30 steps away.

Todd said, "That's a little hard to see the spot. I'll go get some paper targets I bought."

"You can if you want to, but this looks a lot more like the color of a squirrel sitting on a limb. That's what you need to be able to shoot and HIT. When you can hit that spot ever' time, I'll hang it on a small limb and let it bobble around a little, like a tree limb with a squirrel sittin' on it. Hittin' a piece of cardboard that is nailed to something solid is a lot easier. What I'm doin' is gettin' you ready to bring home supper."

It was just the first of many lessons that day. Todd and Christopher each shot over 200 rounds, but by evening, they were hitting what they aimed at. Gerald had asked for a couple boxes of .22 ammunition for teaching them, but Todd gave him a brick of 500 rounds and thanked him sincerely. Gerald thought

he was a little too generous with his ammo, but he took it and was grateful. Todd promised him they would practice more until they were sure of themselves.

Alicia had been watching part of the time and after seeing the whole process, she told Todd she would like to learn to shoot a rifle like that. Todd grinned and said, "I thought you'd never ask!" He went back to the building and got the third rifle out. He handed it to her and said, "Happy birthday."

"It's not my birthday yet..."

"No, but now I'm off the hook for when it does come around!"

"How many guns did you buy?"

"I bought three of these .22's, three shotguns like the one in the kitchen, three 9MM pistols like the one you've seen me carry, and three AR15 rifles. I decided it wouldn't be long until Christopher grows up so I should have one of everything for all of us."

"But I've never shot anything in my life."

"You'd have shot that dog the other day, though."

"Yes. I'd have shot him."

"That's why I bought the guns."

She thought about it for a minute and said, "I suppose you got shells for all of them, too."

"I bought enough that we won't run out anytime soon."

"You never do anything halfway, do you?"

"You should know that by now."

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## CHAPTER 37

Butchering time. Again.

The smokehouse was about empty, and Harlan had more people asking for meat, so he decided it was time to butcher 4 more hogs. The last batch of pigs he bought were up to probably 300 pounds or more. It was still cold enough out so the meat wouldn't spoil before he could salt cure and smoke it, but the weather could change pretty soon, so this might be the last chance for the year. Four was all he could do at one time, since that would fill the old log smokehouse.

He had Matthew go to his customers and see who wanted to help butcher for part of the meat. Todd Reynolds, Harlan's daughter Joann, Lennie and Vicki Hoskins, and Charles Allen took him up on it. They would show up early the next morning. Ronnie and Harlan set up the old tank and they all carried water until they were tired. The scalding tank was filled halfway so it wouldn't overflow when they dunked a hog in it, and firewood was laid ready to light the fire under it. The old chain hoist was hung on the stout tree limb he always used, and the lard kettle was hung on its' tripod with wood ready to make a fire under it.

They dragged out the old butcher table Harlan had made many years ago of split walnut logs, adzed and planed smooth, pegged together on a strong frame. He would boil some ashes tonight in the kettle to both clean it and to use the lye water for cleaning the butchering table. Then, another boiling of water in the morning for rinsing should do it. They would make more lye later when soap making time came, but that didn't have to be done tomorrow, and butchering 4 hogs was plenty to do in one day. They had bags of salt, some sugar and molasses he'd gotten last year from the Amish man, and some home grown Sage and red pepper ground up for seasoning the sausage.

They were as ready as they could be. There was just a little frost on the grass in the high pasture, and the sky was clear, so it would get colder tonight without any insulating cloud cover. Should have a hard frost tonight, Harlan thought. That would be perfect.

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Breakfast came early the next morning and was over by daylight. Harlan had started the fires before breakfast, so the water was hot by the time help got there. Ronnie sloshed buckets of boiling water over the butcher table and rinsed out the lard kettle with it. The scalding tank was just starting to boil, so Harlan said they were ready for the first hog.

Christopher had vowed he wanted to go and see the butchering. He was sure he could do something to help, and the idea of turning a live hog into bacon and ham was something he just had to see. Todd told him it would be more gory than the worst horror movie he had ever seen. That was fine with Christopher. Besides, he had something to prove to Matthew, who had seen this before.

He mentally braced himself for the shot from when Ronnie raised the rifle, thinking that blood would go everywhere. It did not. There was a POP, then the hog fell down flat, and that was it. No blood, just a little black hole in its' head. He decided that this was a piece of cake. Nothing too bad about killing a hog. They weren't his favorite animal anyway. Charles Allen and Ronnie hooked a log chain around the hind legs and dragged the pig a few feet over the frosty grass to the hoist. A big dirty tarp was on the ground there, and he wondered what that was for. The hog just got hoisted up until the head was off the ground when Harlan stuck a butcher knife in its' throat and cut sideways. Blood gushed out by the gallon, and Christopher felt a little sick, but he bit his lip a little and decided he could take this.

The men swung the carcass over the scalding tank and lowered it into the hot water for half a minute, then pulled it out again and two people began to scrap bristles off the hog. That was finished pretty quickly, leaving a pile of the stiff hair on the ground. They washed the outside of the hog with more hot water.

He learned that the show was just begun when Harlan cut around the hog's anus and pulled the gut out far enough to tie a stout piece of hay twine around it to keep it from leaking on the meat. Then the old man began at the hog's throat and cut all the way up the center of the belly to the anus. Halfway through this, the intestines and organs began to spill out. Chris was frozen in place, staring. Harlan rolled up his sleeves and reached inside the body cavity to pull out the lungs. The wind changed then and a strong whiff of the hog's insides hit Christopher's nose. He had never felt so sick in his life. He did get bent over enough so that when he threw up his breakfast, it missed his shoes. Mostly.

Matthew was nearby and said, "It does STINK, now don't it?"

Christopher was too bleary eyed to answer. Matthew said, "I got a bucket of drinking water over here. I'll get you some to rinse your mouth out and it'll get better."

Chris took the offered glass and did as he was told, to rinse his mouth and spit it out. After a couple of times he drank some water to ease his burning throat. He handed the glass back to Matthew and wiped his eyes on his coat sleeves. He mumbled something about he never thought he would get sick.

"Some people do every time they butcher, but most get used to it. Nobody likes the smell though. Most people hold their breath till the worst is over and you can take it better. They'll drag the guts off and bury 'em now, so that is about over."

Chris looked at Matthew with new respect and said, "Thanks for the drink. I think I'm okay now." Ronnie was washing out the inside of the carcass by sloshing buckets of water in it and letting it drain away. The smell was mostly gone now.

Within a few minutes, Harlan had split the hog down the center of the back bone with an axe, then removed the tenderloins with his knife. The jowls came off next, then the head with the help of the axe again. The butcher knife alone separated the front shoulders and then the hams. Harlan carefully peeled the bacon off the ribs on one side while Ronnie did the other side. The meat was piling up on the table fast.

The women took the tenderloins into the house to slice for fresh eating. The rest of the hogs would have the tenderloins canned for keeping, but the slices from this one were all to be fried so they would keep for a few days. Some fat trimmings from the bacon were put in the skillets first to get fry out fresh lard for frying the lean tenderloin. The rest of the fat trimmings went into the big lard rendering kettle that was starting to sizzle with just a little water in the bottom to keep them from sticking, aided by continuous stirring with a long wood paddle.

Men carried hams, shoulders, bacon slabs, and jowls into the smokehouse to be packed in wooden boxes, layered with dry salt mixed with sugar, molasses and a little pepper. They would stay in the boxes for a week or so before taking them out to smoke.

The table was empty again except for trimmed chinks that the women began to cut up further and sort, the lean meat and some fat went into a box to make sausage, and the excess fat went into the rendering kettle to make lard. Some of the fried tenderloins would be packed in crocks and big jars with hot lard

poured over them. Those would keep for a couple months until hot weather.

The whole process was repeated 3 more times that day. Chris did his share of carrying water and washing up things. He learned that butchering was a messy process, and was one tired boy by the time he and his Dad drove home taking fresh lard and tenderloin slices.

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Author's Note:

There are no pork chops doing it this way. The tenderloin is the inner back muscle that forms the eye of a pork chop. (Known as a ribeye in beef cuts.) The pork chop bone is part of a rib. That is hard to do without a bandsaw to cut the bones, so farmers normally cut it the way I described. Meat is trimmed closely off the ribs and put into sausage. The "backstrap" muscle can be cut as split and pounded slices for more tenderloin, known as a "butterfly" cut. Feet are usually cut up close to the hams and shoulders and meat from the lower legs is put into sausage along with all other trimmings from the main cuts. The sausage meat is ground in a hand cranked meat grinder and then mixed with seasonings and ground a second time to get it finer and well mixed. Sausage can then be stuffed into casings, in this situation, not synthetic casing (plastic, IIRC), but cleaned and washed intestines that have been turned inside out and scrubbed, often with diluted vinegar then soaked in salt water to help disinfect them. A sausage stuffer is required, the gut being slid onto a spout and tied at the end. As meat is forced into the gut, the link of sausage grows in length and can be twisted at any point to form "links". The links are left together as a rope that is then hung over a stick in the smokehouse for smoking.

Alternately, sausage can be fried immediately as patties, and the patties put in crocks layered with hot lard for longer keeping, an easier choice.

There is no single "right way" to butcher an animal, the methods and cuts being personal preferences.

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## CHAPTER 38

### The Next Leg Down April, 2012

The computer was so slow, Todd thought he had lost his internet connection again, but the Zerohedge page came up eventually and the headlines were panicky. On Monday, the Japanese, in dire straits from all their ills, had sold a sizable amount of Treasury bonds. The Italian banks followed suit along with the big European banks, breaking the faith with their intertwined US bank friends. The US 10-year bond was the big news, trading at 8%, then 12%, then no-bid.

Todd knew what to expect next. He sold all his stock he could in the next hour and had the money wired to his bank in Salem. He managed to get almost a third of his Humana stock sold before the market closed on a down circuit breaker. It was too big a drop for the market to re-open, so Todd told his wife he had to go to the bank. On the way out the door, he told his wife to have all their friends to spend every dollar they had on something they would NEED to live, and do it ASAP, because the dollar was crashing hard again. Oil prices would go out of sight, and everything else along with it.

At the bank, he got all the cash they would let him have, \$5,000, the limits having been raised again. He said he was going to buy a tractor and to be expecting a call to verify his checks. He made it to the next small town south where a major Case-IH dealer was located and began to bargain. In an hour's time, he was the confirmed new owner of a tractor and some new farm equipment with some maintenance items. It would be delivered the next day. The dealer was delighted. Sales had been slow to non-existent this year, so Todd had gotten the best prices he could allow.

He stopped at Blue River Farm Supply on the way out of town and bought plans and materials for a large Pole barn and a large amount of fencing materials, also to be delivered the next day, or as much of it as they could get in a couple truckloads, with the rest to follow later. Back at home, he went to Ed's place and found him there. Ed agreed to mow a couple acres of ground that evening, and stay at Todd's the next day to meet the trucks and sign for deliveries. Todd told him to use his best judgement about what to do with everything as it arrived, and handed Ed a wad of money for his trouble. He told Ed to spend it fast because it would probably be worthless soon. Ed promptly called home and had Joann drive his little pickup over. He handed her the money and sent her to town to buy "anything you think we need if we can't go shopping again for a couple years".

Early the next morning, Todd got on the phone to the Jackson County Co-op and ordered a couple fuel tanks to be set and filled with diesel fuel, and another with gasoline, a couple barrels of Schell Rotella motor oil, and one of trans hydraulic oil. The prices were outrageous, but he got what he wanted. He offered a sizable tip for fast delivery and it seemed that money still had some influence. He did the same at the local stone quarry and had several Tri axle loads of fine stone spread where he would put the pole barn.

Todd watched the computer the next morning and saw the stock market open and close again, lock limit down. It reopened and crashed from automated trading sales in a flash-crash. Todd went off on a shopping binge again, with the Ford Super Duty and trailer in tow. He wrote checks at [Sam's Club](#), Walmart, and other stores that did an instant electronic transfer. The prices were astronomical, and shelves had been less than half full, but there had been few people in the stores. The truck and trailer were both loaded on the way home.

Todd didn't have time to talk to anyone in their neighborhood, but he met several of them on his trips in and out. Apparently, they were busy following what he'd said.

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Thursday Alicia and Todd had piles of materials stacked on the newly mowed ground, and a thick stone driveway laid going to the building site. The ground had firmed up enough after the Spring thaw that they also spread the fine stone for the new barn floor about 8" thick. Ed was busy running the big new tractor over it repeatedly to pack that stone in place, and used the bucket loader to level it. He had put some stakes out to guide the stone trucks, so they got it about the right size. There was an impressive lineup of farm machinery behind the building site.

Late the next afternoon, the INO dollar index briefly showed the US Dollar Index at 23 (Out of 100) before the site shut down. Kitco's site was too overloaded to come up, but Todd got a silver price on Northwest Territorial Mint at \$162 an ounce before the site quit responding on Friday afternoon. Todd was taking a break after another trip to the farm store, based on what Ed had told him he needed. That load was still on the truck and trailer. It might have to stay there until the new building got put up.

Despite massive interventions by the European Central Bank and the Federal Reserve Bank, the dollar had not been rescued. FX markets were closed, along with all other financial markets and all US banks. There was nothing on the evening news of any announcement by the government.

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"Todd, are you going to buy a farm to use all that equipment? Surely we don't need that much for this small amount of ground." Alicia was beginning to think her husband had blundered.

"I'm betting a lot that there will be ground available to farm and nobody to do it. Farmers are broke, at least most of them. The banks will take the ground back in foreclosure and it will sit there looking for someone to work it. The big seed and fertilizer and chemical companies can't function without the banking system, so all that is broken. I don't think there will be much farming next year, unless the government takes a hand in it, and they are broke and broken, too. There will be a terrible need for food next year, and nobody able to supply it. We are going to hit bottom in a big way."

"How can you make any money if no one else has any money?"

"Money is the old way of measuring wealth, and that is broken the worst of all. Money as we knew it is dead. The new wealth is going to be measured in real goods. I have been thinking about that for over two years now, but I didn't see how to find the opportunity in the situation. The answer is to be a producer of real things that people need. Food, water, heat, clothing, medicine, and all the rest. I think I have an opportunity to produce food and get paid in real goods. Like the deal of the government trading diesel fuel and gasoline for grain."

"How do we buy what we need if we don't get paid in money?"

"The idea is to get paid in what we need, INSTEAD of money, and cut out all the middlemen. We raise corn, grind it into cornmeal, and trade that usable food product for things we need. Even if goods aren't available in stores, there is still a lot of goods around. If I need a part for the tractor, I am betting the person who has it will be hungry and want food. It will be a different way of doing business, but we will all have to learn it together, like we have here so far, trading with neighbors. I'm just upping the ante and planning on doing business on a bigger scale."



Alicia sat and thought for a while without saying anything. Christopher had been listening and trying to understand the best he could. He asked, "Dad, if money is no good now, how did you buy all that stuff outside?"

"Money still had some value this week, but it has been getting to be worth less every day. For example, I bought rolls of barbed fence wire yesterday for \$129 each. I saw Ed this morning and he said it was \$199 a roll this morning at the same farm store in town. It was made in Brazil, and imported to the US. With the dollar going down in value so fast, stores have to raise their prices faster to be able to buy more, if they can get any at all. I think that within a month, we won't be able to buy much of anything that is imported because they won't want our dollars."

Alicia looked grim.

Chris said, "What can we use for money to buy stuff, if dollars are no good?"

"We'll have to trade for what we want. Find someone who has what we need and find something they need to trade for it. It's called barter. Like I bartered some .22 cartridges to Gerald for teaching us about shooting a rifle."

"Yeah. But lots of stuff is made in China. It says so right on it with little stickers. Who can we trade with in China? That's halfway around the world!"

"We probably won't be getting much of anything from China for a while. The cost of sending it here on a ship would be too much, and with our dollars not worth much, we couldn't afford to buy their goods."

"Where are we going to get stuff?"

"We probably won't get much of anything for a long time, unless it is made in the US, and more likely, close to home. Like we got pork from Harlan by helping him butcher, and I gave him some silver coins for the rest."

"I guess that means no toys and stuff. Oh well, I guess I don't need toys that much."

Alicia said, "I'm worried about what that means for clothing, and shoes and household goods. How can we live that way?"

"It's not going to be easy," Todd said. "Better take good care of what we have."

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Experience had taught Joann what she needed, and she had seen the nearly bare stores in Salem, so when Ed had given her all that money, she headed north. At Brownstown, the local hardware store had all manner of country living things. They still had plenty of canning jars and lids, lye for soap making, and much more. She was in a hurry and wasted no time. Prices hadn't gone up as fast here in the small town as they had elsewhere. She got all she could without attracting too much attention and went to both grocery stores in town. They had limits on some things, like flour and sugar, but she bought all she could of those and stocked up on what they had.

Seymour had more and bigger stores, but had also had some riots last year. Walmart was open again, but their stocks were very low. Joann did get a lot more sugar and some fabric and thread. She went to the shoe aisle and bought herself a couple pairs of good quality sneakers and sturdy outdoor boots, then

got some new underwear and lots of socks for both Ed and herself. Next was a few pairs of jeans for each of them, heavy work shirts and Tee shirts for summer wear. She checked out the load and went on to every grocery outlet in town buying sugar and coffee. She filled up with gas on the way out of town at \$11.60 a gallon. That used about all the money she had left.

A big flatbed trailer was unloading roof trusses at the Reynolds place with Ed supervising when she got there. Joann stopped to see what was going on and talked to Alicia for a few minutes before going on home.

The truck was sagging when she got home with it. The camper top on the bed was packed full. Joann parked it behind the trailer and left most of the stuff in the truck, since none of it was perishable. She was tired. She decided it was time to get something going for supper, so when Ed got back they could eat and crash for the evening.

Ed had the farm equipment unloaded near the back edge of the area he had mowed. Todd had dumped a load of fencing materials by his storage building, so Ed took a few wood fenceposts to lay the trusses on when they came. That would keep them from getting too wet and preserve them until they were used. More posts were laid down for stacking the barn lumber, then he had the delivery guys use the metal siding and roofing to cover all the lumber. That would keep rain off of it. He threw a few big sticks of firewood on top to keep any wind from moving the sheets of metal. It made a neat stack and was pretty weatherproof.

Ed and Todd had talked late one night about what sort of farm equipment Todd should buy to work his few tillable acres plus what ground he could rent nearby. Ed told him about a rebuilt tractor he had seen. The dealer had taken it in on trade, then sales slowed to a crawl, so they had used their idle mechanics to do whatever repairs it needed, and put some tires and new paint on it. It was an IH 686.

The tractor had 66 HP, a size smaller than Ed's 786 at 80 HP. There was a 4-14" plow that went with it, and it had been sitting there a long time, so the price might be right on it. It even had the gear shift transmission instead of the troublesome HydroStat, and the torque amplifier had been rebuilt. Todd had bought the tractor and plow, and a lot more. There was a late model John Deere square hay baler, a 3 point mount cultivator, a JD 4 row toolbar planter and a 12 ft. wheel disk. More was coming the next day, the driver said, an 11 foot haybine and he wasn't sure what else. Ed thought that Todd had probably cleaned out the back lot of good used equipment at the dealer, and he was close to right.

Todd had also asked a lot of questions of the IH dealer about what parts and supplies he would need to farm for at least a couple seasons. The old salesman had farmed for most of his life. This young man looked to have more money than brains to be getting into farming, seemingly overnight. But he answered him to the best of his ability and Todd took a lot of notes. The salesman had a really good sales tally that day, too, and that would net him a nice commission check.

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Ed and Joann spent a couple days getting her purchases put away, and had to shuffle things to make it all fit. Ed told her, "I need to get busy using some of the stuff I bought last year. There is enough here to put up a pole shed big enough to keep the tractor inside and have room for doing work on it. I can dig the hole with the auger, but I'll need some help to set those tall posts. That's coming up for Todd, too, on his much bigger pole barn. I'll have to work with him so we can each find enough people to work when we need them."

"The women can work, too. That Tara Robertson is a worker. Let me talk to her about it, and I bet the three of us can get this done."

"Suits me. You don't need too much experience to hold posts straight, and hand lumber up so it can be nailed in place. Wonder if she can drive nails?"

"I'll find out, but it doesn't matter, 'cause I can drive nails. I'm not too sure about those big long ones for putting the frame together, but I have put siding and roofing on before. My first husband and I fixed up an old house."

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## CHAPTER 39

May 2012

Ed provided ground flour and cornmeal, plus some garden seeds in exchange for a couple days work from Tara, and it turned out to be a good deal for him. The extra hands made the pole building go up easily, and that in turn got Tara a job helping Todd when he began work on his bigger barn.

When he wasn't tending cattle or clipping pasture, Ed and Joann were busy cleaning up their place. With the tractor parked at home in the pole shed, there was room in the barn at the farm for extra fence wire and posts. One of Ed's small sheds got cleaned out by moving garden tools and mechanic's stuff to the new pole shed.

Joann had helped with the hog butchering and meat processing, and besides some pork, she came home with a rooster. She now had an old hen sitting on some eggs to hatch. Meanwhile, Ed had plowed a much larger garden for Mike, Laura, and he and Joann. The garden seeds proved to be a valuable commodity. Everybody needed some seeds so trade was brisk and gave Ed some needed income.

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The radio and TV announced another official devaluation of the dollar by 50% and increases in Social Security and other social program payments. Unfortunately, store prices went up as fast as everyone's checks increased so there was no net gain. All the moves did was to price a lot of people out of being able to buy anything to much to eat, and more problems followed. Rioting began again in the cities and this time they did not stop when soldiers fired on them. There weren't enough soldiers to quell the rioting.

On the heels of this new devaluation, Indiana and 28 other states immediately passed laws accepting silver and gold coins as legal payment for taxes and other debts owed to those states, in addition to accepting Federal Dollars. Within a month, all 50 states had done so. The exchange rates offered were generous, indicating the States' distaste for the plunging US dollar. The Federal Treasury then tried to make a legal case for this being a violation of the Federal Legal Tender Law, but was struck down by both the Supreme Court in an extremis ruling, and also by 29 States threatening secession for violation of States' Rights under the US Constitution.

Silver and gold became the de facto currency in most of the country within days. The problem was, there just wasn't nearly enough of it. That was remedied to some degree by the high valuation of each relative to US dollars, but most importantly in relation to oil and petroleum products. A gallon of diesel fuel had been recently selling for \$14 to \$16 a gallon before the last devaluation of 2 to one. After the devaluation, diesel was selling at over \$40 a gallon, indicating that the "official" devaluation was not nearly equal to the real drop in the dollar. But now a pre-1964 silver quarter would buy a gallon of diesel fuel at most stations. The station owners had no trouble selling the quarters for more than \$40 each, so they made a profit on that end of the transaction besides the profit regulated by the government that set the price of fuels.

Ed was glad that he still had a small stash of silver coins that he had collected over his lifetime, and he was adding to it regularly selling garden seeds and beef. Todd Reynolds had decided to hedge his stock

investments long before the market crashed by selling some stock for bags of silver and tubes of gold coins. Harlan Ames had been accepting silver coins in payment for pork, milk and eggs for some time. Lennie Hoskins had once bought some "collectible" silver bullion bars in one ounce sizes. He had paid a premium price for them at the time, but was glad now that he'd bought them.

Silver was now valued at somewhere between \$160 and \$240 an ounce, and gold was selling for \$6,600 to \$8,000 an ounce, depending on the exchange rate in a given State. The numbers were mostly meaningless, since the problem was the low value of a dollar, not the high price of precious metals.

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This latest surge in prices was the breaking point for most of the population. Very few could afford to buy enough to eat and that resulted in chaos. Any store or home that was thought to have food was a target of individuals and impromptu mobs. The criminal element that had been freed from prisons across the country now came into their own time. Home invasions soared, with little success because few had any food to steal. Groups from towns and cities began to move toward the countryside in search of anything to eat. Mostly, they moved on foot, but some found vehicles to steal and drive until they ran out of fuel. Some family groups were benign at first, simply begging at any door, but they often became violent as they found no one willing to part with what they had, if anything.

Communications began to fail as employees of the government run systems were as bad off as the rest, and failed to show up to work. Telephone systems were the first to go and the internet along with it, although the more automated systems endured for a few days. Radio and television stayed up longer, being the propaganda systems of a government desperate to hold onto power, and restore some kind of order. Nobody believed what was on the media, however. With the telephones failing, the last source of real news was gone.

A few days into this latest stage of the crisis, Wes Blake called his sister Gloria and told her there was too much risk for her and Larry being alone on their place closer to town. They discussed it at some length and agreed to join Wes, Gloria and Kate for mutual protection at their place, being farther out of town by about 5 miles.

They would move their livestock and everything else of value that they could. Wes would drive the tractor and pull a wagon, and Ashley would drive Wes' truck with stock racks and pulling another wagon to try to make the move in one trip. Gloria's car and Larry's truck with stock racks would also haul all they could. Goats, rabbits, chickens, pigs and dogs would all come on the first trip. The men planned to go back with the trucks to get the cattle, but before it was over they had made 2 more trips, trying to get everything that wasn't nailed down.

Kate's big old farmhouse would be full, but there would be two more people to help keep watch and guard what they had.

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Todd called a community meeting at his place. There was some early salad makings to freshen up the meal, cornbread, and a big pot of chili. People were quietly talking as they ate, with some worried looks around the picnic tables.

Mel stood up and spoke first. "We need to talk about how to provide some security for ourselves here. The last news I had, there's more riots going on and people doing home invasions because they are starving."

Charlie interrupted to say, "My cousin called from town and said her husband got killed when a gang came in their house. She was at the neighbor's and they fought 'em off. Shot some of 'em too, but most got away. It's crazy out there."

Mel went on, "No doubt about that. I think we need somebody guardin' the road. What do you all say?"

Everyone talked at once for a while until Todd stood up and called for order. "Let's talk one at a time about this and get a plan put together, okay? Who's first? How about you Charlie, since you live close to the end of the road?"

One by one people voiced their ideas and feelings. It took a couple hours, but a consensus was reached to block the road beyond Charlie Allen's property and station someone to watch that blockade from a hidden vantage point. They would have a walkie talkie provided by Todd, to call for help if they thought there was a threat trying to get past the blockade.

Mike and Ed would cut a couple big trees to fall across the road to stop vehicle traffic. It would still be possible to get in and out of the neighborhood by going across the back of Todd's property and out to the highway through Dan Billings' farm lane, a deserted looking dirt track. A volunteer schedule was worked out for the first two weeks for watch duty. Help would be on call, by another pair of radios monitored by Mel and Gerald who could gather a force to stop any trouble.

On his way home that night, Mel began to think back to days long ago and the methods used in a long ago war. It gave him nightmares, but he knew it was needed now. He had hated going to war back then, hated it more during and after it, and even more so now. He'd decided long ago to live out here where nobody would bother him, but he had backed up as far as he planned to go. He began to look over his property and others in a new way. He had some ideas.

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Driving an over the road truck had been Mel's choice after Vietnam to keep himself sane. Back then he could not stand the idea of sleeping the same place two nights in a row. The sleeper in a semi suited him just fine. He kept John Browning's finest achievement, a .45 ACP under his pillow and a short shotgun hanging in the back of the sleeper for over 20 years. It began to get very tiresome, the endless roads, the truck stop food, and nobody to talk to except other truckers when he stopped.

He had never married. Once he had tried to stay with a fine woman in Kansas, had even spent several weeks living in her house off and on between runs. One morning early she came in to wake him up as he'd asked her, but she forgot to call to him first and touched his arm. He had her up against the wall with his arm under her throat, ready to break her neck before he became fully conscious. Then he sat down on the bed and cried for a long time. He tried to apologize and explain, but she could not understand the devil who lived deep inside him. The next morning he'd left a couple thousand dollars of his mad money on the table under the salt shaker and was gone. He decided that he wasn't cut out for living with a woman, or anyone, for that matter.

When he had finally started to think about settling down somewhere, he came back to his roots in the southern Indiana hills. Mel had simple tastes and had never spent much money, so there was an appreciable amount saved in his bank account when he bought his place. It had once been a farm and still had an old barn on the back and the well and septic remained after the old house had burned. He had moved a nearly new mobile home out here and set it up properly, then built a separate garage.

Mel had worked driving a UPS truck for a while until he could retire at age 62. That job had kept his bank account full and he had added a permanent roof over the trailer with a full length porch on the front and steps out the back door where a path led down into the steep hollow behind it. There was an outdoor wood furnace now, with a solar powered fan to move the heat into the house. He had electricity from the utility company, but didn't really need it he figured, since he canned all his meat and garden produce, and he could live just fine without the conveniences.

The dead end ridge road had given him a certain amount of security, knowing it was impossible to get a vehicle on the road except by the one way in from the highway, and very few people came back here. The steep hills and hollows made coming in here on foot a difficult thing, even for the young and adventurous. His trapping hobby gave him an excuse to be out wandering the hills looking for tracks to assure himself that nobody had ventured up to his hideaway. It made him feel the most relaxed he had been since the war. Now there was the threat of people on the move to steal something to eat. He had seen starving people before, and knew what they were capable of. They were not coming back HIS road, if he had anything to say about it.

Mel went to the barn and dug out the rifle he'd paid a Gunnery Sargent big money for back then, an Army issue M14 with a box of magazines, still in the original wrapping. There was a false bottom in the old horse feed bin that opened up to show many boxes of .30 caliber Match ammunition in stripper clips. He'd seen no sense in paying an outrageous tax to own the thing legally, and it wasn't legal anyway, but now with no noticeable law around, that didn't matter much.

There was an M1951 Butt pack on a web belt with 4 ammo pouches that fit the big box magazines for the M14, 2 in each so he could carry 8 magazines on the belt and one in the gun for a total of 180 rounds. It didn't take many 7.62 NATO rounds to do the job, so that was plenty for him.

Mel spent the rest of the evening cleaning the Cosmoline off the old rifle and oiling it until it suited him. It felt heavier now than the one he had carried 50 years ago, but tolerable. He would shoot a little and adjust the peep sights tomorrow. He put the issued cleaning kit back in the butt of the rifle stock and snapped the cover shut.

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## CHAPTER 40

It would soon be time to plant farm crops, so that was on everyone's mind as they got more worried about the grief in the towns spreading out. Ed and Todd decided they would make a run to see Wes Blake about some seed corn, in case things got even worse later. Ronnie and Harlan had given them some silver to buy seed for them, too. Blocking the roadway would be delayed until they got back.

Mel Sawyer showed up in full battle-rattle carrying his M14 and .45 on his belt. Paratroop boots, OD fatigues, and a boonie hat completed what was visible. The .38 snubbie was in an ankle holster covered by the loose fatigues.

Mel had added a couple canteens of water and tied his old Kabar on the web gear suspenders. He had some homemade rations in the butt pack, a spare pair of socks, and his trauma kit. He had no need of a compass and some of the other GI stuff. He was within half a mile of his own place, and he knew half a dozen places to get clean water in between. It didn't look like rain, so he left his poncho at home, too. The less he had to carry, the better. He told Ed and Todd he would stay in position at least until they returned.

Lots of practice had made Alicia more confident with her guns. With Todd being gone today, she had her pistol in its' holster behind her back and the shotgun within easy reach as she worked in the kitchen. She wouldn't let Christopher carry his rifle around, but had it on the rack in his room with magazines loaded nearby. They'd had many long discussions about how to handle it safely and when he was allowed to load it.

The drive to Wes Blake's farm through hilly county roads was peaceful and quiet. Telephones had all quit working now, so there was no way to contact him but to take the chance he was at home. Most people were these days, if they still had a home. They did see what looked like smoke from cooking fires in a couple places, but no people visible. Knowing that bad news travels fastest, Ed and Todd both had the uneasy feeling the people were there, but hidden and most likely were looking at them over gun sights.

At Ed's direction, Todd slowed and turned into the farm lane then drove slowly up toward the house. Three big dogs barked and surrounded the truck. Ed wisely stayed in the truck and rolled his window down, stuck his head out and yelled, "Hello! Wes, are you home? It's Ed Wilson."

His caution was rewarded when Larry Barnes stepped partway out of the machine shed with a shotgun at the ready and asked what he wanted.

"I'm Ed Wilson and this is my neighbor Todd Reynolds. We want to talk to Wes about buying some corn for seed. We brought some barrels to put it in. Is he around somewhere?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Wes answered as he came out onto the porch. "Easy Larry, I know this guy. How much do you want, Ed?"

"About 25 bushels would do it, and we'll take more for feed, depending on what we can afford."

"Okay, well, I want to charge more for this because it can be used for seed, and that seems to be rare this year. If you want some corn to feed, you'd do better to talk to my neighbor down the road. He's got



hybrid corn to sell for feed."

"That sounds right. I knew you'd treat me right. What do you need for your corn?"

"Last year, a gallon of diesel was about \$4 and a bushel of corn was about \$8. This year they are both in short supply, but they ought to be about the same by comparison. Diesel is over \$40 a gallon at the stations, but you can get it for a silver quarter, too. So, I want 2 gallons of diesel a bushel, or 2 silver quarters. Or, if you got something else to trade, we can figure that out. Does that sound okay?"

Ed said, "That sounds fine to me. We have pre-1964 silver coins to pay you, and we want the 4 barrels full, I guess. The 55 gallons figures out to 6 and 7/8 bushels, so 4 of them comes to 27 and 1/2 bushels. That sound right?"

"Yeah, that's right. I had to look that up for another guy who wanted some seed. Pull your truck on around to the bin back there and we'll load you up. Everything okay at your place?"

"So far we're doin' okay. Heard about a lot of trouble in towns all around, but we've stayed pretty close to home and been all right. How about you?"

Todd drove the truck to the grain bin as Ed and Wes talked. He backed it up to the bin door and stopped, a little unsure how this would work, never having been on a real farm in his life. Ed motioned him a little closer and indicated he could shut the truck off.

Wes said, "We're doing fine, but we haven't been to town in the past couple weeks. Larry is my sister Gloria's husband. They lived about 5 miles closer in toward town and had heard about so much grief there that we decided to join forces for protection. We keep somebody on watch most all the time now."

Ed nodded and said, "We're doing the same."

They filled the barrels with corn using a scoop shovel and put the lids on. Kate and Ashley came out to say hello to Ed and to meet Todd. Both were carrying pistols in holsters. Ed inquired about seeing the neighbor about feed corn and Wes said, "We better drive my truck down there. He knows it and we don't want to get anybody shot. We're all pretty jumpy around here."

They got into Wes' truck and drove to see the neighbor, Neal Davis. When Wes stopped and got out, a big German Shepherd dog met him and sniffed him over as he walked toward the house. Wes yelled, "Neal, you around somewhere?"

"Yep. Be down in a minute, " came from an upstairs window.

"This is Ed Wilson I've done some work for, and his neighbor Todd Reynolds," Wes said, indicating the truck. "They want to talk about buying some corn for feed. You still selling?"

"Yep, for silver or gas or diesel fuel. How much they want?"

"I'll let you work it out with them. They bought some seed corn off of me, and have some hogs to feed yet."

They made a deal to buy a wagon load of corn and would come back later that day for it. The business finished for now, they made their way back to Wes' farm and headed home. Ed said, "I didn't want to say so, but I have one wagon full and some in the other one of his corn. We can split the cost of what we bought today, or however you want to do it. Now we know what its' worth as seed, and we can get feed corn for half that. It was the only way I knew to learn what corn price should be now."

Todd said, "Yes, that makes sense. We'll split the cost of what we got from Wes like we planned. How are we going to get your wagon empty to use today?"

"There's not that much in it. Have you got any more barrels?"

"There are 8 or 10 in my building, but I'll have to empty them. I can do that pretty quick and we can put your corn in them."

"Okay. I'll get 'em back to you soon."

Just before they crossed the highway, Todd saw something and stopped. "Somebody just ran over the bank there!"

Ed said, "I saw it too. Looked like a kid. Let's take a look. I don't want to get into an ambush here."

They shut off the truck and each grabbed their guns out of the back seat of the crew cab, then went to the tall grass along the roadside. Down the slope were two half grown kids trying to hide in the grass. Ed said loud enough for them to hear, "You can come out. We don't hurt kids. Are you all right?"

His older voice must have inspired some confidence. One of them stood and said, "Don't shoot us mister!"

Todd asked them, "What are you doing out here? Do you live close by?"

They didn't answer right away, so Ed asked, "What's the matter? Can we help you some way?"

"We're awful hungry. Have you got anything to eat?"

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"We'll get you something. Come on up to the truck," Ed told them. Then to Todd he said, "Get my sack lunch and some water."

When the two kids stood up, their long hair and clothes showed they were girls. They climbed up the road embankment slowly, like they were very tired. Todd came back with their 2 sack lunches. He said, "First things first. Here's bottles of water, and some food. Sit down and eat. We'll talk later."

The girls' hair was tangled and their jeans were dirty, but good quality. They were both skinny, making it hard to determine their age, but looked to be about 10. They ate like they were starved.

Ed told them, "You can have all you want, but you shouldn't eat too much too fast. It can make you sick. Slow down and get a drink and let's talk a while before you finish eating."

They obeyed him and looked at him with fearful eyes. He and Todd sat down cross-legged by the roadside with them, to look less threatening. Todd asked if they were lost?

The bigger one shook her head no, they were going to their Grandma Duncan's. It was back that road, and she pointed to the ridge road. "We haven't been there for a long time, but we know where she lives on a farm back there. It's all the way back at the end of the road."

Todd and Ed looked at each other. The Duncan farm was deserted since the woman lost it on her youngest boy's bail forfeiture. These kids must be in real trouble.

"Where do you live? We can take you home," Todd offered.

The older one screamed, "NO! NO! We can't go home! They killed Mom and Dad and they might come back and ..." She broke off into tears and sobs. The smaller one teared up and wouldn't talk.

The men both said soothing things and told them they didn't have to go there. Ed said, "We'll see to it that you are taken care of. You don't have to worry about such things anymore. How about we take you to our house and get you some more to eat?"

The girls had polished off the plastic containers of bean soup and corn cakes. They calmed down some and allowed themselves to be seated in the back of the truck's crew cab.

"We need to go to Grandma's," the older one said. "Can you take us there?"

Ed said, "We'll go there. You tell us the way, okay?"

"You turn on that little road right there and go all the way to the end of it."

"Okay. We'll have to stop at my house," Todd told them, "so I can tell my wife where we're going, all right?"

The girl nodded as Todd pulled into his driveway. Alicia came out to meet Todd and the girls seemed to calm down a little more. As his wife got close to the truck, Todd said, "We have some visitors. These girls are on their way to their grandmothers and we're giving them a ride."

A couple hours later Alicia had learned the story and knew their grandmother's place was deserted. She didn't tell them that, but got their faces and hands washed and gave them more to eat. After some pancakes with syrup and glasses of milk, the smaller girl began to talk a little and the story came out, bit by bit. Two nights ago, a gang of men had broken in their home through the locked door. Their father had fought them with a kitchen knife while their mother had shooed the girls back into their bedrooms and told them to hide. The gang had killed both parents and ransacked the house, then left. The girls stayed hidden for a long time, then came out and found the wreckage and their parents dead. They ran out the back door and had been running since yesterday.

Christopher had come downstairs and sat listening without saying a word, his eyes wide as he heard the tale. Alicia learned that their names were Emily and Sophia Taylor. Emily was 12 going on 13 and her sister was 10. She wondered how to tell them that their grandmother was gone. Todd said, "I told them we would give them a ride to their grandma's so we'd better get going." He winked at his wife and said, "You and Chris should come along."

Alicia understood and they all went out to the truck. Ed said he would stay there until they got back. The road came to an end at the overgrown lane into the old Duncan farm. Sophia said, yes, this was the place. Todd said, "I hate to tell you this, but this woman moved away last year. We don't know where she went."

Sophia had a desperate look in her eyes, and Emily began to cry. Christopher was in the back seat with them and told them, "You can stay with us until we find your Grandma. Don't cry. We have plenty of room. You can have my room and I'll sleep in the spare room downstairs. Isn't that right Mom?"

Alicia told them, "Yes. You can stay with us and we'll try to find out where your Grandma went. Don't you worry about it. We'll take care of you."

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It was later than they planned, but Todd and Ed got the corn unloaded and went back with a wagon for the the load from Neal Davis. The next day, Todd, Ed, and Mel Sawyer drove into town to the Sheriff's office, but there was nobody there, and likewise at the City Police station. Having gotten their address from Emily, the men drove to the quiet residential street on the north side of town and tried to knock on a neighbor's door, but got no answer. The whole street seemed deserted. They decided to chance going in the Taylor house, evidenced by the name on the mailbox. Inside, they found the it like the girls described.

With nobody to object, they found a shovel in the garage and did their best to bury the parents in the back yard, taking turns digging while the other searched for the girls' belongings. All 3 men kept their pistols loose in their holsters and their heads on a swivel as they proceeded, but there was no sign of life in sight. They loaded clothing, toys, bikes from the garage, and whatever they could salvage from the house into the back of the truck and left town.

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## CHAPTER 41

Mid-May, 2012

It was hot in the thicket, despite the shade. Matthew Robertson was on watch duty and glad of it. Everybody else in the community it seemed like were all planting something today. Ronnie was getting their 5 acres of corn put in and his Mom was planting more in their garden. Matthew kept his eyes on the road, but he could hear Todd's tractor running as he disked the field below where Matthew was stationed. When Todd was at the other end of the field, he could hear Ed's tractor working in the distance. Ed had gone early this morning to the Duncan farm with his Bush Hog.

Matthew had heard Todd was going to make hay there this year, if nobody showed up to object to it. The bank owned the little farm, or maybe the county government. Nobody knew and there was nobody to ask about it. Harlan had said it was a favor to whoever owned it to keep it mowed so it didn't grow up in brush.

Todd had plowed a couple acres for Melvin Sawyer to put out a corn patch besides his huge garden. Mel said he wanted some chickens and first he had to grow some feed. It had been hard to find enough potatoes for seed for everyone, so they cut the pieces small with only one "eye" per piece, hoping they all would grow. Some had been slow to come up, but all the potato patches looked good now, just a few inches high. He'd be glad when they were big enough to dig a few to eat. Nobody had potatoes now.

Todd had been able to talk to Dan Billings who owned the farm between the ridge road and the highway. Dan had agreed to rent his ground to Todd, since Dan couldn't afford fuel to farm it now. Dan did have a good combine and with Todd providing fuel and putting out the crop, he would get a third of the crop and Dan 2/3 for doing his part. Dan had 20 acres of winter wheat that he would combine this summer, and Todd was to get 1/4 of that for providing fuel.

When Matthew wasn't busy otherwise, he had been helping Todd put up his new pole barn. He liked that a lot better than guard duty, or hoeing potatoes. Matthew had decided he didn't care too much for farming. He had lived near the Salem most of his life and didn't know that much about farm life. He was learning more than he ever wanted to know about the work on a farm, though. Most of it wasn't too bad, just not very interesting. He understood as well as anybody how important it was to grow food when you couldn't buy it, so he worked willingly enough taking care of the garden and livestock. But if he could make some money doing carpentry work, that was much better. He felt like he was learning something useful at it and there was always something new to learn.

Something was coming down the highway. Todd's tractor was shut off, probably for lunch, so Matthew could hear an engine in the distance coming north from town. He grabbed the small binoculars that Mel had loaned him for watch duty. They were small, but had a lot of magnification, so you had to hold them very still. He could see a stretch of highway about a quarter mile long south of the turnoff to the ridge road. There it came. It was a pickup truck and there were people in the back of it. It slowed down at each house and had a look, then speeded up again. When it got toward the end of where he could see the road, he could see men in the back with long guns, may 4 or 5 men. The truck stopped and sounded like it had turned into a driveway, then shut off. It was probably at that house across from the turnoff.

He didn't like the looks of this. Matthew pulled out his walkie talkie and called Todd's house to report it. Just as Alicia answered, he heard shots across the road where the truck was. He told her that and told her to get Mel, and Todd and anybody else they could reach to check this out. She said she would and cut him off. Matthew got a cold feeling about what he heard. It was over a quarter mile away, but that was too close for him. He hoped the men would hurry.

They did.

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Mel's walkie talkie was on the same channel so when Alicia called him, he had already heard Matthew's report and was on the way to Gerald's to get him. It was a shame they didn't have more radios, but that was what they had to deal with. He was out of breath by the time he had run the 300 yards, but told Gerald to saddle up, guard heard shots on the road.

Gerald took his small car and went back to Mel's to pick up his gear at the end of his driveway where he'd left it so he could run faster. They were on the road quickly, and Ed wasn't far behind with Mike in his truck. Ed must have got the report fast, too. The four of them hustled to Todd's place as quietly as possible. Todd was outside with his gear on and the 5 of them double-timed it to the hill top where Matthew was. He hadn't heard any more shots, nor seen anything else. He thought the truck was still at the house across the road, Dan Billings place. Mel told Matthew to stay in place and report what he saw and heard to Alicia. She had her radio and was on the way to get their "reserves"--all the wives and the rest of the neighbors.

The 5 men moved out down the county road that offered concealment from the highway until they got right to the intersection. They had a good look, then crossed the 2 big trees Ed had felled across the road. Around the last turn on the gravel road they were almost in sight of the highway and took to the ditches on either side of the road. That led to the highway embankment opposite Dan's house where they spread out in a skirmish line. Peeking over the highway edge, they saw a man down in the front yard and a dead dog. Four other men with guns were visible, three behind the truck and one behind a big tree in the yard. Two windows were broken out of the house. It looked like a standoff.

Mel signaled "Halt" with a fist in the air and everybody watched for a few minutes until the guy behind the tree moved one leg and a shot from the house put a hole in that leg. Mel signaled that the tree guy was his, and for the others to take out the rest. Mel aimed for the man's right shoulder, and fired. The others fired a second later and two of those behind the truck fell. The other one dived for the truck cab, and took a round in his leg, but scrambled in. Mel swung and put three rounds of .30 caliber hardball in the back of the cab. The exposed leg quit moving.

Nothing was moving except the man Mel had shot, and he was writhing on the ground with a bloody shoulder and leg. Mel signaled Halt again, and it got quiet. He yelled at the house, "DAN! THIS IS MEL. YOU ALL RIGHT?"

"YEAH! WE'RE OKAY. ARE ALL FOUR DEAD?"

"CLOSE ENOUGH. ONE BY THE TREE MIGHT BE BREATHIN', BUT I WANNA TALK TO HIM! I'M COMIN' OUT. IF HE MOVES, SHOOT HIM, OKAY?"

"GOT A BEAD ON HIM!"

Mel told his guys to watch the man, too, and crossed the road at an angle to the downed man. The guy was not moving at all and there was a lot of blood by him. Mel kicked his leg and got a moan. Holding the M14 on him, he rolled the guy over with his foot and stuck the rifle in his chest. The man had apparently passed out. His right arm was broken and useless, and his leg was leaking from several places, buckshot maybe, Mel thought.

Mike, Ed, Todd, and Gerald came across the road spread out and crouched, guns at low ready. They took up positions around the truck, watching the downed attackers. Mike stuck his shotgun into the cab with one hand and used the other to drag the man laying on the seat. He hit the ground like a sack of rocks, and lay there.

Mel got a tourniquet on his man's arm and tightened it to stop the bleeding. Then he used his belt to do the same on the wounded leg, using the man's short shotgun to twist it tight. The man was pale, but breathing. Mel grabbed his crotch and squeezed. The man gave a loud moan and Mel slapped his face several times. The man's eyes opened and looked at Mel's knife at his throat.

"Answer some questions and it'll go a lot easier. How many of you?"

The man didn't answer and the knife began to bite a little. "HOW MANY OF YOU???"

"F\_Four."

"Any more vehicles? Trucks? Cars?"

"No."

His voice was ragged and weak. Mel wasn't sure if it was all weakness, or not. He asked him where they came from?

"Salem."

He grabbed the man's crotch again and said, "I don't believe you. The truck has Kentucky plates and you ain't from around here or I'd have seen you before. Try again. WHERE ARE YOU FROM?"

Mel squeezed some and the man decided to answer, "Brandenburg. AAGH!"

"That's better. Where you been?"

"Corydon, Salem."

"One more time. Any more of you?"

"No. I need help. Help me."

"Sure thing buddy," Mel said. He stood and put a .30 caliber round between his eyes.

Mel sat down on the ground and said to nobody in particular, "I'm too old for this crap."

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## CHAPTER 42

The reserve force had been told by radio that it was over and all was well. Mel told them to go on home. They didn't need to see what happened. The men hung around to clean up the mess.

They decided the truck wasn't any good. One of Mel's rounds had gone through the heater core that was leaking coolant. Another had taken out some electrical stuff under the dash and under the hood, and the third had gotten the distributor. All three had gone through the occupant first. Somebody had shot out a rear tire. Dan's wife had missed one of the assailants, but her shotgun slug had taken out the truck's radiator and cracked the water pump.

They drained the gas tank into cans, removed the battery, and drained the oil and antifreeze to save. Nobody had tires the size on the truck so they let them go. Dan got his tractor and a chain and dragged the truck down the road a couple hundred yards where there was a steep embankment and shoved it over with the front end loader.

There had been some canned food in the truck, some ammunition, and a couple gas cans that were full. They gave Dan all the gas and food, and the one thug's cheap 9MM pistol with what ammunition they found for it. The ridge group took the other guns, all shotguns, and an assortment of ammunition. There were a couple knives that got passed out. Behind the seat they found a plastic bag of jewelry and some paper money that they gave to Dan over his protests.

The truck's registration did not match any of the identification they found on the dead men, so they concluded the truck was stolen. The dead men got thrown unceremoniously into the loader bucket and hauled to a deep washout gully on the back of Dan's home farm. Todd fetched his tractor and plow to dig some dirt loose, then Dan backfilled over the gully with it. He got some help digging a separate grave for his dog. Mike Wilson offered him one of their dogs. Dan said he'd come over to Mike's to see about it tomorrow. Todd drove his tractor and plow back home through Dan's fields on the other side of the highway since the road was blocked.

Dan thanked the men with tears in his eyes. The other 5 told him that was fine, they knew he'd help them if they needed it, then headed for home.

Dan spent some time cleaning broken glass from his front porch and living room while his wife tried to settle her nerves enough to put a meal together.

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Mel was feeling battle fatigue like he never had before. Before he left the Billings' farm, he'd policed up his spent brass, an old habit of his so he could reload them. He walked home pretty much by himself. At least it felt like he was alone. The 4 men walked in a loose group back to Todd's house where they split up to go their separate ways. Mel's rifle felt like it weighed a ton on the short walk to his place. He shucked out of his web gear, made sure his rifle was on safe, and laid down on the couch, utterly spent.

Alicia and Joann were doing their best to calm down the three kids. Christopher was anxious to hear all the details of what happened, but nobody wanted to talk about it. Frustrated, he asked Matthew what had happened.



Matthew said, "Mr. Billings got attacked by a gang. He and his wife were holding them off, but needed help, so when our guys got there they shot 'em all. I think somebody said they had buried them already."

Chris asked, "I wonder if my Dad shot some of them? He won't talk about it."

"They don't know who shot who. Except for Mel. He got two of 'em. He was in 'nam I heard. He's a tough old man."

"He looked kinda sick when he left here."

"You'd prob'ly be sick too, if you killed somebody."

"Yeah. I guess so."

Emily and Sophia were hysterical. The women assured them repeatedly that the bad men were dead now, and the men here would make sure the girls were safe. It took all afternoon to get them calmed down enough to eat a few bites and then take a nap together.

The next day Christopher spent with the girls getting them interested in things outside and pumped up the tires on their bikes for them. He had them park their bikes next to his in the storage building. Alicia gave them all small jobs to do while the garden planting proceeded and some kitchen chores when mealtime came. It seemed to help, but the girls were still wide-eyed sometimes.

Todd got back to field work on the tractor, but he rigged a scabbard to hang his AR 15 on the fender and carried his pistol wherever he went.

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"I don't believe that crap! It's all BULL!" Ed was fuming about what he's just heard on the radio. The President was on telling about how reconstruction of the nation was going well, food aid was increasing, and law and order had been restored in the cities. Factories were coming back on line and goods would soon be flowing to stores again, but everyone could help by planting gardens and reducing their driving to save fuel. It went on and on.

Joann said, "Maybe he's just trying to give people some hope. We all need some hope."

"I'd rather hear it like it IS! Hope is no good if it ain't happening. We know how it REALLY is! I haven't seen a store open for months, and there wasn't hide nor hair of a policeman anywhere in town last week. The place looks like it's a war zone. There is nobody there. It's deserted. I don't know who he expects to believe that crap, but is sure ain't us."

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Alicia had heard the same broadcast and told Todd about it. Analytical by nature, he considered it for a time before he said, "There are several things that occur to me. One, he is trotting out the usual BS to reassure the public, even if there is no truth in it. Two, there could be some truth in what he said, but if so, it is a spotty recovery effort. My guess is, the government is spread far too thin to do anything of consequence except in selected cities."

Alicia said, "There's no law and order around here, that's for sure. Unless WE make it happen. He's full

of it."

Todd shook his head, saying, "I'm betting they are trying to do something. They have to in order to have any credibility in the future. They probably have DC secured, and maybe some of the Eastern Corridor cities, at least to some degree. If so, that means they had to come up with food from somewhere. My bet is that they are stripping the eastern countryside of farm commodities to do that. They can't ship things cross country with the shortage of fuel."

"They have forgotten that the Midwest exists, from what I can tell."

"I don't think they have totally forgotten the Midwest. They will get here looking for commodities as soon as they get transport figured out. Like the grain for fuel deal last year, they will be shipping farm commodities to the cities, because that's where the bulk of the voters are. Us country residents will have to get by however we can. In fact, they will probably try to beg, borrow, or steal what we have to feed their precious city voters. We need to be thinking about that."

Alicia's face was livid with rage as she said, "The people here have been living on cornbread and beans and they think we will just GIVE them what they want? THAT won't go over very well. These country people might have something to say about that. One kind of thief is no different from another."

Todd said, "They will know where to look. All they have to do is review the satellite photos and see where there are crops being grown this year."

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Ed had told Harlan Ames what he'd heard on the radio. Ed had come to the same conclusion as Todd and was warning Harlan that they had better expect the government to show up to collect "taxes" on their farm produce to feed the cities.

Harlan said, "You 'member what they taught us in school about carpetbaggers after the Civil War? They kept the South starved for years. Lincoln was a Republican, so after Reconstruction there wasn't a soul in Dixie that would vote anything but Democrat for the next hunderd years! Called 'em 'Dixiecrats'. My grandad tole me 'bout that. Said his family had to hide ever'thing they owned to keep the gubmint from takin' it. Some of them carpetbaggers never made it back north, either. Then the poor hill folks got to makin' 'shine to beat 'em outa taxes on likker, too. It was a southern thing back then. If they try that crap AGIN, they gonna have the whole country doin' it."

Ed nodded soberly as he said, "Yes. Politicians never change. Looks like we better learn a thing or two from those old southerners."

Harlan laughed and told Ed, "Grandad raised hogs, an' his Dad did after the Civil War. The dam' carpetbaggers told him they were taxin' 'em half of what hogs he had for "War Reparations", so Great-Grandad, he turned his hogs loose in the woods and said, there ya go! You ketch 'em, an' you c'n have 'em! They let 'em run loose in the woods and eat the oak mast. (Author's note: Mast = acorns) Got fat on it, too. Them hogs got wild and mean, an' so when they wanted a hog to butcher, they caught him with a rifle, and dressed him out where he fell. Wadn't many carpetbaggers would go in them woods!"

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## CHAPTER 43 June, 2012

Summer crop work had tapered off to the regular hoeing of gardens and corn patches, where the cultivators couldn't get all the weeds. Wheat harvest wasn't due for a while yet, and it wasn't peak canning season yet, so repair work and building got top priority. Ed wanted to get his trailer enclosed better before another winter came, so he hired Tara Robertson again to help him and Joann. He had the materials, but the time had never been available yet.

The screen wire came down and was saved for other uses, or for trade. Next was framing for some windows Ed had bought from a materials salvage company. They put up the plywood siding Ed had stacked away in one of the storage sheds, covered the whole building, then sawed out the window openings with his portable circular saw powered by his small Honda generator that would run all day on a gallon of gasoline. The windows were shimmed and nailed in place, then trim was cut to fit, nailed on, painted, and caulked.

Insulation was next, using thick plastic foam sheets, and another layer of thin wood paneling on the inside. The enclosed trailer looked like a house now. They put up foam insulation sheets for a ceiling and left a square opening for a metal chimney fitting. The double wall chimney pipe went in next, and a wood stove that Mike had built for him last year. It had a removable small [firebox](#) to allow using as a cook stove in summer. When winter came, that was taken out and it functioned as a normal box style wood heating stove.

Ed had been worried about his LP gas supply running out and this would eliminate the need for it. They could do all the cooking out here now and keep the trailer a lot cooler in hot weather. In winter, they could heat the building and simply open the trailer doors to heat it. His plan might not have been perfect, but it was decent housing for very little money at the time, and the roof over the trailer made it durable.

He had enough solar panels that he could run his small refrigerator and some lights easily. His neighbors except for Harlan Ames all depended on the grid electric to stay running, which it did, mostly. There were some outages for unexplained reasons that scared everyone, wondering if it would come back on this time. It was basically a government freebie, because there were no electric bills. There had been no mail service to deliver electric bills or anything else since last Fall.

The gasoline supply was getting iffy, since most of what people had stored was close to a year old and only some of it treated for longer storage. The nearest government run gas station that was open now was in Brownstown, and only when they got a delivery. Gas was rationed, too, and few could afford it, but they always seemed to sell out the day they got a delivery. It was chancy driving up there with no guarantee of getting any gas. There was some black market gas available sometimes at the Saturday trading day in Brownstown, but it was probably old and the dregs from the tanks of some defunct station. Some said it had water in it and could stall your engine. The radio told of gas being available in Louisville and Clarksville, but nobody wanted to take the chance of going to the cities.

Ed worried about that more than the LP, because they all needed a little gasoline to cut firewood. Nobody wanted to think about cutting firewood with axes. Mike had an antique circular "buzz saw" in his pile of salvage metal. He spent some time getting it altered to mount on Ed's tractor and driven by the PTO, using a PTO driveshaft salvaged from some farm machinery. That meant the tractor could be used to cut up small poles into firewood lengths. Ed had plenty of diesel fuel, and it stored longer than

gasoline. He would still be trying to get more diesel fuel if it was available. That government station rarely had any.

If the refinery and fuel delivery systems did not improve soon, there would be a lot of hungry people this next winter, and if they did any farming in years to come and they still could not get fuel, farming would have to be with horses.

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"I think I can fix it with parts from that old chain saw in the shop," Gerald told his wife.

Anne said, "What happens when we don't have parts to fix things?"

Gerald frowned and said, "We do without, that's what. I wonder every day if something is going to break and have me stuck somehow. We have to cut wood for heat and for cooking, so if I can't keep a chain saw running, we got big trouble."

Gerald tore apart his old saw and replaced the carburetor on the one he'd been using to get it running again. When he took the old carburetor he found the rubber diaphragm was degraded and had a hole in it. That was not something he could make from odds and ends. Good thing I had an extra, he thought.

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Radio was the only outside news source for the past few months since TV stations had gone off the air. There was usually some recorded music on the radio so some people listened to it as one last shred of the old world they knew, along with electric lights, if they were working. A government newscast came on each hour, mostly the same one repeated all day, but today Joann heard a different news broadcast.

"More fuel will be distributed to the smaller cities in the country now that pipeline and rail distribution is being made operative again. These shipments will reach south Indiana stations by the end of next week. National Guard forces will accompany shipments to assure security. Once fuel distribution is normalized, truck shipments of food and needed goods will resume regular shipments.... blah, blah, blah."

Ed said, "I'll believe it when I see it. We've heard this before."

"They never gave us a date before. Maybe they are serious this time."

"Don't hold your breath until it happens."

The broadcast continued. "National Guard troops will again provide security in the smaller cities to enable local businesses to resume operations as shipments reach them...."

Joann said, "Well all we have to do is wait and see."

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The first fuel shipment in several months did arrive in Salem on Friday the next week, much to everyone's surprise. One attempted hijacking was met with deadly force and no more were attempted. By the end of June, one grocery, one gas station, one pharmacy, and one bank had reopened. All of them had gun toting guards and there was little trouble.

The bank would buy silver and gold coins for New Dollars at something like a reasonable exchange rate, but few people wanted to give up their hard earned coins for the paper money, unless they could spend it all before they left town. Still, it was a beginning and something resembling commerce was going on. There was still no market for locally produced farm products except the farmers' market. There were rumors that the government was taking over the old grain elevator and would buy local grain, but it had not happened yet.

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People had begun to come out from hiding in their homes in town and from the homes of relatives in rural areas to buy some desperately needed things. Some of the more recent residents in the area had moved back to the cities whence they came, confusing their familiarity there with security only to face even worse conditions. Violence from several causes had claimed a number of lives, and disease, augmented by inadequate diet, claimed even more. Less than half the original population remained to emerge by the end of the month.

As people realized that security had actually improved with the return of troops in mid-June, a new farmer's market at the fairgrounds got some business. Some sold garden plants, cabbage, onions, peppers, tomatoes, and others. Late gardens began to be seen in town. A few people already had hidden spots planted behind garages and homes.

The Sheriff's body was found outside his home, one of many scattered around the town with bullet holes in the clothing, the houses ransacked. The very old and the very young were devastated by the winter of near starvation, leaving mostly school age children and young adults to populate the town, with a few of the older and wiser heads that had maintained their habits of preserving and storing food.

Wes Blake and Larry Barnes had learned by word of mouth that security had improved, so they ventured into town on Saturday to have a look and try to buy some gasoline. They took along a barrel of seed corn and some silver coins to trade. At the government regulated gas station, they learned that Indiana had set an exchange rate of 240 New Dollars for one dollar face value of old silver coins they would accept for tax payments. Indiana set the price of gold at 25 to one with silver, or 6,000 New Dollars per ounce, the same as the Federal ratio.

The Federal Government had struck a bargain with the states to stave off an imminent rebellion by allowing both currencies to circulate, but demanded New Dollars for Federal tax payments. That meant that silver, or New Dollars were accepted for buying fuels, allowing the gas station owner to pay his state gas tax in silver (greatly to his advantage) and his Federal fuel taxes in New Dollars. The Federal government was intent on maintaining their monopoly on the issuance of currency to maintain their hold over the states. Thus, they set the official exchange rates for silver at 160 to one, and gold at 4,000 New Dollars, which they ordered the banks to follow.

This worked in favor of the states who were content to collect taxes in metals at the higher exchange rate and bet that it would insure them against future Federal devaluations. The silver in private hands was flowing into state coffers, while the Feds were stuck with the paper dollars that were still falling in value.

Wes almost filled the tank on his truck with the rationed amount of 10 gallons and paid 10 old silver quarters for it, instead of the posted price of 40 New Dollars per gallon. The men noted that diesel was priced at 28 cents in silver, or 44.80 New Dollars. The gas station owner was making money on the exchange rate with every sale paid in silver, but sales were slow. Few people had any money of any

kind.

With the exchange rates in mind, Wes drove to the fairgrounds to see if the farmers' market was going yet. It was, but was very small. Larry did find one man who was interested in the seed corn, but most were wanting to trade for the cheapest food they could find. They sold 50 pounds of the seed corn for 2 silver quarters and gave it up for the day. Larry learned that ground cornmeal was in demand, despite there still being unpicked fields of it. The corn in the fields had mostly fallen over and was beginning to rot, and almost nobody had any way to grind it into meal, except to pound it with hammers or stones.

The banker had his problems, despite infusions of New Dollars from the government. Almost all commerce being done was local, and done either in silver and gold, or by bartering. He was out of that loop entirely. He existed personally by paying himself from the bank's funds, but they were dwindling without paying investments of any kind. The stock and bond markets were open, but values were falling and nobody would buy a short contract on anything. The bank owned numerous foreclosed properties, but there were no buyers at any price.

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## CHAPTER 44

July, 2012

The heat of July took its toll on the ridge community, first when Lennie Hoskins fell dead of a stroke in his garden one morning. During Vickie's long career as an LPN she had seen enough to know immediately that it was over. She walked across the road to Mel Sawyer's place and found him outside.

"Lennie's gone. He either had his last heart attack, or a stroke. No way to know, but he just fell over in the garden. I'm going to want some help with him, if you could."

"Sorry to hear that. I always liked Lennie. Lemme get the cleaned up a bit and I'll be right over. Just set down on the porch in the shade and we'll go together in a minute."

"I sure appreciate it Mel."

Mel went after Gerald Tomes and Mike Wilson, the nearest neighbors, to help with moving Lennie's body inside where it was cooler. Gerald's wife Anne came with him and helped Vickie get the body cleaned and dressed in his best clothes. Mike knew his Dad had some lumber left from his work and asked him to make a coffin for Lennie. Todd Reynolds, Gerald Tomes, Mel Sawyer and Ronnie Nichols dug the grave where Vickie said Lennie had wanted it.

Alicia Reynolds, Tara Robertson, Joann Ames, and Denise Allen stayed that evening with Vickie, sitting up most of the night for an old fashioned wake. They awoke in their chairs the next morning in time to have a light breakfast before others began to show up for the burial.

A simple graveside service the next morning was attended by the entire ridge community, followed by a pitch in dinner in the shade of the big trees behind the Hoskin's home. Vickie noticed that Harlan looked very tired that day, and told Ronnie, "You keep an eye on your Grampa. He looks like the heat is being pretty hard on him."

Ronnie said, "That's why we drove the old truck down here today, 'cause I thought he was acting pretty tired. I'll tell him to take it easy, but it won't do much good. He's got a mind of his own."

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Two days later the weather was still hot when Ronnie found Harlan down by the spring leaning back against a tree. Ronnie carried him to the house and put him down on his bed. Harlan's breathing was shallow. Tara left to fetch Ronnie's mother, Joann, and then Vickie Hoskins, the only medical person nearby. Harlan hadn't regained consciousness when Tara returned with his mother, Joann. Joann spoke to her father and asked him if she could get him anything?

Harlan's eyes opened and he looked at Joann. Just above a whisper, he said, "You got you a good man now. You'll be fine." His eyes went to Ronnie, hovering over the bed. Harlan said, "You get those jars under the cellar steps. That's yours, an' the farm is yours. Been in your name for years now. You're a good boy. Best I could do fer ya."

Ronnie and Joann each squeezed one of his hands. Harlan closed his eyes and was gone. By the time Vickie got there, it was finished and there was another funeral to plan. Ronnie said, "I thought he was going to live forever, I guess. Never really thought about him dyin'. He was the best friend I ever had. I'm sure gonna miss him."

Matthew missed it all, having been working on Todd's new barn that day. By the time he got home the funeral plans were well under way. He volunteered to make a coffin for Harlan, who had treated him like his own grandson. He did his best and it was a very nice coffin when he finished.

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A week had gone by before Ronnie remembered that his grandfather had told him the jars under the cellar steps were his. He wondered what that meant, and went to look in the root cellar. They stored canned food in the cellar, so that's what he thought the old man meant at the time, but he finally realized they didn't put jars under the steps. Harlan was always careful to say exactly what he meant, believing that a man's word was important.

Ronnie found the loose stair tread board near the bottom, the only possible access under the steps without tearing them apart. Underneath were 4 half gallon glass jars, the antique kind with rubber seals, glass lids, and a rusted wire bail to hold the lid on. All four were nearly full of coins. Ronnie found that the one on the far right had been opened recently, probably to add some coins that Harlan had been paid for something. The others were pretty full and obviously hadn't been opened in a very long time. The rubber seals were stuck to the lids and the old jars were hazy with age. Harlan must have been saving those coins all his life.

He took the jar with the loose lid out and found it was really heavy. He put the step back in place and carried the jar outside. He went to the house with it and showed Tara. Her eyes got big as she said, "My God, you're rich man! That's worth a lot now! That's what Harlan left to you?"

"Yeah, and there's 3 more jars. I don't know how much it is, but it was real heavy," Ronnie said. "I think we should count it."

It was mostly quarters and dimes, with a few half dollars and silver dollars. They both counted it and got the same answer, \$268.70. Ronnie sat there for a while without saying anything. He tried to figure out what this was worth now, but he couldn't do the math in his head. He dug around and found a pencil and a scrap of an old newspaper to write on. The bank would give you 160 to one, New Dollars for a dollar's face value of silver. He got \$42,992. That was a big number, but he had no idea what it would buy now. New Dollars weren't worth much, with gas costing \$40 a gallon. Still, you could get gas for a silver quarter a gallon, so that was well over 1,000 gallons of gas he could buy with that jar of coins.

He had to think about this. The old dollars got devalued by half, then replaced with New Dollars at about 1/10th of the old ones. But now, with fuel so expensive, he didn't know what to think the jar might be worth. He said that to Tara, who told him, "It's worth what you can get for it. You have 4 jars of it, so if they have this much, that's over \$1,000 in silver. I bet you could buy a house with that. Maybe a farm."

Ronnie didn't know what to think. He did realize that they wouldn't have to scrape by like they had been. He briefly wondered how that much money would affect Tara, but he had seen nothing but good out of her to this point, and he disliked the idea of mistrusting her. She had been really good to him



when she thought he was as poor as anybody.

His next thoughts were that someone could steal the money if they found out he had it. He thought Matthew was probably as trustworthy as his mother, so he decided to tell him about it when he got home from work, and swear them both to secrecy. He put the jar back where it had been all those years and poked a rusty nail in one hole with his fingers to keep the stop in place.

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Ed and Joann had been talking about how to make a living in this new, screwed up world.

"There's just nothing to compare it to. Nothing is the same any more. You can't tell what things will cost, like how much to pay for hay, because you can't tell what you'll be able to get for a beef cow. Maybe I've been overcharging folks, or maybe I've traded off those 2 steers too cheap. Used to be, I could get an idea pretty quick about what I needed to sell something for, but that was when a dollar was still a dollar, even if we did have inflation. Now, we don't know what anything will be worth next month, let alone next year when we have some new calves."

Joann, ever the practical one, told him, "You know for sure that people have to eat. If you can afford to raise any kind of food, you will be able to sell it or trade it off somehow. What you have to watch is the cost of fuel, seeds, and such."

"We'll have the seed corn thing taken care of this year, if we have any kind of a decent crop, because we can save our own seed from it. We have to do that with everything we grow, too. I made sure we only bought good garden seeds that aren't hybrids so they will reproduce true. There should be a market for those, too. Not everybody can figure out how to save their own garden seeds. That's why I wanted to put 2 acres in garden crops this year, you know. Most of it I'll let go to seed and save them to sell next year."

"That might be the best business we could get into now. It doesn't take much room to store a lot of garden seeds. There's those 2 sheds that are getting emptied out now that we used the lumber and stuff that was in there. There's enough boards left to make some shelves, but we're going to need a lot of containers to store that much seeds of so many kinds."

Ed said, "I wonder where we could find a lot of jars, or cans or something to store seeds?"

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Larry Barnes was looking at the fields grown up in weeds as he and Gloria drove into town. He said, "Looks to me like there isn't going to be near enough farm crops grown this year. It's going to be another hard winter for a lot of folks."

Gloria said, "There's not as many people now, but I think you're right. All these fields used to have corn, soybeans, or hay growing, or cattle in them."

Larry said, "I want to move back home, but I'm afraid that if we do, we'll have another winter of starving people and we wouldn't stand a very good chance if somebody tried to attack us with just the 2 of us there."

"I don't think it's time for that yet, like Wes and Ashley said. Kate wants us to stay, too. She said pretty much the same thing you did."

"We have to make a living somehow, and on their place, we are just working for wages, pretty much."

Gloria said, "Hey, that beats the heck out of what most people are doing."

Larry had to agree. "Maybe it's the best thing for now, but we need to get ahead somehow if we can."

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Two little girls and a boy could find a lot of mischief to get into, Alicia learned. They were good kids, just curious as they explored their world, but they were a constant worry. Todd tried to keep an eye on them and that helped. She cleaned up after breakfast with all 3 kids helping and it did go pretty fast. That was a good thing because her breakfast didn't sit so well today. She'd had some kind of digestive upset for several days that she blamed on the heat. The hot weather was getting worse and so was her digestion. Alicia sat down at the kitchen table near the back door to take advantage of an early morning breeze. She was hot and sweaty after washing dishes in hot water, the nausea was worse, and....

It finally hit her like a ton of bricks. Her period was very late. She was pregnant. Duh! There had been so much going on that she had ignored everything except the crisis of the moment all year. Once she had thought of it, there was no doubt in her mind. She didn't need a pregnancy test to tell her what she had experienced before. They had run out of birth control measures a couple months ago, the one thing that Todd had not been able to stock up on in time.

Then the worries and doubts began. What would she do for medical care in this insane world they lived in now? Oh, crap. There was no such thing as disposable diapers now. The hospital had run out of medical supplies and she had no idea where to find a doctor. She had heard that there was a pharmacy open in town, but who knew what they had or did not have? There was no baby formula to buy that she knew about. I'll have to feed him the old fashioned way, I guess. Well, there was Vickie Hoskins. She had probably helped deliver hundreds of babies.

The door banged and Christopher came in, saying his Dad told him that the stray cat they adopted was going to have kittens! Feeling kind of miserable, without thinking Alicia blurted out, "Me too."

"You're going to have kittens?"

"No. I mean I'm going to have a baby. At least I think so."

"Wait'll I tell DAD!"

"DON'T YOU DARE, YOUNG MAN! I'm supposed to tell him first. You keep quiet about it. I'm not even sure yet, okay?"

Somewhat deflated, Chris said, "Yes Ma'am."

"Tell your Dad I need to talk to him, okay?"

"Sure!" Chris raced out the back door. His Mom hadn't said anything about not telling Emily and Sophia.

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About 5 miles west of Alicia, and a week before, Ashley had come to the same conclusion. She hadn't

told anyone yet, because she wasn't real sure, but her period was almost a month late. She had never felt better in her life, so she didn't have the confirmation of morning sickness, but somehow she was pretty sure of it. She just felt a little, different. It wasn't like it should be a surprise or anything. There weren't any birth control pills now, or anything else to prevent it. She had looked forward to having babies sometime. Things were kind of crazy now, but she hadn't changed her mind about that.

As much as she loved Wes, she would wait a while to be absolutely sure before she told him. For now, it was her secret. She wasn't scared of the idea. Ashley was a farm girl. She knew exactly how these things worked.

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## CHAPTER 45

August, 2012

Ronnie thought about the money thing for the next week and decided a couple things. One, nobody should be tempted beyond their limits, no matter how good the person. So, when Tara and Matthew had both gone to work for Todd on his new barn, he came in from hoeing the garden and moved the 4 jars of silver to his toolbox in the old pickup. He locked the toolbox as usual and went back to work.

The second thing he had decided was that the money needed to be put to work, or they would just spend it all eventually. He'd put it in the truck because he planned a trip to town tomorrow to see the banker. He thought that one remaining bank was probably who owned the Duncan place now. That farm joined his Grandpa's--well, his farm now. It was a lot bigger, but had about the same amount of tillable ground and more pasture land. If he could afford to buy the place, now seemed like the time to do it. While everything was all messed up he hoped to get a bargain. Ronnie didn't expect things to stay a mess forever.

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Vickie had cleaned the house for the second time this week. Her garden was perfectly weeded and cultivated, and she had already canned the tomatoes that were ripe enough. The house was so empty without Lennie there, but the clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen helped keep that feeling at bay. As long as she could stay busy it didn't hurt so bad, so she made sure she went to bed exhausted so she would fall asleep instantly. The trouble was waking up alone in bed and wondering why she should get up that day.

Maybe Mel needed some help with canning his garden produce. It would be something to do, and someone to talk to. Vickie saw him in his garden when she got the breakfast dishes cleaned up. She decided to go talk to him about it.

Mel saw her coming and guessed that she needed to talk to someone. People who were grieving for were like that. He had never had anyone to confide in, so he couldn't really relate to it, but he liked Vickie and would be happy to help if he could, or just listen. She was a good woman, in his opinion. She had stayed with Lennie through thick and thin until he died, and loyalty like that was something Mel held in high esteem.

"Hi Mel. You going to can those tomatoes soon?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd just make juice out of 'em. Less fuss to do that."

"Want some help? I'm looking for something to do."

"Mel chuckled and said, "Now, woman, that's the wrong thing to say around me. I'm liable to have you digging post holes in this heat! Ain't you got enough to do at home?" He grinned a little when he said it.

"No, I've about wore the pattern off the kitchen countertop cleaning it, and I need to be busy. With Lennie gone, it's just too quiet in the old house."

"Okay. Lemme see here. I got cucumbers ready to pickle, an' there's okra that's ready to cut if your hide is tough enough to stand the prickles on it. I got a can of crawdads out and had in mind to make some Jambalaya with the tomatoes an' okra an' some Sassafras leaves for seasoning. You up for that?"

"Oh my, I haven't made Jambalaya in ages. I hope you've got a recipe."

"Yep. From an old Cajun buddy of mine in the Army. I got some rice cooked to go with it, after you get the rest done. Lotsa red peppers growin', too."

"I hope you don't like it too hot, or I won't be able to eat it, but you show me the recipe and I'll get it started."

"I'll just add extra hot sauce in my bowl. Made some last year in an old beer bottle. I dried the peppers and crunched 'em up, then stuffed all I could get in that beer bottle. Then I filled it up with vinegar. It's been soakin' in there since last Fall, so it's gettin' about right now. When the vinegar gets low in the bottle, I'll just add some more. I can do that about 3 or 4 times before the peppers is wore out."

"I bet that stuff would take paint off, won't it?"

"It's considerable hot, for sure."

The noon meal of fresh Jambalaya was eaten in good company, with plenty left over for a day or two. Mel left it on the back of the wood cook stove in his garage. It was too hot to cook inside now. There was an old cast iron trivet hanging over the wood stove that said, "Kissin' wears out. Cookin' don't". Vickie took note of that, but didn't say anything about it.

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Early the following Saturday morning, Ronnie told Tara he wanted to go to town for some things and asked if she wanted to go along?

"Yes, I want to see if the grocery has any spices and I'd like to find some new shoes if we can anywhere. I thought there might be somebody that had some at the farmers' market. They drag everything in there to sell now, I heard."

He asked Matthew what he was up to today since Todd's new barn was finished, and found that he had a job working on the inside of Ed's new pole building. The boy was making some money, Ronnie thought with some satisfaction. He was going on 16 now and growing fast. The boy would need some new clothes, but Ronnie told him he would take care of that.

"Okay. We shouldn't be gone too long. Might be home for late lunch, but better take something with you in case we don't make it back by then."

"I'm not worried about that. Joann will feed us, and she's a good cook, too."

"All right, we'll see you sometime this afternoon then. You want anything from town?"

"Naw, I'm okay."

On the way in town, Ronnie told Tara he wanted to talk to the banker and ask about the Duncan farm.

"That's a good idea. It's right next door and you could clear out that strip of woods and make one big field out of it. The house isn't too bad, from what I saw just looking at the outside. Wonder what they want for it? I'd beat him down as cheap as you can. There hasn't been anybody buying anything that I know of."

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"Yes, we own that property. I'll look it up." Mr. Foster, the bank president said it briskly, like he had lots to do that day, even though they were the only customers in the bank. The only other person in there was probably his wife, who had a "Teller" nameplate, but was dusting the counters.

Ronnie and Tara were amazed that his computer worked, and even more so when he used the internet to find the property tax due on the place from County records. He was wondering why their internet didn't work, but didn't ask about it.

"Hmm. It looks like the taxes would be \$480 a year on it, and we have to have \$56,000 for it."

Ronnie looked at Tara and frowned. He knew the story on the farm and asked Foster, "How much was that boy's bail that the county wanted for it? It couldn't have been that high. More like \$20, 000 I think I heard."

"Ahem, well, we paid the county a premium for it, and there are the normal expenses to handle the closing, so our cost basis is higher than that. We need to make a little money on it for our trouble, too, but we could probably let it go for \$45,000."

"What would you have to have for it in silver?"

Foster had trouble keeping his bargaining face on. The exchange rates for silver left a lot of room for him to make serious money on a deal this size, but there were very few silver coins that came in for exchange. He wanted the silver payment so bad he could taste it.

"Let me do some calculation here," Foster said. Finally he said, "At the official exchange rate, "\$45,000 comes out to \$281.25 face value in silver. I can let you have it for \$260 in silver, and you won't beat that price for a property like that."

"And if I don't buy it, what are you going to do with it? It will sit there and the cedar bushes will be taller than I am next year, so nobody will want it. The roofs are leaky now, and I don't see you putting the money in the place to fix anything, so the buildings will be shot in a couple years and you won't ever sell it. I'll give you \$150."

"Now wait a minute, that property is a pretty good farm, and I offered you a giveaway price on it!"

"Farmers can't get fuel to put a crop in this year, so they sure as hell ain't gonna be buyin' another farm, now are they? I'll be back in a minute. I have to go get something."

Ronnie went to this truck and unlocked the tool box, then carried in one jar of coins. He asked Mr. Foster if he had a change counting machine to save time and trouble if they could reach an agreement?

He did have one, like all banks.

Ronnie said, "If you don't sell that place to me, you most likely ain't gonna sell it, are you? I'll give you \$150 in silver and you're lookin' at it. Take it or leave it."

Mr. Foster finally crumbled and said he'd do it. He signed papers for a while, then Foster sent his wife to the Courthouse, then they made out a Warranty Deed to Mr. Ronald J. Nichols for the farm. His wife had the paperwork done pretty quickly, Ronnie thought. He had almost half the jar full of silver when he left with the deed in his pocket.

Tara was impressed. She said, "Remind me to never dicker with you! That was quite a performance in there!"

Ronnie said, "I guessed that he doesn't have a penny in that farm, because the Feds bailed out all the banks that had bad loans the second time, remember? So, anything he could get for the place goes in HIS pocket, I'm thinkin'. It was already a write-off. I couldn't hardly come out and SAY that to him, so I just played my best poker game with him and didn't come out too bad, I think."

Tara smirked and said, "Let's see how you do buying me some shoes."

Ronnie grinned and headed for the fairgrounds.

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## CHAPTER 46

September, 2012

The farmers market had grown a lot since Ashley had been to town. Harvest time was coming, so everybody would be busy then and had to get their business done now if they could. The government had opened the grain elevator and published prices that would be offered for grains at harvest time. They would pay in New Dollars, of course, but that was better than nothing.

Wes was really irritated by this. He told Kate and Ashley, "It doesn't matter what they pay for grain. They are going to just print the money anyhow, so they could pay any price. But leave it to them to keep it low. The poster at the grain elevator said they would pay \$38 a bushel for corn, \$62 for soybeans, and \$42 for wheat. But diesel is up to \$44 a gallon, and I used to sell corn for \$7.00 at harvest time and paid \$4.00 for diesel. They got it backwards. With no fertilizer available, I don't think most farmers can make anything at their prices."

Kate said, "A lot of farmers will have to sell at their price to pay their property taxes and buy what they must to get through the winter."

Wes said, "Yeah, they will. But what it is doing is making everybody so poor they can barely afford to produce a crop. When they hit some big expense for machinery or something, they'll be out of luck. We're better off to feed it to hogs, because we can feed out a 200 pound hog on 15 bushels of corn or less, and we can get \$800 for that 200 pound hog. That's like selling corn for \$53 a bushel. Of course there is the work of raising the hogs, but that's a good profit. I wish we had more hogs now."

Ashley said, "How about chickens? Hogs have a feed conversion rate of around 4 pounds of feed to get a pound of pork, but chickens are 3 to one or better."

Kate said, "The problem there would be finding enough chickens to raise. I don't know anybody who is raising chicks around here. And you sure can't order them from a hatchery like we used to."

Wes said, "Other people are going to see this same thing, and the price of feeder pigs will go nuts pretty soon. We need to breed hogs and sell feeder pigs. It takes less feed and the profit will be better."

Ashley said, "I'll ask around about baby chicks. If nobody is doing that, maybe we should raise some."

Kate smiled and said, "That's my girl!"

Wes was about to make some snappy remark about his wife having babies on her mind all the time, but thought better of it and kept quiet. They found some things they wanted at the market, and were especially glad to find sugar. It was turbinado sugar, the first refining run of cane sugar, so it was still slightly brown and had a hint of molasses flavor, but it beat nothing. The government had decreed that white sugar used too much natural gas to refine so for now it was this or nothing. It had more moisture than white sugar, and bigger grains, but it would make jams and jellies. Wes was wondering where he could get seed for sugar beets, or sorghum cane. Their internet still didn't work, so he would look it up in Joe's old encyclopedia set tonight and learn all he could about those crops and processes.



Kate bought a 50 pound paper bag of the sugar and a 10 pound sack of roasted coffee beans. Her mother's old coffee grinder still worked, and she felt lucky to have it. Wes found some used socks that were in pretty good shape, and Ashley bought a pair of women's white leather shoes, the kind that nurses wore. Their purchases seemed expensive, but they had the money from selling some hogs lately and could afford it. The prices made them shop pretty hard, though, and they passed up a lot of things that would have been nice to have.

On the way home, Wes said, "If they don't get some parts in at the equipment dealers soon, there's going to be a lot of machinery that breaks down before long. The whole country is running on the ragged edge of falling completely apart. I'm glad I finally found that old metal lathe and milling machine, 'cause I'm afraid I'll have to make my own parts before long the way things are. And I can't make hydraulic hoses, or ball bearings. Some stuff just has to come from factories. It scares me bad. I just hope we make it through harvest time this year without any bad breakdowns."

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Ronnie had worried for a while about what he would do with their new farm to make some money, so he took a long walk one Sunday with Matthew to look it over good. They figured out pretty close to where the boundaries were, and walked down one of the big hollows to the creek bottom below, a drop of almost 300 feet that was steep enough to slide in places. In a forest cove at the bottom, he saw some familiar yellow leaves and red berries. It was early for Ginseng to turn colors yet, but it had been pretty dry lately.

He pulled out his folding belt knife and whittled himself a pointed digging stick. A regular Ginseng hoe would be better, but a blacksmith would have to make that. It had never been a commercial tool. Some people carried digging forks when they hunted it, but they got pretty heavy climbing over the hills. Matthew found another patch across the creek that was even thicker. Thinking about it, Ronnie decided that nobody had been out digging the stuff for a couple years, and this was pretty remote, too.

They dug about every third or fourth plant, pulled off the berries and scattered them back in the patch to seed a new crop. The last he'd heard, this stuff was worth over \$200 a pound dried, and that was before any of the devaluations. But Ronnie wasn't planing to sell it. He planned to keep it for medicinal uses, so they didn't dig but a few plants. A little Ginseng goes a long ways. They washed the roots in the creek and shook them dry, then cut off the top of the plants and carried the roots in their shirt pockets. They also dug some Yellowroot, also called Goldenseal, a powerful antibiotic herb that commonly grew in the same sort of places as Ginseng. Harlan had taught him well about hunting and wildcrafting.

Facing a long hard climb back to the top of the hill, Ronnie bit off a very tiny piece of root and chewed it. It had an acrid, slightly bitter taste, strongly flavored like dirt, but it was a powerful stimulant. This creek was so remote that nothing but animals were in the area, so he got a handful of water to chase the taste out of his mouth and wash the Ginseng into his stomach to be absorbed. Matthew tasted it and chose to do without the stimulant. After a brief rest, Ronnie felt much better and began the climb back up the fields above.

The farm was on the broad end of the ridge and had more flat table land on top than most of the properties up here. Out of the 80 acres he had bought, there was probably 20 acres or more in one irregular field, and almost that much in another one, plus a small sloping pasture lot of about 6 acres. All of it was overgrown with tall weeds and some scattered cedar bushes. It needed to be cut over this Fall and reseeded with pasture grasses this winter if it was to be useful next year. He would pay Ed

Wilson to do that. The old fences were rusty and brittle, but would probably hold cattle. The gates were trash, but he could make new ones.

He had exaggerated how bad off the buildings were, knowing the fat Mr. Foster would never actually come out here to look at the place. The tall farm house roof shingles were old, but appeared to be intact. The metal barn and shed roofs wanted some nails and a coat of roof paint wouldn't hurt, either. He wondered if he could find any roof paint. He had some nails, so he could tend to the worst of it. Ronnie didn't see any broken windows, so it wouldn't take much to have the place in shape for winter. He tried the hand pump on the old well and after about a dozen strokes, it began to pump rusty water. It soon cleared up and didn't taste bad at all.

Ronnie discovered a big pig pen overgrown with horse weeds taller than he was. It was in pretty bad shape. He walked on to look at the wood fenced garden spot, also gone to weeds, but with a couple determined tomato plants along one edge. All the place needed was a little tender loving care.

Matthew wandered into the barn and looked around. He climbed into the loft to look over how it was built with hewed beams and pegged joints. There was a little wood siding missing, but it was in good shape. He'd already found enough old boards in a stall to fix the siding. The loft floor still had a little hay trash in spots, and piles of old junk, the cast offs of previous residents. Matthew ignored all that, interested instead in the immense amount of work the builders had done to create such a thing, mostly with axes and chisels. It looked strong enough to stand at least another hundred years, like Harlan's old barn. This one was a little bigger than Harlan's barn, and had a laid limestone basement that opened on the lower side level with that part of the hillside where it sat. He loved the old building. It was something he would like to build as his masterpiece someday.

As the two of them walked toward the road, a pair of big does snapped their heads around to look at them in alarm, then flipped up their tails showing the white flag of retreating deer as they bounded for the trees.

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Alicia was relieved that the girls had been sleeping through the night for the past couple weeks. They had spent a couple nights upstairs in Chris' room, but they woke with nightmares and Alicia had to go calm them down. That had gotten worse after the shooting across the highway. It made sense to have them closer, so the kids traded rooms, with Chris back upstairs and the girls right across the hall from the adults. More than once Alicia had slept half the night with the girls after having them wake up screaming.

Chris was doing his best to comfort them in his own way, showing them around the place and talking with them. Today, all three of the kids were out with Todd in the new barn working on a wooden bin to hold their share of the wheat from Dan Billings crop. It was still stored in grain wagons at Dan's farm, but he would soon need the wagons for corn harvest. Alicia walked out there to tell them that lunch was almost ready.

"Hey Mom! Look what we're doing! This room is going to be all full of wheat, and Dad says we can make bread out of it," Christopher enthused.

Sophia asked, "Can you make bread Mom?"

Alicia was a little startled being called 'Mom' for the first time by her, but tried to hide that and said,

"Yes, I can make bread. We haven't had much flour for a while so I've been using it for other things, like gravy and baking cornbread instead."

"That's good. I like bread to make sandwiches."

"We'll have to grind the wheat to make flour first," Todd told them. "I have a flour mill that will do that."

Alicia asked Todd, "Won't mice get in there with the wheat?"

"I'm going to line the room with those rolls of aluminum over there, to keep them out of it. They can't chew through metal."

"I'm hungry," Chris said, and started for the kitchen. The girls ran after him, followed by Todd and Alicia.

"The girls are settling down finally," Alicia said.

"Yes. I was wondering if they would ever get over what happened to them," Todd said.

"They won't ever forget it, but maybe we can cover their bad memories with good ones."

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Vickie Hoskins had gone with Mel Sawyer to the Saturday market at the fairgrounds hoping to find some chili powder and any medical items available. She realized that she was the medical resource her neighbors had now, with virtually none in town. Halfway through the first row of sellers she ran into an old friend from her hospital days and chatted with her while Mel went looking for his own things.

Vickie learned about the disarray of the medical community, only now starting to come back together as State and Federal governments issued one dictate after another, few of which could be communicated to the right parties, let alone be implemented, so were mostly being ignored. She also learned that a Mrs. Margaret Duncan had passed away at the hospital, for lack of her blood pressure medication. That was not long before the hospital ceased to function in any useful way. Vickie dreaded having to pass that along to Todd and his wife, certain that this was their girls' grandmother.

There was next to nothing in the way of medical supplies. A few veterinary items were displayed on the tables and blankets, but nothing useful to her except a big bottle of gentle iodine solution. It was a good general purpose disinfectant for wounds, so she paid a good price for it.

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"We've got to give the combine a good going over before corn harvest to make sure everything is as good as I can make it. We can't stand having a breakdown with parts almost impossible to get," Wes told Ashley and her mother. "So, if you women can handle the canning for a few days, it would sure help me and Larry have time to get through the mechanic work."

Kate said, "Of course we can do that. We always did do it since Ashley was a little girl, and with Gloria to help, it'll go fast."

"Even with only half our normal acreage we need that combine to work perfectly. I don't want to think

about having to pick 30 acres by hand. Joe said he'd helped do that as a kid, but it would take weeks and we wouldn't have a way to shell it. I am SO glad that we put all new hydraulic hoses, drive belts, and bearings in that thing last year."

Kate said, "It looks like good corn, even with the dry weather at the end of summer. It should dry down good and that's a blessing since we don't have gas to run the grain dryer."

"I think it looks about as good as last year. If we get 90 to 100 bushels an acre, that will fill the other bin at around 2,700 to 3,000 bushels. The Nitrogen in the plowed down clover really helped it, I'd say, with no fertilizer to put on it. Helped the ground hold moisture, too, through that dry time. So, that clover seed we combined last year is going to be worth gold if we still can't get fertilizer. We can go back to what Joe said about crop rotation to keep up the fertility."

Ashley told him, "Dad did that most of the time anyway, the best I remember. That's why the ground is in good shape. If we're really careful with crop rotations and manuring where it needs it most, maybe we can get along without so much fertilizer."

Wes said, "I'm glad I had time to learn what I did from Joe. Cultivating corn is important, when you don't have chemical sprays to keep the weeds out. I think I can figure out what to plant where next year, but I have to use a pencil and paper and Joe could do it in his head."

Larry walked into the kitchen and got himself a glass of water. "Did I hear somebody take my name in vain?"

Wes laughed. "No, I was just sayin' that it will take you an' me a while to go through that combine before picking time."

"We'll get it done easy enough. Not to worry."

"It's my job to worry," Wes said.

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"Do you know anybody that has any sewing needles? I just lost one somewhere and I only have a couple left," Joann told Ed.

"Not offhand. We'll have to ask around at the market. That drug store used to have a little sewing stuff, but I bet it's gone now. I'll look next time I go to town," Ed said. "That's just one more thing I should have thought about last year."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. I think you did a great job of getting ready for this. Most people had no idea what was coming and that meant they did without."

"We'll be doing without, too. It's just a matter of time before we run out of something important."

Laura came to the door and knocked.

Joann said, "Come on in! What are you in such a hurry about?"

"The internet is back up!"

From the Bottom Up, Part Four

The New Normal

## CHAPTER 47

Eds' laptop booted up and gave the familiar Microsoft screen, then his desktop. He opened a page and got his homepage, Google. He clicked on a favorite financial site and got a screen that said the site was not available. The screen changed immediately to an unfamiliar notice.

Official Government Information

Read Notices in the links below

There was a list of links that followed.

The gist of the information links was that many sites had been deemed detrimental to the public and/or national security and had been permanently blocked. The remaining sites were all vetted by government security, or published by the States or Federal government itself.

Ed fumed. "No more alternative news then, huh?" Joann was looking over Ed's shoulder as he read.

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Christopher had discovered they had a web connection and his parents had a similar reaction. Laura sat down and painstakingly dug down through all the government links and found one to an Indiana State site for Education. It said that public schools would be closed for the foreseeable future due to budget constraints, so homeschool materials were available on the internet to be downloaded for personal use. It would be parents' responsibility to use these materials and educate their own children. A standardized test would be published online with parental password security.

Todd got disgusted quickly and went outside to work on his barn.

Alicia kept digging. She found Federal and State sites that outlined a new "Fair Tax" structure. It simplified the tax codes to a one page form that asked for income from any source paid in any manner, and the taxpayer was then required to pay their 25% tax to "Auditors" who would collect in each town or city, in cash or "kind". For farmers, that meant shippable produce, grain, and livestock. For any business that produced a tangible product, it meant cash or government ordered production of products to be specified by Auditors or their Authorized Deputies who would inspect the premises and make determinations based on their observations.

Under Martial Law for "The Duration of The Emergency", tax collection would be aided by military troops as found to be "necessary for orderly function of the process", and "Places of Ordinary Business" would have Deputies assigned to check on "proper record keeping for tax purposes". Paper money would be phased out, along with silver and gold, with the goal of all paperless transactions.

Under "Aid Programs" there were many pages with titles only, and others that were blank. Only the

Food Aid had any details, consisting of requirements to be eligible for Food Aid, and that mostly bulk commodities would be delivered as available to central distribution points, with minimal details about that.

Land line telephones were being phased out as too costly to maintain in the new streamlined economy. Cell phone service was back in major urban areas and would soon extend to rural areas.

Alicia used a little of their precious printing paper to print out the things she thought were most crucial for people to know about. Over the next couple days, the information spread faster than gossip, but talk about how to deal with all of it spread even faster.

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People everywhere put all their efforts toward how to survive another day, through the summer, and how to live through the winter. Paying taxes was not a high priority. Avoiding taxes was a high priority. Black market trading flourished, and was patronized by those few Government employees assigned to monitor business and collect taxes. They couldn't get the necessities of life any other way, so they turned a blind eye to the cash sales and trading that went on under their noses, only asking for an occasional bribe to help them make a living.

The government desperately needed to collect grain and meat, so they put emphasis on getting it done. Corruption was rife among the Tax Auditor Deputies who were of necessity local people, being the only ones who could locate the farmers to be taxed. They collected a modicum to satisfy their federal overseers, took a lot of bribes to become very nearsighted when inspecting farms. On the odd chance that a Federal Auditor would accompany them to inspect a farm, word somehow got to the farmers in advance and there was very little to be found when the Auditor and Deputy arrived.

That gave rise to new terms, like "flying pigs/cows/sheep" , and "floating corn". When the Auditor was expected, some means was found to have the commodities be elsewhere. More than one Auditor solicited bribes, too. It was cheaper than paying the 25% tax, so Auditors lived well. If the Auditor was properly "greased", he didn't "squeak" to those above him.

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The past winter of scarce food and fuel, and a certain amount of violence, had cost a lot of lives. There was no estimate yet of how many survived, but more than half the houses in Salem were empty. Great numbers of the town's residents had moved in with relatives or friends, with 2 or 3 families sharing a home for reduced cost for heat and to share food and other expenses. A lot of those had moved to rural areas, but some stayed in town where natural gas was available for heat and cooking. Some people died in nursing homes, the hospital, or other places where the death was recorded, but others died in varied circumstances with no record of any kind.

Employment was hard to find. The town still had its' Mayor and City Council, but they were barely to exist on their salaries. Both City and County governments were out of money until the next disbursement from the State, and that was long overdue. The water treatment plant and gas company had been taken over by the Federal government, but they were unable to send out or collect bills with not enough employees, and no functional postal service due to lack of fuel. There were posters in the County Courthouse promising that mail service would resume as soon as fuel was available. The real reasons had more to do with lack of vehicle maintenance, and inability to pay employees enough to live on.

With only a small percentage of the population working jobs for pay, very little tax money was collected in cash. Factories were already tasked with making what the government told them to make, so it wasn't difficult to shunt some of that production to government use, except the government didn't need much of what they could get that way, so they used what they collected to help pay government employees. Most of those goods were traded off on the black market that sprang up instantly.

Farmers were hard to collect from, also. Having barely a subsistence living, they had none to spare and giving a quarter of it in taxes would leave them destitute. Consequently, crops were not sold to the government as expected, but grain was kept and fed to livestock to defer any income until the next year. Livestock were slaughtered and sold on the black market then reported and "died". Tax collectors were shunned from society and denied the benefits of the black markets, thus remaining at or near poverty level. Clandestine trading meets were moved constantly to avoid a few overly zealous tax agents, and some of those tax agents who infiltrated these meetings never made it home.

Minimal amounts of grain and livestock were produced that year, but a little of that was sold for cash, then the taxes dutifully collected at the grain mill on that income. What taxed cash income people made, they used for buying fuel, sugar, coffee, and a few other manufactured and regulated items.

The tax take for the year was less than 5% of what had been budgeted, and the difference was promptly made up by the digital creation of more New Dollars. Banks had already been flooded with New Dollars to make them functional, so government bonds found no bid from other countries. The exchange rate for foreign currencies took another dive, making imported goods almost impossible to buy. The US population reached a new low standard of living. The government was unable to pay its' employees a living wage without creating even more New Dollars. The New Dollar had crashed to 5% of its' issued value by the Spring of 2013, and was falling faster. Most people with real incomes elected to pay their taxes in Dollars that were now virtually worthless, a hollow victory for the tax collectors.

Despite arguments for war on those countries who refused to accept Dollars for payment, the US was unable to confiscate adequate supplies to feed its' military reliably and suffered mass desertions as a consequence.

For all intents and purposes, the Federal Government was non-functional. States had already begun to fill the void, but in only minimal fashion. The States major achievement so far had been to keep the electric grid running, with some generating plants being shut down as demand fell and some equipment failed. Repairs were miraculous, when they happened at all. Telephone and internet services were a thing of the past.

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## CHAPTER 48

July, 2013

Wes looked over his herd of hogs grazing in the creek bottom on what had been his neighbor's farm. That family had been killed in a confrontation with a mob of starving people last year. Several farm families had come to their defense too late to save them, but the mob had been destroyed. By mutual agreement, the farm was split up and used by those who had defended it. He hoped he had enough fuel to harvest the crops he'd planted and tended this year. There had been no new fuel supplies, or much of anything else, available since last Fall. With parts and fuel unavailable, Wes was thinking hard about training some of his spring calf crop to use as oxen. He had been looking around the area for equipment he could convert to use with them. He wasn't sure he had enough shop supplies to get the job done.

Canning lids had been unavailable for over a year now, but he thought they had enough to last this season and maybe next if they used the root cellar and other means of preservation a lot more. After that, he wasn't sure how they could handle what they grew. He needed some new stove pipe for the kitchen range, and decided he would have to make it somehow. Maybe he could chisel out a section of sheet metal from Bob's old car in the back gulley, burn the paint off of it, and make it into a pipe. That might be the best thing to do. He had to save what roofing metal he had for roof repairs.

They didn't have much gasoline left, and he was worried about how to cut firewood, too.

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The dismal results from tax collection were duly noted and methods debated on how to achieve better results. The rapid failure of the New Dollar, the Yen, and the Euro had made it clear that the days of pure fiat currencies were over. China, Russia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, India and Turkey had been amassing gold to back their currencies long before the crisis hit. They now conducted trade among themselves, after having adjusted exchange rates to suit the relative amounts of gold backing them. International trade was now cleared through the new Trade Bank established by the BRIC countries, Brazil, Russia, India, and China.

Those countries had their problems, too, with the crash of the Dollar causing horrendous impacts on all the US trading partners. Russia had an internal coup with a new leader in command for a short time before Putin had the new guy killed and regained his position. China had a series of uprisings from their unemployed and starving masses. That resulted in a new "Democratic Peoples' Republic", mostly differing in which of the surviving members of the old gang were in which new slots. Most countries in the world had changes of governments, some improved, but with many new despots were in control, too.

The big losers of power were the bankers, who moved off center stage. They had not lost any of their wealth. On the contrary, they had made the biggest grab of worldwide wealth in history by looting all the economies of the West. They simply hid in the shadows with their accumulated wealth awaiting the opportunities they knew would come to reestablish their puppet-master positions.

The US officials decided that with minimal resources they could not force a confiscation of precious metals, but they could push for taxes to be paid with gold and silver. That would bring a flow of the metals to the US Treasury and provide the start of a basis for a new, metal backed currency. To



accomplish this, gold and silver would have to be given temporary status as legal tender. Fiscal and monetary advisors were sought out and the path to a new currency was plotted with the help of those old banking fortunes who could supply the needed vaults full of gold in addition to what the government could collect. The game was about to be restarted.

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The income and lifestyle of the average US citizen had sunk to resemble that of an average African citizen. Some were doing much better than others, which depended on how well prepared they had been and how fast they could adapt to the ongoing changes. In general, rural citizens had a better survival rate, but the most clever of the city residents would recover faster, if they lived long enough.

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Ronnie and Matthew had spent some time last season gathering and drying Yellowroot (Goldenseal), Ginseng, Honeysuckle blossoms (antiviral), Forsythia blossoms (used in conjunction with Honeysuckle), and Elderberries. Tara had gathered and dried Marsh Mallow plants (digestive soother), peppermints (digestive aid), corn silks (diuretic), blackberry leaves (astringent aid for diarrhea), and other herbs she recognized. The barn loft on the Duncan farm was filled with hanging bunches of dried herbs. Ronnie was hunting for containers to put them in, so he could more easily keep them clean. Vickie had already bought a collection of herbs from the family.

When Ronnie and his family had taken a collection of their herbs to market one Saturday, They sold briskly, but containers to put them in were at a premium. Most people scrounged up some paper of some sort to wrap up their purchases. Gloria was one of the buyers, seeking information on how to use the herbs also, like everyone else. Kate had a bad cold and seemed to be getting worse, she'd said. Gloria was afraid she had heard the deep congestion of pneumonia with her stethoscope.

The pasture looked good, having been mowed last year and reseeded. Ronnie had Ed clip it early in the year and again recently to stop weeds from going to seed again. The 20 acres he'd had Todd rent for corn was looking good, although some rain would help it to fill out better. The corn and wheat on his original farm was good, too. Like Ed, Ronnie had bought some old grain wagons from an old farmer's widow to store his wheat crop. The corn he would pick by hand and store on the ear. The hogs and cows could do the shelling and grinding themselves.

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Ed had searched several markets before he found a man selling out the remaining stock of a paint store. He bought a few gallons of outdoor oil base paint, and enough latex base white paint to cover the barn on his small farm. He looked in vain for roof paint, but found none. He settled for 10 gallons of green oil base enamel for 50 cents in silver a gallon. It was expensive, but paint was not available, otherwise. He had a few brushes and could use diesel and gasoline to clean them.

The real find that day, however, was cases of new empty quart and gallon paint cans. He got a few of the lever tools to open them, and was delighted at the low price. He'd found his seed storage containers. He had used some of his ready money, but his few silver coins had bought a lot. He would be collecting soon for the seeds they had grown, and the cans would last for a long time. He decided to spend the time to paint the outsides of the cans to prevent the thin tin plated metal from rusting. There was no telling when he would be able to get more containers, so he had better make these last.

Joann had hired the Reynolds kids to help harvest their garden seed crops, only leaving those plants that were biennials to bear seed the following season. Matthew had earned a few coins protecting the

vegetable seeds from deer and other wildlife. He got to keep whatever animals he shot doing that, so Matthew had deer jerky, hides, and had provided fresh meat to his family during late summer. The animals still ate some of the crop, but most of it survived to harvest.

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School had started on the ridge road as soon as corn harvest was over. Alicia used the education materials she had printed out while the internet was still working and collected whatever school books she could find at the markets. They usually went very cheap. She had taught Christopher, Emily, Sophia, and Matthew through the winter and on until it was time to plow and plant. At that point, practical life lessons were what counted. Todd had finally remembered his stash of cheap printer paper, toner cartridges, pens and pencils when he began to teach math class and saw the kids needed them. Alicia had trouble deciding whether to thank him properly, or jibe him for waiting so long to find them.

A bigger challenge came when Emily's first menstrual cycle came along. Alicia had already told her what to expect, but it was accompanied by the usual nervousness and distress. The real problem was coming up with suitable home made pads. They worked the problem out together and Emily learned something about sewing and more about laundry in the process. Once that problem had been dealt with, Emily was less of a problem in class, and got back to learning at her usual high rate.

Todd had been carefully maintaining his solar batteries, knowing there were no replacements available. He had collected rain water and carefully filtered it through an old Tee shirt, then bottled it to use for maintaining the fluid level in the batteries. He did a desulfation charging cycle at recommended intervals, and so far it seemed to be working. He never let the battery bank get below 70% charge level, and was hoping to get more than the expected 10 years out of his premium Rolls Surette cells. As he had read on the internet, batteries are too often mistreated leading to short lifetimes. He wanted all the life he could get out of them. They provided refrigeration and lights, both very rare things in this new world.

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## CHAPTER 49

November, 2013

Laundry had been a problem since things had gone bad. The most common method now was to boil clothes in whatever big container was available, using home made lye soap. Stirring them vigorously with a stick helped loosen the dirt. Then the clothes were dipped out with a stick into rinse water and agitated as much as necessary to get the soap out. A second rinse helped. Then it was hand wringing and drying on a clothesline or a handy bush. The labor was intensive.

Clothing was worn for longer periods and everyone tried to keep their clothes as clean as they could for as long as possible. A kid who willfully got into mud was asking for the "board of education to be applied to his seat of learning". Then they got to help with the laundry, and that usually cured the problem.

Mike Wilson had applied himself to this problem and had recreated some antiques. First was a hand cranked wringer made of wood. To make the wringer rollers, he had to first make himself a wood lathe. He dug into his book collection and found drawings of what he wanted. He and his Dad had a good selection of hand wood and metal working tools, so he set to work.

Using steel from old coil springs he salvaged from a junk car, Mike forged some chisels in the blacksmith forge, a gouge, a skew chisel, a round nose and a vee point. Those he fitted with handles made with an axe, drawknife and hand drilled them for the chisel tangs. The chisels were ground sharp with his pedal powered grindstone, a relic from his great grandfather. The whole blacksmith shop had been something he had insisted on when they went off grid. Mike didn't have a lot of experience at this, but he was learning fast. He already knew how to harden and temper steel from his experience as a metal worker. Doing it without all the modern technology made it more of an art than a science, though.

The tools ready, Mike proceeded to chop out the lathe frame members from saplings the size of his leg, and used a few bolts and lag screws from his stash to put it together. Turning the stick in the lathe was simple, but not convenient. He tied a rope around an overhead tree limb that was springy, then wrapped the rope a couple turns around his workpiece in the lathe. It was then tied to a crude pedal made of a split piece of wood under the lathe, hinged to the back leg. When he stepped on the pedal, the work piece revolved, and then revolved backwards as he raised his foot and the overhead limb pulled the rope back up.

Because he could only cut when the piece turned the right direction, it was slow going, and tiring to the legs. But it worked. He got a pair of rollers turned straight and smooth before lunch one day. He forged a crank from some junk steel, then drilled the roller and pinned the steel crank in place by cross drilling it and putting a nail through the whole works. It was slightly off center, and didn't work very well in the frame he'd made. Laura used it anyway, and was grateful beyond words. He promised to make a better set of rollers as soon as he could.

The answer was to find a way to put the crank and axles through the wood first, then turn the rollers using the axles to center the work. He had to make a suitable fixture for each end of the lathe, but he got that done and the next set of wringers worked perfectly. He had a marketable product, and he knew

it. The second wringer didn't take nearly as long to build. He made 4 in the first week and had them all sold before he finished them.

He didn't mention it yet, but he had an idea for a hand operated washing machine, too, and it would be a lot easier if he could find what he wanted for materials.

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When Mike and Laura set up their homestead off grid, they had bought a good used Maytag wringer washing machine, since those used less electrical power and less water. They had to run a small generator to power it, because their 2 solar panels didn't provide enough power, but the machine worked very well. Now, with gasoline almost unavailable, the generator was not an option. Mike had seen a YouTube video by a guy called Solarcabin who built a hand operated washing machine, and it was as simple as could be. Mike needed some plastic barrels and a few other things. The barrel he found on trading day in town. The man who had owned the local car wash was selling barrels that he'd bought with detergent in them. Mike bought all he could fit in his Dad's little truck, eight of them. It took some rope to get them to stay on the truck. They made a trip back to the man's home and bought 8 more barrels. Those he cut in half with a hand saw for rinse tubs.

The washing machine consisted of a plastic barrel laid on its' side, with an axle through the center of both ends. Mike used some salvaged metal pipe for the axle and drilled holes to fit it. That axle was supported in a wood frame allowing the barrel to rotate freely. A small door with a latch was cut in the upper side of the barrel for adding clothing and wash water. A wood handle was bolted to one end that was used to agitate clothes inside by moving the handle up and down, rotating the barrel first one way then the other. Some pieces of plastic pipe were bolted inside to assure that the clothing got bounced around in the wash water. To empty water from the barrel, you simply turned it with the door on the bottom.

By the next wash day, all the women on the ridge road had a hand operated washing machine and a pair of rinse tubs, and a hand cranked wringer, so their life got a lot easier on wash day. Mike began to have women pestering him and Laura about other things they wanted. They took a variety of things in trade, some of Lennie's clothing and a pair of boots supplied by Vickie, a grown pig from Ronnie and Tara, Gerald paid with an assortment of junk steel, 500 rounds of .22's from Todd, and so on.

Mike had used a lot of his stash of small bolts building all the washing equipment, so he was looking hard for a supply of hardware.

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Ed was getting concerned about fuel for his tractor. There had been no fuel available since last Fall, and although his supply would take care of his needs for this year and more, he wanted the income of doing work for others, too. Few people drove anywhere now, unless it was a trip to town for market day and may people walked there. Bicycles were valuable items now, even the old heavy single speed kind. They would carry a heavier load than the modern ones, if you could find good tires for them. Fuel for transport was becoming a real problem, too. There was no source of real news to know if fuel or anything else would be available any time soon.

Commerce was almost at a standstill now, except for locally produced items. New items were not being made, and existing warehoused supplies were not being trucked to stores. The majority of stores were closed because business owners found they could not afford to buy imported items, and lack of fuel,

and thus transportation, meant that existing goods could not be shipped. Government efforts to jump start the process of commerce had largely failed for lack of a sound currency to pay for it. The only goods available were those left over from generations of over consumption.

Some of the warehouses in cities had been broken into and pillaged. The thieves didn't bother to close the doors so the remaining goods were exposed to the elements and more thieves. A few enterprising individuals made it their business to exploit those warehouses and haul away whatever they thought they could sell at local market days. But some important items were very scarce. Batteries, medicines, sewing basics, most clothing, shoes, petroleum products of all kinds, staple foods, and repair parts of any kind were almost impossible to find.

The nation's poor had always needed to find alternatives to buying new items, and became the new merchants of salvaged items of any sort. Saturday trading markets began to resemble a combination of a traditional farmers' market and a large yard sale. Finding something specific was a real chore. Nobody asked too many questions about where things came from, but a growing number of empty homes began to look vandalized. If the doors and windows had not been broken, they had been carefully removed and reappeared at the markets along with other parts of plumbing, bedding, clothes, and furniture. The difficulty of transporting heavy and bulky items to market caused "yard sales" to see a new resurgence, and vendors at the markets often had signs listing items they could supply, but were at another location.

One of those signs caught Mike's attention on market day, advertising hardware. He questioned the man and later followed him to an old garage where he found stacks of boxed bolts, nuts, washers, hooks, and hinges among a pile of unrecognizable things. Some discussion and bargaining followed, but a bargain was struck. Mike would repair the man's drains in his house and take his pay in hardware. The marked prices on the hardware would be used and traded for Mike's labor at an hourly rate, plus whatever materials he needed. Mike spent the afternoon under the man's house and scrounging the market for a few things, but he got the drains working again. He went home a muddy, smelly mess, but he had a good assortment of new hardware and a promise to do more business with the man.

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Trips to town were reduced to one a month for the families on the ridge road, and those were done with Ronnie's pickup pulling a light farm wagon to haul the goods they offered for sale, and haul home their purchases. Every one chipped in some gas from what little they had to make this possible. Gas was very hard to find and was very expensive now, which dramatically reduced the number of customers from outlying areas. People had begun to travel in groups, with at least a couple members obviously armed.

On the last trading trip, Ed had spotted a sign that said, "Old tools", and asked the seller what he had. Upon naming over some things, Ed got interested. He knew the man slightly, who had once had a flea market in town. Later in the afternoon Ed went home with him and bought 5 old crosscut saws, an adze, a broad axe, 4 scythes, 2 large cast iron kettles, and several axe heads. He paid the man with garden seeds, 20 pounds of wheat flour, and silver. They were both happy.

Ed and Mike spent some cold rainy days repairing the tools and making new handles for some. Mike sharpened them all on his pedal grindstone, then rubbed them all with an old bacon rind saved for the purpose, to prevent rusting. They found that a sharp, properly set crosscut saw could fell a tree in short order. Using an axe, the tree could be trimmed of branches almost as fast as with a chain saw. Large limbs were chopped off with the axe and taken to Ed's buzz saw mounted on the tractor for cutting into

firewood lengths. The remaining log would be cut into firewood lengths with the crosscut saw when no other job was pressing, then split with a maul, or a sledge hammer and wedges. It was a hard way to make firewood, but it could be done without gasoline.

The small garden near Mike and Laura's house was still producing turnips, kale, cabbage, and some surviving brussels sprouts. They had enough firewood cut and stacked for the winter, there was hay in the barn for the cattle, and corn stored. Canned food in the houses and cellared potatoes meant they would eat well this winter. Not everyone could say that.

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## CHAPTER 50

December, 2013

Unknown to the public, the central banks of Europe, the UK, and the US had been in negotiations with the real fortunes in London's "City" district to fund a new currency that would be backed by gold. After the Euro debacle of some overspending nations causing the demise of the Euro, there was little taste for anyone to join such a plan. Oddly enough, it was the worst offender of overspending that objected the loudest, the US. A compromise was reached, whereby each country would have their own currency, also backed by the gold of the money masters, but each would have control of only their own currency. The money masters would still have ultimate control of all the nations as before by controlling the gold behind it all. They could continue to loot the real wealth of nations at will, as before.

Announcements of the new currencies was done piecemeal, first the new Gold Euro, then the new Gold Pound, and finally the Gold Dollar. Exchange rates were initially set somewhere close to parity, as in the past and the currencies would be free-floated to seek their own value in the markets, but with a great degree of influence by the money masters. Within days of the introductions, trade was resumed among nations with a few caveats. Any trade between Europe, the UK, or the US with other nations outside the money masters control would be cleared through the BRIC countries Gold Exchange Bank for settlement. Trade between BRIC nations and their partners would still be outside the control, but not the indirect influence of the masters' fortunes.

Sovereign debts remained in place, keeping the nations beholden to TPTB, but none of the details of how that worked were disclosed. The issuance of new debt, however, was controlled by credit available from the Super Banks in the "City". Everything appeared to go back to normal, but with tight reins on the spending of each nation.

Superficially, it looked like some miracle had been performed by governments to bring the world back from disaster. Trade began to move again, slowly, but within a few months something like the old normal was starting again. The big difference was, all the countries backed by the Super Banks were now less wealthy by a factor of about 1/4 of their old value, based upon their indebtedness to the Super Banks.

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The first anyone in the Salem area knew about this second new currency was on a cold winter market day in late December. Sellers at the market had some of the new printed bills with gilt edges and "Gold Dollar" prominently printed on both sides. The current Presidents picture was on the face of the one dollar bill, something that did not create enthusiasm for it. But customers were told they had 3 months to turn in their New Dollars for Gold Dollars before the last currency would be declared void. The exchange rate was ten New Dollars for one Gold dollar at the local bank. This new currency was said to be backed by gold and good for international trade, so imports would begin flowing in again. Everyone thought that was a doubtful prophecy.

The only good news as people saw it was the government gas station was open again, with gasoline and diesel rationed, at 10 gallons each per customer, and you had to have identification to buy it so they could assure you didn't try to buy more than once. Few people could afford it anyway, and the ones who could used silver to pay for it at the rate of a silver quarter for a gallon of gas, or 3 silver dimes for

a gallon of diesel. Ronnie filled his truck by having his wife also buy 10 gallons. The excess went into a couple plastic gas jugs.

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Making change was a problem for a while with the new currency, because the old pennies and "clad" coins had disappeared, since the copper in them was worth far more than their face value relative to the New Dollars, and nickels had likewise been melted for their nickel content, or hoarded for it. That was all illegal, but it happened anyway, mostly sold by importers of what little foreign goods had been coming in. So, new coinage was a must, but it would not be available in any quantity for a while yet. People solved that problem by making the difference up in barter exchange, or using New Dollars as change for a couple months before the new coins appeared in some quantities at the bank. They were all made of steel and plated with something pretty durable.

Silver and gold were recognized as Legal Tender again, with the exchange rate to Gold Dollars being 15 Gold Dollars for one dollar face value in silver, and 600 Gold dollars for an ounce of gold, in bullion or slight variations for various gold coins.

Having been burnt more than once by paper money, nobody wanted to let go of their precious metals, but many were forced to spend it by necessity. When silver and gold made their way to banks, it was promptly exchanged for Gold Dollars at the set rates, and taken out of circulation. That fact was soon discovered and less of the metals got to the banks. Nonetheless, a great deal of it did go to the government coffers and was used to help offset their debts to the Super Banks cartel. The game had begun again, in earnest.

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By March of 2014, the hospital in Salem had opened again, with 2 doctors on call and 4 nurses doing both nursing and office duties. The pharmacy had a few needed drugs in stock, and a few more OTC medications. Medical care was available but waiting times were long, treatments were limited, and prices were high. Ronnie found a brisk market for his herbs on market days.

There were a few sewing notions available at the pharmacy, more staple foods at the only grocery, and fuels continued to be rationed. A special ration of fuel was available for agriculture needs, based on acreage to be planted.

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Todd Reynolds had bought a shortwave radio recommended by a preppers' site. He got materials for an antenna and other accessories then packed it away in a waterproof container he found as military surplus. He forgot all about it, preferring to get his news on the internet. When the internet has shut down the last time, Todd was busy enough with farming and daily problems it never came to mind.

Now he really wanted more information on the new money and remembered the radio, hoping someone knew more about what was going on. He read the literature with the radio again, and a couple other reference books he'd bought with it. Next was stringing a long wire antenna between a couple handy trees and hooking up the radio with the lightning arrestor and ground wire. The radio would operate directly from his 12 volt solar system, so that was no problem.

English language news from China came in loud and clear, with much disparaging talk about the international money situation. They didn't have anything nice to say about Europe, the UK, nor the US, claiming the US especially had repeatedly devalued their dollar to rob China of their investments in US



Treasury Bonds. Australia had little to say about the US, but a lot about their new trading alliances in Asia, having reciprocal currency agreements with China and other nations there.

Todd continued to listen and scan the SW bands for news from closer to home. A couple nights later, taking advantage of the better reception at night, he heard a scathing critique of the new US Gold Dollar, saying the government had sold out the country to European bankers to back the new currency. Todd didn't quite know what to expect it would lead to, but it fueled his distrust of the new currency.

He did learn that the New York Stock Exchange was open again, and the DOW was trading around 800, reflecting the various devaluations of the US dollar. Todd suspected that most of the stock trading was being done by a few big banks. His Humana stock wasn't mentioned, but he doubted that it was worth much with most hospitals either still inoperative, or mere shadows of what they had been. Todd had the foresight to obtain paper stock certificates, back when they still did that, so even if his brokerage firm was defunct, he might still one day get something from his investments, but he had small hope of it being anywhere near what it was originally worth. There was no mention of hedge funds, ETF's, or anything except major company stocks. Those more exotic instruments probably no longer existed, as far as what he could learn from the government broadcast.

It took a lot of time to gather much information from the radio, so Todd gave Alicia his notes of what he was interested in, and what frequencies to check with the broadcast times. She, Emily, and Christopher each took a turn at listening and making notes whenever someone had time. The picture that emerged over time was of a world that deeply resented the currency manipulations of the western countries. Asian trade alliances had formed for the express purpose of fixing higher prices for goods sold to the West. Chinese goods were again showing up for sale in the US, but they were no longer the bargains they had been in the past. The quality was as good or better, but prices were about 4 times what people had seen before, and there was much less variety.

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"They've done it to us," Todd told Alicia coming out of the Dollar General Store, "The banks have taken all the wealth in the country and left us poor."

"I know we can't begin to afford what we once did. The prices in there are atrocious. They want \$2 in the new money for a package of sewing needles that I once bought for one old dollar, and that was when we had lots of money. It's a good thing I saved baby clothes and you had bought cloth diapers. But I didn't keep all that many of Chris' bigger clothes. It will be expensive now to come up with something for Logan to wear."

"Logan is growing fast," Todd said. "We can go to the farmers market and look for clothes for him. It shouldn't take all that many. It's not like anybody worries about style now."

They had left all the kids, including their one year old boy Logan James in the capable hands of Joann Wilson while they and Ed had come to town. Ed was shopping at the grocery nearby.

Todd said, "I don't have my head around it yet, but it looks like we are far poorer than the average person used to be. I have to learn more about what other things cost and farm market prices, for example, to know where we really are, but my gut tells me we are poor now. It looks like prices are about double what I remember from before the dollar crashed, but now a Gold Dollar is a lot harder to

get. Just roughly speaking, I think what we sell will only bring about half what it used to, based on what I saw for grain prices at the elevator. I think that puts us at about 1/4 of the buying power we had before the dollar crashed. The big problem is, I don't have the big income now."

"They have devalued the money so much and messed with it until I can't keep up. What bothers me is, what's to keep them from doing it again?"

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## CHAPTER 51

April, 2014

Ashley carried her toddler on her hip to the barn then sat her beside a straw bale while she milked the goats. Ella Katherine didn't stay there long. She wanted to see the baby goats and crawled over to peer into their pen. She used the pen slats to pull herself up. The goats came over and nuzzled her nose through the slats, making her giggle. Ashley let her play with them until she was finished. It took some cajoling to keep the little girl out of the pen while Ashley freshened it up with clean straw.

Ashley put the covered bucket of milk in the tank of cold water by the well pump and went inside to wash up. Gloria had the stove hot and was making whole wheat pancakes. There was a platter of fried ham on the table that smelled wonderful. Ashley sat down, thankful for someone to cook. She fed Ella some mashed pancakes and some very finely chopped and mashed ham, then let her nurse while Ashley ate. Her mother had told her that the longer you nursed a child, the healthier they seemed to be and it was less likely that she would get pregnant again right away. Ashley planned to let Ella nurse for another year, so she drank a lot of milk to keep herself healthy. She had regained her figure pretty well, mostly due to the farm work. She only had two nursing bras that she had to make herself, with much experimenting. They were a Godsend, though.

Another blessing was that she had started with potty training. What a relief it would be, to be free of the diaper mess. Thankfully, Kate had never gotten rid of the cloth diapers that Ashley herself had worn. The cloth was so old that it tended to tear easily, but they had gotten by using them. There were a lot of her old baby clothes, too, which had saved no end of trouble. Ashley still had no idea what all was stored in the attic of the old farmhouse, but she had Wes and Larry drag the old treadle sewing machine down and put it in the dining area. It would be warm to work there in the winter and the big dining table was handy when laying out a pattern. She really needed more sewing thread, the way she had been going through it lately.

Wes recently learned about the hand powered washing machine from Mike Wilson and built her one. Wes had made some improvements on the wringer, too. Although electric power was available, they had elected to do without it when the State had begun sending out bills for it again. The bills were high and they could get along just fine without it, so why spend the money that was needed for so many other things? It made some things harder for Wes and Larry in the shop, but they had been getting by. They might decide to get the electric turned on again, if his shop business picked up again. They had a small generator now that they used when needed, but only when a shop customer was providing gas for it.

The hand pump supplied water for the house, and the wood cooking range had a tank to heat water. Wes had arranged water to be siphoned from the small pond on the hill above the barn to fill the hogs water trough. It would freeze in winter, but for most of the year it was no work at all. They planned to have most of the hogs sold before it got that cold. His best move in her mind was the bicycles. He had traded a hog for a pair of touring bikes with trailers, and got their tool kits, frame pumps, spare tires and tubes in the deal. Those bikes had already saved them a lot of gasoline when gas had been hard to get.

The way things were now, the name of the game was to live as cheap as you possibly could.

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Alicia loved Todd for many reasons she reflected, one of which was his diligence. Their year old son Logan James crawling around the kitchen reminded her of both Todd's strengths and some shortcomings.

Because she was not on board with the idea of preparing yet Todd had been doing it all pretty much on his own when he was buying things to prepare for a crash, so Alicia didn't have any input into what was needed in the way of baby things back then. Todd did pretty well, she supposed. He had bought dry baby cereal, a hand crank blender, prenatal vitamins, liquid baby vitamins, a breast pump, bottles and nipples, bottle liners, cloth diapers, dry bleach powder, dry detergent, fabric softener, mineral oil, diaper rash ointment, baby cold medicine, some vet medicines, baby blankets, toys, clothes for both boys and girls up to size 4, and vacuum sealed most of it in bags, then put it all in sturdy plastic storage boxes.

He had been thorough, but in his rush to get things bought, moved, and stored, his organization left something to be desired. It had taken several months to find it all and by the time they did, most of the boxes had been gone through and the baby was due any day. Alicia had forgiven him for being a little disorganized and forgetful sometimes. After all, he'd done a pretty good job of getting her and Chris out of harm's way and providing for them. But for his foresight, they might not have survived.

Now she had two boys to raise in a very different way of life. With Todd's help she was sure they could handle it.

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The welder was running, finally. Mike had traded a ham and 100 pounds of freshly ground cornmeal for it, knowing the machine had been sitting outside for a year or more. It was a gasoline powered Miller portable, the sort used on construction jobs, and capable of doing heavy work at 200 amps and would run a disc grinder from an outlet on it. Rain had gotten into the gas tank and fouled everything including the carburetor, but diligent cleaning had fixed that. A battery to start it with was a problem, but they had been getting along borrowing the one from Joann's car.

He had gotten a few ratty cardboard boxes of electrodes with the deal, but they were mostly rusted and barely usable at all. Mike had dried them out on top of their wood cook stove so they worked with only some sputtering. The find of the year came from the town mayor, when he had asked Mike to do some welding at the water pumping station. The town was pretty broke, so they couldn't pay him in cash, but some old fellow had died and the town had taken his property for back taxes. In the garage was a cheap welder, a grinder with extra wheels, and a big collection of electrodes stored in an old refrigerator. Mike made a deal for it all and was now stocked up on electrodes and had the dead refrigerator to keep them dry. He couldn't use the AC powered welder, but he used the cables and kept the rest for parts. He had a few cans of gasoline stored, with a little STABIL put in each one, but he had run out of the gasoline preservative. He could do a lot of work with what he had on hand now, as long as nothing went wrong with his equipment that he couldn't fix.

Mike made sure to collect part of his pay for any work he did in scrap metal. With his blacksmith shop and the welder plus their hand tools he began to do some business. Now he could earn some money beyond common labor rates.

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Only the first home on the ridge road had electricity before the crash, belonging to Charlie and Denise Allen. They had used the electricity during the crisis months when it was free, like everyone else, but when the bills began to come in, they had it shut off. There was no way they could afford it with only their Social Security checks coming in to the bank now. Benefits had been cut in half, per the agreement with the Super Banks that had forced the government to get their spending under control. There had been no deposits from Social Security while the banks were closed, nor until the Gold Dollars came out had the deposits resumed. Their benefit amount had been small to start with, but now it was impossible to make ends meet. They had to save to pay their property taxes, and had to work to pay for food and other needs.

The Allens were old enough to have known what living without electricity was, and how things were done back then. Food preservation methods were different, not depending on refrigeration and freezing. Water was pumped by hand, or dipped with a bucket out of cistern. Lights had been kerosene lamps, and if you had a radio, it ran on a battery that you took to town once a month to get charged up while you did your "trading".

The kerosene lamps they had bought for power outages were not the best light, they made an odor with the poorly refined kerosene of today, and it was expensive, besides being a fire hazard. The couple had made it a habit to "go to bed with the chickens" as was once the saying, and get up at dawn. Charlie was looking for a better way. He wanted some way to power a radio, too, and from what he had learned from Todd, he wanted some small solar panels and deep cycle batteries, but both were nearly impossible to find.

Charlie worked wherever he could, and had been helping Dan Billings cut firewood. When Charlie had talked about his need for a battery and solar panels, Dan suggested the battery from the raiders' truck they had given him last year. And maybe he could figure out a way to make the alternator from the truck charge it up somehow. Charlie accepted the battery as part of his pay for the week, and borrowed some tools to go take parts off the truck, now deep in the hollow where they had pushed it.

Next, he talked to Mike Wilson about making him a windmill. The hilltop where he lived almost always had a stiff breeze. It made the house hard to heat in the winter, but maybe it was good for something. Mike had thought about the same thing, and had once looked into the old Savonius turbine design.

He was convinced he could make them from old barrels, but some other parts were needed, particularly some roller chain and sprockets to speed up the alternator to generating speed. He also knew that the whole thing needed to be up off the ground to catch very much wind. Still, Charlie wasn't looking for a lot of power, so it might just work if they used enough barrels to make a tall rotor. While Mike was thinking about it, Charlie put the nearly dead battery in his car. He used jumper cables to start the car from the charged battery he'd removed, and let it charge up on the next trip he made to town. He couldn't afford to let the car sit and run to charge it every day, so the wind turbine would be the right answer.

Mike had some plastic barrels he had bought for washing machines, but hadn't used. He needed some kind of bearings for the top and bottom of the shaft, which he planned to be a piece of pipe he had in his pile. The barrels he could cut in half with a handsaw vertically to make the

rotor. He had metal to fasten them together overlapping in the required S shape. He used the drive from an old chain drive rototiller to get the speed increased, so all he had to find was heavy bearings and some cables to keep the thing upright. He put the word out on market day that he needed a couple hundred feet of small diameter steel cable and thought hard about the bearing problem. It came to him when he remembered that he would need brakes of some kind on the thing to keep it from going too fast in a wind storm. What he needed was the rear axle from a truck for the bottom bearing. It had both great bearings and brakes. A front wheel spindle would do for the top bearing. And Mike knew just where to find those in a hollow not far away.

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Rolling the truck over to get to the axle, then dragging the heavy rear axle out of the hollow required the use of Dan's tractor and all the log chains they could find to reach it, but it came out, leaf springs, brake cables and all. The front spindle was more work to get loose, but not so heavy they could not carry it out. Mike spent a couple days putting the thing together with Charlie's help at his place so they didn't have to haul the completed rig.

It took the help of the front end loader on Ed's big tractor to set the thing up and get it guyed in place with 3 cables solidly anchored to trees. The rotor shaft was a 21 foot long piece of 2" pipe, somewhat rusted, but now sporting a coat of leftover green paint from Ed painting his barn roof. The 6 blue plastic barrels were soon spinning merrily in the breeze atop the truck axle standing on end, with half of it buried in the ground for a base. The internal gears had been removed to let it turn freely, and Mike had filled the axle with oil they drained from the truck engine to assure the top bearing would get lubrication. Mike locked the exposed brake with a lever he'd made to stop the thing while he hooked up the roller chain from a sprocket on the truck wheel to the rototiller drive case, then a belt to the alternator.

The ammeter from the truck was wired to the setup and showed that the battery was being charged at a slow rate. They finished off the installation with a plastic igloo style dog house over the whole drive works on the ground to protect it from the weather. It was held in place with a big rock, and easily removed when Charlie wanted to change batteries. He would use both his car battery and the one from the truck, with one being in the house to use, while the other one got charged. Charlie had taken the dome light, backup light, the front running lights, and the radio from the truck. They were installed in the house. Charlie and Denise were all smiles when it was finished.

For his work on the project, Mike took home the leaf springs from the truck, the front coil springs, and a big can of bolts. Charlie had agreed to work 5 days for Mike for his labor, and paid him \$2 in silver coins for the barrels, his welding rods, and other supplies he used. Mike was pretty sure that when other people saw the setup, he would be building more of them.

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## CHAPTER 52

June, 2014

Larger acreage had been planted in crops this year for several reasons. There was fuel available rationed in larger amounts for agriculture by the Federal government who retained control of the oil industry. Also, the State of Indiana, recognizing the need to feed the nation, had allowed the use of abandoned or unused farmland by any farmer who could make it produce. Fertilizer was still in woefully short supply, especially nitrogen products, but some potash and phosphate was being distributed by rail, and offered to farmers on credit by the State, to be paid for in grain after harvest. The Federal government was unhappy with that arrangement, since it bypassed their taxes, but the States held sway and the Feds knew the grains were needed. And, they could be taxed later.

City populations had fallen drastically, but there remained a lot of mouths to feed, and most of those were unemployed, or claimed to be. The Federal government had few resources to provide for those in need, but the States had more due to closer proximity and a more flexible approach to tax collection. The balance of power had shifted back to the States with the money flows. The States were also in a better position to collect and provide food commodities to their employees, generating a lot of loyalty.

Todd had gone into partnership with Dan Billings and Ed Wilson to farm about 400 acres of corn and soybeans. Wes had partnered with his neighbor, Neal Davis and was planting nearly 500 acres of mostly corn. Their main limitations now were the lack of nitrogen fertilizer, and the lack of chemicals to prevent weeds, necessitating plowing down weeds and later cultivation. Plows and cultivators were in short supply, and using both took large amounts of fuel and time. Parts were still in short supply, being mostly old stock since manufacture had not restarted as quick as agriculture. Some parts were not available at any price, making viable equipment another limitation. States were offering tax breaks for partnerships and leases that made use of functional machinery.

Natural gas and some oil was coming in from Canada, as in the past, but no oil was being imported from other countries, per the radio news, where there was constant talk of fuel conservation. Electricity was available, but more limited and expensive because of several generating plants having been shut down that still required maintenance crews to keep the nuclear plants in a safe idle condition. Materials and personnel to service and run the Midwest's coal generating plants were easier to find, and the Midwest States had relaxed regulations on those, after the Federal regulatory departments were no longer operating. Still, generating and maintenance costs were high, and fewer people could afford the power. The goal, however, was to provide power to restart manufacturing, with consumers helping to finance the grid. Industries would bear their share of the cost when they were running again.

Chemicals and pharmaceuticals were slow to restart, not being amenable to running at less than full capacity for the reduced demand. Where possible, chemical plants were restarted, and the products shipped over larger areas, so one plant could operate at efficient levels. That put a strain on fuel for transport, so it was a balancing act, again, one performed by the States involved. Government had been forced by their own desire to survive to once again serve the needs of their people first.

Once again, cell phone service was back. The service was not the best, and billing had to be reinvented because credit cards were not working. Service minutes were now payable only by direct deduction from a bank checking account, to be accomplished by a long and tedious process. Internet was up

again, but still limited to the 'permitted sites' and some internet providers were not operating yet, having been taken over by the Federal government who lacked the personnel to keep them going.

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Cell phone service had always been unreliable on the ridge road, except at Charlie and Denise Allen's place, so nobody in the community had bothered to try to get phone service again. Things were working just fine without the expense, and at the much more relaxed pace of life that everyone was beginning to enjoy.

Ed got a message on market day to go see his old factory boss. They wanted him to come back to work. The money offered was good, but he did not trust the money system, nor was he much interested in working indoors again on their confining schedule. The cost of fuel to drive to work was a big factor, although the factory would get extra gas rations for him. Ed thought hard about it, then agreed to come back for a short time to assist in getting the place operating again, but told them he would disappear at harvest time, so plan on it.

He wasn't going to worry much about getting there on time, since they wanted him, rather than him needing the job. Ed did make it a point to go in early the first day to learn more about what was going on. For the first couple weeks, Ed's main duties were not supervising production workers, but working closely with the tool and die shop as they built and tried out tooling for new products. It wasn't auto parts now, but instead, can openers and small hand garden tools that would be the first products out the door. It was a State government contract to supply local needs. Other products would follow in quick succession.

Ed learned that a Canadian steel mill was shipping coiled stamping stock in by rail. There was a 2 week long problem figuring out how to get the heavy coils from the flat cars to a truck for the half mile trip to the factory, since steel had always been shipped in by truck before. Wes Blake made some money using his grain truck to haul coils to the factory. The rail line had supplied a crane car normally used for track repairs, to off load the coils onto the truck. The factory had an overhead crane and other handling equipment to take it from there.

Ed enjoyed using what he had learned over the years about metal stamping and how to keep a stamping press running smoothly. The two old toolmakers in the shop were long time friends, also recalled from retirement as part of the skeleton crew of 15 people running only a portion of the factory that had once employed over 300 people. The time flew by as long days were the ordinary thing, often 12 hours or more. But as soon as the first dies were running, Ed took leave of the place to cultivate corn and soybeans for a couple weeks. After the hectic factory, he enjoyed the relative peace of driving a tractor.

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Canning jars were available again, in limited quantities, and plenty of spare lids for them. The Ball Brothers plant in Muncie, Indiana was up and running again making Mason jars in quantity. The Canadian steel manufacture was the key item for making lids again, producing the special thin sheet metal for them. To their credit, Indiana and other states had negotiated hard with the railroads to restore limited runs for shipment of critical goods, notably coal to the power plants and steel to manufacturers. Higher shipping rates per ton-mile were allowed due to the "short run" nature of needed shipments, and truth be told, the railroads had little choice but to forget their past policy of only running long trains of bulk items for more profit. It was a changed world, so they had to adapt or be taken over by the government. They chose to adapt.



Trucking was all local now for lack of fuel for over-the-road runs. That was being replaced by trains with a tremendous savings in diesel fuel. Semi trucks were parked by the thousands, with the few exceptions being runs of 30 to 80 miles where there was no rail service. Truckers were already idle, and were glad to get any job available, but the vast majority of them would never be needed again, those jobs a casualty of scarce, expensive fuel and greatly reduced shipping volumes.

Rail shipments were so few that it was no problem for trains being mandated to stop at the closest possible point for dropping cargo, many times where a mainline crossed a highway for off loading to a local delivery truck. Manpower replaced forklifts, and there was no shortage of manpower for these jobs. Soon there was pressure on the rail lines to build new sidings closer to points of use, often simply repairing old ones that had been abandoned when the short runs were dropped in the past.

A new Freight Department was added to most States' government with broad powers to order a rail pick up when needed goods were ready to ship. Delays were inevitable with the added bureaucracy, but it did force necessary commerce to function. Bickering over shipping charges was constant.

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County governments were broke, so road maintenance was almost nil. The thin blacktop paving began to break up as farmers moved heavy loads of grain and machinery on them. Potholes were patched with crushed stone, if they were patched at all. The Counties began to allow a hundred year old practice of letting landowners pay their property taxes by working on road repairs. Paved county roads began to revert to gravel as blacktop crumbled. The local stone quarry reopened after having been closed when business had fallen a couple years before the crash.

Lesser used gravel roads began to revert to dirt, and the counties abandoned some altogether. The ridge road was one of those. The State highways stayed in better repair, using what little asphalt was available to keep them from deteriorating. Lesser traffic helped with that, but weather still took its' toll. Speeding was not a problem now. The rough roads and expensive fuel took care of that.

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State Usury Laws were enacted and State Bank loans were available to businesses at low rates to enable maintaining an inventory of raw materials and goods between infrequent shipments. Defunct tanning and nail salons became warehouses for nearby grocery and hardware stores. Investors who had the foresight to buy up empty business properties cheap began to earn a decent return on their money by renting them for storage. If the local warehouse ran out of an item, you had to wait for the next shipment, which caused people to do more planning ahead. Instant gratification had become a thing of the past.

Expensive restaurants were a thing of the past except in certain large cities, being replaced in the smaller towns by "blue plate special" diners with scratch cooked meals for hard working people. The menus varied with the seasons, depending now on locally produced food items. Citrus fruits and bananas had become rare treats in Indiana, but black walnut pies and persimmon pudding was common in season. Long keeping food items like crackers, roasted peanuts, candies, and some cookies showed up in groceries in small amounts, but most people now did their own baking to save money. A lot of gardens had popcorn growing, but unless there was local maker, potato chips were not to be found.

Salem had a local wood worker who began to make hand carved wooden toys that became popular on market days. Beck's Mill with its' overshot water wheel was running again, not as a tourist attraction like after it was first restored, but to grind cornmeal and flour for local consumption.

The US had come to resemble what it had been 80 years before.

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## CHAPTER 53

Late September, 2014

Wes took the sample of shelled corn out of the wood cook stove's warming oven where it had been since morning. He weighed it carefully on a postal scale and did his calculations. Fresh shelled weight minus dry weight, then the difference divided by the fresh weight gave him the percentage of moisture.

"I think we can run corn pretty soon, Larry," Wes said.

"What did you get?"

"I got 13% moisture. That is as dry as I have ever heard of this time of year. I think it will keep all right, if we run the fans for a while in the bins. We could wait another week or two, and if it stays dry we might get by without the fans for very long."

Kate said, "I'm in favor of waiting a while. If it stays dry out, that corn will dry down on the stalks to 12% or less and that will keep without getting hot in the bin. You know how electricity costs now. I'm not sure it was the right thing to get it turned on again."

Wes said, "I agree, it's cheaper to let God do the drying. We have plenty to do otherwise. I'm a little antsy, though, with so much acreage this year. How about we combine what we're going to sell, and let the government worry about drying that much?"

Kate said, "Well, that would be all right I suppose. I'm not used to thinking about selling so much. We can use the money."

"We sure can," Ashley said. "It's bad enough to have everything all screwed up, but with corn at \$3.00 a bushel, everything will have to go right to make much money on it. Diesel fuel is still over \$4.00 and everything we need to buy is outrageous. I saw a 12 ounce can of coffee at \$12. Can you believe that?"

Kate said, "That's why I dug all those dandelion roots this summer and dried them. I've been roasting and grinding those and mixing it with the coffee to make it go farther. I don't see how most people get along now, unless they have family to help like we do. Larry, I don't know what we'd do without you and Gloria. It takes so much work just to keep the place going and do enough to make a living that one couple just can't do it all."

Larry said, "We've talked it over and we're planning to sell our place. We rented the ground out to the neighbor this year because it's too far away for us to farm from here. He wants to buy it since it joins his farm. He wants the barn and outbuildings, but has no need for the house, so I think I'll tear it down for the materials. It would give us a lot of repair materials here, and we'd like to buy in to the farm here with what we get from our land."

Ashley said, "That makes a lot of sense to me. You deserve more than wages for the blood, sweat, and tears you put in here."

Wes agreed. "I like that. We can take the big truck over there after harvest and probably haul all of the

house materials in one load."

Ashley said, "Well, it ought to be on paper and recorded at the Courthouse, like any partnership. I can start to work on a partnership contract, if you want me to, and you all tell me what needs to be in it. We need to make sure you and Gloria get credit for all you've contributed."

"I'll help you work on that," Kate said. "I've been hoping things would turn out this way."

Their corn crop began to be sold to the grain elevator the next day, the start of a long harvest season.

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Harvesting was going well for Todd, Ed, and Dan Billings, with no breakdowns so far. Dan had another good crop of winter wheat that sold high this year. The 3 of them had out 120 acres of soybeans, the limit of the seed that Dan had in the bin. Even unfertilized, it made 30 bushels per acre, but getting it hauled to the grain elevator had been a problem. Dan's old grain truck would only haul 300 bushels so Todd had bought a trailer to pull with his pickup that could haul 100 bushels. It still made a lot of trips to the elevator to move the 3,000 bushels of beans. There was a lot of waiting in line to unload as the grain elevator augured beans into waiting railroad cars. One whole day was lost waiting for a switch engine to move cars into loading position. Todd and Dan got disgusted with the delays and decided to keep the last 600 bushels for seed the next year.

Ed knew that every truck in the county would be busy when corn harvest began, so he looked into the problem early. One of the men hired at the factory had a semi truck and a grain trailer, but it needed license tags and insurance, plus fuel. He didn't have the money for that. Ed talked to Ronnie Nichols and arranged for money to get the truck on the road by the time corn was ready to pick. Ronnie leased the truck and driver to work through harvest for him, Ed, Todd, and Dan. There were other farmers in the valley below the ridge community who kept the man running constantly through harvest time. It was a good thing for the truck owner, since the factory was idled for a couple months after filling their last contract. They were refitting dies from another company to run later, but it would take several weeks.

Harvest went slower than it had in years past, for lack of equipment. Too many farmers had put off repairs until too late to get parts, or had suffered financially so they couldn't afford parts while they were still available. As the season dragged on, some early Fall rains began to weigh down unharvested corn stalks. Very little hybrid corn with its' sturdier stalks had been planted. The old open pollinated variety that Wes had provided for seed grew much taller and thinner stalks that were prone to deteriorate fast and fall over in the least amount of wind. The combines could not reach fallen stalks to pick them up, so several farmers were in a panic to get their crops in fast. The weaker stalks made no difference when corn was picked by hand, but that was impossible with the huge acreages planted now, requiring machinery to harvest it fast before it rotted in the fields.

Larry and Wes had finished picking everything except the 30 acres on their home farm when a gusty thunderstorm almost flattened it. There was no way to get it picked with the combine, except for a few acres that was sheltered from wind by a wooded area. Larry had gotten good at running the combine, so he had taken turns with Wes and Ashley to keep the thing running almost around the clock in order to get as much done as they had. This was one of the better fields they had planted this year, and had promised a good yield, as much as 90 to 100 bushels per acre. the combine would be lucky to pick up a third of it, and would mash the fallen stalks to the ground to rot. At \$3.00 a bushel, they were looking at a loss of around 1,800 bushels, or \$5,400. That was more than a lot of people made in a year now.

Wes came in from looking over the field and said, "That's going to hurt. The profit margin is too slim to let this go. We have to save it somehow. I guess we can snap it by hand and then shovel the ears through the combine, but that is going to take all winter and a lot of it is going to rot."

Kate said, "We have some money, enough now to do us through the year. What are feeder pigs selling for now?"

Larry caught on right away. "YEAH! That field has nearly new fencing! Just turn some hogs in there and let them do the picking!"

Wes said, "Why didn't I think of that?"

Ashley said, "Because you were thinking too hard about how to combine it, that's why. Nobody can think of everything."

Wes said, "Okay, how about pigs for free?"

Everyone gave him blank looks until he explained. "Neal was telling me that there are a lot of hogs running wild in the creek bottoms and they had gotten into one of his fields there. We think they came from those farmers who got killed last year."

Larry said, "I heard that too, but how do we catch 'em? Those things get mean."

Wes said, "I'm thinking about that. They hang out just down the creek from our back pasture. If we can get 'em into our pasture and close the gate, they are ours."

Kate said, "The way to a pig's heart is through his stomach. Why don't you leave a trail of feed for them to follow? There are all those wormy apples I couldn't can this year, and they love apples."

Larry took his smaller tractor to the orchard and used the front end loader to scoop up half rotten apples, aided by the others raking them up. They were loaded on a hay wagon and hauled down near the creek, then scattered in a trail up to the pasture gate. Larry stationed himself in a deer stand on a tall tree to watch that night. They had run over some apples with the tractor to smash them and spread the smell. It was almost daybreak when he heard grunting and awoke from dozing off. The quarter moon's light was enough to see the mostly white hogs slowly following the trail of apples into the pasture. When he didn't see any more coming out of the trees beyond the pasture, Larry quietly got down and closed the pasture gate, then went to the house for some sleep.

"I counted 62 head in there, but they were moving around some, so it may not be right," Ashley said.

Wes grinned, "Problem solved, thanks to that idea! That isn't enough to eat that much corn, but with what hogs we already had, it should do it. Boy, do I feel better now."

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"We need to get married, you know," Gloria told Larry. They were getting dressed for the day and it was just light enough to see in the room.

Larry said, "Yes. Uuh, I want to, it's just that everything else keeps getting in the way. The Courthouse is working again, I think. Do you want a big wedding?"

"No, definitely not. I had one of those and it didn't work out. I'm talking about the partnership in the farm here. So you will have legal title to your share if something happened to me. It's just the right thing to do legally. Besides, I think I want to keep you."

"I for sure want to keep you, too," Larry said with a grin. "I guess you've got it all planned out how you want to do this, huh?"

"No, I was just thinking that it needs to be done before we write a contract."

"Okay, how about we go to the courthouse and get this done next time we're in town?"

"Oh you romantic devil, you!"

"Hey! You're the one started talking like it was a business deal!"

Gloria giggled and said, "I couldn't pass that up. If that's a proposal, the answer is yes, I'll marry you the next time we're in town." She kissed him and said, "We better hurry before Wes eats everything Kate is cooking for breakfast."

Passing the biscuits and meat platter around the table, Gloria said, "We plan to get married as soon as we can. Does anyone need anything from town when we go?"

Kate about spit food in her plate. "WHAT? You can't just do it without us planning this! You've got to have a dress and there's the service and the food to get ready..."

"Hold it! We don't want to go through all that. No big wedding, and all that trouble. We just want to get married before we make a partnership contract, and do it all legal."

Ashley asked, "Do you really want it that way?"

Gloria said, "Yes, we do. I do, and Larry agreed. We're going to stay together anyway, but there are lots of reasons to get married besides that. All the legal stuff and taxes and all."

Larry said, "It doesn't have to be today. We just mentioned it so we can plan for it the next trip we make. Didn't mean to get anybody all stirred up. Wes, are we going to get some creek gravel today like you said? That place by the barn is pretty soft and it'll be a mess if we don't do something about it."

Wes said, "Yeah, that'd be good thing to do before it gets any worse. We can use your tractor and loader to dip it out of the creek, and I'll get a hay wagon to haul it on. Then we'd better repack your front wheel bearings to make sure we get the water out of them."

Kate said, "Well, I never in my life... You two talk about getting married like it was no more important than anything. I guess that's all right, but it takes me some getting used to."

Gloria said, "Kate, Larry and I did all the talking and promising a long time ago. That's the important part to me. I wish I had known that before I got married the first time. We're just making it official what we have already committed to, is all."

Kate said, "When you say it like that, it makes sense. There's a lot of couples that didn't figure that out

before they got married. I'm thankful that Joe and I did."

Ashley smiled a little into her plate, seeing her traditionally-minded mother unbend that much. It meant she had a lot of respect for Gloria and Larry both.

Gloria was remembering the talk she'd had with Larry several months ago, when she told him she wasn't able to have children. Larry said that was all right with him. He didn't need children to make a marriage, just her.

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"Mom, can I go look for Ginseng with Christopher and Matthew?"

"I suppose so. Make sure you have them show you the poison ivy and help you keep out of it, Emily. Tell them I'll make some food for them to take, and be sure to take some water. I don't want anyone getting sick from drinking creek water."

"That's one thing I want to learn from Matthew. He knows all about the stuff in the woods. Thanks Mom!" Emily raced off outside to the boys who had found some old back packs to take along. She told them her news and came back in to get her own old school backpack.

Soon they were off together, with Matthew carrying his ever present rifle, and Christopher proudly carrying his, too. Alicia had worried about the boy and his rifle, but he had earned her confidence enough to allow him to carry it in the woods. It was the lesser of two evils, as she saw it. You never knew when you might need a gun these days. The weather had turned cool enough that snakes probably were not a big concern. Mothers had a lot to worry about, not the least of which was the obviously terrible crush that Emily had on Matthew.

She could do a lot worse, Alicia thought. He was a pretty good boy and ambitious at almost 17 years old. With Emily at just past 14, they were far too young to be serious, but of course kids didn't know that. Christopher made a good chaperone, though. And Emily was the tomboy of the two girls, always outdoors if she was allowed. Sophia was altogether different, quiet, studious, and a born homemaker. The younger girl loved to help in the kitchen and knew a lot from the short time she had been helping Alicia cook. She had no interest in wandering in the woods at all. She would help with anything, but her preference was to be in the house.

Todd watched the kids leave and waved from the barn where he was doing maintenance on his tractor. He had confidence in their kids, too. Christopher had matured fast, in the sense that he was a responsible kid, and reliably obeyed what he was told. Todd had drilled him with the rifle for almost 2 years now, and was confident he would handle it right. He had gotten his first squirrel with it over a year ago and thought of himself as a hunter now. He watched as the kids disappeared into the woods across the road from their cabin, Emily paying more attention to Matthew than to where she was walking. Todd shook his head and went back to work.

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Ronnie Nichols had planted 20 acres of corn on Harlan's farm and 20 on the Duncan farm, not expecting that to do as well, having not been planted for four years. It surprised him that although he had some weeds to contend with, he got over 80 bushels per acre from it. He'd had Dan Billings combine that and sell it for cash income, but picked the rest from his farm with Harlan's old ear picker and stored it for hog feed at home. He had over 100 head of hogs to feed out this winter, so that income

would go on next year's taxes when he began to sell them sometime in February. There were small livestock auctions now in Salem and Brownstown that both seemed to bring better prices in winter. And, there was always the State sales in Indianapolis. He could ship the hogs there by train, but the prices there had been unpredictable.

He wanted to expand the hog operation, but there was a limit to how much work the 3 of them could do, and hogs took a lot of time. So, he had Todd cut the other 26 acres on the Duncan farm early for hay, and gave him half for the cutting and baling. Ronnie's half now filled the barn on that farm and some in the barn at home. The hay fields had grown back and were now ready for pasturing through the winter. Ronnie made a trip down the valley below looking for cattle to buy.

Two farmers there had young calves to sell. Ronnie brought them home 6 at a time in his pickup with the old stock racks on it. Four trips got the 2 dozen calves home. He and Matthew had set up a water tank for them by the old hand pumped well and bought a windmill to do the pumping from an antique collector. It had been a job getting it home and putting it together again, but it was in reliably good condition. That allowed him to rotate the calves from the back pasture where there was a pond to the front one near the old house.

The old Duncan farm house was now occupied by a renter. Bob Clemmons was a middle aged man that Ronnie had met at the farm market in Brownstown. He had been working for the vegetable produce growers in the river bottom to the north a few miles. Bob was out of work there for the winter, so he agreed to watch over the cattle operation and help clean up the place for reduced rent. He had paid Ronnie in cash to rent the house until next Spring when he would go back to work again. Bob drove his old pickup pulling a small camper with all his worldly goods inside. He said it was all right for summer living, but winter was a different story.

Bob did a good job of cleaning up the old root cellar and helped Matthew make a new door for it. The potatoes he'd gotten from his last farm job went inside. He fixed siding on the barn and cleaned out a lot of trash. Ronnie told him he could have whatever he found in the buildings to sell for scrap metal, or whatever, so Bob unhooked the camper from his truck and left it parked in an unused shed. Bob hauled a couple loads of his salvage on market day to sell. He came home with an old shotgun and some shells for it. Ronnie lent him a chainsaw to cut some firewood right away and agreed that Bob could hunt all he wanted to for meat. Within a week there was a deer hanging in the barn being made into jerky, and a small salad patch of greens planted under some old windows Bob had found in the shed. Bob let it be known in the community that he was available to work, so Todd hired him to help during corn harvest, following the combine with truck and trailer to keep things moving.

Alicia fed hired hands lunch as everyone traditionally did. Conversation during the meal led to Bob telling of living near Indianapolis and working for a landscaping company before the crash. When he lost his job, he hung around for a few weeks looking for work, but gave it up when his south side neighborhood had some rioting. He didn't know anyone on his street that had work and trouble was brewing. He was renting the place by the month, so he'd left for Brownstown where he had distant relatives. From what he had seen back then, a year ago, the city was full of hungry people. He had seen hitch hikers on the road but didn't pick up anyone. There had been many people asking for farm work after he got a job a year ago last Spring. There were more asking for work this year.

Todd had noticed Bob was little reluctant to talk about the rioting. When they were back outside after lunch he asked Bob if it had been really bad?



"I saw two men get shot getting out of their cars, and then the mob set the cars on fire. The cops never showed up. One of the cars caught a tree on fire and it spread to a house. The house burned down and the fire department never came. I left early the next morning when there wasn't anybody around outside. I had heard that the East side was mostly on fire back then, but I didn't want to get close enough to find out. Comin' down I-65, there looked like there had been some fires here and there until I got south of Franklin. I didn't stop until I got to Uncle Marty's outside of Brownstown. He let me park the camper there last winter, but I couldn't get enough gas to keep it warm. I like to froze in that thing."

Todd told him it had been quiet here, except for one incident, but better keep his eyes open anyway.

Bob said, "That's why I traded for a shotgun last week. All I had was a .22 pistol, and I didn't think that was enough."

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## CHAPTER 54

December, 2014

"Louisville has started the Christmas Season, with more merchants for shopping this year. Third Street downtown is decorated and lit up like the proverbial Christmas Tree, enticing shoppers with new gifts to purchase, including a lot of hand made items from area crafts people."

The camera cut to a shot of people looking at dolls and toys in a store as the announcer said, "Credit cards are back with the refinancing of banks by the Federal Reserve, and that gives shoppers a new lease on spending...."

"They didn't learn a damned thing, did they?" Ed was fuming.

Joann said, "Some people have never thought for themselves in their whole lives. They just do what they see other people doing."

Ed said, "We'd have been better off if they never started TV broadcasting again. It's the same old, same old. Buy, buy, buy. You'd think that after all people have been through, they would learn something, but they're acting like fools again."

"They probably just want to forget about it all. They think that shopping and buying will make them feel better, like it used to be."

Ed said, "I wonder if it's really like the TV is saying. I didn't see any pictures of the big shopping malls like they used to show, with crowds of people beating the doors down. It makes me think this is what they WANT us to think. TV was always a propoganda machine for big business, and then for big government. I'm calling BS on this. Let's just shut the thing off."

Joann said, "I want to catch the weather forecast. I need to do laundry."

"Okay, but I don't want to watch it. I'm going out to take care of the chickens."

The door closed a little harder than it needed to as he went out. Joann started sorting clothes and was thinking that Ed was probably right, and she was, too. She knew for certain that she had no intentions of going shopping in the city, even though they had the money for it. Ed had dropped a hint that he really liked black walnut pie, and that's what she planned to make him for Christmas. They had started going to church lately, down in the valley below the ridge. It was a social thing as much as it was religious for her, but she liked the sermons, too. She and Ed had gotten married there last month, and had been attending since then. The Christmas service should be nice, she thought, with a pageant to be put on by the kids. It made life seem a little more civilized for her.

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Larry Barnes was having similar thoughts. He had seen the TV ads as well, but they sounded more like desperation than sales promotion. There were no "overstock sales" or "going out of business" sales like he used to see. Instead the commercials all showed the outside of the store and a few well stocked shelves, but never the whole store. He thought the city stores were like the local ones, with half the

shelves crammed together in storage at the back, and only a few shelves in front with goods on them.

He didn't plan on going shopping either, although they had just sold the first batch of hogs that put over a thousand dollars in the bank for him and Gloria. They had decided how they would use that money, and they would spend the majority of it within the next couple weeks on repair parts for farm equipment, diesel fuel, some new clothing, and shoes, too, if they couldn't find them used. After the sale of his land, he and Gloria had been able to buy a 20% share in the farm partnership, almost half of that from the farm equipment and livestock he had been able to contribute. He was in good shape financially, and he planned to stay that way.

Larry noticed that Kate, Wes, and Ashley had said much the same sort of things he had in mind. They were all as close as any immediate family now, everyone having lost some relatives during the trouble.

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The first snow of the year came down fast, with big wet flakes and lasted all night. The ground was already frozen on top, and it was getting colder. An 8" layer covered everything, making chores and driving troublesome. County road maintenance no longer existed, unless the residents did it themselves. Ed had made a large Vee-shaped drag out of a pair of logs with 2 smaller ones cut to fit on top for braces. His tractor would pull it easily and it helped to grade the road with it and keep the small holes filled and leveled.

When the snow stopped, Ed decided he'd better get busy clearing the road before anyone had to drive on it and packed the snow too hard to scrape off. Halfway down to Ronnie and Tara's farm he saw a couple dogs he didn't recognize loping through the trees to his left. They ran heedlessly in front of the tractor where one was run over and killed, the other barely bumped by a front wheel. It acted like it had been seriously injured, so Ed stopped the tractor to get a better look.

The dog was close enough he could see a dazed look from the dog, and foamy drool coming from its' mouth. It wandered rather aimlessly, then staggered and fell in the snow. Ed knew what it meant and pulled his old .30-06 out of the crude scabbard he'd made for it on the fender. One shot and the dog fell in a heap in the dry weeds. Ed looked at the one behind him laying in the road, crushed from being run over by the tractor then the drag. It wasn't moving either. He watched them both for a couple minutes. After deciding they were in fact dead, he stepped down off the tractor and went to the one he'd shot. It was very thin, and had dried drool on its' muzzle. What was left of the other dog showed the same signs. Ed was pretty sure they both had rabies, so he didn't touch either one.

When Ed got to Ronnie Nichols' place, he stopped the tractor on the road and walked down to the house, afraid the drag might still have some infected remnant of the dead dog on it. He knocked on the door and was met by Matthew.

"We got rabies in the neighborhood," Ed told him. "Better get your folks for me."

"They went over to the other farm to take Bob some lard and stuff. Where'd you see something with Rabies?"

Ed told his story and advised Matthew to stay away from the place until they could burn the dog carcasses.

"I'm going to need some help with that, because I don't want any tools or anything to touch those dead

dogs."

Ed, Ronnie, and Bob went to work moving the two dogs into the clearing just off the road using a pair of fresh cut poles and with a bit of rope tied them together for crude tongs. They laid the tongs aside and dragged deadfall wood from the surrounding forest into a big pile of brush and wood. The carcasses were placed on top of the pile and it was set on fire, poles and all. They continued to heap wood on the smoky fire. Soon they were joined by Gerald Tomes and Mel Sawyer who joined in to help gathering wood. When the fire was burning well, Ed offered to take the message about rabid dogs to the rest of the neighbors. The rest of them would stay and feed the fire until the dogs were consumed.

Bob wanted to go home to get his shotgun. Ed gave him a ride home and back on the tractor, making a better job of clearing the snow on this second pass with the drag. Ed stopped to tell Mike and Laura what happened so they could pass it on to Joann who might be wondering why he was late.

By the time Ed got home, it was getting to be well past lunch time, but he had alerted the whole neighborhood, along with Dan Billings and his wife. Dan said they would pass it on to neighbors on down the highway in both directions. As soon as word got to where someone had phone service, it spread a lot faster. People began to check their guns and watch carefully any time they were outside for any animal behaving oddly.

Kate heard about it from their neighbors. Every farmer in the north half of the county was watching for signs of Rabies. A week later, someone shot a skunk that was acting aggressive and another shot a coyote. It would be well into Springtime before the scare began to abate.

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"The TV said that FEMA was handing out food for the needy in Louisville today," Gloria told everyone at lunch.

"What, are they only about 2 years late now?"

"Wes, that's pretty cynical," Ashley said.

"It's the truth. Where were they before half the people died over there?"

Gloria said, "They were pumping it up like it was the grandest thing that every happened. I'm sick of their talk."

Larry said, "That's what you can expect from them. They might tell the truth, but it's so twisted you'd never be able to tell it from an outright lie."

Gloria wasn't finished. She said, "They said there was a big problem with cases of the Flu this year, too, and said flu shots were finally available again. They wanted everybody to come get a shot and it would only cost \$24 this year."

Wes said, "Yeah, that's about what most people make for a day's pay, and they used to be free from a lot of County Health Nurses and schools and stuff. I guess that's gone forever. I bet they didn't say anything about the measles or pneumonia that is going around over there, did they?"

"No, they didn't. Where did you hear that?"

"From a trucker at the farm store. He was delivering from Louisville and was worried about his kids getting measles. Said it has killed some kids and adults, too."

Gloria said, "It's no wonder, with people not getting enough to eat, and some don't have heat. It could get pretty bad. The news did say that Federal Income Taxes were going up this year, because the government needs to pay back some on the gold that backs the dollar. I was surprised that they admitted that. But the next breath they were bragging about having the city buses running back and forth across the river to New Albany again. I suppose they want us to go over there and buy stuff where they have a 12% sales tax. It's bad enough here at 10%."

"The only way we can have anything like a decent living is if we just our trade in our community and don't use cash unless we can't avoid it," Wes said. "Otherwise, the bankers will end up with all of it again like they did before."

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Alicia took her job as teacher for the 4 children seriously. She had a Bachelor of Arts Degree with a double major in Literature and Sociology, but little science or math background. Todd had some math background with his degree in Business and a minor in Economics. Alicia was sure they could do a good job up to high school level in most subjects, and had studied what books she could find on high school level science and biology. She was even working on a section in comparative religions to fit into the sociology class she had planned out. She was grateful for the fairly new encyclopedia set she had found at the market, with the internet having been off and on again for months at a time.

What concerned her now was how to teach kids what they needed to know to make a living in this strange new world. She thought they needed trades, like the German high school programs she had read about, where kids were carefully tested for aptitudes, then taught the trades or other skills they needed to get real jobs. College education was pretty much out of the question now for lack of money, transportation, and probably a lack of colleges, too, considering how bad off the cities were said to be.

Farming was what most people did in the rural areas, but other things were needed, too. There were a lot more occupations in the world. Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and 4H clubs were gone. It would be up to parents to supply that sort of teaching, if they got it at all. Alicia began a list of skilled jobs. Butcher, baker, candlestick maker. Sewing, canning, horticulture, nutrition and health related skills, mechanic's and things like construction, plumbing, electrical work. There was no way she could learn enough to teach all that. Then she realized that the historical answer had been apprenticeships. Children had been essentially given to some tradesman to learn their skills. In the past they were used as nearly free hard labor, but they did learn something and earned their own bed and board while doing it.

She thought about what skills were available in the immediate area. Dan Billings was a pretty good farmer, from what she had heard. Todd had learned a lot from him and some from Ed Wilson. Mike Wilson could do welding and designed machines. Ronnie Nichols knew everything his grandfather Harlan had been able to teach him about wild herbs and their uses. Denise Hoskins was a retired nurse, also a medical resource. Alicia had asked her, and yes, she still had her college books from her nursing program at U of L. Gerald Tomes made some excellent wine, and could use an apprentice, but he had no children at home now. Mel Sawyer had shown to be a very good soldier, and although her mind rebelled at the thought, the kids should all learn how to defend themselves and their community.

Then, Alicia began to think about the 4 kids and what they would be suited to do. Matthew was easy. He wanted to be a carpenter and build things. Ronnie would teach him a lot about farming and wildcrafting, and had in fact been doing that. Sophia should have the best Home Economics teaching she could get. Alicia was a good cook because she enjoyed it, but Sophia could learn from others, too, like Laura Wilson who was the acknowledged local expert on baking. Sophia should spend some time with Laura.

Emily was still a tomboy, and loved the outdoors. The kid liked people and was gregarious. She was good help in the garden, but she was distracted so much by Matthew right now that it was hard to tell what she should be studying. Alicia needed to have a talk with the girl.

Christopher had her baffled. The boy had taken to the rural life and never mentioned anything from the past. He idolized Matthew's skills in the woods, loved to hunt squirrels and rabbits, and wasn't averse to doing the skinning and butchering, either. The trouble was, not many Daniel Boones were needed, except to add to the food stocks. He loved his Dad, but had little interest in farming. Maybe Todd could help her figure out what Chris would want to do for a living. What jobs would even be available, for that matter?

Alicia felt like she was getting a late start, and she would take all the help she could get with this problem.

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" 'Gold is the money of kings; silver is the money of gentlemen; barter is the money of peasants; but debt is the money of slaves.' I'm quoting that from a book called Money and Wealth in the new Millennium by Norm Franz. He had some great insights into how money and currencies work. I won't bore you kids with all the details of it, but the man helped convince me that paper money is worth what it is made of-paper and ink. I learned the hard way that promises may not be worth much, even if they are written on paper. Thankfully, I learned that soon enough to convert some of the paper promises I had into something real that represents real wealth."

"I don't mean to say that I am rich. I'm not. Wealth is what any of us own that is REAL, whether it is a metal coin, land, or some food. Those things have real value to us. Paper money does not necessarily have value unless a lot of people believe it does. What happened to our country was that we did things to make others lose confidence in our currency, and that meant it was worth almost nothing. It's sort of like a fairy tale, where magic works only if you BELIEVE in it."

Todd was addressing their home school class on economics. He meant to tell them the truth about it, too.

"More important to each of us than money of any sort is our ability to earn enough to live. It doesn't matter how you do it, but we all have to eat and have clothing and a place to live. Some work is worth more than other kinds of work, depending mostly on two things, how much you have to know to do that work, and also, how badly other people need it done. If you are sick it is worth a lot for someone who knows medicine to help you get better. But if you want help cutting firewood, most anyone can do it, even if it is hard work. Guess which one pays the most?"

"The doctor or herb person is worth more," Matthew said. "They don't have to work as hard, either."

"That's right," Todd said, "and there aren't nearly as many doctors and herbalists as there are people

who can cut wood. You kids all get to choose what you want to do to earn a living. It's worth thinking about before you decide. There is no test on this subject except that it be the best you can figure out. There are no wrong answers, but some are much better than others. If you can make a lot of money doing something you hate, is that a good idea? Or, if you can't make much at all, but you love it dearly, is that any better? You get to decide those things for yourself. Look around at the people you know, and we will tell you about other people and what they do. Next week, I'll ask you to give me your idea at that time. You are free to change your mind later, so just come up with the best idea you can by then and we'll talk about it, okay?"

The kids were very interested in what Todd had to say and it showed. It was quiet after he finished. Todd told them, "That's all from me for today. Talk about this among yourselves and with everyone you know. Let's get some lunch and Alicia will have English class afterward." He smiled at them and got some smiles in return.

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## CHAPTER 55

March, 2015

Warm days came early, a welcome relief from a bitter cold winter. Cold frames were readied and planted with salad greens, and cold weather crops were planted in gardens with anticipation of fresh vegetables to add to the winter diet. The warmer temperatures came with plenty of rain, replenishing soil moisture but adding to the muddiness from the recent thawing of frozen ground. The river bottom fields were flooded and where the lower county roads were not flooded they were too soft for traffic. It was what older generations called 'mud time'.

Mike Wilson was watching the evening news with Laura. The newscaster had been talking about the excessive rain and a drainage problem. Mike said, "Did you see that car lot behind the reporter? I think that was The big Ford dealer in Louisville, and the lot was empty."

Laura said, "I don't think anybody has even thought about buying a car for ages. No wonder they are closed up."

"Yeah. Todd said they heard on the shortwave radio that Detroit hadn't made a car in over 2 years. It was like a war zone in downtown Detroit before that. I can't imagine what it is now. Todd said Indianapolis isn't much better, from what he heard. You know Bob Clemmons said the street gangs were taking over a couple years ago when he left Indy. I wish we could get some good video of what the cities look like, instead of the cherry picking views they always show."

"The guys at the gas station hear things from the truck drivers. You know they all travel in pairs now, and carry all kinds of guns. Your Dad said he'd been hearing that Louisville is maybe half of what it used to be. The odd thing was, the downtown area isn't near so bad as the suburbs, from what he said. I guess the suburbs went stark raving crazy down there. Of course, the West End is about all burned out, and people are living like rats in the churches and old store buildings that are still standing. They'll never show THAT on TV."

"Yeah, somebody high up decided that we don't need to see anything but the best of it. Like maybe showing a few stores open will get us country folks to go there. Do they think I've got STUPID tattooed on my forehead, or what?"

"It would be nice to get more than one channel, but I guess they would all have the same nonsense. All I wanted to see is the weather and what the government is liable to do next. Whatever they do, you can bet we won't like it. You can shut it off if you want to."

Mike shut off the small 12 volt TV and said, "It doesn't look like much is changing down there. Todd told me they only have one channel going because they have been scavenging stuff from all of the old stations to keep one running. I guess they aren't getting much in the way of electronics from Asia yet to fix it up. Probably can't pay the staff much, either. Their hairdos and clothes don't look near as slick as they used to."

"Clothes are going to be a problem. They all used to come from overseas somewhere, Indonesia, Malaysia, China. There's not much coming in from there that I've seen, so I doubt if there is a clothing



store open anywhere. Walmart still hasn't reopened except in a few big cities the truckers say, 'cause the cost of import goods is so high. That business model of cheap imports here is dead and stinkin'. Imports are the new high priced stuff now."

"Maybe we'll get some business running here for a change," Laura said.

"We can hope so. There's a couple plastic molding plants in New Albany that are crying for recycled plastic I heard. Some guy at market day said he'd buy all he could get, but there wasn't much in his bins except what kids had found laying around somewhere. I bet with the price of oil so high, that making new plastic is pretty expensive now. You don't see hardly any in the stores. Everything is either in cardboard, or bulk packed in barrels."

"You ready for supper yet?"

Mike said, "Yeah, put it on to heat. I'll go feed the dogs and the pig."

As soon as Mike went outside, she heard him shoot his pistol, twice.

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Laura grabbed her pistol and ran to the door. Mike was just outside, looking at a dead coyote.

He said, "That one was headed for the pig pen when I came out. He didn't get that far. I saw a few others, but didn't get a shot at them. We better get the pig in the barn and close it up."

"I'm glad that's all it was. You had me scared for a minute there."

"Sorry, but I had to shoot when I had the chance, or I'd have told you what it was."

"That's okay, I just wondered what I needed to shoot."

"Maybe I'll leave him there for bait tonight. If they come back, one of our dogs will wake me up and maybe I can get more of them. I better tell Dad and everyone about 'em, too."

"I'm going over to help Joann can up some meat tomorrow, so I can tell them," Laura said.

"I'd better look for some 9MM ammunition pretty soon. Ammo of any kind is scarce now. If they are still making any, you can bet the government gets first dibs on it. I'm saving my brass, in case I find somebody who can reload it."

"Didn't Mel say something about that once? Or was it Todd? I'll ask around, too," Laura told him.

"It was Todd," Ed said, startling them. He had just materialized out of the bushes beside them. "I heard the shots and got here as quiet as I could, not knowing what was going on."

"I'm glad you came Dad, but you scared the snot outta me. Better be careful about that!"

"Yes, we need to work out some signals or something."

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"Yes, I have reloading equipment, but I've never used it yet," Todd told Mike. "I stocked up on whatever they said it takes to do 9MM, .38 and .357, .44 magnum, .40 S & W, .45 ACP, .223 Remington, .308 Winchester, .270, .30-06, and 20 gauge and 12 gauge shotgun shells. I got the presses and dies and powder and primers, and I got bullet molds, too. There's some buck shot, and some #6 shot, and I don't remember what else. Come on in and we'll dig it out."

There were 8 big covered plastic totes marked "RELOADING, NO SMOKING, FIRE OR FLAME". Todd didn't know what most of it was, but the boxes were labeled and there were 3 reloading manuals plus some other books that looked expensive.

"I didn't have guns for all those calibers, but I thought it was a good idea to get all the most common ones," Todd said. "I bought what the guy at the gun shop told me to buy. I told him I wanted enough to make a business out of it, too. I just hope he was telling me straight. I think he was, because he was a prepper, too. We got pretty well acquainted."

Mike smiled and told him, "You did good! This will keep all of us shooting for a long time. How long did you work at getting all your stuff together? I keep being amazed at what you have here."

"I worked on it pretty hard for about 3 years. And, I had a lot of money to throw at it, because I became convinced that it was just a better investment than what I had in stocks and bonds. I watched for a high in the markets and sold those and put it all into this place and what you see here. I missed some things, but not many that were really important. I wish I had bought more cloth and sewing things."

"You're going to need a bench to set this up," Mike told him.

"I have some lumber, but I'm not much of a carpenter. Maybe we'd better get you or Matthew to make that."

"I've done a little of this with a friend of mine, would you want me to set it up for you?"

"That sounds good to me. In fact, I'd like for you to just take it home and do the work and give me a percentage of what you make with it. I bought it for an investment. I don't know anything about it, and frankly, I don't care to learn. I have all I can do to learn about farming and how to make it pay. There is a lot to figure out about how to do all this and then how to charge for it. Can you do that?"

"I'd love to! Let me work on it a while and work out some ideas then let me get back to you, okay?"

"Deal!" Todd offered his hand and they shook on it.

Ed had cleaned out one of his pre-fab sheds when they used most of the building materials that had been stored there. The tractor shed he'd built was big enough to handle all his garden tools, too, so Ed had dedicated one of the 2 pre-fabs to his garden seed business, and the other just had some odds and ends in it. They agreed to make it the reloading building and moved it farther away from Ed's trailer, at Joann's insistence. They put the building in a small grove of Eastern Red Cedar trees, thick enough to completely hide the building.

Mike soon had a work bench built and some shelves put up, then put a solid lock on the door with a steel bar across it. He welded up some grates to cover the windows and called it secure. Only then did he move Todd's reloading things inside and began to organize it. When plowing time came, Mike had a

good start on an ammunition business. He didn't advertise it at all, but told people he knew where he could get it done for them. He and Todd began to make money.

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## CHAPTER 56

April 2015

Plowing ground was a necessity now that chemicals were not available for weed control. The problems were twofold; one, plowing took a lot of fuel, and two, plows were scarce because farming had come to depend on chemical weed control for no-till planting. Todd had been fortunate to find the set of equipment he had bought at the last minute. Ed had more time and still looked for a long time to locate his equipment. Harlan had never changed to no-till, so what Ronnie had inherited was a complete tillage setup with cultivators and all. Other farmers were not so lucky, and had been scouring the area for what they needed to get crops in the ground.

But plows, disks, and cultivators all wear out from digging the soil, so that began to take its toll, and replacement parts were not to be had. Mike was busy welding wear-resistant surfaces on plow points and cultivator shovels using hard facing rods he had been lucky to find. He also did some modifications to various plow points to make them usable on the equipment at hand. He could make things last a while longer, but eventually they would have to get parts, or make them. When a State Representative came to town, he heard a lot about the need for repair items for many things.

Not all politicians had survived the hardest times, and not all wanted to go back to Indianapolis after seeing the condition of it. Those hardier souls who did so were well aware of the needs of their people by the time a new legislative session was called to order. They found an horrendous set of problems when they attempted to force production of critical items.

Manufacturing was desperately needed, especially the forged steel and cast iron parts for farm equipment, the precision items for medical use, and the chemicals for agriculture and medicine. The problem was, anyone they talked to in manufacturing told them they needed inputs from many other suppliers to get started. Some chemical plants were idle for lack of some specialty valve, or electronic component. Those were made in other countries and not available because trade had not been worked out with them yet. Two oil refineries were shut down for lack of demand for their products. The flow of gasoline and diesel fuel had bogged down so pipelines were not able to dump their products to storage and truck transport. Plastic molding companies could not get bulk plastic because the makers were lacking petroleum precursors.

Restarting the economy would be a lot harder than it had been to shut it down.

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Christopher had made notes of what he heard on the shortwave radio news reports and gave them to his Dad. Todd read and tried to understand what he had. An oil field in Saudi Arabia had dropped production to less than a third of its recent output. There were a lot of comments about that following.

"Are you sure of this name, Chris?"

"That's what it sounded like to me. Guh-war."

"Okay. That has to be the Gawar oilfield. That is the largest of all the Saudi fields. We have a problem. I saw a book some time ago that said the Saudi's were lying about how much oil they still had in the

ground. He must have been right. What about this one? What did they say about it?"

Todd pointed to a note about the Bockin oil and gas field. "Did they say where this was? North Dakota maybe?"

"Yeah, that's in the US."

"That's the Bakken field. OOOH Boy, have we got problems."

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Todd loaded his fuel tank on the heavy farm trailer and headed for the Jackson County Farm Bureau Coop. He used his agriculture ration allotment for the year completely by filling both tanks on his truck and filling the 300 gallon farm tank on the trailer at \$4.12 a gallon. Following Todd's advice, Ed Wilson ordered immediate delivery to fill his farm tanks and drove to town to fill his truck and all the cans he could find to use up his ration limit. Ronnie Nichols and Dan Billings did the same for their farm allotments, as did all the ridge community.

What was left of international commodity trading lost no time in adjusting crude oil prices when the Saudi's production dropped by 30% in a month. Being the second largest producer in the world behind Russia, at 13% of the world total meant that they reduced the world oil supply by 3.9%. On the heels of that came the news that the much touted US Bakken oil field reserves, always a controversial amount, was in serious question after 24 oil wells quit producing the same month. Mexico's Cantarell field had been pumping 94% water for some time and was almost ready to be shut in, since they could barely make a profit on it at \$120 oil prices, and the diesel fuel used to get that crude to the refinery was not much more than it produced. Norway had some wells hitting that Energy-Return-on-Energy -Invested limit, too.

Crude oil prices went to \$260 a barrel overnight. The next day the futures market on Brent Crude went to \$315 before noon. Brent closed at \$382 a barrel that night in London. Fuel prices followed almost instantly, tripling the per gallon prices at the pumps in the US. No US oil was being sold abroad, the Alaskan North Slope crude having been diverted to US refineries, but crude was still a world priced commodity, with British Petroleum being a price-setting player in the US.

US supplies were not immediately impacted all that much, but the Federal Government tightened rationing policy by 20% immediately based on the world wide shortfall.

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Larry Barnes was in town that Friday with their farm truck to get a load of lime at the quarry. A sign at the scales cautioned that the price had gone up by half. He got all he could pay for and stopped at the gas station to get their ration of diesel for the week put in the truck. What money he had saved for fuel only bought part of the rationed amount, at \$12.45 a gallon. In shock at the prices, Larry didn't stop for anything else and drove straight back to the farm. By the time he got there, The rest of the family had heard the news on TV.

Wes was doing some math on a piece of paper and talking about it.

"When I started farming with Joe we were getting about 160 bushels of corn per acre, and it was bringing \$4.50 a bushel. That gave us a gross income of \$720 an acre. At that time, diesel cost us about \$3.80 a gallon and we were paying \$160 for a 50 pound bag of seed corn."

"Now, we raise our own seed, but without chemical fertilizer this year we averaged 62 bushels per acre on 400 acres. We sold most of that at \$3.00 a bushel, for a gross of \$186 per acre. With diesel fuel at \$4.15, we could make some money, but not all that much. After expenses, we netted \$112 per acre. We took the risk that our equipment wouldn't break down beyond repair while parts are impossible to get. We all worked our butts off and put more wear on the machinery than we used to do in 5 or 6 years, but we only made \$45,000 to support all of us. I don't think we can afford to do that next year. We have to find some better ways to farm, or as soon as we have a major equipment failure, we are finished."

Kate said, "Don't you think the price of oil will come down when they get over their panic? We've seen this sort of thing before and prices always came back down a lot."

Gloria said, "I think this is different. What we saw before wasn't a real supply shortage like this. I hope I'm wrong, but I think we'd better look at this like these prices are going to stay where they are."

"The news reporter said they were looking into making gasoline out of coal," Ashley said.

"If they do that it will take years to get it going. They'd have to build some big place to process the coal, and I'm not sure anybody has the money to do that now so I wouldn't count on it," Wes said.

Larry said, "I'm glad we filled up the farm tanks and bought motor oil and grease right after harvest. At least we've got that much. I'd hate to think what that would cost now."

Wes said, "You all might think I'm nuts, but I've thought about training some calves to work as oxen. I don't know how much we could farm with them, but it would sure keep our cost down to almost nothing. But that takes a couple years to get them trained and in shape to work, and I'd have to figure out how to come up with a plow and disk and all that to make it work. I don't want to start on something like that if there's a better way. But I don't want to use up all the fuel we have now without having a way to keep going, either."

Larry asked, "What about biodiesel fuel? I read somewhere that farmers could make their own out of soybeans."

Kate said, "One thing is for sure, we can't make a living the way we have been doing it if fuel is that high. And if lime went up so much right away, I bet everything else goes up, too. We need to know for sure what prices are before we do anything drastic."

Wes said, "We ought to look into biodiesel and see if we could do any good with it. I have heard about it, but I don't know how it's done."

Ashley said, "Mom's right. We need more information. I think we need to wait a few days and watch prices on things and see what the government is going to do."

Larry said, "We know the government already cut fuel rations 20%. The gas station guy told me that. So they aren't going to be helping any from what I can see. And if we need to get into farming with oxen or horses or something, we'd better figure it out fast, because everybody and their uncle will be looking for the same stuff and the prices will go outta sight."

Ashley said, "I heard on the TV that electric rates are going up again because oil went up. They said most of the East Coast uses oil to make electricity, and we share power with them, so they are

averaging out the cost of it even though Indiana uses coal for electricity."

Larry said, "If we can't afford fuel or electricity, then next week we'll be living like the Amish, whether we want to or not."

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"It will affect everything," Todd told the kids. "Everything that is made uses some kind of energy, electricity, diesel fuel for transport, and energy to light up the stores that sell things. When one kind of energy source gets more expensive, they all do because to some degree they are all interchangeable. So prices of everything we need to buy will go up."

"What happened to all the oil?" Sophia looked suspicious.

"We used it up driving around, making things we didn't really need, heating houses when we weren't even home, fighting wars, building cities, all kinds of ways."

Emily was skeptical, too. "I don't see how we ran out of oil all at once and nobody expected it. It doesn't make any sense."

Todd said, "You're right, this was not a secret, but nobody wanted to talk about it. People didn't want to believe that oil would get to be precious someday, and oil companies didn't want people to look for other energy sources so they could sell their oil."

"We didn't run out of oil, and I expect we won't run out for a very long time. There just isn't quite as much available now as we need to keep things the way they were. At first, we used all the oil that was easy to get out of the ground. Some of it was even under pressure and squirted up into the air when they drilled into it. Now, all that easy oil is gone, and we have been drilling under the oceans and all kinds of more difficult places that cost more to get it out. It takes a lot more energy now to get a barrel of oil than it used to, so it is more expensive to produce. There are oil wells now that are being shut down because it costs more in terms of both energy and money to get it out of the ground than it produces."

Matthew said, "Why don't we use something else? We all use wood stoves to heat the houses now instead of oil or gas. Why can't we run engines on something else?"

Todd said, "I'm no expert on that, but from what I have read, gasoline engines can be converted to run on natural gas, or LP gas, but that takes new parts and time and money. And there aren't any places set up to fill our tanks for that, like there are gas stations. People have tried to use all kinds of things to run cars and trucks, from batteries to solar panels, but none of them can either gather or store enough energy to do very much. Batteries have to be recharged too often to be very practical, and big trucks and tractors need a lot more power than batteries can produce. And batteries aren't free, either. As far as I know, there aren't any practical ways to replace using gasoline and diesel fuel directly and get the same RESULTS."

Alicia was listening and asked, "What do you think is going to happen now?"

Todd said, "Nobody is going to like it much, but we are going to have to get used to using a lot less energy and paying a lot more for it."

Alicia said, "I don't see how that is possible. We don't drive unless we really need to, and we heat with

wood, dry our clothes on a clothesline, we cook with gas, but when that runs out we have the wood cook stove you bought. Were can we cut back that we haven't already?"

Todd said, "All the items we buy had an energy cost to make them, so when we buy clothes, or anything else we are buying that energy it took to make them. We will have to find ways to make more things ourselves. We will have to drive even less. I'll have to find a way to farm that doesn't take hundreds of gallons of fuel. I might have to farm using horses because we can grow their feed. If I don't do something different, we can't make any money at farming. We have to learn to live with what we can produce, or it is not a sustainable way to live."

"Think of it like this. If we used more firewood each year than what grows in our woods, before long the woods would be gone and we'd have no heat. You can't live above your income level forever. It just won't work."

"This is going to suck," Matthew said.

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## CHAPTER 57

May, 2015

Mike said, "There are all kinds of things you can use to fuel an engine. Natural gas will work, which is methane and you can make methane by composting. And LP gas will work, but it is made from oil, and both of those need a gas bottle for a fuel tank, and both take a special carburetor."

"You can run a gasoline engine on alcohol and make that from corn, or sugar cane, or several other things, but that's a lot of trouble and work, and it uses up our food supply. I don't think it's a smart idea to use food for fuel."

"You can run a gas engine on wood smoke. They call it a wood gasifier, and the wood burns slow, just smoldering. It makes carbon monoxide gas and can kill you if you breathe much of it. You have to go to a lot of trouble to get the impurities out of the smoke, or it'll screw up the engine quick. And, we only have so many trees that we need for building, heating, and cooking."

"Diesel engines can run on vegetable oil made from soybeans, or sunflower seeds, or other seeds, but that gets into our food supply again and it takes special presses to get the oil out of the seeds, and chemicals to treat the oil. That might be hard to find now."

He was talking to Laura, Ed and Joann, all gathered at Mike's house for supper.

Joann said, "What's the right answer? How can we keep on living with things so expensive?"

Mike scratched his head and said, "I don't know any easy answers. The simplest thing is to only use what we can afford. That means we don't buy any more fuel than we have to, and find ways to use as little as possible. It means we do a lot of walking instead of riding, and anything else we can do to save fuel."

Ed said, "I'm too old to cut hay with a scythe and stack it with a pitchfork. We'd better be thinking about how we can farm and raise a garden without it costing us an arm and both legs. It looks to me like now we are in the same shape as all the poor countries around the world. The smarter we are from here on, the better off we will be."

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"I think you were right, Wes," Ashley told him. "Trying to farm a lot of land is too risky. Just working on our farm is plenty of work and I think we can make it here."

"I hope I was right. At least Larry agreed with me, I think mostly because he knows that if we wear out the equipment we're in trouble. Your Mom was probably thinking how they had done it years ago. Gloria is depending on us to make the right decisions. You probably have a better idea of where we really are than anybody."

"I don't think anybody knows what to do, Wes."

They were walking out to check on the cattle in the back pasture near the creek. Gloria and Kate were cleaning up the kitchen after a supper of leftovers from the midday meal, and watching Ella, their toddler. Ella was almost 2 years old and could be a handful. Ashley was thankful for a break from minding her.

"Neal Davis and the Martins are all going to just work their home place this year," Wes said. "We're all going to use the old Byerly place for pasture and hay ground and split what we get off of it. As far as we know that abandoned farm rule is still in effect so we can do that. But nobody wants to take a chance on putting livestock there with dog packs and coy dogs around."

"The TV said the government would pay more for corn and soybeans this year," Ashley said.

"Maybe so, and maybe I'm wrong for staying smaller this year, but I'd rather go for what I know for sure we can do than take a chance on losing it all if our combine or something else decided to die on us."

"That's what I think, too. I meant that if the price does go up some, we'll come out okay. We've got the hogs to sell, too, and should have a dozen head of cattle for market by Fall, so we'll be fine."

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Todd was thinking the same way. He only rented 80 acres this year to do by himself, instead of partnering with Ed and Dan Billings. They all decided to just farm what they could afford to plant without borrowing any money for fuel or other needs. Farmers all across the Midwest were doing the same, planting less than half what they had the year before, despite encouragement from official government sources to plant more. Nobody believed anything the government said anymore.

Those who had a job did not believe they had any real job security, and likewise cut back on their spending in the face of high fuel and retail prices. Retailers felt the reduced sales quickly and made adjustments, laying off some help and reducing their orders for new stock. The fledgling economic growth that had just begun slowed down again.

Lacking any better information, people felt the tightening economy locally, and made decisions intuitively from the small signs around them. More and bigger gardens were planted, clothing was patched, shoes were mended, and purchases were put off or forgotten. The whole population was forting up in case things got really bad like they had been the past few years. No amount of propaganda would change that in Middle America. City folk had also had enough hardship to react in the same fashion, buying at produce markets, canning food, and reducing spending to an absolute minimum.

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Central planners and the major banks who effectively set the prices of commodities, had colluded to produce the oil price increase. The intent was to put pressure on the general public to go into debt as they had in the past to maintain a standard of living. They had generated pressure to do this through lots of messages that the economy was picking up, that employment and retail goods were to be had again, and good times were returning.

But, the unexpected bad news on oil supplies had created a much greater oil price increase than had been planned. The oil price shock was followed by inevitable retail price increases and that had torpedoed their plans to milk the public for interest money. The bankers had squeezed a little too hard this time, and it had blown up in their faces. There was very little tax money to be had, and virtually no

new loans being made. There were a lot of heated meetings in high places that followed with much finger pointing. There was plenty of blame and guilt to go around for all parties concerned.

The Super Bankers who had backed the new Gold Dollar had a choke hold on government money printing and refused to allow more deficit spending. Without that credit there was no government money to spread around, so their influence on affairs of the States was reduced to near nothing. The States, with a few exceptions, had been more prudent in their affairs after the crash and many passed Constitutional Amendments that disallowed deficit spending.

The States were also given credit for keeping the electric grid running through it all, even if the price had been high. More States had passed resolutions declaring their rights and powers under the US Constitution. As more State programs began to have their effects, more power devolved to State governments as they had been originally. Whatever objections the central powers had, they had little force with no money to back them up. The bickering began to be diffused as the Central Bank now had 50 States to contend with, instead of one central government.

States could not be bullied as easily, as they learned to apply leverage with their individual riches of commodity resources through trade deals with each other. The central government chokehold on grain and meat prices was loosened as other markets appeared, trading between States. A fight was coming as the Federal officials prepared to use their Interstate Commerce authority to stifle this trend. The States fought back by rescinding Federal use of National Guard assets. Battle lines were drawn, but it was a stalemate so far.

The banks who backed the US currency watched this develop and decided they did not want civil wars to erupt that would further damage their cash cows. They applied pressure to the central governments in the US, UK and Europe to defuse similar conflicts in all three. The word was given to those in power that there was to be no conflict of arms. Negotiated settlements with member States would be made and business would continue without interruption. If they wanted to continue having gold-backed currencies, that is. Those terms were accepted and negotiations began in earnest.

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"Don't throw that away Chris," Alicia said, "We can use it."

"What good is an old bottle cap?"

"I don't know yet, but plastic can be used for something. Put it in the box for plastic out in the storage building."

"Okay Mom." The boy headed out the door, closing it carefully. He put the cap in the box marked PLASTIC. There were several of his Dad's totes there, now empty of the things he'd bought long ago. They were used now to store recycled materials. The one for glass was half full of various bottles, washed and dried with their caps in place. If they didn't use them, Ronnie and Tara would always trade for them for their herb preparations. There was also some window glass, salvaged from an old house that was falling down, the owners long gone. That glass was stacked against the wall with a piece of plywood in front of it for protection. A broken window was a near tragedy now, since glass was impossible to buy new.

Old shoes and leather items, mostly belts and purses, were in another tote. Some had pieces cut from them for repairing something or other. The lid for that was sealed up tight to prevent moisture from

causing mildew. Chris knew that some guy down in the valley was tanning leather and would buy hides, so he had learned from Matthew how to "case" hides from the rabbits he trapped, and dry them on a willow stretcher to trade to the man. Rabbit fur made wonderful warm mittens. The man would trade 4 to one, four dried raw hides for one tanned and ready to use. Matthew had shown him how he'd learned from Ronnie to make a box trap, and how to set a snare and make deadfall traps. Todd had paid the man in silver to tan 4 deer hides for him with the hair removed, and Chris' mother had promised to make him and his Dad jackets from them. They would help protect his shirts from snags and tears.

There was a tote with paper in it, of all kinds. If it could be used for writing, it was saved separately. the rest was used for lesser purposes, the worst for starting fires in the kitchen wood cook stove, but they mostly used dry cedar bark and shavings for that, like Mike Wilson did in his forge. They tried to keep a fire going somewhere, because matches were expensive.

Chris had a box of his own for deer antlers he had found in the woods, and some from their own kills. Ronnie showed him how to hold them in a vise and saw off thin slices to make buttons. Drilling the holes took some concentration and sometimes broke a drill bit, so his Dad had told him to burn the holes in them with a red hot piece of wire. It stunk like burning hair so he had to do it outside, but it saved drill bits. Chris had done a lot of that last winter and had a big jar full of buttons to trade now. He was hoping to get more .22 shells for them somehow, since .22's couldn't be reloaded. He saved all his .22 brass empties so he could trade them to Mike Wilson who used them to make jackets for high powered rifle bullets. Mike had showed him how to make a small cloth bag to fasten on his rifle to catch the empties as they were ejected.

His Dad had a good sized pile of old metal things outside that he had found and saved. Chris kept a watchful eye out for such things, because Mike Wilson would trade for most any metal to use in his blacksmith shop. Newer stuff brought a better trade. Mike had made some parts for his Dad's farm equipment.

There was a trash can in the kitchen, but it was mostly a place to hold things until they could be sorted for other uses. Wet garbage went into a big tin can to give the chickens who got the eggshells, too. Ronnie said that crushing the old eggshells and mixing that in the chicken feed would give the hens what they needed to make good hard shelled eggs.

They didn't really throw away much now.

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## CHAPTER 58

June 2015

Saturday everyone was up early and loading up to go to market. Ronnie had loaded his things the night before and had taken his truck and wagon to Gerald Tomes place to be centrally located for others. Ronnie had his usual assortment of herbs, some smoked hams and pork shoulders, 4 buckets of lard, and some fresh vegetables from their huge garden. He was looking for a couple good tires for his farm wagon and some quantity of salt, which would probably have to come from the grocery and be paid for in money. He was also going to shop for a battery for his tractor. Gerald wasn't going to town, but entrusted a load of 10 gallons of good Concord grape wine to Ronnie to sell. (Bring your own bottles.)

Ed Wilson loaded a couple 100 pound bags of corn meal and two of wheat flour, packets of garden seeds, several dozen eggs, and a plastic barrel filled with dried beef. Joann had fresh vegetables including some onions and garlic. They would take dollars, but preferred silver. Joann wanted some cloth or clothing she could alter to fit her and Ed. She was going to town, but Ed was staying home to watch the place.

Ed's son Mike had added an assortment of reloaded ammunition (not for sale without usable empty brass), a sign advertising blacksmithing and welding, two of his hand cranked clothes wringers, some hand forged garden trowels and hunting knives. He would take good steel in trade for up to half the value of things he had made. His wife Laura wanted some shoes for herself and sewing notions, mostly thread.

Alicia, Sophia, Emily, and Chris were going mostly to buy, but Chris had his bottle of antler buttons, sorted by sizes. Sophia had baked some pies to trade in their last aluminum pie plates, and Emily had a bottle of dried Goldenseal. Alicia was hanging onto fidgety 2 year old Logan who needed shoes. She had 6 dozen eggs to trade and wanted some butter. They had silver coins to trade, too, and wanted any textbooks or reference books she didn't have.

Mel Sawyer was going, but taking nothing to trade, and didn't say what he wanted.

Charlie Allen told Todd to buy him some coffee, and gave him \$20 in paper money.

By 7:00 AM they were on the road, making about 20 miles an hour with Ronnie's truck in 3rd gear. The group was cheerful, but just a little wary. Trouble had died down after a new County Sheriff had been elected and he had no tolerance for thieves and other troublemakers. His influence was mostly in town, however, so everyone carried guns, even the girls who had learned how to shoot pretty well with a rifle. The trip was uneventful, though, and the market was already bustling when they arrived.

A tour down the aisles at the fairgrounds had Alicia a little shocked at how poor everyone seemed to have become since her last trip. The goods offered were pretty rough and too many people were dressed in worn out and ill fitting clothes. Some weren't very clean, either. All were polite and businesslike, though, and hawked their wares with some dignity.

Only one woman had some books, and the prices were low. Alicia made a deal for a cardboard box of hardback books. Some of them were old novels, but the package price got them for almost nothing. The

best of the lot was an Oxford unabridged dictionary, an old home medical book, and a pair of thick green volumes titled The Lincoln Library which was a compact encyclopedic set. She gave 2 dozen eggs and a dollar for the lot. The woman seemed glad to get it. Apparently, books were not selling well. Alicia inquired for more books and was told the woman had a lot at home. Alicia got directions and would visit her on the way home. She carried the heavy box back to Ronnie's truck and stowed it in the bed.

Ronnie was doing a good business selling sliced ham and pork shoulder by weight. He had found some old newspaper somewhere to wrap it in. He already had a pair of tires for his wagon. Joann was busy measuring out cornmeal and flour with a quart Mason jar, and selling seeds by the packet. Sophia had only sold one pie, and was a little discouraged. Alicia told her to wait until near lunch time and offer it by the slice. The girl perked up and looked around for something clean to dish up the slices. She got some newspaper from Ronnie and set about cutting a couple pies.

Christopher was nowhere to be found for a while, then showed up with a proud grin. Alicia asked how he was doing?

"Real good! I traded off my buttons for a set of kitchen knives and a hatchet. I didn't want those, but another man did, and he had fishing stuff. I got a bunch of sinkers and hooks and line, and traded that for 4 boxes of .22's I wanted! I kept some of the fishing stuff, too. Matthew told me how to make floats, so I didn't buy any of those."

"Sounds like you have this trading thing figured out," she told him.

"I figured out that I had to trade around until I could get what I wanted, and that was the best I came up with."

Alicia and Laura found that clothing and sewing items were scarce and expensive. There were a few old shoes, but nothing they could use. Disappointed, they traded for what they could find of their needs and were talking to Joann about it.

Joann said, "Ed has a cowhide and two deer hides down at the tanner's he should be getting back before long. Maybe we can figure out how to make some shoes for your boy."

Sophia sold out her pies fast at lunchtime. Most people had brought food with them to eat, but no deserts. She netted a can of baking powder, some soda, and some money. The money went fast when she found a pair of shoes that fit her, just a little bit big so she could wear them for quite a while. She had enough money left to buy a couple pounds of sugar and she came home with 4 of the aluminum pie plates.

Ronnie's lard was a popular item, but most people had to go somewhere to find containers to carry it home. He had warmed the metal buckets by their campfire so he could pour the lard into a quart jar for measuring, then into the customer's container. It also gave the customers the chance to smell the heated lard and know it wasn't rancid. He could have sold more, and promised to have more the next week.

Alicia bought 2 pounds of butter from Gloria Barnes, and promised to buy from them regularly. Kate had sent some braided rugs to sell that Alicia looked over closely. She decided she could make them, and would try it with the girls. It was time they began to put together a Hope Chest for themselves.

It had been a good day at the market, and after stops on the way home Alicia was very happy with a pile of books and copy paper she'd bought from the book seller. Todd bought coffee for Charlie Allen and some for himself. Mel visited the pharmacy and grocery, coming out with small parcels. Ronnie got the salt he wanted, but had to go to the grain elevator where they sold bags of salt for animal feed.

The group was pleased with how things went, and were talking about it on the trip home, paying less than full attention to their surroundings.

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Ronnie slowed down and shifted to second gear as he turned onto the ridge road. The gravel was rough and bumpy, so anything over 10 miles an hour was out of the question. He idled along, munching on the last of his lunch. A light wind from behind them made the air almost still on the wagon, then became a cross breeze when the road turned.

The dogs came out of the woods from several places at once, and there were a lot of them. They smelled the hams, lard, and cooked food on the wagon and gave chase. All of them were very thin, starving animals crazed by hunger. Chris spotted two wild eyed dark colored dogs leaping out of the brush and almost onto the wagon. He grabbed for his rifle and slid the safety off as he swung toward the pair, now behind the wagon, but gaining on it. Ronnie seemed to be unaware of danger and continued to drive slow.

Mike pulled out his pistol and shot at the same time as Chris. Two dogs gave up the chase, one falling dead and the other stumbling off into the bushes. The others on the wagon tried to respond and aim at the dogs, but were hampered by other people in the way. From the bed of the truck, Alicia finally got her .22 in action as they rounded a turn and she could see 3 dogs not in line with the wagon. She fired at them without effect for a moment, but one faltered as it was hit and fell. Another slowed and headed for the trees.

Chris heard his rifle click on an empty chamber and scrambled for another magazine, dropping the empty on the wagon. Mike was firing at a big dog near the back of the wagon, faster than the others and ready to jump aboard. He got one shot into it as it jumped, then kicked it off the wagon. It fell hard, but got up and started to chase again, limping on one front leg. Mike dropped his magazine and yanked another from his belt pouch, slamming it home and cycling the Glock in time to shoot past Chris' head at one trying to jump on the side of the wagon.

Reloaded now, Chris searched for a target and saw one limping on his side of the road, the wagon bounced and his first shot missed. The second one did not, and that dog went down. Only two dogs remained in pursuit. Mike got up on one knee and steadied his shots as best he could, hitting one in the head that tumbled end over end then lay still in the road. Chris was firing at the other one and did some damage, as he put round after round into it. It slowed to a walk, then stopped and fell on it's side by the ditch.

Throughout the shooting, Ronnie had seen what was going on and was afraid to stop, lest the dogs get on the wagon or truck. He couldn't drive fast enough to outrun them without risking people falling off the wagon, so he continued as he was, trying to miss the worst bumps. When the shooting died down and there were no more dogs in sight Ronnie was near Mel's driveway. Mel had been in the cab with him and advising him, but was unable to get a clear shot at any of the dogs. The danger past, Ronnie slowed and stopped. Mike and Chris immediately stood and scanned the surroundings for any sight or sound of danger, guns ready. Mel quickly got out of the truck and stood in the back with Alicia,

looking in all directions, but no target appeared.

Shaken, but otherwise okay, the group calmed down some and began to assess the situation. Mel and Mike checked their weapons and started back down the road on foot to look for targets. Chris stayed on the wagon and Alicia stood in the truck bed scanning the area. Ronnie shut the truck off and got out with his shotgun to keep watch.

Todd had heard the shooting, grabbed a rifle and trotted down the road toward the sounds, careful to not expose himself to the firing. He saw one dog stagger into the trees as the truck rounded the next bend out of sight, a quarter mile ahead. Assuming dogs to be the enemy, he continued to look for them, walking to avoid getting too close to the action. He stopped on a hilltop in the road and watched until he heard the shooting stop and then the truck shut off.

Mel yelled at Todd to not shoot as they headed his way. They met and walked back down the road to look over what had happened. They found five dogs dead in the road, and one just beyond the roadside ditch. After much discussion, they all decided that out of the 8 they had seen, only two dogs had gotten away into the trees, and both had been hit. Both Sophia and Emily had been in the truck bed and gotten their hands on their rifles, but had kept their heads down to keep out of Alicia's way, unable to find a target themselves.

A very shaken group made their way to their homes with the days' proceeds.

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## CHAPTER 59

July, 2015

When Matthew had been mushroom hunting the past Spring, he'd found a hollow tree that had blown over in a storm. The good part was, it had been full of wild honeybees. They had moved most of their honey when he found it, but most of the old honeycomb was still there, so instead of mushrooms, he filled his sack with the sticky beeswax.

It was the work of a couple days to get it cleaned up. It had been very dark, almost black in the beginning. First he soaked in in warm water and stirred a lot to loosen the remaining honey, then rinsed it several times in cold water to keep from melting it and washing away the prized wax. He followed that with putting the still dirty wax in a kettle of hot water on the wood cook stove. It melted slowly, then he stirred more as it got hotter and thinned out. He carried the kettle outside and poured cold water in it to dilute and rinse out the impurities. The cold water went to the bottom, took the dirt with it, and cooled the wax. It sat outside overnight to cool.

The next day he had a cake of fairly clean wax set up hard in the kettle, with dirty water under it. He cracked the cake of wax out and scraped more dirt from the bottom of the cake. Then he repeated the whole process and came out with very nice yellow beeswax the third day. There was almost a gallon of it. This he melted and poured it into an old muffin pan and let it set up hard. When it got cold, he tapped it on the bottom and came out with cakes of wax. He planned to sell it to women for waxing sewing thread, or to mix with tallow for making candles that wouldn't soften and sag in hot weather.

When Mike Wilson heard about it, he offered to buy a couple pounds of it for bullet lubricant. He was casting lead bullets from salvaged materials. The molds Todd had bought had lubricant grooves in the cast bullets. Tallow alone would melt in hot weather and wasn't a real good lube, but beeswax was excellent. Mike mixed a one cup of beeswax with 2 cups of beef tallow, and added some old short candle stubs made of paraffin to harden it more. This mixture he melted and poured into some shallow baking pans, too rusty to use for cooking. When he had a batch of bullets ready, he set the pans on the cook stove to melt the mixture, then carefully set bullets in it one at a time, nose up. When it cooled off, he used old shell casings, expanded slightly oversize, as a cookie cutter to remove the bullets with the wax intact.

It was a slow process, but new ammunition was not available. Mike was hoping that ammunition would soon be produced again, and components for reloading. Todd's stock of primers and powder especially would not last forever. Mike had only a few hundred factory made rifle bullets left in .223 and .30 calibers. Cast lead bullets did fine in most pistols and revolvers, but rifle velocities were too high for their standard loads because the lead would melt slightly and foul the barrels. The ammunition problem would get critical in a year or two. Good reloadable brass was hard to come by. Nobody could save all their empties when they were hunting. Mike made good money reloading for the present, but he could see it coming to an end. He had set aside personal stashes for himself and his Dad, but that would be gone someday, too.

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Ed Wilson wanted another way to make an income that an old man could do. Raising beef was all right, as long as they could get some fuel and keep the hay machinery running, but they were getting short of

baler twine, and mice had gotten into some of their spare twine. He was thinking that if twine and machinery parts were not available soon, they would be making loose hay in stacks. The garden seeds brought a good return, but they were getting short on money, so Joann had been working extra hard remaking old clothing to trade to some neighbors. It was hard to keep enough coming in for what they needed.

The problem of shoes had come up several times, so when Ed got his hides back from the tanner, he set his mind to making himself a pair of shoes. First, he made himself a good belt using an old one for a pattern and salvaging the buckle. He had seen leather punches and awls and knew how they worked. Mike had acquired an old small metal lathe that he had arranged to power with a 10 speed bicycle. If someone wanted lathe work done, they got to do some pedaling while he made the parts. Ed and Joann took turns pedaling while Mike made some leather punches for Ed using old engine valve stems he had softened in the forge and re-hardened when he was done. Like most jobs now, it was slow business, but he got his punches.

After much deliberation, Ed decided to try using some masonry string for sewing leather. He had a lot of it, being one of the things he'd stocked up on. The string was far too thick for sewing, but it was made of 3 strands that he unraveled and got an acceptable answer when he waxed one strand with some of Mike's bullet lubricant. He had some heavy needles he had bought for farm use, in case he had to sew up an injured animal, or repair heavy canvas. Mike modified an old pair of pliers to push and pull the heavy needles by filing a narrow groove in the jaws.

Ed used an awl he'd ground from an old screwdriver to punch holes for thread in the hard cowhide, then hand sewed the buckle on his new belt. To soften the hard oak tanned leather, he coated it with beef tallow and laid it in the sun until it soaked in. That was too slow, so he heated a piece of flat metal in the cook stove and used it like an iron to melt the tallow into the leather. He found it worked better if he mixed in some lard. It took some working to soften the leather, pulling the belt over the edge of a board to bend it sharply back and forth until it was flexible. He was pleased with his result, and thought he could probably make shoes, but he needed some old ones for patterns.

The cowhide would make good soles and heels, but he had no way to split the thick cowhide for use in the thinner, softer upper parts of shoes and boots. Deerskin was too soft and delicate to wear very well, being better suited to making clothing and pouches. He bought a pig hide from the tanner and found it worked just fine. He had some mistakes to make and a lot of learning to do, but Ed found he could do the work sitting down, and it was a lot easier on him than farm work.

It took him a while, but Ed duplicated an old pair of slip on engineer boots he had loved until they were beyond repair. He didn't have to advertise. Anywhere he went wearing his new boots, he got orders for shoes. He was pretty slow making the first several pairs, but as he learned it got easier and faster. His products cost more than even the high priced shoes imported from Mexico they had seen in town recently, but Ed's were high quality and would outlast those.

Two year old Logan Reynolds got a new pair of tiny shoes made of deerskin, with pigskin soles and cowhide heels. Ed made them a little big, so he would grow into them. Joann learned that Alicia was pregnant again, so the shoes would surely get handed down to the next child.

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The 4th of July dawned bright and clear, promising a hot day. Country people were enjoying a respite from hard work until the winter wheat got ripe, their gardens producing food for canning green beans,

new potatoes, early tomatoes, salad greens and any vegetable they had seen fit to plant. Laura was busy boiling potatoes for the community dinner's potato salad, and had picked an assortment of young squash, green peppers, Roma tomatoes, and eggplant for grilling over the campfire at Gerald's place.

"Mike! Can you get me a bucket of water? I need to watch my cooking."

"Sure. Be right back."

He went out with the kitchen bucket and worked the hand pump on their cistern. He was careful not to spill any on the freshly mopped floor, and sat it on the kitchen counter top by the sink. He went out the back door to where his wife was cooking on the porch. They had moved the wood cook stove outside as soon as the weather got warm enough. It kept the house a lot cooler for sleeping at night.

"Can I help you here?"

"Yeah, you can skin those potatoes while I cut up some boiled eggs to put in the potato salad."

As they worked together, Laura asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah, I got the dishes packed in a wood box with some towels, and I got the barbecue utensils and salt and pepper. I put in the fire tripod I made, and the dutch oven with the baked beans in it. That's all in the truck. Dad and Joann are coming over soon with their stuff and we'll go together to Gerald and Anne's place."

"Okay. Better get some drinking glasses, and pack them good to make sure they don't break."

"There's room in the box for that." Mike went out with the glasses, holding them with both hands and backing out the door."

"I can get the door," Ed said, and opened it for him. "You all ready to go?"

"Soon as Laura gets the potato salad put together."

Joann asked, "Where can I put these pickles that they won't fall over and break?"

"I'll get another box. We need it anyway." Mike disappeared into his workshop.

As Laura came out with a covered dish, Joann got the door for her and opened the tailgate of the truck. Mike showed up with a box and some clean rags and packed it all away. Ed added his pan of barbecued beef, and they all got in the truck, the men in back and the women in the cab. Laura let the truck roll down the hill from the house and popped the clutch expertly, starting the engine without using the electric starter. The battery was about shot, so they habitually parked it on high ground. She pushed off the manual choke button Mike had used to replace the faulty automatic choke and the engine began to purr. Ordinarily they would walk the half mile to Gerald's place, but this was a holiday and there was a lot to carry, so they splurged a little by driving.

Mel Sawyer and Vickie Hoskins walked across the small field from their place carrying loaves of bread and a covered kettle. Mel had his ever present rifle on a sling over his shoulder, like everyone else with some kind of firearm, including all the kids over 10 years old.

Todd and his family came in their truck with Charlie and Denise Allen in the back with the kids, except Logan on his mother's lap. They unloaded their food and carried it to the tables set up in Gerald's yard overlooking his ponds. Gerald had a big kettle on the fire frying catfish, and was too busy tending it to do more than say hello to everyone as they came in.

Tara and Ronnie came in with Matthew, Tara looking very pregnant, and carrying a big basket covered with a towel. Matthew had a couple jars of something he sat on a table with the rest of the food. Gerald's wife Anne said, "The big cooler over there has drinks in it. There's some sweet iced tea, several bottles of Gerald's wine chilling, some milk for the kids and some cold water in there. We can all thank Todd for bringing over the ice early this morning."

Everyone had found a patch of shade trying to stay out of the hot sun. A couple cheers went up for Todd as people headed for the cooler. The kids didn't seem to mind the heat and went down to the ponds to see if Gerald's catfish would come up to see them. Gerald fed them every evening, so when people showed up a few of the big fish would come over to investigate. They saw a few big ones laying on the bottom of the clear water, but even tossing a few pebbles in the water didn't bring any fish up from the cool depths.

"Come an' get it!"

The kids heard Gerald yell and ran for the big metal building where everyone had gathered to eat. Gerald had moved most of his winemaking things back out of the way to make room, and had set up temporary tables with concrete blocks overlaid with planks. Everything imaginable was pressed into service for seating, old lawn chairs, a couple dining table chairs, some buckets, and a box or two. The bigger kids all lined up by the farm wagon to eat standing with their plates and glasses on the wagon bed. Matthew found a seat on the wagon bed and held his plate, while Emily sat close beside him. The conversation got quieter as they ate. When plates were emptied, a few began to look over the deserts and found Sophia's peach pies, Laura's molasses cake, and various other baked goodies.

Later, as the food began to digest, some went to the cooler for a glass of wine as they sat and talked.

"What's the news, Todd? Heard anything on the shortwave?"

"Not much. Indiana says we don't have to have vehicle insurance now, but drivers are 'financially responsible for accident damages' ".

"Hell, that ain't news! All the insurance companies went broke a long time ago."

"Right. They just made it official. They did say they are trying to get some businesses going, a small factory to make matches, and they are financing a few sawmills to get going again. They are letting them cut pine in the State Forests, but they can't get around the Federal fuel rationing, even for industrial use."

" 'Bout time somebody made matches," Charlie said.

"The fuel rationing is keeping everything down," Ronnie said.

"That's the bad news. A couple other Mideast countries are having oil wells lose production, so the prices are supposed to go up. Rationing will probably tighten up, too," Todd added.

Gerald said, "We got to find some ways to do things that don't need oil. Ever' time somebody wants to start a business, they bump their heads on the fuel thing. Electricity is the only thing that is still going to amount to anything. But you can't haul logs with electricity. You can run a sawmill on an electric motor, but that don't do any good for movin' logs or lumber."

Ed said, "It looks to me like we better get used to high priced fuel. I don't see that getting any better. I talked to Wes Blake in town a while back and he said he is training 4 head of steers for oxen. I said they are slow as the devil, so how can he get much farming done with 'em? He said, yes, they are slow, but we grow the feed for them, and they are more reliable than a tractor that you can't get parts for. He said he doesn't have to farm as much ground because he doesn't need the money to spend on fuel and equipment. Made sense to me."

Charlie asked, "So, are we going back to horse and buggy days?"

"Might have to," Ronnie said, "There wasn't any need for oil before we had it. I suppose we might have to learn the old ways again."

"Well, I sure as hell don't want to cut wood with a crosscut saw. I'll pay \$15 a gallon for gas for the chain saw," Charlie said.

Ed said, "I agree with you Charlie. I think it depends on what the job is and what other ways there are to do it. It still makes sense to use gasoline and diesel fuel for some things, but if it gets much higher, we better find ways to get by without it."

Mike hadn't said anything, but he was wanting to talk to Wes Blake about what farm machinery he planned to use with oxen, and how he was going about doing that. There was probably a need for modifying some machinery for use with oxen, or horses, if people did that. Mike began to think about what he'd seen the Amish do with machinery.

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The women were talking among themselves, too. Alicia told Tara, "If we can't get material for sewing, we're going to be wearing animal skins like the cave men."

Tara said, "I saw some new imported clothing at the used clothing store in town, but I couldn't afford any of it. And it's not that great, either. Just like the old cheap stuff with seams that rip out and thin material."

"I can't find any needles and thread to speak of. They just have some of those cheap repair kits at the pharmacy now. They had some regular big spools of thread, but they ran out quick. I got a couple spools of upholstery thread at the Saturday market, but it was old stuff, and they wanted a price for it, too," Joann said.

Vickie said, "I hope somebody starts making those things here again. We can't afford to buy the imported goods at all. I'm just watching for old clothes I can buy to make over to fit Mel and myself. It's underwear that is a problem."

"Isn't THAT the truth? All my under things are worn out and they are just not to be had anywhere," Joann said.

Alicia said, "Todd tells me that there isn't enough money to start up factories again, and if they did, fuel is too scarce to ship things around the country. He thinks this is going to last for a long time."

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Matthew had seen some nice looking clothing for sale the last time he went to market. The prices were a little on the high side and it wasn't new, but a lot of it looked pretty good. He told Ronnie he'd like to know where it had come from. They asked some questions quietly and learned that the man came from up north and drove a gray van that was dirty, but looked to be in excellent shape. Nobody seemed to know any more about him, but the van was always packed full of stuff. The man would rarely take anything except cash or silver for his goods. It remained a mystery for now. Black marketeers were common and nobody dared ask too many dumb questions about them. Matthew had bought a couple shirts and a pair of jeans from him. The jeans looked to be brand new.

Joann heard on the radio one day that the old Walmart warehouse complex in Seymour had been cleaned out by some very well organized thieves. The warehouses were mostly empty and unused now, except for an occasional rare rail shipment of goods out to other stores in the state. A night watchman had been killed and a large amount of clothing and other things stolen. The State Police, now operating at about 1/4 of their original staff level, were investigating.

She told Ed, "They'll sell that stuff on the black market and if they are reasonable about prices, nobody will turn them in. Clothes are too hard to find."

Ed said, "That's a fact. I'm thinking we saw some of that at the market last week. Ronnie bought some things that looked like brand new. I better warn him to not wear those clothes where a cop could see them. It would be real hard to prove, anyway, unless somebody was dumb enough to tell where they got the stuff."

Gloria, Kate, and Ashley were overjoyed to find new underwear at the market. They had heard the same news broadcast on TV. Larry and Wes were glad to have new socks, under wear, and Tee shirts, too. They had both gotten a couple pairs of new jeans and some shirts. All of them were some of the old Walmart brands, so they were pretty sure where they came from, but they all swore they wouldn't tell anybody about where it came from.

The gray van had left town empty. It didn't show up again until the weather started getting cool in the Fall.

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## CHAPTER 60

September, 2015

Wheat harvest had gone well for Dan Billings and Todd Reynolds. The yield had been pretty good at a 40 bushels per acre in the fields where they grew soybeans last year. Lesser acreage planted this year had caused grain prices to go up. The State was paying \$8.20 a bushel this year, having struck deals with other states in the south, with trade agreements to supply sugar, molasses, and cotton cloth from restored textile plants there, to be delivered by rail later in the year.

Dan and Todd had only planted a total of 40 acres, but the income from that was \$12,800 they split between them. Almost \$2,000 of that they had spent on parts made by a machine shop in Seymour, to keep Dan's combine running. Even so, they had almost \$4,500 each left, and they both had enough wheat left for seed and home use for the year. They still had soybeans and corn to harvest, and expected to net around \$20,000 apiece for the year.

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Truck drivers that delivered fuel and groceries had told that there were more stores open in the Clarksville area now and they were stocked pretty well on Mondays and Tuesdays, after the weekly rail shipments came in. They also said the city police were back on the job, at least a third of them, so there was less crime now. The stores all had their own armed security people, too, and open carry of firearms was allowed. He didn't know if the gun laws had been changed or not, but everybody carried guns anyway and nobody was objecting.

Wes and Larry decided to take a trip to the Rural King farm store there and look for some much needed supplies. The women objected, but were resigned to the risks and made their lists of what was needed, and nice-to-have items separately. Early on Tuesday morning the two of them set out in Wes' pickup with the lockable camper top.

Wes drove slowly, both for better gas mileage and to better see the surroundings. The trip down highway 60 was quiet, with almost no traffic. Half of the creek bottom fields along the highway had not been farmed this year and were grown up in weeds. Only about one in 3 houses showed signs of being lived in, and that was hard to tell, with overgrown lawns. A few hardy souls were cooking over fires in the yards and warily watched the truck when they passed by. The closer they got to I-65, the more burned out houses they saw. In Hamburg, there were several obviously deserted business buildings, but one old grocery parking lot was busy with what looked like a market day gathering. The traffic light at the intersection worked, but there was only one car crossing their route.

The interstate highway looked narrower somehow, until Wes realized that the grass along it had not been mowed, causing the illusion. Both men had handguns under their loose flannel shirts, and there were 2 shotguns behind the seat, but everything looked quiet when they turned into the store parking lot. It had a lot of potholes, but there were a few vehicles there and shoppers going in and out looking more or less normal. There was a security guard at the door with a short shotgun and a holstered pistol, standing with his back to the brick store front. The men watched as several customers walked in and out carrying guns in holsters. Customers seemed to all be in pairs, one pushing a shopping cart to their vehicle and the other behind them looking watchful.

Larry said, "Looks kinda like the wild west, but I don't see any trouble."

Wes said, "You know what they say, an armed society is a polite society."

Larry chuckled and said, "You got that right! I say we go on in and just be slow and careful. I don't want to get anyone agitated here."

"Right. Let's go."

They found a cart inside and were surprised that the store was fairly well stocked, although there were only half as many shelves as there used to be. The clothing area was very small now, and prices were high. Most of the clothing looked a little dusty, like it had been there a long time. After seeing the price on a heavy work coat at \$349 Wes decided that his old one would do just fine for another winter. Likewise on his rubber boots. What they had here said Made in China, and were close to \$100 a pair. They weren't very thick material, either. Wes thought he could use some old parts of inner tubes to come up with a useful substitute, if he could figure out how to sew it together.

Oddly, there was still a big selection of paint, but it also looked like it had been there for a very long time. Some of the cans even showed a few specks of rust on top. Wes decided that a couple gallons of oil based aluminum enamel would be a good idea, even at \$59 a gallon.

They found some sewing needles and thread, packages of lighter flints, and tubes of pressure grease, but all those were limited quantity per customer. There were still some odds and ends of bolts and pipe fittings, but nothing that looked like very useful sizes, and a small quantity of motor oil (15W40 only), limit 5, at \$29.95 per gallon in generic looking metal cans, with a \$4 deposit on the can. There were no filters, except some odd air filters. Wes bought 5 gallons of motor oil and the limit of 6 tubes grease at \$5.99 each. Larry popped the cap off one tube to look and it was the old yellow colored cheap kind, not even the black lithium base grease.

The veterinary area had only some fly spray in cans and odd things like ear tags and calf pulling chains, but zero antibiotics or disinfectants. The housewares section did have canning jars and lids, but at \$4.99 for a dozen lids, the men got the minimum they felt they had to have. There was a lot of old stock of kitchen gadgets and decorative items that clearly weren't selling. What matches were available were limited to one box per customer, and they were \$4.49 a box for 100 books of paper matches. No wood matches were in sight.

Larry said, "These prices make our farm income look pretty small, huh?"

"Sure do. We'll not be buying anything we can do without."

"Makes me start to wonder if the trip was worth it," Larry said.

Wes looked grim as he said, "The women aren't going to be happy, are they?"

"Nope."

They added a few more things on their lists, but had only checked off a third of what the "Need" list said, and nothing else. Even so, their bill was \$428 and change. Wes had been keeping track and thought that was too high until he saw the sales tax was now 15%. Apparently the State had about



given up on collecting much income tax and were going to get their money this way. His expression looked like most of the long faced people at the checkout.

To their surprise the Bass Pro store was open. It had the big glass front windows covered with well aged plywood. The doors were covered with a sheet of steel, and had a place for a bar on the inside. The selection there was almost all old stock, with very few guns in evidence and no ammunition. There were a few compound bows, but only the cheapest variety of arrows and points, and not many of those. The decorative fish pond displays had been emptied and the fishing gear was badly depleted. There were only three clerks to assist customers for the entire store, compared to a couple dozen in years past. The hunting clothes were picked over leaving only odd sizes of things, and like Rural King, prices were outrageous and the goods were dusty.

The store lighting wasn't the best, with a lot of burned out lights. Larry looked at Wes and said, "I don't see anything I can't live without, do you?"

"Nope. Let's go."

The Walmart store was open where they found the same poor selection of food and clothing with super high prices, so they didn't buy anything. Harbor Freight was closed and looked to have been so for a long time with grass and weeds growing through numerous cracks in the parking lot. The only restaurant they saw open on the business strip was where Long John Silver's used to be, but their sign had been replaced with a hand painted one that said "Home Cooking". They drove on past the few cars there and headed for home.

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Cotton harvest was nearly finished in the Deep South, despite a lack of equipment. Unable to either find parts or pay for them to keep their equipment running, crop incomes were lost so over the past 3 years many had lost farms to foreclosures and now worked directly for the banker owners. Small southern farmers were now tenants on the farms they had once owned. Those who had been able to hang on were reduced to picking cotton by hand as it had been generations ago.

A few cotton gins were in operation again, with most of the product being shipped directly to Asia. Some ancient textile mills, shut down years ago when production moved overseas, were running again, with all the old hazards of lung damaging dust and firetrap buildings. But it meant jobs where there had been none. Some very old and long retired mill mechanics had been recruited to oversee repairs and restoration of the long idle factories. Bolts of plain, undyed cotton muslin and denim began to flow out first in a trickle, then a stream to eager customers. Cotton thread was being spun again and these products in small quantities made it to northern states by late September.

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Joann saw the truck, a box van, unloading cloth at the Dollar General store and hurried inside. She waited for half an hour until the bolts of cloth and boxes of thread were put on display. When she saw the price at \$3.50 per yard for 54" cotton muslin and \$6.00 for denim, she asked how much was on a bolt? Fifty yards, they said. She went back out to Todd's truck and told Alicia, who chased down Todd in the grocery next door. Together, they all went back to Dollar General and bought a bolt each of muslin and denim, and 2 big cone-shaped spools of white thread, one regular weight and the other heavy weight. The women went home overjoyed and set about splitting up what they each needed and settling up on the cost. Ashley and Kate were the next ones to make a similar purchase. Before closing time, there wasn't much of the shipment left.

The seams were ripped out of the worst worn clothing so the pieces could be used for patterns, and women began sewing immediately, the menfolk being diverted to help keep the garden harvests coming into kitchens for canning. Everyone watched for walnuts to get ripe to use for dyeing the resulting garments, along with pokeberry juice, and any other dyestuffs they could think of. Old books were searched for dye recipes and mordants.

There was no elastic, buttons, zippers, or hooks available, so boxer shorts were fitted with drawstrings, and buttons made of wood, horn, and antler replaced zippers, requiring some alterations in patterns. Socks were still an expensive and sought after item, with no ready replacement for them. The imported cotton socks from China had shown up again at the Dollar Store but at \$4.00 a single pair, few people bought them, choosing to do without in summer, but winter was coming soon. There were rumors on market day of some woman who had sheep that was spinning yarn, but nobody had seen any yet.

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Larry Barnes had spent half a day carefully stirring the aluminum paint that must have sat on the shelf for years, until he got the settled pigment mixed up. Wes found a gallon of linseed oil that Joe had bought years before and mixed some in the paint to make it go further. They painted all the metalwork around the farm, fuel tanks, gates, sheet metal on the combine, and the hand well pump. The farm began to look a little better. The motive was not appearance, but to preserve the metal. Kate had insisted that they put up a gate across the driveway so they could let the cattle graze around the house and barn lot. Using gasoline to mow the lawn was unthinkable. She and Gloria shoveled manure from the yard and put it on the garden. Larry and Wes found Joe's old mowing scythe and cut the highest weeds. It began to look like a lawn again just before corn was ready to pick.

Larry was a pretty good woodworker and had hewed and whittled out a series of ox yokes as the steers they were training grew bigger. Both teams of oxen were working fairly well now, and did some duty dragging logs up near the wood shed to be cut into firewood. At 2 1/2 years old they weren't driving well enough yet to trust them with a wagon, but they did fine pulling a wooden sled around the farm to move loads. They would get some practice plowing this Fall if the weather held. Wes had converted an old 2 bottom drag plow to pull with both teams hitched one in front of the other.

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## CHAPTER 61

October, 2015

An early frost had killed a lot of weeds along the roads and fencerows. The leaves on Poplar and a few Maple trees had begun turning bright yellow and red. Todd was driving his tractor pulling Dan's old 2 row ear corn picker, the combine being out of commission for the moment until they could figure out how to repair it. This was slow business, picking only 2 rows of corn at a time instead of 8 rows with the big combine. It also meant they had to find storage space for the ears of corn, since this machine did not shell the grains off like the combine did. Ed had found rolls of welded wire mesh that would answer for temporary corn cribs, but there was still the problem of how to shell the corn if they were going to sell it. Cows could chew it off the cobs, although they were a little wasteful doing it. Hogs would, too, but they wasted even more of it. Nobody around close had an old corn sheller, either.

Dan and Mike Wilson were working on the combine and expected to get it going again, but it had rained some and the corn stalks were starting to fall over. They had to get it picked pretty soon, or lose a lot of it from being fallen over where the picker could not get it. Bob Clemmons was driving Dan's tractor and shuttling wagons of corn to the crib to unload them with a hand scoop onto their quickly erected wire cribs. Bob had found enough work in the area to stay on renting from Ronnie Nichols. He was a willing worker and a likable sort. Ronnie said he had made a lot of improvements in the old Duncan place for him, mostly to reduce his rent and that suited Ronnie just fine.

The sun was going down and the corn was getting tough as the evening dew settled on it, the ears not snapping off well, nor shucking very well. Todd decided that when this wagon was full he'd better quit for the day. Bob was coming over the rise when Ronnie got to the end of the field and shut it down. He planned to leave the tractor and picker in the field and ride back with Bob when he took in this last load. Todd went to the back of the picker to unhitch the wagon for Bob who expertly backed up to it. Todd dropped in the hitch pin and climbed on the tractor.

Bob asked, "You done for the day?"

"Yeah, it's getting tough. I'll help you scoop this one off. What's that thing in the fencerow?"

Bob said, "It looks like an old mowing machine. One of those old horse drawn jobs. I saw the seat sticking up outta the weeds."

Todd was thinking. "Ronnie said something about getting some horses to work his place, and he wanted to find some of that old equipment. I better ask Dan about that and see who it belongs to."

"They's a mess of that old stuff down in river bottoms. I seen several things settin' in the weeds down there when I come down here from Brownstown. They wasn't anybody on them farms, either. They got flooded out a coupla years in a row and then with the hard times an' all, I guess they just give it up."

"I bet Ronnie would love to get his hands on that stuff. You'd better tell him about it the next time you see him."

"I'll do that. He's been pretty good to me. I'd do anything I can to help him."

They shoveled off the load of corn and walked from Dan's place to their respective homes.

Bob stopped at Ronnie's to tell him about the mower in the fencerow and the old equipment across the river. Ronnie was interested.

"You say nobody lives on those farms now?"

Bob said, "Last year they wasn't nobody there, an' it was all growed up in weeds. I doubt if anybody is there now. That stuff will just lay there and rust away. You just as well have it as anybody. The bank prob'ly took them farms and I know they was gettin' all the newer machinery, but nobody bid on it at auction. I dunno what happened to it. Then the bank went bust and no tellin' who owns them farms now, if anybody does. State'll prob'ly take the ground for taxes, eventually. I say, finders keepers!"

A week later when the corn harvest was finished, Bob and Ronnie packed a lunch and went to look at what might be available on the deserted farms. Off the highway on the county roads there was one old farmhouse after another with weeds grown up around them and no signs of life anywhere. They drove for 5 or 6 miles before they saw a couple cooking something over a fire in the side yard and stopped. The man straightened and picked up his shotgun leaning against the porch of an old house. Ronnie shut the truck off in what had once been a driveway, now overgrown with grass and weeds. He told Bob, "Let's leave the guns in the truck."

"Hello! I'm looking to buy old farm machinery. Like to talk to you a bit."

"Well, c'mon up. We got nothing to offer you but a drink of water, but you're welcome to that," the man said.

"I'm Ronnie Nichols, " he said, offering a handshake.

The man held his shotgun by the barrel, but shook hands with Ronnie and introduced himself as Calvin Brown.

"I got no machinery left. Bank took it all. They couldn't take the house 'cause it and 2 acres was in my mother's name, but they took the farm and everything off of it. Damn 'em all," he said with feeling.

"I hate to hear that, but seems like it happened a lot."

"Sure did. Ain't nobody in 5 mile of here but what got kicked out with nothin'."

Bob said, "That's what happened to my sister and her husband. They did get together with his brother, though, and they are working his Dad's old place."

"Who's that?"

"My brother in law is Alvin Wischmier, his brother is Steve. Their Dad's place is up just west of Brownstown. I ain't seen 'em this year, but they was growin' melons and vegetables last year when I camped there."

"Yeah! I know Steve. Worked harvest for him last Fall. What's your name?"

"Bob Clemmons. I lived in Indy until it all came apart and came down here for a place to land. I work for Ronnie here now, and some others over on the ridge south of the river."

The small talk continued for a few minutes, putting them all at ease before getting down to business.

Ronnie said, "I'm looking for old horse drawn machinery. With gas and diesel so high, I think I might be able to make that work out."

"Real horse drawn stuff? You can have all that you can find. There's probably a piece or two of that kind of thing at every farm in the county, layin' in fencerows and in scrap piles. I got a couple things in that pile over there. I was gonna sell it for scrap, but nobody's buyin' now."

"Let's see what you've got."

Ronnie bought a couple one horse cultivators and a very rusty but serviceable walking plow for \$25. The wood handles were long rotted away, but the metal parts were workable.

"That's more than they used to give for scrap metal. I'd sell you a lot at those rates if I had it."

"Do you know where there is more, so we don't have to hunt? I'll pay you for your help."

"Let me get a bite of lunch here and I'll show you where we can load your truck."

Ronnie and Bob got their sack lunches from the truck and sat down to eat with them talking over what Ronnie wanted. Within a couple hours, Ronnie's truck was loaded and he paid Calvin Brown \$40 for his help and information. They agreed he would come back the next day and get other things he had seen, but didn't have room to load.

The next day they took the flat bed wagon behind the truck. They spent the day digging around old farm buildings and fencerows, and Calvin Brown made another \$50. Ronnie and Bob were tired and had the truck and wagon loaded heavy on the way home. He drove it straight to Mike Wilson's home shop unloaded the truck and left the wagon there.

"Fixing this stuff up is going to take quite a while," Mike told him.

"Yeah, I know. I'll have Matthew come down and help you take it apart so you can fix what needs it. I'm going looking for some paint while you do work on it. You keep track of what work you have in it and I'll trade or pay you in silver, okay?"

"Yes sir! That's my kind of work."

Ronnie's next stop was at the tanner's down in the valley to buy leather, and that man directed him to an Amish man who made horse harness. He left an order for a set of team harness and asked who might have work horses to sell? The harness maker sent him to a member of his community that had horses and needed to sell some. Property taxes would be due next Spring and he would rather not feed the extra horses through the winter. The team of ten year old Belgians, a mare and a gelding, were big and in good health, but they were not cheap. After some haggling, and seeing some real silver coins, the man sold them for the silver equivalent of \$1,200. At the going rate of 15 to one, that came out to 320 silver quarters, or \$80 face value of silver. The man gave him the horses' work collars and halters as

part of the deal.

Ronnie hired Todd and his truck to pull Dan Billing's stock trailer and haul his new team home a week later wearing their brand new set of black harness. Since he had supplied the leather, the maker had charged him \$65 in silver. Ronnie thought it was a fine deal and gave the man a \$5 tip for good, fast work and his help finding the horses. The Amish man thanked him sincerely and invited him to come back if he wanted to do more trading. Ronnie suggested that he tell all the horse breeders that there would be a demand for their stock coming soon from small farmers like himself.

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Besides repairing all the horse equipment, Mike Wilson made 2 sets of singletrees and doubletrees out of old water pipe and rebar rod. One set was extra heavy because Ronnie said he planned to do some logging with it. When he came to pick up those and other things he had finished, Mike asked Ronnie if he planned to sell his tractor?

"No, I'll keep it. I still want it to run my feed grinder and the corn sheller I just bought. It gives me an option if I need it, but I plan to mostly be using the horses. I heard there's a man down in the valley who has a sawmill running on wood gas, so I plan to do some logging and get him to saw some lumber. I expect there will be a market for that."

Bob was helping load things on the truck. He didn't say anything, but he figured he would be helping with logging this winter, a welcome addition to his off season income.

Mike asked him, "Do you think you can farm enough with the horses to make a living?"

Ronnie said, "It's not as much about how much I make as how much I can KEEP. I can grow feed for the horses, instead of buying fuel. I expect my old tractor would be needing an engine rebuild if I keep farming with it, and parts are hard to find. The horses will help some with fertilizing, and they can work in the woods where the tractor won't go. I can make loose hay with the horses and not worry about getting it baled when the baler breaks down, or we can't get twine for it. It's not just about money."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, I can see that. You ever worked with horses before?"

"Well, no, but when I was a little kid, Grandad had a team of mules that he used, so I know how it works. I'll have some learning to do, though. The good thing is, these horses have good strong hooves so they don't have to be shod unless I was going to work them on the road. It's not like a riding horse or a mule that needs constant attention to his delicate feet. I'll have to learn to trim their hooves, but I think I can do that. I watched the Amish guy do his while I was there."

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## CHAPTER 62

November, 2015

The steel stamping factory where Ed had worked last year had not called him back. He learned by the grapevine that the State didn't have the funding to last until they could make a profit, so it had apparently closed for good. It was unclear who owned it, the privately held stock company having bankrupted and dissolved after the crash.

Ed didn't miss going to work early every day. He had enough to do with the small farm and tending his cattle. His shoemaking enterprise had picked up speed when he found an old leather stitching machine by way of the normal gossip at the farmer's market. Mike had helped him rig up a small gasoline engine to run it, so when he got enough shoe parts cut out and ready, he would fire it up and sew leather for a couple hours. It cut his time and thus what he had to charge for shoes and boots enough that he could compete easily with the Mexican imports. Christopher Reynolds was helping him one day a week with some of the work, so they were able to fill orders in a reasonable time.

With Joann's sewing, and her helping with the seed business, they were doing pretty well financially. The trailer was now snugly enclosed in the insulated shelter building, and they had gravity flow water from the cistern tank installed uphill from it. The shelter building was becoming a house, as Ed added improvements here and there, all heated by the wood stove Mike had built. There was even a bathroom in it now with a real flush toilet and the trailer was more roomy after Ed had taken out its tiny bathroom and increased the size of the kitchen and dining areas.

Joann was sitting beside the stove mending some work clothes when Ed joined her with two cups of coffee, one of their few expensive indulgences. He sat one cup on the table beside her and said, "I really think a lot of you. I hope you know that."

She smiled and said, "I've known that for a long time now."

"I don't say it often enough, though. You deserve to hear it more often. I really do love you."

Joann laid aside her mending and stood to kiss him and give him a hug. "I love you, too. You're a good man Ed Wilson."

Ed's old white cat moved closer to the stove to keep his tail from being stepped on, and went back to sleep.

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Mike was busy in the reloading shed, filling an order for 100 rounds of .308 for Mel Sawyer. The case tumbler was busily working away, rattling as it cleaned and polished other empty cartridge brass. It was the only powered item in the shed, and driven by what used to be a decorative windmill from somebody's yard. Todd had found he could order imported bulk primers and powder, plus some kinds of ammunition through a gun shop in Clarksville, but the prices were high. That kept the reloading a money making proposition. Todd ordered enough at a time to get the best prices he could and had developed a good business reselling ammunition at the weekly market days.

Mike had enough shop work to keep him busy now and had added some things to reduce their spending. There was a calf to pasture on the back half of the clearing around his Dad's trailer where it could get to the pond for water. It kept most of the weeds down and would fill a lot of canning jars with beef soon.

Laura had planted grapes, strawberries, raspberries, horseradish, and rhubarb from starts she'd taken in trade for sewing. Mike had bought her a new Janome 712T treadle sewing machine only weeks before everything had crashed. True to his habit, he'd bought enough needles, bobbins, and parts to keep it running for a lifetime. He had mounted it in an old Singer treadle machine cabinet, and refinished it like new. She and Joann used it to keep their men in clothes and make some extra money.

There was a market for Mike's improved hand cranked clothes wringers, so he had improved his wood lathe to run off a 3 HP Honda engine that powered a light line shaft into his shop. That ran his grinder, a table saw, old metal lathe, and some other equipment as needed, and it would run most of the day on a quart of gas. The wood lathe made it easy for him to turn out rolling pins, a popular market item.

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Mel Sawyer had been trapping for hides and meat, growing a huge garden and working a little here and there for income like Charlie Allen and Bob Clemmons, lately for Ronnie Nichols doing some logging.

"This kind of work gets harder all the time," Charlie told Mel as they were piling brush to burn.

"Yes it does," Mel said. "I need to find an easier way to make a buck."

"Yeah, me too. But what can an old guy do now? There just ain't that many ways to make an income. If we wasn't doing for ourselves with food and all, we couldn't make it now."

Mel looked serious as he said, "I've been thinkin' on it and there's no jobs for truck drivers now. I'm too old to be soldiering now. I figured that I'm not a farmer or a blacksmith or anything like that. Mostly what I'm good at is some gardening and cooking, and I got plenty of food. I was thinkin' to open a restaurant, but there's not much need of that. Then I got to thinkin' that people sure gobbled up those pies that Todd's girl took to market. Maybe I could set up with a kettle of Jambalya, or Burgoo, or Chili, and do some good there. What do you think?"

"Well, it's gettin' on toward lunch time and I'm hungry so allow for that, but it sure sounds good. You want some help at this?"

"Prob'ly need some help. I'd have to see what I can make at it before I say what I could pay you."

Charlie said, "How about we work out something on shares? You know, pay me a percentage of what you make? That way you don't get hurt and I get paid for the amount of work I do, huh?"

Mel stopped and wiped sweat away, then said, "I think it's worth a try. It's gotta beat doin' this."

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The mayor was at a loss for how to finance city government operations. Property ownership was at an all time low, so property taxes yielded very little. The water Department was unable to treat water to a drinkable standard and the State said they could only charge the industrial rate for non-potable water. The City Police Department had only the Chief as an employee for lack of funds, and trash collection



was a thing of the past with fuel so expensive and truck maintenance impossible without repair parts. There was no city council now, everyone having abdicated those positions when pay wasn't forthcoming to try to survive. Street maintenance consisted of individuals going to the quarry and buying small amounts of crushed stone to patch the worst potholes. The quarry was on it's last legs again as State revenue for road repair had fallen.

But the mayor's wife had an idea. Tax the farmer's market. "After all, that is where the money is now. You're charging for booth space, but not nearly enough. There is no way to tell how much anybody sells, because it is all trading and cash, so all you can do is up the charges for booth space."

"But the Fairgrounds belongs to the County, not the City," he protested. "I'm on thin ice there now."

"The County government doesn't exist, so do what you have to. I don't intend to starve when all those people are making money out there."

The mayor put up a large poster at the fairgrounds to the effect that booth space would be collected by a City official (him) and the rate was changed from one dollar to 5 dollars effective the next Saturday. Mass confusion resulted. Most of the poorer regulars couldn't afford the increase and immediately went home, wondering what to do. As customers milled around, a few of the bigger sellers paid the charge and set up their wares, but it was a much smaller affair. Many customers left after seeing the small selection of sellers.

Brent Collins, once a building contractor who now sold used building materials, spoke to each vendor in turn. He invited them out to his property, a mile north of town just off the highway. It was outside the City limits, so the mayor and his high charges could go hang. Brent would offer the use of outside space for a dollar each, and inside his huge pole barn for 2 dollars each. Everyone agreed to move there next Saturday. Brent asked all the sellers to spread the word to everyone. He planned to have someone posted near the fairgrounds to direct customers to his place.

The mayor went home despondent and told his wife he had collected even less than usual, because so many small vendors had left. His wife assured him they would be back the next Saturday, not to worry, and it would weed out the riff-raff, she said.

The following Saturday, Mel and Charlie set up their lunch booth at Brent's place, paying only a dollar for an outdoor space and did very well. A few vendors came in late, and a few were missing, but most had showed up. The trading was busier than usual, having mostly missed the past week, but now resumed smoothly. The mayor heard what happened, and was fuming at his wife that it was all her fault. Another source of City revenue was gone. Two weeks later, his wife had to go to the market to buy some necessities, because her husband refused to do the shopping there. He began to worry about his chances for reelection.

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## CHAPTER 63

December, 2015

In other parts of the country that still had natural gas and electricity, some industrial activity was restarting, although on a much smaller scale. Old automobile plants in Dayton, Ohio and around Indianapolis had begun making everything from engine gaskets to bathroom faucets. The selection was very limited and distribution was still a problem, but some items began to show up in general stores. Dollar General was one that had weathered the crash and the stalled recovery better than most and now expanded what they carried to include a little of everything, in many cases taking over adjoining empty buildings for more floor space.

One business that had boomed as a result of a lack of part supplies was junkyards. Although driving was down to maybe 5% of what it had once been, new cars were completely unaffordable and gathered dust in storage and car auction lots, old vehicles were being kept running if at all possible. Wes and Larry had begun to do some mechanic work at their farm shop. Most of it was on old farm equipment, but some vehicles, mostly pickup trucks, began to collect there waiting for repairs.

Farmers whose operations had survived had downsized and were trying to make their equipment last. A growing number were using animal power, convinced that things were not going to get a lot better for the machinery and fuel situation. Consequently, every old moldboard plow that once adorned a junk pile or fencerow was dragged out and put back into service, many of them taken apart to make single bottom plows for pulling with horses, mules, or oxen. Because neighbors had seen Wes and Larry's use of oxen, they got the business of doing many conversions of machinery. One of the most popular products was what the Amish called a fore cart. It was a simple 2 wheel affair like a heavy duty chariot with a rear hitch for pulling any drag style implement with a pin hitch. Rear axles from old cars and junk pickup trucks got used for this, with a long tongue and seats added of all descriptions.

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Vickie Hoskins had some income from Todd who rented the tillable 20 acres of her land, but that wasn't enough to make ends meet. After the devaluations and cuts to Social Security it was now only about 1/8th of what it had been. She made small amounts when somebody needed her medical skills, but that didn't amount to much. She and Mel Sawyer had been helping each other where they could, but with her big house to heat it made sense for her to move in with Mel and seek a renter for her house. The first tenant was a middle aged couple who only stayed a couple months until he found work elsewhere. Disappointed and needing the rent money, she advertised on the bulletin board at Brent Collins' on market days, and had Ed Wilson post another notice at the market in Brownstown. She'd had no response when the weather turned cold, so they closed the house up for the winter and she settled in to make herself useful to Mel.

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The demand for reloading had dropped after the first of cold weather, with hunting and butchering being finished for the season, so Mike Wilson turned his attention to cutting additional firewood and working on restoring an old windmill he had gotten in trade. It was an antique water pumper that he hoped to sell. He kept the wind powered tumbler busy polishing empty brass shells while he did other work.

Laura was busy making mincemeat to can, and helping Joann package seeds for sale. They had bought a stack of old magazines for practically nothing and were using the paper to make seed envelopes. Laura had a roll end of newsprint paper she was cutting for labels and gluing them on the envelopes with paste made from sifted and boiled wheat flour. Pens and pencils were a rare commodity, so she had made ink from pokeberry juice and used a quill pen made from a wild turkey feather.

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The pink stain Ronnie saw on the cut ends of some Ash logs was evidence of the Emerald Ash Borer, he'd been told. The Ash trees in his woods were dying, and something was afflicting the Tulip Poplar trees as well, causing them to bleed large amounts of sap from the leaves in late summer, then to drop their leaves early. Nobody seemed to know what was causing it and a lot of Poplar trees had already died in the past couple years. So, Ash and Poplar was what Ronnie was cutting now, trying to get what lumber he could out of the trees before the wood rotted. Most of the Ash went for firewood, in an attempt to keep the borer insects from spreading. The Poplar made good siding lumber for farm buildings and was sawed at the mill in the valley. The sawmill owner had an old diesel log truck he used to take logs to the mill. Ronnie made several trips with his horses and a farm wagon to get the lumber home.

Ronnie was concerned about getting enough nails to use what lumber he had cut, since nobody had them in stock. There was a rumor that nails were being made in northern Indiana, but so far it was just a rumor. He badly wanted to build a good hog house. He knew he could split pegs from Hickory to use instead of nails, but each hole had to be bored for the pegs and it would take ages to do that. He was greatly relieved on the Saturday before Christmas when he found new boxes of nails from China in the recently reopened hardware store. He was less than overjoyed at the prices.

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The Christmas dinner at Gerald's place had the whole ridge community attending for the plentiful food and companionship. Each person had contributed a small gift to put under the tree and one person chosen by drawing a name from a hat, picked a gift and opened it. Another name was drawn and that person got to choose either a gift from under the tree, or the one already opened, whereupon the person without a gift could pick another from under the tree. As gifts were opened, it gave each a chance to get something they liked better, or to aggravate somebody by choosing the one they had. Lots of banter ensued, with adults having mercy on the younger people by letting them have what they wanted.

As the exchange was finishing up, people began to talk of Christmases past and how they were different.

"I like this better than before," Christopher said. He had chosen a package that had a simple, but elegant hand forged skinning knife with an antler handle. "We used to get stuff people bought for us, but it wasn't near as nice as what people are making now."

"It's more fun to make something than to go running around stores to buy things and spend too much on it." Tara said. "And it didn't mean as much. I know that somebody chose the best fruit to make these pies and took special care to bake them to perfection. Thank you, to whoever made them!"

Vickie Hoskins smiled at that, and said, "You're welcome. And thanks to someone who made these lovely gloves. It sure helps as cold as it is getting!"

Ed said, "I think we all used to be caught up in the spending routine for holidays. The stores and the TV kept pushing that, and most of us fell for it."

Alicia said, "If I had known what to expect, I would have bought more useful things back then. I can't believe what I used to think was so important."

"Isn't that the truth," Joann said. "It sure would have been nice to have a crystal ball and see what was coming, like Todd did."

"I didn't have a crystal ball, I just lucked onto some ideas that were floating around out there on the internet," Todd said.

"But you were paying attention and did something about it. That's what counts," Alicia said.

Gerald asked, "What do you see coming up now? I keep hoping things will get better, but I'm not seeing it happen."

"Well, it all depends on what kinds of energy we can find to use at an affordable price," Todd said. "There are a limited number of sources for energy, so I don't see things going back to what they were before the crash. Energy cost is the ceiling that we are up against now."

Ed said, "There is a lot of energy around, but most of it isn't as handy to use as oil. Like solar energy. There is a lot of it, but it is hard to harness for what we want to do, like plowing and hauling loads."

"Solar is at the root of it all," Todd said. "The sun powers the water cycle to evaporate water and create rain, then grow plants. We use firewood for heat that is an accumulation of solar energy. Any way that we can concentrate solar energy to suit our needs will help a lot."

Mike was thinking about how he could do that. He remembered seeing solar reflectors on the internet that concentrated heat on a water tank.

Gerald said, "Ronnie is ahead of us here, with his horses. They don't eat any of that high priced diesel fuel, and they can get all over these hill and hollows to get the logs out."

Ronnie said, "Yeah, but they eat every day, whether I use 'em or not. That means I need to use 'em every day if I can."

Gerald said, "Yeah, but at least you can grow the feed. It's the solar energy thing, like Todd said. The sun makes the grass and the grain grow, then the horses eat it and concentrate it so you can plow and log with 'em."

"I have to get enough out of the horses to make them pay for their feed, because if they weren't eating it, I could sell it. Of course, without them I'd have to buy diesel to grow the hay and grain, so I'm coming out ahead. It's just more time and work for me to use 'em, because they're slower than a tractor."

"There's no doubt that horses make sense for what you're doing," Todd said. "I'm thinking about it, but so far I can't justify going to horses for the grain farming we do with Dan. If the price of fuel goes up more, that will change to favor the horses. The problem now is how to harvest grain using horses. The

old equipment for that is all gone, the horse drawn corn and wheat binders, and threshing machines that ran on steam engines."

"I'd have to go about it differently to make horses work out for us. Instead of selling grain, it would mean changing to less grain and more hay ground. That makes some sense, because without chemical fertilizers, we need to do the crop rotations and use manure to put nutrients back on the farm, or the ground will 'wear out' like they used to say. The soil gets poor if you keep taking crops off and not putting anything back in the ground. It's a matter of time before our soil fertility drops to where we can't make any money farming with tractors."

Ed said, "There was an old saying when I was kid, that if you sell hay, it's like selling your land. That was because you were selling off the nutrients of the soil in the hay. You need to keep some livestock to feed, and use their manure to keep your ground up."

Gerald said, "Looks to me like we could use wood gas for our cars and trucks. That outfit with the sawmill down in the valley uses wood gas to run the sawmill. That's an old Chevy truck gas engine they got."

Mike spoke up. "That's a lot easier to do with a stationary engine. To make wood gas work really well, it wants to be a steady engine speed, not changing all the time like a car or truck engine does on the road. And to make the engine last, you need a lot of filtration to get the acid out of the gas and that takes room. Makes it harder to do with a car or truck. And it isn't an instant start up, either. It takes a while to get the fire going just right. Not as easy as it looks. Might work with a tractor pretty good, though, since they run pretty steady speed in the field. I need to look into that more."

Alicia said, "It seems to me that land is the key to the energy thing. The more land you have, the more energy you can grow, whether it is trees, or grain, or whatever."

Todd said, "That's true, but it means you have to be able to farm that land and that means a bigger operation overall, with more horses and more work to make it all happen."

"Wind is free," Laura said. "Mike uses a little windmill to run a tumbler in his shop."

Mike said, "Yes, but that tumbler can run whenever it wants to when the wind blows. It's not something I can depend on day in and day out. The tumbler doesn't care, because it can sit there with stuff in it to polish until the wind is blowing and then it works. I just pay attention to how much the windmill runs to know when a batch is done. If there are more jobs like that, then yes, windmills are a good answer, like that water pumper I'm working on."

Ed said, "It all depends on how we can use these things the best and for what cost. We have to be smart in how we go about it. The better job we do of finding the right energy to run the things we want, the better we'll come out. That little windmill works for Mike's tumbler and the big one he's fixing will work for pumping water. The horses work for logging on these hills and small farming, and wood gas works for the sawmill where they already have slab wood there to burn for it. I don't see any good answers for fueling a car or truck without it being expensive."

Joann said, "Yeah. We won't be running to the store for a loaf of bread anytime soon like we used to."

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## CHAPTER 64

February, 2016

Wes and Larry took a break from splitting firewood and opened the thermos of coffee Kate had made for them, warming their hands around the mugs.

Larry said, "I wonder if they'll ever come get those boxcars on the siding down there? They been sitting there for 3 or 4 years that I know of. The weeds have grown up on the tracks, so they haven't sprayed with herbicide for ages."

Wes said, "They might sit there forever. The railroads had parked a lot of cars like that long before the crash. But I think those got put there just before you and Gloria came out here. You can't see the tracks when the trees are leafed out, so I'm not sure."

"Those are all closed up. I thought they used to leave empty boxcars open when they parked them."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, too. Maybe they planned to leave them there for a long time and closed 'em up to keep the rain out."

They sat and finished their coffee, then went back to splitting wood for another hour. When they stopped again for a break, Larry said, "I'm curious as a cat, I guess, but I'm going down there and have a closer look at those boxcars."

"It's a long walk. I think I'll stay here."

There was something of a path, or a game trail through the woods down to the creek that Larry followed. The creek was frozen over. He tested his weight on the ice and then walked across it. His pant legs got covered with small burrs from the weeds that grew alongside the railroad tracks. He followed the tracks about a hundred yards to the cars on the siding that followed the small valley. The first two cars had no lock or seal on the doors so he wrestled with the latch until he figured it out. It was rusty and didn't move easily, but he finally got it unlatched. The door protested loudly, squeaking as he shoved it open about a foot. Inside were pallets of boxes marked, "Continental Steel Co. 16d Common Nails". The other pallets had other nail sizes and types.

Larry pushed the door closed and walked down to the next car. It had rolled woven wire fencing banded together on pallets, also from Continental Steel Company. The third car had barbed wire rolls. Larry went on down the tracks to a tank car. He couldn't tell what might be in it without getting on top of it and opening the fill hatch, but the drain valve was greasy and smelled like oil of some kind. He faintly heard Wes splitting wood in the distance and headed back his way, anxious to tell him about his discovery.

"What do you mean they are full? They wouldn't park a loaded train out here!"

"Well, they did. There's car loads of fence wire, nails, and barbed wire. The tank car I looked at smelled like oil, but I don't know what's in that."

"You gotta be kidding me!"

"Nope. Sure as I'm standing here."

"Man, could we ever use some of that stuff!"

"It's there for the taking, if we don't get caught," Larry said.

"Boy is that ever tempting!"

Larry said, "I'm not so sure it's a good idea to take any of it. If all of a sudden we had a lot of fence wire and nails and stuff, somebody would be wanting to know where it came from."

Wes leaned on his splitting maul and said, "I know for a fact that Continental Steel Company is history now. I remember reading on the internet that they went bankrupt and closed. That's why there weren't any nails to buy until they started getting some in from China lately. Continental couldn't compete with the imports back then."

"Wonder who it belongs to now?"

"It'd be hard to find out," Wes said. "I gotta talk to Ashley and Kate about this."

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"The railroads went belly up about that time," Kate said. "There probably isn't anyone around that knows those cars are sitting there, let alone what's in them."

Ashley said, "How could we find out who it belongs to? There's a new County Sheriff now. Maybe he would know. I'd rather find out what the story is before we go looting a train."

Three days later was Saturday, so the family packed Wes' old truck with things to sell at the market. They had some cured hams, aged cheese rounds that Kate and Gloria had made, several pounds of butter, a 20 gallon can of fresh milk, and a big box of eggs loaded. Kate decided to stay home and babysit with 3 year old Ella so Ashley could go shopping. Larry had no particular yen to stand out in the cold all day, so he was staying home. He'd had cold feet all week cutting wood. That left Wes, Ashley and Gloria to do the market business.

Brent Collins' farm was a couple miles further away than the fairgrounds, but nobody minded that because there was no City Mayor to deal with and there was the pole barn for shelter, plus hot food available. A sheriff's deputy usually showed up, more for trading than law enforcement, since Brent and his two grown sons didn't allow bad conduct. Shenanigans would get you thrown bodily off the property and told to stay off.

Today it wasn't a deputy, but Sheriff Townsend that showed up. Gloria had gone to high school with him and had thought later that she would have done better to marry him when he got out of law school than the piece of crap that Bob had turned out to be. She had no regrets about marrying Larry, though. He was a really kind soul and treated her like a goddess. She put all that out of her mind and spoke to Terry Townsend when he walked by.

"Hello Gloria! I haven't seen you for a while. Where have you been?"

"Well, I'm a farm wife now. Bob got killed in a car wreck and I married Larry Barnes. We're farming with Wes Blake and Ashley now on her Mom's place."

"That's a nice farm. I live a couple miles on out the road from there. Looks like you have a lot of good things to eat here."

"See anything you like" That ham is great stuff, and Kate's cheese can't be beat."

Terry looked thing over and said, "I'll be back in a minute. Let me go get my wagon to carry things."

Other customers kept them busy until Terry came back with a kid's toy wagon, a popular substitute for a shopping cart here. He loaded up a smoked ham, a round of cheese, a pound of butter, and 2 dozen eggs then asked, "What do I owe you for this?"

When he had paid and had his change, Gloria said, "Hey! Don't run off yet. I have a legal question maybe you could answer."

"What would that be?"

She lowered her voice so others didn't overhear and told him about the train cars on the siding, asking who they belonged to now. She didn't mention that they were loaded. He asked where they were, so she told him, on the siding at the edge of their farm. They owned a few feet the other side of it where the right of way went through their place.

"Oh. Well, I suppose they belong to you now. See, that is the Southern tracks and they went bankrupt along with most of the other railroads. The banks that received their assets are dissolved now, too. By law, the right of way reverted to the original landowners, so that whole right of way strip is yours again. The rail cars are abandoned property of the railroad and its' receivers, so they are yours, too, for what they are worth. Not much, I'd say. Maybe you could raise chickens in them, or store corn or something. A lot of farms have taken over rail cars like that and mostly use them for grain bins."

"Are you kidding me? We own the train?"

"That's what the law says. Of course, there isn't much being done with the law these days without much in the way of a court system. Actually, I am the highest legal official in the county now, like it was a hundred or more years ago."

"What do you want for your legal advice?"

"How about another pound of that butter? My wife will love it!"

"You've got it. Here!" Gloria graced him with her beautiful smile and Terry thanked her profusely. Maybe she had flirted with him just a little. It didn't matter. She knew he was happily married and she was too. It was all in fun and probably helped her learn what she wanted to know. She had planned it that way.

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"We own the TRAIN?"



"That's what the Sheriff said," Gloria told Kate.

"Well, that beats stealing it," Larry said.

Wes had been thinking about it and said, "We need to get a look at what is in all those cars, and then make some plans. First, what are we going to do with it? And next, how do we get it out of the boxcars and up here. It's across the creek, and it's half a mile away."

Larry said, "I'd say just leave the stuff where it's at for now, and keep quiet about it. Some stuff we could make a little bridge across the creek with some logs and go get things with the tractor and loader. If that doesn't work for some things, we can cut the fence and take it across that pasture we've been using on the next farm."

Ashley said, "Larry's right to keep quiet about it for now. If the word gets out that there is stuff in the cars, there will be no stopping the scavengers. If we go through the neighbor's farm, we'll have tracks in the snow and anybody could tell what we're doing there. Better do the work from this side if we can."

Gloria said, "I want to know what all is in those boxcars. It could be anything. It's getting late this evening to go poking around down there, but first thing tomorrow after I do the milking I'm going to have a look."

Larry said, "I'll go with you. Opening those car doors is a real pain. I'll be taking some oil and a crowbar."

Wes said, "I like the bridge idea. Let's take the chainsaws down there and cut some trees on the far side then drop them across the creek. If we can get several across the creek for supports, we can cut poles for decking and spike them into the logs. We've still got a lot of long pole barn nails left over we can use for that. I'm thinking about getting some of those heavy boxes of nails and rolls of fence wire up here."

Larry said, "Haven't you got log prongs for your tractor loader? Thought I saw some somewhere."

"Yeah. They're in the machine shed. They're a pain to put on, so I don't take the bucket off the loader unless I have to."

"That's the way to handle those pallets of stuff. For now, we can use the loader bucket. We'll need that to help grade a dirt road down there. This is going to take a while, so we better figure on making a road up to the house."

Kate said, "Sounds like maybe we struck it rich, or maybe not. But it's going to be a lot of work either way."

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When chores were done and breakfast over, everyone except Kate and Ella went to explore the train cars. They crossed the creek where Larry did before and had a look in the cars he had opened. These were toward the east end of the string of cars. The west end of the string was out of sight around the curve that direction. Larry got better at opening the doors after some practice. After an hour of work, they had opened a car full of plywood bound for Home Depot, and one of boxes of motor oil and lubricants, besides the 3 that Larry had opened earlier of woven wire fencing, nails and screws, and the

barbed wire.

Larry worked methodically down the string toward the east end. The next car had pallets of instant coffee and boxed teabags. The next 2 cars were dry bulk hoppers, both full of masonry cement. A boxcar beyond that held dry charge car batteries and crates of plastic acid bottles. The next one had huge rolls of paper, 3 feet in diameter bound for a printing business in Indianapolis. Another came from Porter Paint Company in Louisville, but the paint was in cardboard boxes full of buckets. Larry cut into one box with his pocket knife and saw 5 gallon plastic buckets of Outside White Semi Gloss Enamel. He closed that door quickly, noting that the car was insulated and the paint was Latex base. He knew freezing would damage it and hoped it was still okay.

The last 2 cars on the east end were flatcars with containers on them. The containers were padlocked, but those yielded to Larry's crowbar, with some damage to the latches. There were two 30 foot long containers per flatcar, all with Chinese markings on them. The first one had pallets of schools supplies, and the second had boxes labeled, "Designer Purses", "Leather Coats", and "Ladies Fashion Shoes". When Gloria saw that she said, "It looks like we will be in style for years to come! But I'm cold and I'm hungry. The rest can wait. I'm going to the house."

Ashley said, "I'm going with you. Let the men tough it out if they want to."

Larry said, "You go on to the house and warm up. I'm going to look in the last 2 containers."

Wes took over the crowbar and ripped the latches off the last two containers. One was labeled to go to Walmart and was full of boxed bicycles. The other was destined for Harbor Freight's distribution center and was full of solar panel kits. The men were getting cold, too. They latched the containers shut and started the long walk to the house.

Kate had a pot of beef stew on the wood cook stove and it smelled heavenly. She was taking biscuits out of the oven when they came in. When she had been informed of the contents they had found so far, she said, "What can we possibly do with those rolls of paper?"

Ashley said, "I suppose we can cut it up somehow and use it to write on. Paper is hard to find now."

Gloria was delighted. "This is like the best Christmas ever! And we haven't got a good start yet. I wonder how many more cars there are? Did you guys count them?"

Wes said, "I think there are about 3 dozen more, give or take. "We'll get a better look later."

"It's pretty gray out there," Kate said after lunch. "It looks like we'll get some snow."

"Could be," Wes said. "It felt pretty humid out there. I better get the cattle in the barn and do the feeding before we go back to the train cars. If we get a lot of snow it would be better to have the cattle up in the barn lot."

They fed all the animals early and got the woodpile on the porch replenished, carried in a couple extra buckets of water from the hand pump, and threw a tarp back over the pump to prevent it freezing up. By the time they were finished, big snowflakes were coming down and they all decided against walking the half mile back to the train cars for the day. When Gloria went out to milk that evening, the snow was 4" deep on the walks and still coming down fast.

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The next morning was Monday, when Ed had said he would work on some boots for Christopher. Joann looked out the window when she went out to stoke the wood stove and saw white everywhere. There was no sign of the trails to the hen house or other buildings, and the road to Mike and Laura's house was recognizable only by the lack of weeds and brush. She looked at Ed's truck and saw it was about a foot deep and still coming down. This ought to be a good morning for a batch of pancakes, maple syrup, and lots of fried ham she decided. She wasn't planning on going anywhere for a while. She had come to a belief in God late in her life and her thought as she looked outside was that God had put the snow there, and he would melt it away in His own good time without any help from us humans.

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At the Nichols house, Ronnie looked out at dawn, discouraged that he wouldn't be able to do any logging for a while. He thought it would be a good time to butcher a couple more pigs and get the meat in the smokehouse. Tara wasn't going to like that, he thought. She had in mind to work on herb preparations today, and butchering was always a cold job.

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Gloria's curiosity was put on hold, while the family tended to livestock and waited for the snow to stop before trying to dig out paths to the various buildings. It was a little warmer than yesterday, at 26 degrees on the porch thermometer. They needed to do laundry, so that meant it would be hung in the house to dry near the wood stoves in the kitchen and living room. The added humidity in the house would be welcome to keep their noses from feeling so dry.

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In town, nobody was going anywhere except a few hardy souls with snow shovels, digging out the sidewalks from 19" of snow. It was wet and heavy, then it had gotten colder overnight and frozen harder. Shovels worked best when used to cut chunks of it then lift it out as a block. What businesses there were did not open until after noon when walks could be cleared. Streets remained blocked with snow, although people trampled trails across intersections.

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Mel Sawyer told Vickie, "I'm glad the snow waited until today. I'd hate to have to fight it on market day."

"I doubt if anyone would come anyway in this weather. What are you up to today?"

"Hm. I have to run the trap line, in case I caught something fit to eat. That might be it for the day. I don't take to cold weather like I used to, and kicking through snow ain't my idea of a good time. Have we got any of that chili left from Saturday's market?"

"Yes, there's about a half gallon of it, and I already split it with Charlie and Denise. Hope you like it."

"That's just the thing for a cold day. We'll be fine."

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Gerald asked Anne if she could help him decant the last batch of wine.

"Yes, I don't have anything that has to be done. Do you think Ed will clear the road today?"

"I doubt it. He might hit it a lick when the snow stops, but not before. Fuel costs too much." Gerald went to the window and looked out. "I'm glad I got some wood up on the porch last night. Looks like about a foot and a half on the trailer bed and it's still snowing."

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"Why don't we get a snow day off school like we used to?" Sophia asked Alicia.

"Because you don't have to leave home for school, you know that," Alicia said. "Now let's get through the lessons and you kids can go play in it after lunch."

Emily wasn't complaining. Matthew had ridden one of Ronnie's big work horses to their house for school, since there wouldn't be any logging done today. He'd cleaned the packed snow from his hoofs and put the horse in the new barn with some hay and fresh bedding. They would have to go give him some water at lunchtime and she could help. She wanted to spend all the time she could with Matthew, preferably without the adults around. He seemed to be oblivious to her part of the time, but he had noticed that she'd rolled her dark blonde hair and had some waves in it today. Sophia thought the boy was nice, but told Emily she was goofy about him. Emily didn't mind her sister. She had plans for Matthew. Matthew was almost 19 now and she would be 16 soon. She thought they were old enough to get married. All she had to do was convince Matthew and she was sure she could do that.

Sophia liked Christopher a lot better than Matthew. He was less than a year older than she was, and had always treated her like family. He'd been nice from the first day, not like the kids she remembered from school before, even though she wasn't as pretty as her sister. She didn't enjoy running around in the woods as much as he did, but she went with him sometimes just because she liked him. Sophia knew that you couldn't marry your brother, but she also knew that Christopher wasn't really her brother. It was nice they could do lessons together since they were both in the 8th grade.

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## CHAPTER 65

March, 2016

It was ten days before the snow melted off so Wes, Larry, and their wives could go back to look at the train cars. Wes had dug out a can of old bolts and some wrenches to secure the door latches where they had twisted off padlocks. Knowing more about what they faced, this trip they also carried a big pipe wrench to help get rid of locks and open rusty door mechanisms. The next one in line to deal with was the tank car that Larry had looked at but failed to open.

A fill hatch on top was the logical place to inspect it, in case the drain valves should be inoperable, or fail to close. Larry had a tin can with a wire fastened to it to dip out some of the contents, which, when they looked at the other side of the car, was plainly labeled "Kerosene". The tank car beyond it contained "Naptha", a somewhat dubious name, so Larry dipped out a can of it. It smelled like lighter fluid, and burned like gasoline. He tried a drop of it on his old Zippo lighter and found it worked just fine. Maybe they could find some other use for it, since there was 28,500 gallons of it, according to the car markings, the same amount as the Kerosene. Larry did know that kerosene was essentially the same as #1 Diesel, so they could use that to fuel the tractors. Wes and Larry talked about it and decided that the safe way to get the liquids out of the tank cars was to use a siphon hose. Not understanding the valves on the cars they would leave them alone.

The next 2 boxcars were bound for the Ace Hardware distributor. One was mostly outdoor equipment with dozens of lawn rollers, de-thatchers, fertilizer spreaders, and mowers with bagger attachments, all sort of useless now. The real find in that car was 6 pallets of Stihl chain saws and 4 more of chain saw accessories--spare bars and chains, air filters, spark plugs and the like. The second one was better, with an assortment of grass seeds and bagged fertilizers. Wes was really glad to see pallets of Urea nitrogen fertilizer.

After crawling around in those 2 cars for a couple hours, everybody was tired. They opened the next car and found it wrapped in plastic labeled Scott Paper, and the women cheered. There were paper towels by the truck load and over half the car was toilet paper. That was the first car that they immediately tore into and liberated some of the contents.

Wes said, "Whatever is in the next one is bound to be a let down after this. Toilet paper is a hard act to follow these days."

"Unless you find some feminine supplies," Ashley said.

That was not to be, however, as the next car was packed with treated lumber, mostly 4 X 4 posts and deck boards. The smell of it was strong in the car so they closed it up quickly. The men were happy with it, but the women were less than ecstatic. They perked up, though at the following car when they found "Joann Fabrics" on the destination label. Boxed on the pallets were many kinds of fabric. Each pallet box contained all the same type of fabric, but there were various printed patterns in one box. It was too dark to see deep inside the boxcars, and they didn't have a working flashlight, so learning for certain what all was in each car would be left until they could unload some of it for accessing the deeper reaches of them.

It was getting on toward lunch time when they opened one last car for the day and found it came from Pfizer Corporation. The stackable plastic totes inside had stickers on the outside. Gloria said, "We hit the mother lode here."

"What's that?" Ashley asked.

"Vet supplies. Lots of them. Electrolytes, vitamin and electrolyte powder, Sulfa, injectable iron, tetracycline. Enough to keep a lot of animals and probably people alive."

Larry pulled out an couple of the totes by the edge of the door and saw other names on the ones behind it. Gloria had a look and said, "It's not all from Pfizer. They are a drug company. The rest is something else. Pull out one of those, Larry."

He did and they found totes with vet wrap, syringes, packaged sterile sutures and vet bandage wrap in the next layer. They did some mixing and matching of contents and packed 2 totes of assorted items to take to the house along with the toilet paper.

"Did you get that all down, Ashley?" Wes asked.

"Yes. I started the list with the first car on the east end and used your lumber crayon to put numbers on the cars. This is number 21, vet supplies."

"Good. Let's go to the house and eat."

They had driven Wes' truck as close to the creek as they could get it, but it was still a long haul up the hill and through the woods before they could put their loads down. Wes volunteered to ride in the back, but Ashley said she could sit on his lap, to crawl in. It was a cramped ride to the house, but better than the sub-freezing temperature outside.

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As they were eating, Kate said, "How are we going to handle all this new found wealth?"

Gloria said, "That's simple enough. Keep plenty to be sure we have enough and sell the rest."

Larry had caught on immediately and said, "If we go to selling a bunch of stuff, the secret will be out in no time, and we'll have people all over us. They'll figure out where the stuff is and try to steal it. There's no way we can guard half a mile of train cars. And there'll be too many people trying for it. We'd likely get shot over all that stuff."

Ashley said, "Right now nobody knows about it. We need to keep it that way as long as we can."

Wes said, "That's right. And use whatever time we have before anybody finds out to haul as much as we need for ourselves up here and put it away. My pickup is pretty quiet. Let's use it and a farm wagon to haul stuff. It's cold enough now that nobody is out running around if they don't have to, so we maybe have another month to get it done before somebody will be wondering what we are up to from just hearing the truck if nothing else."

Larry said, "It's pretty well hidden down there in the creek bottom. It's deep enough you can't see down there except from the road where the tracks cross. As long as we work during the day and keep it quiet down there, we'll be okay I think. Might ought to cut a little firewood, too, just to let folks think they know what we are doing. You know how nibby country folks are."

Kate said, "The only ones close enough to see anything is Neal and Olivia Davis. I've known them all my life. I think I should bake some pies and go see Olivia pretty soon. Those two don't have much to do with other folks, but we've been friends since our school days. I know I can count on them keeping their mouths shut about this. I think we need some help, especially to watch out for us while we work on this."

Ashley said, "That's a really good idea, Mom. I should have thought about them. I bet the train goes back on their place, too. I never really paid any attention, because you can't see it in the summer time when the trees are leafed out and hiding it."

Larry said, "I know there are cars that go past our line fence, but can't say how far. We better go look before you say anything to the Davises."

That afternoon Wes and Larry went to the back end of the farm where they joined Davis's land. They counted a total of 38 cars on their own property and 14 on Davis's property, where the siding ended, deep in woods on both sides of the tracks. With that information in mind and a couple of Kate's freshly baked pies in hand, Kate and Ashley took the pickup and drove over to visit Neal and Olivia.

"We brought you some pies for desert, Olivia, and some news," Kate said as the woman answered the door. Her husband was close behind with his hand on his old revolver stuck in his belt. Neal relaxed when he saw who it was and they were invited inside.

"I guess you could say we are here to celebrate," Kate said.

"What is there to celebrate these days?" Neal asked.

Ashley said, "I think we are all rich now. I'll let Mom tell the story."

When Kate was finished outlining the story, Neal said, "I think like you do, that this newfound wealth could be both a blessing and a curse. Everybody is going to be jealous and greedy and want some of it."

Olivia sat there thinking about it. All of a sudden they had more goods than they knew what to do with, and along with it, a major problem. She finally asked, "What all did you say was in the cars you opened?"

Ashley said, "There's all kinds of stuff. For one thing, none of us will ever run out of toilet paper again as long as we live!" And there's a whole shipping container full of ladies' shoes, and purses and coats. There's one with paint, some chainsaws, cases of motor oil, enough wire to fence in the county, and enough nails to build a town. There's whole tank car full of kerosene that can be used as diesel fuel! It just goes on and on. There's even a container of school supplies and a carload of vet supplies and medications. Wes was really glad to see all the batteries in one car, because our tractor battery is about a goner."

"Of course we'll share with you," Kate said. Anything in there you might need you're welcome to have

it."

Neal said, "I saw those cars sitting back there behind our pasture and wondered if they'd ever get 'em out of there. There must be a dozen on our place. I wonder if there's anything in them?"

"Fourteen," Ashley said, "Our men went back and counted them all. And there are 38 on our place. I bet they are all full of something. We can show you how to get the doors open so you can find out what's there."

"What in the world are we gonna do with it all?" Neal asked.

Kate said, "For right now, we're thinking to keep REAL quiet about it and start hauling what we can use to the house and barn. Maybe we can sell some things later, but for now I'd suggest we put that off as long as we can, or we'll start having problems."

Olivia said, "Oh, I'm sure that's right. Why, people will do anything now if they think they can get by with it. Yes, yes, we won't say a word to anyone about this, not even our daughter. Of course we don't see them very often, because they live out the other side of town. That's good because she can't keep quiet about anything. We'll have to be sure she doesn't learn about this. It would only take one person, and the news would travel faster than lightning."

Neal said, "I just thought of something. I bet the government would want to tax this, or just steal it if they found out about it. We better be real careful what we do with it. If we sell anything, it had best be like the black market men do it, all real quiet like, and not close to home, either."

"Where are my manners?" Olivia said, "I'll cut those pies and we can have some now. I'll get some cold milk, too. I'm sorry I don't have any coffee."

Ashley grinned and said, "You do now! There's bunch of it in one of the cars!"  
She pulled 2 jars of Folger's Classic Instant out of her deep coat pockets.

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## CHAPTER 66

Late March, 2016

Four bays of Wes' new machine shed had filled up within less than 2 weeks. The pickup and farm wagon made at least one and sometimes 2 trips a day from the rail siding up to the machine shed. Larry spent three days building doors for that part of the shed, and a partition to block it off from the rest of the long building. The Ace Hardware car had boxes of hardware, but it was a lot of work getting it out of the car, across the creek and up the bank to the truck and wagon. The task of sorting through the car loads was a grueling job. Many cartons and pallets were unloaded, only to be loaded back again after finding what was wanted behind or beneath other things.

Five medium size oak trees were cut, then dragged and shoved into position for supporting a temporary bridge across the little creek. Smaller poles were cut and laid crosswise of the oaks to begin the flooring, and finally, some of the treated deck lumber was used to make a reasonably flat bridge deck. There was a lot of trimming with chainsaws involved and much manual labor for all four of the younger family members. Kate said she would gladly forego the pleasure of seeing "all that plunder" until later, and stay at the house to babysit and provide meals.

What Larry had called log prongs, were actually forklift arms that had been adapted to Wes' loader for handling logs. The bridge had been built with that heavy tractor in mind for unloading the cars. Some fill work and grading with Larry's smaller tractor and front end loader bucket enabled the men to negotiate a long stretch of cars before they ran into heavily wooded rough ground farther to the west. Wes had a carryall platform for the rear of his tractor that mounted on the 3 point hitch. That was used to move some of the loads. It could be backed up to the truck or wagon and lifted a couple feet to allow easier transfer. The same was done in reverse at the machine shed.

After almost a month of hard work by all four people, they had filled the four enclosed bays of the machine shed, part of the barn loft, a spare room upstairs in the house, and a similar amount had been taken to the Davis farm. Treated lumber was hauled and stacked behind the barn, then covered with roofing metal discovered in car number 24.

Meanwhile, Neal Davis and his wife had not been idle. They had cleaned out their old hog farrowing house for storage and done some clearing in the woods to make a better trail to the bank above the creek on their farm. The 2 families agreed to make a gate in the property line fence near the back of the farms for moving goods back and forth between them, out of sight from the road. It was a simple matter to cut the woven wire fencing, staple a pole on the cut end, and provide a couple wire loops to fasten it back closed when not in use. They didn't want it to be obviously a gate to casual observation.

Neal and his wife had found a carload of tobacco products, mostly cigarettes from a Louisville maker, and some pipe tobacco that they split with Wes and his family. They also discovered a carload of bottled whisky from a Kentucky distiller, one of small engines destined for Harbor Freight's warehouse, and another flat car with one container of imported tools, and the other headed for Rite Aid Drugs filled with over the counter medications, vitamins, makeup, shampoo, and hair coloring products they had found so far.

The shifting of goods back and forth between farms, then storing those things kept both families busy

until the middle of March, and they just had a good start. It was becoming a burdensome job to do morning chores, then put in 8 to 10 hours a day hauling and storing things. The women were getting pretty tired of it until Wes opened a car full with a Walmart shipment of clothing. Inside the various boxes were literally tons of winter coats, ladies', men's, and children's underwear, heavy socks and insulated underwear, jeans, and sweatshirts and pants, all a seasonal shipment to fill a couple stores with winter clothing. The men unloaded palletized boxes and hauled them to the house, where the women began to sort out what would be useful sizes for the families. When a pallet had been sorted, it was marked with a big X and sent back to the rail car. They used the barn for a staging and sorting area, and kept the doors shut tight until this was all cleared out.

Wes and Larry had been turning away shop work, saying they had their own equipment to fix, but that story wore thin and the neighbors began to press them for repair work. Wes took on a few jobs, which complicated security matters for moving goods from the train cars. By having the stock gate at the end of the driveway, and a buzzer hooked to it, they avoided getting caught with any train goods exposed, but just barely a couple times.

Kate called a halt to looting the train cars. It wasn't worth the risk of having the secret let out as the weather warmed up and farmers were outside more, scattering manure on fields and moving livestock to other pastures. Larry cut a large red cedar tree and dropped it on their bridge to hide it somewhat, then cut a couple smaller trees to block and disguise their road into the woods. Anything they got out of the train now would have to be done very carefully to avoid discovery until next winter.

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The smokehouse was filled with the last hog butchering for a while, so Ronnie and Matthew had been helping Tara process dried herbs and package them for sale. It wasn't their favorite thing to do, but since the ground had thawed out and some early Spring rains came, the ground was too soft and muddy to do any logging. Ronnie had bought some salvaged metal roofing from Brent Collins, then with Matthew's help had erected a pole style shed to house lumber. It was open on the sides, which allowed free air movement to dry the lumber stacked with thin sticks between each layer.

By hot weather the lumber should be dry enough to build the farrowing house he wanted to put in the pasture below the barn, where he could run water from the spring by gravity flow. They were all tired of carrying water by the bucketful to water animals. Hogs drink a lot of water, which was one reason very few people raised very many of them.

He planned to have a cattle watering trough in that area, too, if he could find a way to make one. His metal water tanks all had been patched several times and would only last so long before they rusted out. He'd like to make one out of concrete. He could get sand and gravel from the river, even if it was a terrible job, but cement was impossible to find now. If he made a trough of wood, it would leak, no matter how careful he was.

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Christopher was busy in the storage building grinding chicken feed with his Dad. They had bought some young pullets and a few roosters from a woman last market day and had them in a small pen in the corner of the building. It was safer to keep them inside all the time, lest a coyote, raccoon, or stray dogs think they looked like lunch. Chris had a coyote hide on a stretcher now who was bold enough to try to get into this barn. The meat from him was drying in the sun today, and would soon make a good protein supplement for the chickens he had planned to eat. Chris was thinking that if he could find some steel traps like Mel had, he wouldn't have to go hunting so much for meat and hides.

When they shut off the small engine that ran the feed grinder, Chris looked up to see Sophia.

She said, "When you guys are finished, we have lunch ready. We have ham, green beans, corn and I baked some apple turnovers for desert."

"Wow! That sounds good," Chris told her. Sophia beamed and said, "Hurry up before it all gets cold."

"I'd give you a kiss for those apple turnovers, but this is pretty dusty work and I wouldn't want to get your clean dress all dirty."

Sophia's heart thumped a couple times at the thought, but she tried not to let it show. She turned quickly and trotted to the house to get the meal on the table with her Mom. Everyone ate their share and said it was very good. After lunch, Chris went to wash up and found Sophia had put a kettle of hot water by the kitchen sink to add to the cold water from the hand pump there. He thanked her and was rewarded with another big smile.

Later that day Sophia joined Chris when he went out to plant some early salad greens in the cold frames his Dad had made.

"Mom said to have you put in some onion seeds in there, too, so I brought them out."

"Okay, I guess there's room for some."

She lingered a minute watching him. She had to know, so she asked him.

"Do you like me Chris?" She couldn't help her face getting red when she said it.

Thankfully, or maybe not, he didn't look up from what he was doing.

"Of course I like you! You're my sister, and you're really nice."

She was a little flustered, but she went on. "I don't mean like a sister. I mean do you like me as a girl?"

"You're the nicest girl I know, Sophia."

"I like you a lot Chris. Did you really mean it when you said you'd kiss me for the turnovers?"

"Sure I did. They were really good!"

He wiped his hands on the grass and stood up to give her a peck on the cheek. Sophia held his face between her hands and kissed him full on the mouth, then backed away quickly and blushed again. This time he saw it and stood there looking at her like he was seeing her for the first time.

She said, "Was that okay?"

Chris finally found his tongue and said, "Yeah, it was okay. It was nice."

Sophia had to get the idea across to him. "We're not really brother and sister, you know?"

"We just as well be. You're family, and we all love you Sophia."

"I know, but I like you better than a brother. Oooh!" She turned and ran around the house then went inside and hid in the bathroom until she got herself calmed down.

Chris stood there, wondering what that was all about. It was that night when he was getting ready for bed that she passed him in the hallway and gave him a slightly guilty looking smile. And then he knew. It took him a while to get to sleep that night, thinking about Sophia.

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## CHAPTER 67

April, 2016

Two more brand new calves were up and nursing when Ed walked over to his farm to feed in the evening and check on the cows. The rest of the cows all looked to be ready to drop a calf any day, so he made sure the feeding area was clean, they had fresh bedding, and he gave the cows some extra ground feed. Ed was up to 15 brood cows now that all looked healthy and content. Last year's crop of calves were growing fast and eating enough that he began to hope for new pasture grass soon.

The Fescue had greened up as soon as the snow was gone, but the clover he had seeded with it was just starting to show enough green to be seen across the field behind the barn. He stayed long enough to see them all go to the pond to drink, then come back to the barn to get out of the misty rain. The cows with new calves were halfway to the barn when three coyotes came galloping out of the trees, then 2 more, encircling the cows with calves and half a dozen others. Ed ran for the barn driveway where he had left his old Springfield rifle.

He laid the rifle stock against the corner of the barn for a rest and sighted on one that was farther out from the herd. When the rifle boomed, the coyote dropped in a pile and the others took flight for the trees, headed north toward the old Duncan place. Ed swung the rifle at the departing coyotes and squeezed the trigger again. As that one fell, he moved on to the one closest to the tree line and hit it, but it struggled to it's feet and trotted on 3 legs out of sight. By the time he cycled the bolt again, they had all disappeared.

He looked at the cows that had circled the baby calves in a protective huddle, shaking their heads aggressively. They might have fought off the attack by themselves, he thought, but he'd thin out the coyotes every chance he got. He looked around and picked up his empty brass and pocketed it for reloading later. As he reloaded his rifle Ed heard another shot from the Duncan farm, then a second one. It sounded like the neighbor had got in some licks, too. Bob Clemmons kept a watchful eye on Ronnie's herd of hogs, and he hated coyotes as much as anyone. Mike had reloaded some shotgun shells for Bob with home made buckshot cushioned with sawdust, a very lethal load at up to 50 to 75 yards.

Ed slung his rifle over his back and walked out in the mist to gather up the dead coyotes. He dragged them to the driveway one at a time and left them in a pile. Ed started his walk back home. He would drive the truck back later to pick up the coyotes. The meat would be run through his cranked meat grinder then spread out to dry slowly in his home made dehydrator over the wood stove. He had more than enough to feed his chickens for now, so he'd probably trade it off to Ronnie to use in hog feed. The bones would be dried on the hen house roof and later ground in his hammer mill to put on his garden. The pelts would be dried on stretchers and given to the tanner toward Ed's next leather purchase. All of the proceeds didn't amount to a lot, but it would pay for his rifle shells and some besides.

The neighborhood came to full alert when they heard the shooting. Ed knew this and stopped at Gerald's house to tell him what happened, then at his son's house on the way out with the truck to pick up the coyotes. Mike said he'd help him skin them out. Ed loaded the coyotes then drove over to Ronnie's place where he met Matthew at the driveway carrying a rifle and explained. The young man

thanked him and walked back to the house.

Since he was close, Ed drove across the road to tell Bob what he shot at and to see if Bob had any luck. He had. There were 3 dead coyotes in his barn driveway, the first hung up and being skinned.

"How'd you get 3 with 2 shots?" Ed asked.

"You got one and he just made it over here to die. You take him. The hide belongs to you," Bob said.

"No, the two I've got is all I can handle tonight. You're welcome to the hide. Just wanted to let you know it wasn't outlaws I was shooting at."

Bob grinned and said, "They're outlaws as far as I'm concerned. They can make a mess out of a herd of hogs."

"Well," Ed said as he got back in his truck, "That's 5 of 'em we don't have to worry about now. See you later. It's getting dark and we both have work to do."

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Neal Davis didn't have the security problem that Wes and Larry did, since the back of his farm had steeper and higher banks above the creek, and he had always pretty much kept to himself, so they didn't have a lot of company. It would be a while before the ground dried enough for him to begin putting in crops, so he spent some time opening boxcars and containers. He was tickled pink with the next car he opened, it being a shipment to some big feed store, he supposed. There were pallets of the brown salt blocks he fed his cattle (he had run out of those), some blocks of molasses and magnesium to prevent grass tetany, and the rest of the car was filled with bags of dried pork meat scrap, which he knew as "tankage" from many years ago when he started farming. It was a protein supplement that was richer than soybean meal, and it would keep practically forever in the plastic lined bags. Neal wasn't young, but he was still fit. Even so, it took him a couple days to carry enough of the 50 pound bags up the steep bank to haul to the old grain bin he used to store such things. It was hard work, but it was all sorely needed things to feed his stock.

That had kept him occupied, but he was getting more curious all the time about the rest of the cars and opened a couple more containers on the next flatcar. He wasn't much of a fisherman, but he knew he had a fortune in fishing equipment when he got a look at the load addressed to Bass Pro in Clarksville. The shipping papers inside listed hundreds of fishing items, and almost as many clothing items. The prize, though, was cartons of archery equipment--compound bows, graphite arrows, hunting broad heads, and pages of accessories, all of it made in China and shipping direct to Bass Pro.

The other container didn't excite him much, although he knew it was worth a lot. It was a shipment of parts from Rednekk Trailer Supply to some trailer manufacturer in Kentucky. The shipping papers said it had hitches, stub axles, rims with tires, and springs. He figured somebody would want to make something out of all that, but he left it where it was for now, picked up his big pipe wrench and crowbar and went on to the next one, a boxcar.

He read the shipping papers twice and part of it again, before he began to believe it. The car had the yellow placard that said, HAZARDOUS MATERIAL, and sure enough, inside were boxes printed with "A. Uberti" and addressed from Accokeek, Maryland to a distributor. There was a separate shipping document from Remington Arms, a re-shipment from the Uberti company to their distributor. It listed

numerous calibers of ammunition he only vaguely remembered, like .44-40, .45 Long Colt, and .45-70. From what he could see reading the papers, this company must be a maker of old style guns, because it listed things like Trapdoor rifles and Colt single action revolvers. He used his belt knife to cut open a carton and found it full of 1873 Carbines, replicas of Winchester's fine lever action rifle chambered for .45 Colt.

Neal wasn't a "gun nut" as he called the people who bought one gun after another just to have them, but he knew what he had in that one car was worth as much or more than his farm. He struggled to get past that carton to the one just behind the car side by the door. It required that he cut away and half emptied the carton of rifles to get to the pallet labeled Remington Arms Company. It was full of boxes of ammunition. Neal put all the rifles back in the carton except the one he'd laid aside and took out several boxes of ammunition, then closed the car door. Having that many guns sitting there made him nervous. He'd heard on TV what some people had done to rob gun stores when the trouble all began. He decided that he'd seen enough for today and went to the house, after figuring out how to load and work the simple lever action rifle.

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Olivia Davis was getting more curious about what they might have sitting in those rail cars, so she encouraged Neal to open the rest of them. There was only one more boxcar. The rest were flatcars with 2 containers on each one. He had noticed some leakage from the boxcar so he opened it next. When he released the plug-seal door, a brown sludge came dripping out. The stench made him nearly lose his breakfast. It was filled with canned food that had apparently frozen and burst open the cans, then rotted.

He closed that one as fast as he could and went to the barn for a bucket and a shovel. The bucket he used to dip water from the creek and slosh the brown ooze off the car and the wash down the tracks and ties below. Neal shoveled some dirt over the mess on the ground and that helped some, but the stench was still bad. It looked like rain, so maybe the smell would diminish soon.

Knowing better than to disappoint his wife, he went back to work opening containers. The first one wasn't going to be of much use, being full of washing machines from The GE plant in Louisville. The problem was, very few people could afford much electricity now, let alone a new washer. The other container on that car had a shipping label addressed to Big Lots on the boxes inside. He cut open an unmarked box and found plastic bags of inflatable Halloween decorations--tombstones, ghouls, ghosts, a ten foot inflatable spider, and witches with brooms that looked like they crashed into something. This wasn't going well at all today, he thought, but dutifully moved to the next flatcar.

Neal's next discovery helped make up for his earlier bad luck when he found a shipment from Marion Kay Spice Company. The boxes were smaller than he had been finding, and marked Cayenne Pepper, Vanilla Extract, Cinnamon, Black Pepper, Cloves, and Bay Leaves that he could see from the door opening. A carton of each went to his wagon on the hill above. He dug deeper and found granulated garlic, mustard seed, allspice, celery seed, coriander, and several kinds of extracts like lemon, almond, and butter flavor. There was more further back in the container, but he called that good for now and went on to the other container on that car.

Proctor and Gamble was the name on the shipper he found, but the aroma told him it was cleaning products. All he could see were cartons of Tide and Dawn detergents, but the papers said there were Ivory soap and Mr. Clean products as well. Neal took a carton of both detergents to the wagon. Olivia would like those, and they had lye soap they had made, so he left the rest for now, but got out his

pocket notepad and wrote down what he'd found so far. It was close to lunch time, or at least he was hungry, so he went to the house with his small load and the news of what he'd learned. He had five more cars with 2 containers each to look into later. It was time he got the garden plowed up and planted some things, so this was going to have to wait a while. Food came first in his mind.

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Struggling internet providers tried to provide service, but after some of their electronics failed the only service for most places was dependent on telephone lines, and there was little or no maintenance on those lines now. The tower that gave Ed Wilson internet service was still working, so when it came back on the last time, he and Mike dutifully paid the fee when they were in town once a month. Todd Reynolds also had service, and gladly paid for it so Alicia could access the State Education site for teaching and testing materials. Todd watched the financial reports sometimes, mostly to get the current prices on oil and watching currency exchange rates. The various statistics put out by the government were always out of date and suspect anyway. There was still a BBC News site, but it was as sanitized as the rest of the so-called news. They still monitored the shortwave radio for real news.

The last he had heard, the US dollar was staying pretty stable, but inching down relative to the Chinese Renminbi, as China recovered faster from the world currency reset. Japan's Yen had been toast since the reset, and the shortwave news from China, always a critic of the Japanese, said that millions of Japanese were starving due to their inability to afford imported foodstuffs. There was no news of significance from the Mideast, beyond the normal butt-kicking going on between Israel and their neighbors. Russia had made an offer to sell more natural gas to Europe, but their stranglehold on Europe's energy supplies had cratered the economy so badly that there was almost no economic activity outside Germany. The Mediterranean countries had devolved to something like feudalism, from what little news was known about them.

The UK had begun to dig out from their economic rubble, using their highly regulated agriculture to the utmost for producing all the food the country needed. That was almost possible now that their population had dwindled to only 15% of what it had been, and with some revival in the North Sea oil field, the UK balance of payments began to look better. Their cities had been ravaged with riots and disease to the point that labor was again moving to the cities for employment, leaving the rural parts begging for farm labor.

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Matthew had tested in the high 90 percentile ranks when he took his high school graduation exams online and received his diploma. Thankfully, their printer still worked so Alicia could get him a copy of it. His graduation was recorded at the County Courthouse, according to the State, so it was a matter of public record. This practice had been started when there were no funds for public schools, and all students were required to be home schooled. The old Federal Laws pertaining to education were ignored as being impossible to comply with them.

Matthew decided he wasn't finished with education, however. He asked Todd to teach him some higher mathematics and science classes, so he was still a regular at Alicia's school sessions. That suited Emily very well. She had convinced her Mom for Matthew to teach her more of what he knew about herbs and how they grew. She had an idea to cultivate all of them she could for sale. It had the fringe benefit of spending a lot of time with Matthew in the woods, too.

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## CHAPTER 68

May, 2016

Crops were being planted after an early Spring warm up that let farmers begin plowing early. Larry and Wes were somewhat ahead of the game because they had been plowing off and on all winter with the oxen, whenever the ground was not frozen and dry enough. A single bottom plow was slow, but 4 oxen could pull it most of the day in the easy ground that had been worked for years.

An acre a day is not that much, but by working many days in the winter, Wes and Larry had plowed the 40 acres they planned to put in corn and soybeans this year. This month, they had gone over all of it with a disk and had it ready to plant. Not trusting their young oxen to be precise enough for planting, they resorted to Larry's tractor, but that was light work and took little fuel. They had their crops in early, and had spent very little to do it. Cultivating could be done with the oxen, too, when that time came.

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The stamping plant got word to Ed Wilson that they had a contract to make several parts and would probably be working through the summer. The next time he was in town, Ed went to the plant and told them he was no longer interested in working there. The Plant Manager was not happy about that and told him it was the best place to work in the county. Ed told him no, it was not, and he was not interested, thank you, since they couldn't pay him the pension he had been promised for prior service, he doubted if they could be relied on to pay him for work now. The Manager had no idea where to find knowledgeable help. He asked his General Foreman who he could get to help start this production run and he had no ideas either, so he got appointed to do it himself. It was a slow startup with a lot of expensive mistakes.

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Gloria decided that she could open boxcars and containers as well as the men could. She was dying to know what was in the rest of the train and determined to find out. She wanted some fabric anyway, so her first stop was the JoAnn Fabrics shipment. She and Alicia consulted the list and drove the pickup truck into the edge of the woods and out of sight of the road. Once they had the car door open, they began to methodically remove cartons of fabric until they could get deeper inside the load. The cartons were smaller in the west end of the car. Further digging got them deep enough to hand out boxes from the dark interior.

It took a couple hours of work to get the assortment of cartons outside for inspection, and more work to open each one. This shipment seemed to be intended to open a complete new store, based on the variety of things. There were cartons with entire displays of thread, scissors, needles, bobbins, zippers and buttons. They found whole pallets of new patterns, some dress forms, sewing machines that they laughed about because they were electric until Ashley saw "Janome 712T" on a box and knew what it was. An Amish friend of her Mom's had one of those mounted on an old Singer Treadle base.

"That one is going home with us" Ashley said.

"What's so great about that one?"

"It's a treadle powered machine! You don't need electricity for it," Ashley told her.

"They still make those?"

"Yep. The Amish buy a lot of them because the antiques are getting harder to keep running. I guess they sell them in other countries where they don't have electricity, too. They don't come with a treadle, so you just use it to replace the head on an old treadle machine like Mom's. Her's is skipping stitches and is pretty worn out, so this will be great. It's a modern machine, too, that will do a lot of things, like buttonholes."

They had quite a load to carry to the truck before they finished in that one car, but Gloria wasn't finished. On they went to car #22. It took both women on the crowbar to get the door to move.

"What the heck is that stuff?"

Ashley said, "Welding rods, that's what. Lincoln makes everything for welding. Let's see what else is in there."

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The town had a newspaper again, of a sort. It was one sheet, printed both sides and folded in quarters, with a few commercial ads and lots of small classified ads. Someone had taken the old high school print shop equipment from storage and had cut newsprint sheets from the ends of rolls at the old newspaper plant. The new paper was printed by letterpress, set with moveable type just like Gutenberg had done it. The first issue was printed on Friday and taken to the market day meeting at Brent Collins' farm to distribute at a quarter per copy. The type was small to get more on the single sheet, but the front page carried a big headline, "BANK PRESIDENT ARRESTED", followed by "Embezzlement Charges Filed". The run of 500 copies sold out in nothing flat.

Tara asked Ronnie, "Did you read about the bank guy?"

"Read what?"

"The newspaper. It says that the guy we bought the farm from was embezzling money and now the State Police have arrested him. They say he sold the bank's foreclosed properties and kept the money. At least the money is missing from the bank's accounts."

"I thought that guy was shady as the devil. Maybe I should have bought another farm, too.

Tara asked, "Won't the court ask questions about us buying it? Are we in trouble?"

"No, we're not in trouble. We have a deed to the farm and that's it. What that guy did with the money has nothing to do with us. He's the one with a problem," Ronnie told her.

But the next day 2 State Police officers came knocking on their door asking for Ronnie. Tara called him from the barn. Tara was worried sick, but the officer only wanted to confirm what they had paid for the farm and a witnessed statement to that effect. The State had the deed as proof the bank had sold the property, but there was no paper trail for the amount since it had been a cash deal. Ronnie filled in the amount in the prepared statement, his name and signed it. One officer signed it as a witness and the other one pocketed the paper.

"That's not much to pay for a farm," one officer said.

"It's not much of a farm, or, it wasn't until after we got it," Ronnie told him. "It's in a lot better shape now, but it was grown up in brush when we got it and the buildings were in bad shape."

The other officer said, "He's right. I made an arrest at that place some years ago and it needed work back then. Not that it matters. You paid for it and the deed was duly recorded. You folks don't have to worry about this at all. Oh, one more thing. We found the remains of a truck in a hollow along the highway close to here. It had some bullet holes in it, and some parts were taken from it. Do you folks know anything about that?"

Ronnie and Tara looked at each other and both said no they didn't know it was there.

The officer looked seriously at them and said, "I doubted if you did. We ran the VIN number and it was stolen years ago. Hunters probably shot it up. Thanks for your time and help on the bank matter. We'll be going now."

Tara breathed a sigh of relief when they got in their car and left. Ronnie remembered that Mike Wilson had been careful when he installed that truck rear axle for Charlie's windmill and made sure the end with the VIN number on it was in the concrete. It looked like that old situation was peacefully at rest now.

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Larry said, "We gotta keep the electric bill paid now, with all those welding rods you found."

Wes said, "Yes, and it will be easier to pay since we can work in the shop."

Ashley said, "I knew you needed them, so that's all we brought up here, but there's a lot more stuff in there. I saw boxes of helmets and lens filters, some grinding and sanding discs, MIG wire, all sorts of welding stuff. You two should go through that one. We just brought the 6010, 7014 and 7018 rods you use a lot, but there are several other kinds."

"We need to get back on Neal's planter job. He needs it bad. But we'll go take a look as soon as we can," Wes said.

Ashley said, "We've got the early garden put in, so there's nothing pressing today. We're going back and work until milking time."

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"Wes ain't gonna believe this," Gloria said. "He's been whining about needing steel for ages."

"He'll be in shock, but he'll get over it," Ashley told her. "I have to make some notes. I wish we had something to measure with. Oh! Yeah, my notepad says it is 3 1/2" x 5". That will work. Let's see here, that has to be 2" wide, and that is 4" wide," She said as she made marks on her pad, creating a crude ruler. "Okay. I have marks at every inch up to 4" now. I'll tear this sheet out and you take notes for me."

Gloria took the pad and pencil while Ashley climbed up on the ends of the bundles of steel in this container, calling down measurements. The bundles were fairly large so there weren't that many

different sizes. Most of it was flat bars of several thicknesses and widths, with several bundles of steel angle in sizes from 1 1/2" wide to 4" wide. They closed up the container and moved on to the other one on the car. There was nothing but black pipe in it, 1", 1 1/2", 2" and 3" diameters. They made notes and moved on.

The next 2 containers also had steel in them, a variety of shafting quality cold rolled rounds in one, and sheets of plate in the other one, from 1/8" up to a few 1/2" thick, all from a Canadian Steel mill headed to a distributor in Louisville.

"Who the heck is Browning? Is that a gun company?"

Ashley looked inside the container and said, "Not this load. They make gears and pulleys and stuff."

"It's headed to Industrial Motion Sales Company in Louisville," Ashley read off the shipper.

They dug open some cartons and found no end of chain sprockets, pulleys, roller chain, and bearings in profusion. All types and sizes, of those. The stuff was too heavy to move, but they read the shipping list and saw that buried in there somewhere were hundreds of Vee-belts, too.

Ashley said, "Our boys are going to be in seventh heaven with all this stuff. And they are going to work us like slaves getting it up to the shop. Let's take them as many different samples as we can, because they are going to need this when machinery starts breaking down this year."

The women worked until late in the afternoon digging through the container, taking off just the top layer of cartons so Gloria, being the skinny one, could crawl in deeper for more. She began to get a little claustrophobic when she got stuck once, and wouldn't go back without making more room for her. The Spring sunshine was heating up the inside of the container, too. She came out sweaty and dirty, and not at all happy about getting stuck, but she had brought out cartons of tapered roller bearings.

"The boys can dig for their own buried treasure. That's enough for me today," Gloria said.

"Let's open the other container on this car. That will finish 26 cars, and we'll have an even dozen to go," Ashley said.

"Whatever. You get to break the lock this time," Gloria said.

It came open with moderate difficulty this time. The contents were crated in wood and cardboard to protect stainless steel sinks, tables, and carts that they could see, from Aero Manufacturing to a restaurant supplier. They didn't try to move any of the heavy crates, but peered in as deep as they could. There were boxed cartons in the far end they couldn't figure out. The women decided that was enough for the day, and headed for the house with their load on the truck.

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## CHAPTER 69

June 2016

Gloria had been busy. The garden was producing, so harvesting and canning was proceeding, but there were some hours that she found to help Kate and Ashley put some of their newfound wealth to work. The south porch roof was covered with small solar panels now that were charging the golf cart batteries they had lugged out of the creek bottom and installed in the enclosed porch. The welding supply container had spools of welding cable they used to hook up their battery bank.

Electric power had been somewhat erratic, sometimes being off for days at a time, so shop work would come to a halt until the power came on again. That was no longer a problem after Neal had found a container of 15 Kilowatt Generac diesel generators. The families had been sharing whatever they found and this was no different. Wes and Larry helped Neal move and install a unit for each farm, complete with transfer switches for automatic operation if desired. The tanker car of kerosene provided fuel to last for years. The units were pretty quiet, but they had improved on that by stacking hay bales for a square wall around the inside of the machine sheds where they were located and venting the exhaust up through the roof with a long pipe.

They only ran the generator for shop work when necessary, and the women planned their laundry accordingly if the utility power was off. The biggest hassle was the occasional trip to the tank car for fuel. That required some barrels and the 12 volt transfer pump that Neal had on his farm truck fuel tank. They filled the tank in Neal's truck, plus a couple barrels to transfer again to each farm's generator tanks. The units were frugal, so they had only done that once so far.

Sorting out clothing had taken some time, as did moving steel and welding supplies to the men's shop. They soon understood that it would take years to move what they could use from the train cars, and they could never use even a small portion of what was there. So far there had been no security breaches, but this week a couple neighbors had wondered aloud where they got some things. Their explanations of black market sources may, or may not have been believed. It was time to do something about the wealth they were sitting on.

"We need to open up the train cars as a store," Larry said. "People need a lot of that stuff and we can never use it all. If we sell it for what people can afford to pay, they won't try to steal it."

"It would be one whopper of a store," Gloria said. "Maybe we should have more than one store, and let somebody else do some of the selling for a share."

Kate asked, "And who would we trust to do that?"

Wes said, "I know some people. Ed Wilson and his son, and their neighbor, Todd Reynolds. We've done business with them, and they are a solid bunch. And I think we should talk to Brent Collins, too. He's a natural for this, since the market is at his farm now anyway."

Ashley said, "There is bound to be trouble out of doing this. Somebody will be jealous of what we have, and some will try to steal things, no matter how cheap we sell it."

Kate said, "Yes, there is no changing people. Maybe the Sheriff can help with that. He ought to know about it before we open that barrel of snakes, at the very least."

"I know him fairly well," Gloria said. "Let's go talk to him about this. He just lives a couple miles down the road. He'll have some ideas, I'm sure. Neal and Olivia will have to go with us and be partners in the whole deal, too. We have to go see them before we do anything drastic here."

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Sheriff Townsend did indeed have some ideas.

"Use that big farm truck of yours to haul goods into town. There are store buildings sitting empty that you could rent for very little, I'm sure. That would keep the attention away from your farms and give people a central place to shop. It would be a lot easier for us to keep an eye on the whole proceeding, too."

Olivia said, "We're too old to do that much work, and it will take a lot of help. There are a lot of people out of work. Let's ask at the Saturday market for labor help to move things. If we provide meals and let them choose goods for pay, we can get all the help we want."

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Wes and Ashley went to see Todd Reynolds, who they knew had a large storage building. Todd jumped at the opportunity to use it as a consignment store for the goods, and offered to pay in silver for some things he wanted. Todd called all his neighbors for a meeting and solicited help to move things from his storage building to the barn and elsewhere. Then he would need help to move the goods using his truck and trailer. From what he had learned, there would also be work for anyone who wanted it sorting things out for sale.

Todd had no doubt that there were plenty of people in the north end of the county who would rather not travel another 8 miles to Brent Collins to buy things. He could add his ammunition sales to the new store. Ed and Joann would sell garden seeds, Ronnie would sell pork products and herbs, Mel and Charlie could provide a noon meal, and everyone would also sell at the Saturday market. Reaching a wider crowd was sure to increase sales.

Retail Sales tax was payable to the County Treasurer's office at the courthouse, a duty the State required from each county now. It was the practically the only source of State revenue, chosen because of the widespread unemployment and the difficulty of collecting income taxes. The Federal government was considering doing this for the same reasons. Food was still exempt from sales tax, and the rate on clothing was reduced to 5% to make the tax less onerous for the poor. Tobacco and liquor were taxed at 25%. The rate was 15% of any sale, including real estate, but items for farm use were exempt to encourage agriculture. The States still got their taxes on fuel, but the federal government had monopoly control on it so they made a killing on it, which helped offset what they were not getting in income taxes. Wes and his family decided that they would not sell any fuel to avoid tax complications and assure their own supply.

After reading their old encyclopedia, Larry learned that naphtha had a flash point very close to gasoline. There were other additives in gasoline that naphtha did not have, being a pure solvent, but he tried it and found he could mix half and half naphtha and gasoline with no ill effects. The books said that naphtha was once known as "white gas", and had been used alone to run engines long ago. They had a lot of Chinese made small engines that he planned to try on pure naphtha. It would be a small cost if he ruined

one of them.

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## CHAPTER 70

July, 2016

It was roasting hot in the shipping container. Sweat ran off Emily and Matthew as they handed out boxes of motor oil and boxed tubes of pressure grease.

"That's enough for now," Todd said.

The two young people gratefully came out into the comparatively cooler shade of the creek bank, wishing for a breeze.

"When you cool off some, we need to load barbed wire and fence staples. Then some instant coffee and teabags, and a dozen golf cart batteries. That should do it for today."

They were all tired. Already on the trailer were solar panels, 40 gallon buckets of paint, a lot of welding rods, a full pallet box of fabric and a smaller box of sewing notions, a big box of school supplies, and 2 Stihl chain saws. Under all that was 80 sheets of metal roofing and 14 sheets of 3/8" plywood. The trailer was sagging on the springs, showing it had all it wanted.

"Let's put 6 of those bikes on top of the load in the trailer, too," Todd said. The youngsters wanted to groan, but Todd was right there helping and sweating as much as they were. The bikes were not the top of the line, being built in China for Walmart, but they were a sensible choice for general use. They were 26" frame size branded Schwinn, and were 15 speed "comfort" bikes, with front spring suspension like a mountain bike and medium width tires to carry a load on less than perfect roads. Todd dug out some spare tires, tubes, patch kits, frame pumps, carry racks, and other accessories from the end of the container and loaded those. Todd pulled out a couple 20" kid's bikes and some things for those also. The trailer was heaped high when they finished.

Matthew and Emily were taking their pay in roofing metal, nails, and plywood. They were fixing up the unused chicken house on the Duncan farm for Bob Clemmons to rent. The plan was he would live there rent free for helping Ronnie with the livestock and farming, then the house would be available for Matthew and Emily when they got married next Fall. Matthew had been saving his money, and Emily had been making money of her own gathering herbs and processing them to be sold by Tara in Todd's store. They had pooled their money to buy a used kitchen cabinet with a sink and some used furniture from Brent Collins. The roof on the chicken house was fairly new metal, so it didn't need attention. The metal they were getting now would be used for siding the old building to eliminate the need for paint. The plywood was for finishing the interior of the walls, already insulated with odd sized styrofoam sheets salvaged from various packaging materials in the rail cars.

The couple had been working for a couple months making things for their new home and buying some used items at the Saturday market. Bob was still living in the house, but he only used the kitchen and other rooms downstairs, so they were storing things as they gathered them upstairs. Matthew was a busy young man, putting in full days working for Todd, doing morning and evening chores at home for his parents, then working evenings with Emily renovating the chicken house.

Mel had never liked to get up early. His body clock had always kept him awake to all hours of the



night, so he was not an early riser. That fitted him perfectly for the job of night watchman at Todd's store. He usually took a turn around his own property pretty late at night anyway. With a little pay for that, and what he made providing lunch for the store customers, Mel made all he thought he needed and still had time to tend his garden and home chores. He and Charlie still went to Brent Collins market on Saturday, too. Or, at least Charlie did. Mel began to stay home on Saturdays, to take the day off and just made some extra food on Friday for him to serve. Charlie made a little more money, Mel still got paid for cooking, and he had a 2 day weekend. Vickie told him his name should have been TOM Sawyer, for getting Charlie to do his work, like the famous fence painting scheme in Twain's book.

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Kate approved heartily of the plans they had made jointly with the Davises and the Sheriff. They had rented the old National Guard Armory that had been sold off when a new one was built. The 80 year old building was huge, and resembled a gymnasium with a full basement. The owner was an older man who had once had a business there, but closed it due to Chinese competition. He was glad to take his rent in the form of goods he selected, based on the volume of business they did. Gloria had worked out that deal, and was fast becoming the family's business negotiator.

The building had excellent security, due to it's original function back when an armory actually had ARMS stored there. The Sheriff had his deputy do some patrols at odd intervals, but there was never a problem. The family had started rumors that there were booby traps in the building. There were none, but nobody could be sure of that. It would take a cutting torch or heavy equipment, to break in there anyway, and gas for cutting torches had been unavailable for several years now.

Conveniently, the Courthouse was only a few blocks away, so the tax agent showed up now and then to monitor the level of activity and check their sales records. Nobody tried to cheat on sales tax collection and payments. The penalties were severe.

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Alicia found that nursing her new baby had helped get her figure back in less than 3 months. Benjamin Carter Reynolds had been born on March 18, and she was back to her old weight by the end of April. Working the early garden had something to do with it, and the rest of her everyday chores, but her belly had gone away much faster with Logan and Benjamin than it had with Christopher who had been bottle fed. She still had some belly left, but she knew that was normal. Women who had kids could count on never looking quite like a teenager again, which brought Emily to mind. Alicia hadn't said anything about it, but she had noticed that Emily's clothes were getting a bit tight around the middle, and the girl had been skipping breakfast for a while. She hadn't had any menstrual cloths soaking in the wash bucket for a while. No mistake about what that meant.

She guessed it didn't matter all that much. The kids were getting married in September, and they were working hard to get their life in order. She thought it would work out fine, so she didn't bother to mention it to anyone. She did resolve to talk with her when Emily was ready. She was probably worried and would need her mother's advice.

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Todd had been working like a fiend. Besides farming 120 acres, he was working late nights in the new store with Christopher and Sophia sorting goods and setting it all up to sell. Tonight they had put the bicycles on display. Todd had found small cheap tool kits in one container that he put with the bikes for sale, along with tires, tubes, and all the other accessories he'd found. Alicia had looked it over and saw that he was a natural sales person.

Somehow, he still found time to check on money matters on the internet, too. What he had told her was discouraging. The dollar along with the Euro and UK's Pound Sterling were still about par with each other, but the Canadian dollar and the Chinese Yuan was increasing in value by comparison. The Chinese had amassed an untold amount of gold in the last 10 years to back their play for the Yuan to be internationally recognized. The new Gold Bank started by the Chinese, Russians, Brazil, and India was at the crux of it, he said, causing those currencies with a greater backing by gold to get stronger. Those countries had recovered pretty fast, too, and were being very productive again. The US was lagging in that respect, with the economy stifled due to high priced energy, and bereft of gold without the borrowed backing of the European fortunes.

In Todd's words, "The damned bankers are doing it to us again, mining every cent they can get out of us for oil, and devil take the hindmost. We have to get energy independent, as individuals, and as a country. If we don't we will be serfs forever."

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Matthew thought he could make it on the Duncan farm. His Dad and Mom had agreed to let him work the place on half shares, except for the hog operation that was still theirs. They had put both farms in a trust at the Courthouse with them as joint first Trustees, and he and Emily as joint second Trustees. That meant that when his parents passed away, both farms would belong to him and Emily. Meanwhile, his parents would pay the property taxes, and he would only have to support his family. His family was already on the way, so that was no small thing, but he knew he could do it.

He needed some farm equipment of his own and a team of horses, for which his Dad had said they would increase his share of the farm earnings to 2/3. He was thinking about how to get those things. After what Harlan had drilled into him not long before he died, Matthew wasn't about to try to work his farm with a tractor that needed diesel fuel. It had been a good thing for Harlan for a while, but when fuel went up many years ago, Harlan had bemoaned letting go of his horses. Matthew had seen fuel prices get stupid expensive, and would not make the mistake of being dependent on it.

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A trial was held for the bank President. It was short. He was found guilty of embezzlement, then sentenced to 5 years of hard labor at the State Penitentiary. The prison had been emptied of prisoners and closed for a time, but now a portion of it was reopened in the old style. The prisoners grew their own food on the prison grounds, and those not required to that or other duties to maintain the place were sent to work on roads, bridges, and repairing other public works in chain gangs.

The money the bank president had stolen was never recovered. His wife had absconded with it, all in the form of silver and gold coins. It was rumored that she had run to distant relatives in Louisiana, never to be heard from again.

By contrast, the bankers who were at the helm when the currency crashed left their positions with untold wealth and disappeared. The general belief was that they had a lot of help from certain government officials.

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## CHAPTER 71

September, 2016

"It was the big bankers fault that it all came apart! Why aren't they in jail? They should be the ones who pay for what happened to the country," Alicia said.

"You're right that their playing with leveraged derivative bets were what drove it over the cliff, Todd said. "But it was the whole money system that was at fault. It was built upon the idea that debt is money. When a new loan was made, that CREATED money out of thin air. That can only last so long before the interest on the accumulated debt gets out of control. It requires constant growth in the economy to pay the interest, and infinite growth is impossible. The world is finite. There are limits to how much we can mine from natural resources and then it is all gone. So, we cannot keep growing forever to satisfy a banker's Ponzi scheme."

"I still want to see them hanging from lamp posts," Alicia said. "They created this paper money system, so it all goes back to them."

"Good luck with that. They still have everyone dancing to their fiddle just like they always did. Politicians don't care where the money comes from as long as they can use it to retain power. The bankers can dole out a little or a lot of money and make the economy go up and down while they make a profit in both directions. They control the money and the oil, so they have a choke hold on the world."

"There has to be a way to stop them, somehow," Alicia said.

"Presidents have tried and they ended up dead," Todd told her. "Andrew Jackson lived because the gun misfired, but Lincoln and Kennedy both died. Jackson was actually successful at getting the National Bank kicked out, but it was back going again before he died. No, they have too much power to fight them head to head. All we can do is try to protect ourselves from the worst of it."

"How can we do that? The government makes us pay taxes in their money, so we can't get away from using dollars. Gold and silver are scarce now, because everybody used what they had to survive and the banks got most of it," Alicia said. "I don't see how we can NOT play their game."

"All we can do is work with what we have. They keep trying to control everything so they can get a piece of it. The answer is to not NEED money. If we produce our own needs to the greatest degree possible, then that much is not subject to their games and we keep all the benefits of our labor."

Alicia was frustrated to the max. She said, "We can't keep from using gasoline and diesel, and they tax everything."

Todd said, "I think we can get along buying very little energy. The State has some things going there, too. Indiana is working on coal gasification and making gasoline from coal. The real battle will come when they try to sell it. The big government and bank interests will try to take that over, too. But in the meantime, we can do things for ourselves that will help. Mike Wilson and Wes Blake are talking about wood gas and biodiesel fuels. There are some hurdles to cross with both of them, but I think they'll get it done. And I've been talking with Dan Billings about farming with horses. He and Ronnie Nichols

know some Amish folks that are breeding draft horses."

"Are you going to sell the tractor?"

"No. At least not yet. I can still make money with it. I have to see if we can make more money using horses. Fossil fuels like oil and coal are limited and as they get more scarce the prices will go up. Horses are sustainable. That's what we have to work toward, is sustainability. I believe that sustainable business is where future wealth will have to come from. We have kids that will need all the wealth we can generate to get a start in life, or they will never be able to be anything but laborers. We have to provide that start for them, and show them the way."

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Ashley asked, "What are we going to sell and what are we going to keep from all the stuff in the train cars? We have to know before Todd makes another trip." She noticed Ella patting the dog a little too enthusiastically and went to show her how she should do it.

Gloria asked Wes, "What about all that steel and stuff. There's more there than you can use in a million years, isn't there?"

"Oh hell no! I'm not going to sell the steel and bearings and all that! Well, I'll sell it, but I'll do it myself, one piece at a time and charge labor for putting the parts on. Lots more money to be made that way, and you can't even buy that stuff now, unless it's some crap import from China. There's enough parts in that one container to keep machinery running here for years. Let's sell the clothes and shoes and those huge rolls of paper instead."

"I want some of those stainless steel tables and sinks for canning and butchering," Kate said.

Larry said, "We need to keep enough of the metal roofing, and paint and building materials to maintain the farm. Who knows how long it will take before we can get those things again?"

"We should sell the canned food that was still good. It's not getting any younger," Ashley said.

Kate said, "Yes. I was amazed that so much of it was still good. I guess the outside stuff insulated the inner stuff to keep it from freezing. After those men cleaned that car out, the cans that were still good are showing some rusty spots, so it has to be used or it will spoil soon. At least they sorted it out before they washed the labels off! Even at fire sale prices, that will be worth something. Those men who worked on it sure thought so."

Gloria said, "It paid for all the help so far. That was the best part. We know most of what we want to keep, but those men haven't gotten to the back ends of most of the cars and containers yet. There will be more things to decide later. It looks like we will need hired help for some time yet. Harvest time is coming up so that means we will all be working on that for a couple weeks. So, we need to get Todd's store all stocked up before then, and have the hired men keep things sorted out for us to sell on market days."

Kate said, "I still don't want to sell any whisky. It would be a tax problem, and we don't want to let out that we have it. We've been real lucky so far not having any security problems, but whisky would start trouble for sure."

"I'm amazed at the demand for the cigarettes," Ashley said. "You'd think that after people had been without for several years they wouldn't start up smoking again."

Wes said, "People want their vices. I guess smoking isn't that easy to get over. Maybe we should learn about growing tobacco. I heard there is someone up around Brownstown that is growing some, so maybe we could get seed there. The stores have tobacco again, but it's outrageously high priced."

Larry said, "That's because it is all imported. The tobacco companies here haven't got going again yet."

Ashley said, "There's a high sales tax on it, too, but it might make sense to grow some to beat the import prices. That seems to work on anything we can produce now."

Gloria said, "I have more free time than Ashley. I'll go down there and look at what they are dragging out today and make a list."

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"TODD'S STORE AND TRADING POST" the sign said. Sophia was very good at painting that kind of thing. Alicia had helped her lay out the lettering on a sheet of plywood after Christopher had painted it 2 coats of outdoor white enamel. Todd and Charlie Allen had set 2 cedar posts with crossbars of cedar and mounted it along the highway. There was an arrow pointing down their road and the storage building had been converted to a store with another sign above the door.

Christopher painted old cardboard white for indoor signs and Sophia lettered those using a small brush Chris had made from squirrel hair. When wet with paint, the brush became very limp and allowed her to draw the letters by dragging the long hair, eliminating jiggles. It looked very professional, indeed. She had signs for everything in the store, including Mel's lunch table, with price lists. There was also one that said, "TRADES CONSIDERED, SEE OWNER".

People heard about Todd's new store by word of mouth, or noticing the sign by the highway. It began to be common to have several customers in the store at once, mostly exploring what was for sale. The school supplies were very popular, many people buying paper and pencils then using them to list prices for what interested them. There seemed to be a lot of demand, limited by what customers could afford. By the end of the first month, there was a good collection of traded in items in the back of the store, now for sale.

Todd struck a deal with the people printing the weekly newspaper, trading a roll of printing paper from the rail car for his ends of rolls of cheap newsprint, plus free issues of the newspaper for the next year for him to sell. He could sell the newsprint for notepaper by having the printers cut it up into 8 1/2" x 11" sheets that they glued together into pads. Todd made money on the deal, and was able to undercut the price of paper from China at the stores. He sold it fast while it lasted. Todd seemed to have a knack for spotting shortages that he could find a way to supply.

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It was a small wedding at the valley church, attended by just the two sets of parents, Bob Clemmons who Matthew had asked to be his Best Man, and Emily's siblings. The reception at Todd's store was another matter. The whole community came, and a lot of regular customers. The crowd was enjoying one of the first joyous events in a long time. Mel Sawyer and Vickie had done the food, helped by several others, and makeshift tables were loaded down with it. The store was closed for the rest of the day, with sheets hung over the displays and everything crowded back against the walls to make room.

One table was heaped with many hand made presents, none of them wrapped for lack of paper, but all were tagged by the well-wishing givers. There was a long-hoarded greeting card and envelope behind the cake that Laura Wilson had baked. A wedding toast was given with the bride and groom partaking of Gerald Tomes' finest wine. The cake was cut and the bride and groom properly stuffed each other's faces with it, laughing and smiling.

While the crowd was treated to cake and punch then Laura's mints made with Tara's wild peppermint, Matthew and Emily began to acknowledge presents, reading the tags aloud for everyone to hear. There was a complete set of hand forged kitchen knives from Mike Wilson, a gallon of honey from Gerald and Anne, and household items by the dozens, including hand carved wooden spoons and a huge wooden bowl for bread making. Wes, Ashley, Kate, Larry and Gloria had given them a hand written Gift Certificate, for up to \$500 in goods of their choice.

The envelope was left until last. It simply said, from Mom and Dad. Look behind the curtain. One curtain from the house had been hung over what looked like just more covered store goods. Alicia pointed it out to the couple, with a big smile. Emily drew back the curtain and gasped at the array of things. There was a box of clothing for each of them, and it looked like some of everything in the store. The couples' eyes were drawn to the pair of lever action rifles, and a pair of revolvers. The rifles had slings with their names carved into them, and the revolvers each had a holster and belt, all the leather custom made by Ed Wilson. The whole collection rested on a wood crate of .45 Colt ammunition. A dozen steel traps hung on that crate, with a sackful of walnut hulls to dye them with. Atop the crate was another note that said, "Look in the barn."

When they read that aloud, the whole crowd followed them to the barn, where Todd's best kept secret was standing in a big box stall, a pair of Belgian mares in new harness. Matthew couldn't contain his joy at seeing this and gave Todd a rowdy hug, then shook his hand vigorously saying thanks with tears in his eyes.

With her arm around his waist, Emily whispered in his ear, "We CAN make it! I know we can!"

Matthew nodded and said, "We can now, for sure!"

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## CHAPTER 72

November, 2016

The belly was getting in her way. Emily was less than happy about that, but she was awed by the feeling of the baby moving. She had talked to her Mom and put some fears to rest, learned more, and then at her suggestion, she talked to Vickie Hoskins about attending her as a midwife when the time came. Both older women had told her that she had wide hips that would make birthing a baby a lot easier. Not to worry. They had figured out that the baby was probably due by the middle of the month, so she had a little time yet.

Matthew was bone tired, but he was satisfied he had done his best with the farm this Fall, and worked 4 or 5 days a week for wages away from home, too. The new bicycle had made it easier because he didn't have to walk all the way to Todd's when they were building on to his store. Now, with the corn harvest in, he could settle down to logging the woods between him and his Dad's place. He was anxious to really try out that new Stihl chain saw.

There was a market for hides now that the tanner had hooked up with leather workers in other communities, so Matthew had been trapping for coyotes and raccoons. He got a few 'Possums, too, but they sold pretty well also with the winter fur on. Matthew always took tanned cowhide in trade for his hides. That suited both him and the tanner, because money was hard to get. The leather would be needed to make harness, because he had a plan to raise draft horses from his mares and would need harness for them. More people were wanting horses now, and he didn't see that changing anytime soon.

Ronnie and Todd had both said that a man should make all the money he could while he was young, because there was no old age pension or disability insurance for a safety net now. Matthew was doing all he could think of that would add to their savings. Really, savings wasn't the right word, since they only kept a fraction of their excess in money and the bulk of it in livestock, or other farm investments that would make a profit. He and Emily both remembered all too well how money could go bad and leave you with nothing. It had happened to both their families, and they were not going to let it happen to them.

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Kate had the same thoughts. She had noticed that gasoline was up to near \$15 a gallon, and diesel fuel was \$18.90 now. Soon after those prices went up, so did everything in the stores. It was just like what happened years ago, and it scared her. She began to think hard about how they could live without buying much of anything. It didn't matter much that they were really wealthy now, from all the rail car goods, she was still scared because she had seen everything go to hell once, and knew it could happen again.

When Ashley came in from milking with Ella, Kate said, "We need to keep making cheese and butter and doing things just like we have been. I'm afraid the money could go bad again, and I don't want to get caught by it."

"Wes and I had that discussion, too," Ashley said. "He doesn't want to sell much more of the train stuff because he says it will always be worth what it is now, or more, and money might not."

Gloria was making biscuits to go with supper and said, "Boy that's the truth! I'll never trust money again like i used to. It's funny, but even back ten years ago, prices were going up and everybody just thought it was normal, that you couldn't do anything about it. Then when it really went to nothing, we all thought the world had ended until we figured out how to get along with out much."

Larry came in from doing chores and had heard most of the talk. He said, "Wes and I have been talking about that. We agreed that we'd be better off keeping our profits in real stuff instead of saving money. The damn bankers can make money worth a lot or a nothing, so we have to keep it out of their reach."

Kate said, "It would help our tax situation if we just didn't sell everything now, too. I vote that we hang onto what we have, at least most of it. If it's something that would spoil, then go ahead and sell it, or trade for something better, but otherwise, just let it all sit there. We can always use it or trade it. It better than money in the bank."

Wes had come in for supper and heard the last of the talk. He said, "You're right about that. Money in the bank is a fool's gamble. Wish I'd known that a very long time ago. But trading might be a better idea, for things we really need."

Kate said, "I'm glad we all see it that way. It makes things a lot simpler. Now we need to put more of those new things to work. I want to be ready for butchering this year with those new stainless steel tables and a big sink."

Larry grinned and said, "Sounds like we got work to do Wes."

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Todd got a new list from Wes and Larry of things they wanted to take in trade. It looked like they might get into horse farming, too, and they wanted a windmill for their well. They wanted a lot of the same things he did and most of them were antiques, like the old style milking machine, and cream separator. He was pretty sure he could get them the farm implements they wanted. People were getting pretty hard up again, with prices going up and they would trade off anything they didn't absolutely have to keep. It was a good time to be buying things, yet oddly, his store was busier than ever. Maybe folks have learned to get prepared for hard times, he thought.

He had just read an old book Alicia had found at the market, that told about how empires collapse. He had begun to see that what was happening in the US had happened many times before. We have to learn from history, he thought. Then it occurred to him that it presented an opportunity for someone who was ready to take advantage of it. Land was still cheap, and would get cheaper, but fuel was going up and would probably keep going up. That gave him an idea.

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The cheapest land around was the rough forested land nearby. Todd still had some of his original stash of silver coins, bought before the crash, and he was making a good living from the store with some to spare. Their farming income was being put back into farm improvements and livestock. They owned 20 head of beef cattle now and he had bought a pair of draft horses from an Amish man some distance away. They were young and one was a mare that he'd had bred. He thought Ronnie and Matthew were doing it right logging with horses, but they needed a better market for their timber.

Todd began to think about fuel prices in relation to that, and the sawmill in the valley that ran on wood



gas. He and Mike Wilson needed to talk about that. If they could come up with a reliable wood gas setup that didn't require all the tinkering the sawmill needed to keep it going, they would have a winner.

Todd also wanted a windmill to pump their water for livestock. It hadn't been part of his original plan, and he was kicking himself for not thinking of it. The hand pump was fine for the household needs, but cattle drink a lot of water. That meant letting them out to go to the pond for water twice a day, and in winter he had to chop ice off the pond so they could drink. He would want his windmill pump enclosed so it didn't freeze up, and the water tank would have to be insulated somehow, too. But he had to find a windmill first and they were getting scarce.

Todd made a trip to get more stock for the store from Wes Blake, but first he went to the Courthouse in town and inquired about tax sales. He learned there would be several tracts of land for sale at the end of the month for unpaid property taxes. They accepted silver, gold, or cash for payment. He looked over the list for property near his own farm and saw a large tract of land owned by a timber company that he happened to know was bankrupt. There was over 600 acres of timberland in one parcel that bordered Mel Sawyer's place, from the plat map he looked at. There was some road frontage, but most of it was steep hollows and virtually none of it suitable for farming, so the property taxes were very low. He would attend that auction on the Courthouse steps in a couple weeks.

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"Fuel prices are going up again," Ed told Joann.

"How can they do that? It's killing us now!"

"The news on the internet said Venezuela's wells are dropping their output. It seems that the last dictator squeezed them too hard to finance the country and now they are putting out over 90% water. Won't be long until they are dry, so that takes some oil off the world market and that always means the price goes up."

"Any idea how much?"

"Not yet. They only produced about 4 or 5 per cent of the world oil supply according to the article, depending on who you believe, but the problem is they sold a lot of it to the US because we had refineries that could process their sour crude oil. That means the US will be hit harder than other countries, and I don't see anybody else making up the difference. We can look for shortages before long."

"I don't know how people can pay any more for gas and diesel. Everybody is hurting now. Todd said business had been good, but he expected it to slow down this winter. He thinks people have been spending their harvest money to stock up for winter and that will be over soon," Joann said.

"That may be right. It could be a long, hard winter," Ed said.

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"I haven't made a gasifier before," Mike told Todd. "I have read about them a lot and I looked pretty close at the one on the sawmill. They didn't do much to clean up the output gas, so they keep having trouble with the engine. And they have some trouble with corrosion, because the gas is dirty. From what I've read, that's not too hard to fix, but it means building a more elaborate filtering unit."

"Make a list of what you need to build me the best gasifier you can, and I'll see if I can get the materials for you. I want it as soon as you can get it built and working. I'll pay you for your work as you go, because this sounds like it will take a while," Todd told him.

"That would be fine," Mike said. "I did promise Matthew Nichols I'd finish that old machinery he bought, so he is ahead of you in line."

"It will take a while to gather materials, so get me the list and I hope to have that collected by the time you are ready for it. I need to find a vehicle to use, too."

"Okay. Look for an old pickup truck with a gas engine. Something before 1980 would be good. They are simpler and we don't want a computerized engine. Something like Ronnie's old truck would be ideal."

"He wouldn't part with that truck," Todd said.

Mike laughed. "No, he won't. But there are some around, and a lot of them sitting now because they used too much gas. A 6 cylinder would be better."

"I'll start looking. If this works out, I'll want a stationary engine, too," Todd said.

"Let's do the stationary engine first, because that means I don't have to make the unit so compact and it will give me chance to get the bugs out of it."

A week later, Todd hauled in an old Chevy 1/2 ton truck and 2 spare engines for it, all alike. Todd bought the 610 acre land parcel of forest for \$2,200 in back taxes. There was the usual caveat that the previous owner had up to a year to pay the taxes and the deal would be off, but Todd knew the timber company no longer existed. He began to search for a saw mill for sale.

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Emily's back had been hurting, making it uncomfortable to sleep. She had just got breakfast started when she had a bad cramping pain in her belly that doubled her over. She cried out and Matthew came running to the kitchen.

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## CHAPTER 73

Thanksgiving, 2016

Relieved and happy, Matthew sat by Emily as she nursed Melanie Claire, their new baby girl. Matthew had hurried to fetch Vickie Hoskins on his bicycle, urging her to hurry. Vickie knew there was no big rush. First babies always took longer, so she tried to calm him down. Melanie Claire Nichols had taken her own sweet time, finally arriving late that evening after a long and arduous labor. Emily was exhausted, and Matthew was a nervous wreck, but the baby was oblivious and slept quietly on her mother's chest after her first meal.

Matthew had done the chores hurriedly that evening. Thankfully, he didn't forget anything, tending to their own livestock while Bob Clemmons fed Ronnie's cattle, then the sows who were also expecting. They sat on the porch and passed the time as best they could.

Bob was on edge, too, until he and Matthew had heard the first squall from the new baby, and ran inside to greet her. Now they relaxed at the kitchen table with a bottle of Gerald's wine and talked about what they needed to do the next day.

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Two weeks later Gerald held their traditional Thanksgiving dinner in his shop building. His tractor and other equipment sat outside, getting a light dusting of wet snow, melting as it hit. People arrived a family at a time and assembled their food contributions on the tables inside. Talk centered on the new baby girl for the women, and congratulations to Matthew from the men for a while.

Silently, during a prayer of thanks before the meal, individuals gave thanks for the food awaiting them, remembering when they didn't know where their next meal was coming from. Then they began to fill plates, eat, and visit with friends and neighbors while the food and warmth helped everyone relax.

Mike and Todd were celebrating the success of the new wood gasifier that they had operating. It was mounted in the bed of the old truck Todd found and had made a few trial trips. Today they were making plans to move parts of an old sawmill to Mike's shop for restoration. Todd had found it 7 or 6 miles away in a hollow north and west of them near the river, and had some trouble locating the owner. The old man was glad to trade it off for credit at Todd's store. It had taken Todd, Mike, and Charlie Allen a week to get it disassembled and the metal parts ready to load onto Todd's truck and trailer. Mike had made careful drawings with measurements of the machinery before they took it apart, then ordered oak timber from the sawmill in the valley to build new framework. Putting all that together would occupy most of the winter, made possible only by Todd having horses that could navigate the rough ground where it would be built.

Gerald announced that he had made a deal with a store in Seymour to market his wines, and a supply of bottles to be made by the old glassworks in Corydon who had done only decorative pieces for years before. Corks were another matter, and expensive, being imported. He'd had a good harvest of honey this year, and had just finished a batch of Mead.

Ronnie and Tara told how much work it saved to sell their cured meats and packaged herbs in Todd's store, rather than haul it to town each week. Tara had gotten a supply of cut paper from the newspaper printer, some of the bounty from the train cars. That meant that paper for making envelopes was no

longer a problem for them, and they shared the work with Joann Wilson who needed them for their garden seeds. They were working out a process to make this go faster.

Business had dropped off dramatically at Todd's store when the weather turned cold. That suited everyone fine for their own reasons. Wes and Larry had told Todd they wanted to keep a lot of the rail cars goods for future income, and Todd had other business to attend to. His imported ammunition and Mike's reloads were selling well, along with goods produced by the neighbors here on the ridge. There was still regular demand for flour, cornmeal, salt and spices, cured meat products, and some clothing. Todd had all the business he wanted, and was making more money on trades than cash sales. He'd had to hire Matthew and Charlie Allen to build on to the store for room to house the goods he acquired in trading.

Mel and Charlie were doing well selling food at the store and at Brent Collins' Saturday market, although trade there had slowed down, too, after fuel prices rose again. Vickie Hoskins had all she wanted to do tending new mothers like Emily and occasional injuries. She expressed thanks that there had been no outbreaks of disease in the area which she attributed to less contact between people.

Ed Wilson had a new crop of calves from last Spring that were growing fast, and all the leather business he could handle. Bob Clemmons had expressed an interest in doing leather work, so Ed had hired him to help on a piecework basis. Bob was learning fast, and Ed was glad for the help. He had bought out an old shoe repair shop in town, and was in the process of moving the equipment to his place. Mike had helped him figure out how to arrange powered machines along a wall to be run by a line shaft with a small gas engine outside.

The group began to split up as the sky darkened and snow came down heavier, beginning to accumulate on the ground. When Todd's family got home, Sophia looked for something to do and found Christopher listening to the shortwave radio. He was busily writing notes when she came in. He put down the pencil and looked up.

Sophia asked, "What's up?"

Chris said, "Dad's not gonna like this."

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"Turn on the TV. Let's see if it's made the news yet," Todd said.

Sophia turned on their 12 volt TV. The 6:00 o'clock news had some Louisville politician talking about fuel rationing and how it would affect bus service. In a few minutes they began to recap the story about US and Canadian oil well output dropping faster than expected. A video clip from Washington DC had the newly appointed Energy Czar telling that we must conserve our oil supplies to assure national security, so fuel rations to government stations were being cut to half what they had been.

"They're lying," Chris said. "The guy on the shortwave said that a bunch of Texas wells had gone dry this month and the Canadian tar sands had some kind of problem with water supply, whatever that means. But he said it would cut our oil supply by 2/3 or more. He was afraid they would try to pump what's left too fast and kill a lot more wells."

Alicia said, "That is going to kill the country. Imported oil is going to be higher than ever now and we couldn't afford it before this."

Todd didn't say anything, but went to the computer and pulled up the government site that gave international oil and natural gas prices.

"West Texas Intermediate crude was \$268 a few days ago when I looked. It's showing at \$486 a barrel now. We have a problem."

Alicia turned off the TV. It got quiet for a moment while everybody was thinking.

Then Christopher said, "We need more horses. If we're going to farm, and diesel fuel goes up a lot more, it will cost too much to run the tractor."

Todd was thinking a mile a minute. Finally he said, "We have to get that sawmill running on wood gas. That will give us wood to run that old truck on wood gas, and Mike can convert some small engines to run on it, too. The problem is going to be finding enough stainless steel material to build the gasifiers. We can probably get that done, but grain harvest is what worries me. They said something on TV about assuring that the military and agriculture would have priority for fuel rations, but that could mean anything. We have enough diesel on hand to do our harvest this year, but I doubt if many farmers have any extra right now. This is going to drive food prices out of sight."

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Ed had seen the news on TV. He told Joann, "They are going to screw this up like they do everything else. It's going to be a long cold winter, even for the people that heat with natural gas, because when oil goes up, so does gas. It doesn't make much sense to me, but that's what happens every time."

Joann said, "They said they would put controls on food prices, but that won't work. It will just mean shortages in the stores and black market food will cost more. It happened the last time they did that."

Ed nodded slowly. "That means we will probably be in the black market selling beef. I hate to see that coming."

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When Ed and Ronnie Nichols talked the next day, they agreed that they would have to keep a low profile when they sold beef and pork.

"I can do most of the farming without fuel," Ronnie said. "It means we'll have to do some things different but I still need fuel to grind feed and I don't have that much on hand. It's going to be tough year."

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Kate said, "I'm glad we didn't tell anybody about that tank car full of diesel fuel. Before the year's out, people will be fighting over fuel."

"It's next Spring that worries me," Larry said. "We're right back where we were when fuel went up the first time."

Wes nodded and said, "Yeah, even doing all we can with the oxen this winter, we'll have to use some of that tank car diesel to get by. And people are going to wonder where we got the fuel. This will start some real trouble."

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As a farmer, Terry Townsend was doing okay. He had cut back his grain production to just enough to feed his few head of pigs and chickens, the rest of his land being in hay and pasture. That reduced the time needed to work the farm and allowed him to spend most of each day at the Sheriff's office.

But as the County Sheriff, he was worried. The fuel situation was critical and getting worse. Everyone had bought all the fuel they could before the ration cuts took effect, and now they were short on fuel and broke besides. He remembered the last time that fuel went way up, and this looked even worse. People had done all they could think of to cope with high prices for everything. They had moved whole families in together just to survive. They raised gardens, sold or traded off anything they could, and done without a lot of things, even enough food. Some had starved and others got sick and died. Desperate people turned to stealing, and some got killed trying it, both thieves and victims.

Terry had thought that when he took the job as Sheriff that the worst was over. The Mayor had said so, and everyone agreed that those who had survived that first hard winter would make it from there. Crime had died down and some things had improved, but that was all history. He hoped the town could survive this winter. The worst part for townspeople was the high cost of heating a place to live. Gas and electric were the only choices for most people. A few had wood stoves, but the cost of firewood was right up there with the rest now. It cost too much to haul it to town, and those who had chain saws that still worked were thinking about how long they could keep them going to supply their own firewood. Terry expected crime to flare up again, and he only had one deputy.

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"We have enough money now," Gloria said, "but what about next year? People won't be able to afford to buy anything with gas and diesel so high. It's going to shut down business all over. We won't be able to sell anything at all."

Ashley shook her head and said, "I don't know. This just has me lost."

Larry said, "We can't farm like we have been and expect to make a profit. At lunchtime today, the TV said gas was \$28 a gallon and diesel was \$32.40. We can't afford to start the tractor unless it will make us 30 bucks an hour or more."

Kate was thinking back to her childhood when she said, "We have to look at how people did things a long time ago. We have already changed how we live to something like what I knew as a kid, when we looked forward to a weekly trip to town, and people grew most of what they ate. We may have to go back farther than that now, like before there was any such thing as electricity and cars and trucks. I can't think of any other way to do it. We can't buy more than 5 gallons of gas a month under the new rationing, unless they decide to give us more for farming. And that will cost \$140! We just can't do it. We need some horses if we're going to be able to make it now."

Wes said, "All the Amish have figured that out by now and I bet you couldn't buy a horse for any price...."

He was interrupted by knocking on the door. Neal Davis was there with his wife when Ashley answered the door.

"We didn't hear you drive up," she said.

"That's because we walked. Can't afford gas now, so we won't be going much of any place."

"Well come in and get warm. The coffee pot is hot."

Wes pulled some more chairs from the kitchen table to the living room and offered his to the company. Neal sat down and said, "You said you didn't want to sell much more stuff now, but what about trading some of it off?"

"Depends on what somebody wants to trade, I guess," Wes said.

"How about horses? The Amish man over north of us came by today on his way home from town and said he heard we had winter clothes and some other things they needed. They don't get out much either, now, with prices so high, and they need about everything. He allowed as how we might want some horses since we are living pretty much like they do now, and he and his neighbors have some to trade. They bought up a bunch of riding horses cheap when everything went bad, and they've been breeding the biggest ones to their Belgian stud. Says there is maybe 15 or 16 head they could sell amongst their community."

Kate said, "Well, I'll be! We were just talking about horses. Oxen are fine for heavy work, but they have no speed to them."

Neal went on, "See, I don't have everything they need, and I thought maybe we could get together and make a deal with them. I'd like to have a team to work. I grew up with Grandpaw's horses, and I haven't forgot everything I knew about 'em."

Larry said, "I think we still owe you for that big generator, don't we? We can work it out. I vote we do this."

Gloria said, "It sounds to me like the answer to a prayer."

Several heads nodded agreement, then Kate said, "Okay, that's settled. We have a big pot of beef stew on the stove, so you all better stay for supper and help us with it, or we'll be eating it all week."

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## CHAPTER 74

January, 2017-2018

Europe's population had fallen to a tenth of what it had been at the peak. The village settlements, developed centuries before, were where most of the survivors lived now. They farmed the tiny fields around them, often digging them by hand, and eked out an existence, wasting nothing. The lucky ones had the better water supplies, mostly from ancient wells and mountain runoff. The major cities had succumbed one after another to lack of trade, the cost of the energy needed to maintain them, and failing water and sewage systems that brought disease. The few who lived in cities were scavengers and a few business people that exploited the old tradition of cities as the centers of trade.

Fiat money systems had collapsed entirely, with only gold-backed currencies surviving in Germany and the UK. The super rich had retreated from London, Brussels, and Basel to enclaves in the mountainous regions where they existed less luxuriously, matching the 18th century level of world trade that they still exploited for support.

When their oil supplies had failed, Russians survived the way they always had, in spite of crushing despotic governments and the harsh climate. China had lost more than 3/4 of it's people to starvation. After repeated rebellions, China had reverted to its' previous feudal state with warlords ruling areas defined by geography as they had for centuries. Central governments could not get a foothold in either country, with no ready means of transportation to assert their power.

The US still had a central government of sorts, roughly similar to what had existed 200 years before. The rapid loss of taxation and purchasing ability for critical fuel and food had caused mass desertions from the once world class military forces. That left the US a toothless tiger that made some roaring noises, but nobody paid much attention. The US nuclear arsenal was more or less intact, but much of the support systems, most importantly the operational expertise, was fast dwindling away leaving it useless. It had all happened too fast for the once powerful to react.

What military might remained in the world was focused on the Mideast and its' rich oil supplies, as China, Russia, and the rest of Asia duked it out over dwindling supplies. The unfortunate result was a highly radioactive area that would never have the oil extracted by anyone. Kuwait had ceased to exist after US military support had gone away. Saudi Arabia had fulfilled the prophetic saying of the old Sheik, "My grandfather rode a camel, my father rode a camel, I drive a Mercedes, my son drives a Land Rover, his son will drive a Land Rover, but his son will ride a camel."

There were still a few very rich Arabs who now lived in scattered areas of Africa, having escaped with quantities of gold before the wars had begun. They lived much as their forebears had done, on the edges of the desert.

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Some ridiculous vestiges of world trade showed up in rusting hulks of container ships in harbors when they were plundered by the last survivors of those port cities. Most of what they found was left to degrade in the elements, anything other than food or weapons being relatively useless for day to day survival.

Another year went by, marked mostly by the silence of starvation in the US, interrupted by clashes of



violence, but those became fewer as time went by.

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Terry Townsend's hair had turned white in the past year, although he had just seen his 40th birthday. He had been able to do virtually nothing while his town had become a battleground for a short time as people fought over the scraps of a once great civilization. Less than a tenth of the original inhabitants remained, and sometimes the stench of the dead still caused him to retch.

His office had been attacked, although he wasn't there at the time. His farm had also been attacked by the same mob. Terry had seen several men butchering one of his cows in the pasture and ordered them off the place with a rifle. They shot at him and the fight was on. That shot missed him, but his killed the shooter. Terry had dived for cover then made his way to the house for more ammunition.

His neighbors had come running when they heard shooting. Larry Barnes was mending fence and was half a mile closer, so he had called the others with the walkie talkie they all carried. Larry ran up the road and fought from cover in a fencerow until the others could get there, but got hit when the mob began to shoot his direction. Neal, Wes and the young women had been working on a building. They had all grabbed guns and piled into Wes' truck. Neal was hit before he could get to cover, but the others overwhelmed the mob with firepower. The fight stopped when the attackers ran out of ammunition and were eliminated as they tried to run away.

They had hopefully secured the neighborhood once and for all. Larry Barnes was recovering, but Neal Davis had not survived. His widow had moved in with the Blakes. He assumed they would merge their 2 farms.

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A week later, another group had assaulted Todd's store, bent on killing and robbing a rich target. Todd Reynolds had nightmares regularly about the mob attack. He knew his son would never be quite the same, nor would Sophia. The look in their eyes was always distant now.

They had been returning from running their trapline when the attack took place and had the advantage of surprise on the attackers. Chris and Sophia had dropped one after another of the mob with the lever action rifles, forcing the attack into panicked retreat. Todd had methodically shot as targets appeared with his AR-15, while Alicia fired from a window in the log house. Ed Wilson had been walking down to the store to trade when the fight broke out and did his part with his old Springfield, but was hit in the leg. With fire coming from 4 directions at them, the attackers broke and ran, only to be cut down on the way.

If any survived to tell about it, they were never seen again. The fact that Todd knew most of the attackers was what gave him nightmares. Their faces were never far from his mind. The tragedy in Todd's mind was that if they had only asked, he could have put most of them to work and they would still be alive. Instead, he had to use the tractor to make a mass grave.

Todd took the signs down and closed the store.

Christopher spent a lot of time with Sophia close by, not speaking but always touching.

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A month later, Ed Wilson was still nursing the wound in his leg. Joann had told Vickie Hoskins that

she knew he was on the mend because he was cranky as an old bear. Ed was up and getting around on a crutch he had cut out of a dead sapling. Mike had been caring for his cattle and Laura had worked with them to keep a supply of firewood.

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## CHAPTER 75

Spring, 2018

Benjamin Carter Reynolds had just turned 2 years old and learned the word "no". He used it constantly like most his age, trying to assert himself as a person in a world of adults. His 5 year old brother Logan got exasperated with him, as did Alicia, but it was a minor aggravation to her thinking. The fact that they were alive and healthy was always uppermost in her mind. She silently gave prayers of thanks every day since the attack on their place. She had fought like an angry mother bear for her offspring, and killed her share. Weapons had not been out of her reach since that day.

Todd's team of horses and the new filly colt got attention lavished on them as members of the family. Todd spent a lot of time with them when he wasn't with his wife and children. The horses gave him some silent reassurance he needed.

Christopher and Sophia had been inseparable since the attack. When they laid down together late that night, nobody had said a word about it. They had slept together since then, not talking much to anyone else for months. As the weather warmed again, they seemed to thaw along with it and began to seem more like their old selves again, but they were never apart for very long.

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The partnership of the Blake and Davis farms was never even discussed, but accepted as a tacit agreement among the members of the combined households. Olivia Davis and Kate were the oldest of friends and spent every day together doing homely tasks that kept the hard working younger members fed, clothed, and cared for.

Larry's left arm wasn't what it used to be after recovering from a wound, but it didn't seem to get in the way of what he wanted to do. He showed a new devotion to Kate after she had nursed him through some days of fever and pain. Wes and Ashley had enough to do with 5 year old Ella and a her sister Savannah Jane, now 2 years old. The toddler got into everything and quickly got nicknamed Calamity Jane.

Gloria was thrilled beyond words to find herself pregnant and Larry was proud to finally have the start of his own family.

The old Davis home was now a bunkhouse for hired help that had migrated from the mostly defunct town to find any sort of work. The 4 men quartered there were of all ages from 17 to over 50, each having the resilient nature that had kept them alive so far. They were glad to work for their keep and some kind of security, but the Blakes and Barnes were more generous than that and earned their loyalty over time.

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Once the European sponsored gold backing for the US dollar was gone, it floundered for a few months but had stabilized, being backed now by the gold in Fort Knox and exchangeable for newly minted gold coins at \$20,000 per ounce. Trade between states was going on again, but at much lower levels due to the cost of freight, although some new coal fired, steam river boats promised to bring down shipping costs.

Illinois had finally restored a small oil refinery near the Indiana border and traded its lucrative output for what it needed. Indiana had a small coal conversion plant just started up that produced a limited amount of gasoline, patterned after an earlier plant in West Virginia. That product, however, was being shipped by barge downriver, and gasoline for Indiana came from West Virginia, also by riverboat.

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Larry had found they could run their old pickup on straight naphtha from the tank car by retarding the timing somewhat. It tended to reduce to knocking, but they cured that by adding a slight amount of kerosene which increased the power output, but made it very hard to start in cold weather. They didn't use it much anyway, mostly relying on horse drawn transportation now. The fuel was used primarily in small engines for water pumping and running a vacuum pump for their milking system, scavenged from a burned out dairy farm. One of their hired hands made the daily milk run to a new neighborhood store with a team and wagon, bringing home any trade goods from the day before and whatever money they earned.

Diesel engines ran well on the purified kerosene from the other tank car. It didn't produce as much power, but it didn't go sour in the tank, either, and starting was easier with a little added naphtha. They were still able to operate their combine for grain harvest, but it was on its' last legs. Larry and Wes had been busy all winter working on it, using whatever parts came to hand to make it run one more season of wheat harvesting. Their corn crops were all picked by hand now to save wear on the combine. When the combine could no longer be made to run, the alternative was hand gathering and threshing. The men were working on a stationary thresher design for that day.

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At Brent Collins' farm, a somewhat abbreviated Saturday market day continued. Bicycles, teams of horses pulling wagons, and handcarts were more plentiful than gasoline or diesel powered vehicles. Todd showed up with a team and wagon loaded with goods from their neighborhood, and did a modest amount of trading.

Mel and Charlie were there as always, offering hot meals. Mel had begun to be sociable again after the attack on Todd's store. He had been in a funk for months afterward because it was over before he could get there to help, being some distance away at the time. Vickie had badgered him into continuing the food business to give him something to do.

Wes, Larry, and their families had set up on a farm wagon selling their wares along with some craft items their hired hands had made. Gloria and Ashley made the rounds of the market, visiting and shopping. Wes traded 2 pounds of butter for a really nice handmade leather belt and reflected that when he got out of prison, his first suit of clothes made a big dent in his savings. Even after all the money miseries he had been through, he felt like he had come up a long way in money terms.

He watched Ashley carrying Calamity Jane with Ella Kate following her and felt rich in another way. He still carried his father in law's old .45 in his belt, and deep inside he felt the protectiveness in himself. Wes decided that he fit this new, simpler world better than the old one he'd grown up in.

Ed Wilson was there, gimping around with a limp on his bad leg and taking orders for boots and dried beef. Joann did a lively business selling garden seeds and tending the herb sales for Tara who was expecting again and had stayed home.

Terry Townsend asked Ed to measure him for new boots. While Ed traced his foot on a piece of

leather, Terry said, "Looks like business is picking up again this Spring."

Ed looked around at the crowd and said, "Yeah, mebbe so. I wondered if it would. We all hit bottom so many times I doubted things would come back."

Joann said, "I heard that, Ed Wilson! Things are looking up again and you know it. There's no call to be down about things. After all, when you get to the bottom, the only direction left is up!"

Ed looked up and grinned at her and said, "Yes Ma'am!"

The whole crowd had heard her outburst and looked their direction, then gave a hearty laugh at his reply, sharing the couple's feeling to the core. The sun seemed to shine a little brighter then, as did the smiling faces in the crowd.

Life was going on, and it wasn't all bad.

THE END

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