

Families First ~ A Post-Apocalyptic Next-World Series

Character Companion Guide

30 backstories on your favorite characters

McKinney, Texas

Lance

Lance grew up in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, on Saddle Ranch in Loveland, Colorado. He spent much of his childhood outdoors in and around the ranch, shooting his recurve bow, fishing, and riding his 1975 Honda XL-70 dirt bike.

With a swimming pool, tennis court, baseball diamond, fishing canal and miles of forests, it wasn't a surprise that kids from across the country wanted to spend the summer there.

Saddle, however, was a working ranch and Lance had chores during the summer and year-round after school, including stacking hay bales, milking goats and cows, feeding calves, gardening, cooking for 150 people, and landscaping, to name a few.

The 350-acre ranch was always prepared for the unknown, long before the popular television shows and a new prepper movement gained slow but steady momentum.

He ended up in the city as an adult but never forgot his country roots.

Lance quietly prepared for the coming collapse talked about on nearly all the news stations and in every newspaper weekly, but always buried in the back pages.

He wasn't ready when it happened. Nobody was. He did, however, have a plan and began to execute it, to the best of his ability. Led by faith, he would do anything to protect his family.

Joy

Joy had been Lance's wife for ten years. She was what everyone would call beautiful, with a tall, slim build, fiery red hair, and a personality to match! She would always shoot straight and she never wavered from her faith. Attending First Baptist Church of McKinney with Lance and their boys each Sunday, she felt they had a blessed life.

Joy was originally from central California and had moved to Texas with her parents and siblings.

She met Lance one New Year's Eve in Dallas, and six years later they would marry at the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado.

This was the same hotel, Lance pointed out, where Steven King was said to have stayed a night in Room 217, spawning the writing of his bestselling book (and later movie and television mini-series) *The Shining*.

Lance and Joy would be blessed with twin boys, Hudson and Jax, in 2012, and with son Hendrix in 2013.

Joy was tough as nails and a top-notch negotiator, spending more than ten years in the financial industry. Her confident and caring demeanor would come in handy on the journey.

Her faith and family always came first, and at any cost.

Hudson, Jax, and Hendrix

All three were boys to the core, with everything being a competition or a wrestling match. Lance had always said they were so scrappy with each other that they would be a handful for a bully.

After every *Karate Kid* movie (who knew there were five?!) they would practice "the crane kick," first made popular by the actor Ralph Macchio in 1984, and then again by Jaden Smith in 2010. Each boy would take turns being the kicker and kickee.

Through all the competition and frequent fighting, they were the best of friends.

Hudson had always been a cool kid, earning his middle name of Cruz. Easygoing most of the time and always up for an adventure, Lance had always said he would be the first to break an arm.

Jax, not to be confused with Jaxon or Jackson, was a straight-laced kid, always following the rules. He thrives on routine and always knows best. He may have a hard time when he realizes he has to be an employee before he jumps into the CEO position at his first job!

Hendrix is the third in the whirlwind trio. With both Jax and Hendrix having red hair and being about the same size, most people think they are the twins. Hudson, with brown hair and big "doe eyes," as the girls would say, takes after his daddy.

Each child would take turns saying the nightly prayers and reading a children's book with Mom and Dad before bed.

Vlad

Vladimir looked like Vladimir Putin. One could almost see him riding a horse or fishing outside of Moscow. He was a tall and fit sporting man and had been featured twice in *Guns & Ammo* magazine.

Vlad, as he liked to be called, grew up in the picturesque town of Sortavala, in northern Russia, near the border of Finland.

In a small town known for its outdoor adventures, a young Vlad helped his father with the family business.

They owned and rented rowboats and canoes for touring the numerous waterways around the town.

When he was only 16, he met his wife-to-be, Mary, when she arrived with her church mission group from Plano, Texas.

Meeting her the second night, when she rented a canoe, he was sure that she was the one. His brothers laughed at him and told him it could never be.

With Mary leaving for home two weeks later, they kept in touch, writing letters nearly every week.

At 19 years of age, Vlad had saved enough money to visit Mary and meet her parents.

Her father was concerned about her dating a boy from across the world, but he grew to like Vlad's tales of working with his father in the family business.

Mary's mother adored him, and her father helped Vlad get his Visa, and finally citizenship, before he and Mary were married.

Years later, Mary's parents would sign over their 20-year business, Plano Guns, to them.

The store would change its name to Beluga Guns following the passing of Vlad's sweet wife.

Vlad longed for the day he would return to country life and he would eventually would get his chance, but only if he gave up everything.

Lonnie

Lonnie grew up in McKinney, Texas, back when it used to be a small farming town somewhere north of Dallas. Lonnie was a short, stocky Hispanic man with a full mustache and a heart of gold.

As an only child in a family full of police officers, he would tell his friends growing up that he didn't have a choice. His father, grandfather, and even his two uncles, had all served on the force.

His father was transferred to the larger Dallas police force, accepting a promotion on the Gang Task Force unit when Lonnie was just 16.

When a long-term informant turned on the operation, Lonnie's father was gunned down on the precinct steps as a message from a local gang he had infiltrated.

Lonnie vowed to carry on his father's legacy and signed up for the academy as soon as they would take him.

With a new wife, and a baby on the way, he opted to stay working in McKinney, where crime was a rare thing; not the norm like the large city.

Lonnie was proud of his family and his job, serving with honor the community he loved. He was a man everyone looked up to, and his opinion was valued.

As a stocky kid in a family full of officers, he was never bullied or poorly treated like Mike had been.

When meeting Mike at a neighborhood barbecue and hearing his story for the first time, he asked only one question: "Who did you kill?"

Mike's answer was, "Only one janitor."

After talking with Lance, Lonnie tried in earnest to get his aging mother and uncle, both living a few blocks away, on board with heading west to Colorado.

"No, son. We won't be making that trip, I'm afraid," said his mother. "You see, we will both, you and I, end up crossing the Pearly Gates. I'll get there sooner than you. Take good care of your wife and children." Lonnie left them food, a few guns with ammunition, and a water filter.

Mike

Mike hailed from Brooklyn, New York. His father left the family when he was nine. With his mom working three jobs to barely make ends meet, he had no choice but to step up and take care of his twin brother, Arthur, and younger sister, Lily.

In middle school, the kids teased him and his brother about their shabby clothes. Arthur was slow, and nobody knew what was wrong with him. The kids were brutal. It started with name-calling, and it wasn't too bad since Arthur didn't understand it. Mike was an awkward, skinny 14-year-old when it got bad.

The bullies beat his brother up almost every week. Mike wanted to help but was too scared. He tried to tell them to stop, but they wouldn't.

Two weeks before the end of the school year, Mike got up the courage to fight back. It was a Friday after school and the bullies surrounded Arthur, just as always. Something was different today, and Mike had had enough of the teasing and hitting and watching his brother cry himself to sleep every night. This day, he snapped. Screaming and crying, Mike swung his arms wildly, connecting with the meanest bully's face and torso, striking him over and over.

Arthur smiled at his brother and said thank you, as the rest of the group beat them both. The blood on both boys was enough for their mom to take them to the church that very night.

Father Corraso listened patiently to her pleas to tell God to make it stop.

The good Father pulled Mike aside and told him he was brave for standing up to those boys. "They will most likely leave you alone, now that they know you will fight back."

That didn't happen, and the last two weeks of school were filled with nearly daily beatings for Mike and Arthur.

On the following Sunday after mass, Father Corraso introduced Mike to a friend and longtime parishioner of the church. "Have you ever heard of the Great Bambino?" the priest asked Mike.

"Yes, Father," he replied. "He's the greatest baseball player of all time."

"Yes, he is," Father Corraso agreed. "But I mean the other one, the boxer."

"What's happening to you and your brother is not right. Be assured that God is with you and He has brought you here, so that we may find a solution together."

“Joey, also known as the Great Bambino, is the best boxer to ever come out of Brooklyn...and let's just say he feels like he owes me a favor. I never considered taking him up on it until today.”

Mike met Joey, the gigantic Cruiserweight, with a fist bump.

“If you want to learn how to protect yourself and your brother,” said Joey, “be at my gym every morning, Monday through Friday, at 5 a.m. sharp. I'll give you an hour before I start training each day. Miss a day and the training is over. Understand?”

“Yes, sir!” replied an excited Mike.

With the help of Father Corraso, they convinced his mother that the training was necessary to protect Arthur at school.

Mike showed up at the gym every day before 5 a.m., walking the five long blocks, with Arthur tagging along as a spectator most days. Even when he was sick or tired, Mike never missed a morning.

Day by day and week by week, he learned to fight. Changing his diet, with the help of Joey's trainers who took a shine to his always-smiling brother Arthur, Mike gained thirty pounds of muscle and grew six inches over that pivotal summer.

At the start of their freshman year, Mike was no longer weak or afraid.

On their second day back, the bullies targeted them like before, but Mike wasn't the same scared kid from the last school year. Facing off each bully, one by one, Mike protected his brother for the very first time.

He gained new respect that day among all the school students but was challenged frequently after that by tough guys looking for a name.

Arthur died three years later, just shy of graduation, from an unknown disease. The doctors said it was pneumonia, but Mike always believed he died of the same disease he lived with his entire life.

Mike stalked the head bully, who had tormented his brother a few years ago, hoping to find something to numb his own pain of losing his best friend and brother.

Careful and calculating, he made the bully's death appear like an accident, falling out of a three-story window at a drunken high school party in their senior year.

He felt a little better after the bully's death, but his pain remained. He would never forget the names and faces of the other three who beat his brother so many times.

He took one on the wharf, with only a pocketknife, in a deserted shipyard one chilly October night. A friend of Mike's and future police partner helped to lure the unsuspecting boy with the promise of a drug sale.

The final two bullies died that year, the last one during his academy training. They were sloppy and rushed, with Mike hoping to feel normal with the final revenge of his brother's tormenters. His carelessness would cause him many sleepless nights, as he thought the investigations might lead back to him.

He wasn't concerned about being caught, but he knew he couldn't avenge Lily's death from behind bars. A few connections were made during the church trial that could have linked back to him, but nothing stuck.

His younger sister, Lily, both beautiful and smart, was the most popular girl in school. Mike adored her and would do anything for her. Fighting in Brooklyn's bare-fisted underground fight clubs on the weekends, he would earn as much as \$200 for a win.

He clothed Lily and Arthur in the best attire they could find, spending every penny. He gave them everything money could buy that his mother couldn't afford, taking nothing for himself.

Lily was taken on her sophomore year prom night—ravaged, beaten and killed; left like garbage on the side of a deserted road running deep through the Pine Barrens of north-central New Jersey.

Mike joined the police academy six months after graduation, vowing to find her killer.

He worked every lead tirelessly for the next three years, while not officially assigned to the cold case. Nights and weekends blurred the lines between reality and the fantasy of finding her killer before anyone else.

The break came in a routine lineup, as he questioned a man who was a secondary driver in a bodega robbery that had gone bad. Mike was able to get an off-the-record confession about the murder of his sister and pulled a few strings to let the man leave the precinct.

Taking the next four days off, Mike followed him, observing his daily routine and vowing revenge for his sister.

Drugging him, Mike brought him back deep in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, the same spot his sister was found. The interrogation before the man's death revealed two more accomplices.

Two exhaustive years later, Mike had brought all three men to street justice and gained revenge for his beloved Lily.

Mike met the love of his life, Kelly, during this pivotal time in his life. He had dated other girls but only briefly, as they never seemed to "get" him.

Kelly was different. He first saw her driving in a bright yellow Dodge Charger while he was on patrol. Pulling up beside her, Mike couldn't take his eyes off her. A half-mile down the road, he noticed her left brake light was out and pulled her over for a warning. They hit it off, talking for more than 30 minutes right on the side of the road.

He courted her slowly and carefully, as she was gun-shy from her last boyfriend, who beat her up on multiple occasions. Even the restraining order she had on him didn't seem to help. It had been more than two months since he beat her last, but she was scared every day and was always looking over her shoulder.

Mike took care of him one Sunday afternoon on his day off and was still back in time for dinner. He told Kelly that the man was gone and would never be back to hurt her. She thanked him nervously but never asked about it again.

There were others over the next half-decade who crossed Mike in one way or another. One was trying to flirt openly with Kelly and another was cheating in a neighborhood poker game. There were more, and Mike couldn't recall the reasoning for a few of them but was sure there must have been one. It always surprised Mike how most of the men never fought back the moment they realized their time was up.

Mike often thought it was getting easier to conceal with each life taken, and he apologized to God after every one.

Fast forward and Mike, with his partner, had a case they were working involving the Catholic Church.

"They're real serious about the Church in Brooklyn," he would say.

They were the first in on a raid of one of the priest's offices, where the janitor had two young boys locked up. Father Corraso called Mike before anyone else. He was a good man and stepped in a few times when Mike got in trouble as a teenager.

Mike and his partner kicked in the door of the locked room to find the janitor doing unspeakable things to two young boys.

Without hesitation or a second thought, they both opened fire on him. When the smoke cleared, the janitor had nine bullet wounds and died right there in the church, before God and everyone.

“They were messed up, those boys, after that,” Mike would tell Lonnie, replaying the story from two years before.

“The trial was brutal for those boys and their parents. Somehow that monster’s family got hooked up with a top-notch group of attorneys who were trying to say that the boys somehow wanted that to happen and suggested it was just a big misunderstanding,” Mike said.

They came at Mike and his partner hard and it was all over the news. It was being called a murder trial from the very beginning.

Some famous prosecutors started digging around and came up with the theory that Mike gets rid of people he doesn't like. The fabric of his career was unraveling, one thread at a time. There was talk about the boys who had picked on Arthur, as well as Lily's killer, who was discovered dead by a deer hunter in the same spot Lily was left to die. There were even rumors of Kelly's ex-boyfriend suddenly disappearing.

Mike and his partner were found not guilty in the trial of the janitor. The jury was filled with mothers and fathers. The Church filed a civil suit against them both, which was still pending before the lights went out. Father Corraso put in a good word for Mike, but it was out of his hands.

As big as the news was in New York about the janitor and other possible killings, it didn't travel. Even with more than one newscaster naming him “Serial Mike”—an apparent pun relating to an old cereal commercial where they would say, “He likes it. Hey, Mikey.” All the major networks on both sides of the political aisle were busy comparing Donald and Hillary for the upcoming election.

Mike would never confess his sins to Father Corraso or anyone else, as he didn't consider his actions particularly wrong. He would only apologize to God out of his respect for Father Corraso.

He and Kelly moved to McKinney to start over, and he fully expected to be dragged back to New York at any time to face new charges. He even proposed to Kelly, with no real intention of

marrying her. He would have in a New York minute, had he not been facing possible life behind bars, or worse.

They met Lonnie and his wife at a neighborhood barbecue and hit it off right away. Lonnie got him a job on the local police force, even with his past record.

Following the death of his brother and the disappearance of his sister, Mike's mother drowned her sorrows in drugs and alcohol. He had tried to help her several times, offering to pay for rehab, to no avail. He understood her pain, watching her die in his arms at her young age of 47. From that day forward, he vowed to protect the women and children close to him, at any cost.

There was only one problem. He would never tell another soul, not even Kelly. He didn't mind doing the killings he had done, setting him on a roller-coaster course for revenge upon those who prey on the people he swore to protect.

Kelly

Kelly was the girl next door. The kind of girl that felt comfortable in a T-shirt and jeans but could change into a cocktail dress at any time for a night on the town.

Her heart was shattered by her high school sweetheart of six years, eventually running off to marry one of her closest friends.

Dating a long string of the wrong guys, she couldn't shake the last one. He was abusive both verbally and physically. She had tried to get away, filing more than one restraining order after watching a popular police drama. Somehow, it didn't seem to work, as he repeatedly abused her and faced no consequences after the reports she made. When she met Mike, she was scared and considering disappearing to somewhere, anywhere away from her ex. She confided in Mike and told him of her fear and anxiety.

One day, Mike told her it was over and her old boyfriend wouldn't be bothering her anymore. She stayed faithful to him and tuned out the news media hurling accusations at him. No matter the questions from friends, family, and even local news outlets, she supported him, never once asking the question she always had in the back of her mind.

Jake and Nancy

Jake was about six feet tall and at least 250 pounds, with dark hair and a strong square chin. He looked like a sergeant, and there was no doubt he could be a leader of men. Nancy was blonde, with straight shoulder-length hair, and pretty in a no-nonsense way.

Jake grew up just outside Boulder, Colorado, in Niwot. He was the star quarterback for the 1992 Boulder High Panthers, leading the 141-year-old school to the first 6A State football title since 1963.

Nancy was a cheerleader, who had grown up just down the street from Jake.

Jake and Nancy were easily the most popular couple in school. They both genuinely cared for people and would routinely ditch their popular friends in the cafeteria to have lunch with loners or anyone else needing a friend.

They dated all through high school, and both served in the armed forces—he in the Army Rangers and her in the National Guard.

They took civilian jobs when little Danny was born, and moved to Texas a few years after with promises of a big corporate opportunity for them both.

Determined to get back to their Boulder family eventually, they would team up with Lance, Joy and the others for the long journey west.

Tina

Tina was the sorority sister that everyone loved to be around. Pretty, with auburn hair to her shoulders and smart in a scientific way, she majored in organic chemistry in college. Tina babysat for little Danny in between classes.

Her boyfriend was in Los Angeles on a business trip when it happened, and she would have no choice but to move on without him. She had no idea that, in the span of only a few weeks, she would be an adopted mom to two perfect little girls and meet the love of her life, high in the mountains of New Mexico.

Suzie and Veronica

Suzie, aged six, and her five-year-old sister, Veronica, were the sweetest African American girls. They came into the group as children, without a single toy, and thrived. Never once complaining about their situation, they were models for the other children to learn and grow.

Lucy

Lucy was a forty-something mom, doing the best for her kids after her divorce. She touted herself as the neighborhood meteorologist and, if we were honest, she was a better predictor of day-to-day weather than any paid professional.

Always looking out for her neighbors, she was a solid addition to the group.

Jessup

Jessup was a rancher in every sense of the word. He appeared to be in his late 60s or early 70s. His tan, wrinkled skin and stern jaw reminded Lance of that movie with Billy Crystal called *City Slickers*. The main cowboy, Curly, played by Jack Palance, could have been this guy's brother. It was clear that people didn't mess with this man.

Jessup grew up in Plano, Texas, and was the only one of six siblings who would take over his parents' ranch when they passed on. Having once been out of town and surrounded by other ranches and farms, by 2010 he was the only one not having sold out to developers. He would always say, "I'm the only one left, but now I'm surrounded by apartments and damn WalMarts!"

With his wife, daughter and her husband Barry, along with hired hands, they kept the ranch running and profitable, even in lean times. With the addition of a young boy named Sam, they would protect the pristine property, as long as they could, from the thousands of desperate refugees heading north after the power outage.

Jessup always knew he would draw his last breath on his ranch.

Jim

Jim was always a good neighbor to Joy and Lance. His kids were grown and his wife had passed a couple of years ago to breast cancer. Lance never understood why he stayed in that big suburban house all by himself, but finally did. It's hard to find really good neighbors these days.

He was a former marine in Vietnam. He didn't talk much about it, but Lance knew he would be a reliable protector if it came down to it.

Jim taught a ham radio course at the local community college and would prove to be a vital asset to the group.

Steve

Steve was the first to donate a running vehicle to the group, enabling them to reach Vlad's gun shop and secure vital resources for the families heading west. He was trustworthy and the kind of man everyone could count on.

Ringo

Ringo was the biggest dog in the neighborhood, at 150 pounds. Lance got him as a puppy, picking the biggest white lab he could find. With two baby boys and one on the way, they needed a dog they could wrestle with that wouldn't mind the ear- and tail-pulling. He was a big baby with a bark and growl that would deter most people knocking on the front door.

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Saddle Ranch, Loveland, Colorado

Bill, Sharon, and Karl

Bill, Sharon, and Karl called Saddle Ranch their home and thanked the good Lord every day for their blessings. Walks in the valley, along with stunning sunrises and sunsets, were hard to beat. When you get to live where people go for vacation, you're truly on to something special, they realized.

They built an extended family, with both Bill and Sharon always looking out for the entire valley and establishing themselves as leaders in the group.

Sharon felt truly blessed to call this 350-acre ranch her home for the past forty-four years. She was a beautiful woman, both inside and out, and the kind of person who never met a stranger. She was a proud mother and grandmother, always doting on her family.

She had come to this place called Saddle Ranch when she was in her early 20s, seeking a spiritual destination where she could feel at home. She and her husband Bill had raised their two boys here.

Karl was a smart kid growing up—tall and slim, like his dad, and always looking for his next invention. He was in all AP advanced placement classes during high school. Lance had always said Karl should be an attorney because he loved to debate any subject. Karl remained on the Ranch, learning various trades, including carpentry, woodworking, gardening, cooking and landscaping. He loved the freedom of this open land.

Bill, slim and standing at 6'4", was a former military man—a forward observer in the Army for 18 months during the Vietnam War. He was an accomplished wildlife and landscape artist, painting mostly in acrylic, with a few watercolors thrown in now and then. He had his paintings in galleries all over the Colorado Rocky Mountains, as well as New Mexico, Arizona, the East Coast, and most of the country in both public and private collections.

He was respected by all, both at the Ranch and the West properties. He would lead the Ranch in John's absence and always carry a prominent position in the community.

John

John was a confident man with a gentle spirit. With wavy dark hair and piercing blue eyes, he was a born leader.

John grew up in the Northwest, specifically Washington state.

As a young boy, he always gravitated to the Good Book and its fantastic stories of giant whales and parting seas. His parents were part-time believers but always encouraged him to read the Bible. He did just that, cover-to-cover, twice in his high school years.

He attended Seattle Pacific Seminary in his early years and led several churches in the greater Seattle area.

He had met Samuel, of the Church of the West, at several conferences over the years. Although they differed in faith, the two had mutual respect and became friends.

When Samuel heard a spot was about to open up for the leadership of Saddle Ranch, he called his old friend John. The timing was perfect, as he was passing the torch in his current position and looking for a new opportunity.

The second interview was more of a formality than anything else. Saddle Ranch loved John, and he loved the Ranch. Samuel had always maintained a good relationship with Saddle Ranch, but now he was even more confident about working together for the good of the valley.

John was an approachable leader with an open-door policy. He earned the respect of the group quickly, and it never wavered.

Mac

Mac was a tough but fair man, with sandy red hair and a medium build.

He grew up in the mountains of northwest Montana with his mother. His father took off when he was 14 and left him the man of the house.

He helped his mother after that, working odd jobs to help keep food on the table. In his Junior high school year, he held three jobs in addition to school.

The first job was as a trainer, fitting kids with horses they could learn to ride. The second job as a waiter in a local greasy spoon restaurant, and the third as a part-time model for the local college art program.

He would later apprentice as a fix-anything maintenance worker at a large summer cabin resort. Earning the nickname "MacGyver" for his ability to fix anything, with just a few tools, that most would write off as dead.

The nights he spent alone were the longest of all. The nightmares continued, years later, of his father locking him in the basement while arguing with his mother. He was eight or nine years old when he remembered it starting.

In the beginning, it was just occasionally that they fought. By the time he was 12, it was almost every day. That's when he knew his father was abusing his mother. He hated it more than anything, sitting at the bottom of the damp basement, hearing his mother's sobs and calls for his father to stop.

At first, he tried to force the basement door open, but it was always locked from the outside. Eventually, he just stopped trying.

Mac was 14 years old on the last day he ever saw his father. This day, he went down to the basement without being asked, as was the new norm in the house.

His father was drunk and had just lost his job as a construction foreman. Mac knew something was different this time, as he heard the banging from upstairs. His mother was hysterical and called his name for the first time.

“Mac, please help me!” she screamed over and over. He tried the door, and it was of course locked, but he wasn't a little boy anymore. He wasn't the scared kid he used to be. With a single right kick, he broke the basement door open and faced his father.

“We're done with this!” Mac spoke in a shaky voice, holding his mother. “We're done with you.” His dad raised his fist towards him and laughed. “You two deserve each other” was the last thing he said, as he walked out the front door.

Mac would remember that day as the best day of his life. He would also recall it as his worst.

From then on, he did everything he could to not be alone, burying himself with work and school nearly every day of the week.

While his mother was happy that his abusive father had left them, she lived the rest of her life in seclusion.

His mother's poems would be scattered across the house when he returned from school each day. Mac would put them away in an orderly fashion each night, only to find them scattered about once again the next day.

Once a local publisher got hold of a few poems and planned to publish them in a couple of books. It went nowhere when his mother refused to leave the house for her first book signing. Donating her house and car to the church, they took care of her in her dying days.

The day after she passed, Mac packed up his old Chevy pickup with his new Siberian Husky puppy, named Bo, and headed south to Colorado.

He set out for the unknown and found Saddle Ranch quite by accident, picking up a female hitchhiker along the way. They would date briefly while living there, but she eventually moved on, while Mac stayed. When asked why she left, he would only say she didn't like dogs.

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Church of the West

Dr. Sarah Melton

Sarah was strikingly beautiful and looked more like a model than a doctor. A redhead with slim features and an age of 30 something, her hair was beyond shoulder-length, with just a hint of curl.

She grew up at the Church of the West, in Loveland, Colorado.

With both of her parents passing in a car accident when she was four, she was adopted by the group's leader, Samuel.

He raised her as his own, making sure she had everything she needed, including a full ride at CU Boulder for her undergrad degree and the University of Colorado Medical School in Denver, about an hour and a half away. Even though graduating with honors and multiple opportunities in front of her at graduation, she didn't go far for her residency.

A striking beauty, she had her pick of suitors, but none made the final cut. With her training complete, she chose to be the lead doctor of The West's small hospital.

She met Bradley Melton, who had moved there a year later from the big city, searching for a slower life. They had a lot in common, running the small hospital together, and for a while she thought he was her soulmate. There was only one issue—she wanted children, and he didn't.

Samuel

Samuel grew up in Michigan and attended the Theological Seminary located at St. Andrews in beautiful Berrien Springs, Michigan.

As a young boy, he always sought to help people beyond his own family. With help from a few mentors in school, he was able to start a new community in Northern Colorado.

With his daughter Kayla, and Sarah with her parents, they began on a shoestring and a prayer. Adding members over the next months, they slowly built a community.

He would come to lose his daughter, Kayla, in a tragic car accident, along with Sarah's parents. Soon after, he adopted the young Sarah.

Building his community slowly over the years, they acquired more land, 10-20 acres at a time, until they had amassed a sizeable property of 150 acres.

Putting in a good word years later for John, he had a true friend in the valley when the lights went out.

* * * *

Raton Pass, New Mexico

David

When all went dark, David was ready and not too surprised. He had been following the news, like most Americans, but as a computer programmer he had access to a few other “nonpublic sites,” as he liked to call them.

David grew up in Raton, New Mexico, and attended the University of Colorado in Boulder, with Lance as his roommate. Working as a computer programmer, he always had up-to-date information about where the country was headed.

He was always adored by the ladies, with piercing blue eyes that colored contacts could never replicate and sporting a full black beard, just as he did in college.

When his wife passed, it was just him and his son, Mark, with the help of his aging parents, Dean and Beatrice. With his programmer connections, he had started doing research in earnest about the state of the world and what it might look like in ten years for his only son Mark.

David was both a self-proclaimed nerd and a great outdoorsman. His love of both would serve him well in the next-world.

He had everything he ever wanted, except for his wife. She would pass slowly to cancer but always told him to keep an eye out for a woman that could take care of him and Mark. He promised her that he would, but as the time passed it seemed more farfetched with each year gone by.

Mel

Mel lived in Raton, New Mexico, his entire life and only moved up to Raton Pass in recent years.

He was a proud bachelor that didn't have time for a wife or children. He had been in swimming pool construction with a national company and oversaw many of the job sites for more than 20 years.

Always up for a good conspiracy theory, he first got curious about EMPs when a new customer had an odd request. Mel was asked if he could have a hole dug 30 feet deep, 100 feet long and 60 feet wide.

When asked what it was for, the customer replied, "Why, the end of the world, of course!" Although it was out of the norm for Mel's company, they completed the job and buried four shipping containers in the oversized hole.

The customer was thrilled with the work and had Mel as a guest several times on his popular conservative National Podcast. The podcaster was forthcoming with his audience with respect to costs, plans, and project completion time estimates. However, he would not divulge the location of his own bunker.

Mel was hailed as the authority on bunker construction and was soon able to leverage himself as a consultant and middle man, working with multiple contractors, all building end-of-the-world shelters during that time.

His claim to fame was known as the "Fiver." The massive undertaking was a five-story, entirely underground community of bunkers, housing 36 families. Every unit presold for \$450,000 to over \$1,000,000, located near the small town of Farmington, New Mexico.

Several more projects of varying designs were commissioned over the next year, prompting Mel to take a closer look at EMPs. Not long after, he would purchase land on Raton Pass and bring in an out-of-state crew to build his formidable compound.

Eventually moving to Raton Pass and working from home as a TEOTWAWKI (The End of the World As We Know It) construction consultant, Mel stockpiled his house with food, water, firearms, and of course raw coffee beans. He had everything he could ever want. Everything, that is, except someone to share it all.

Dean and Beatrice

Beatrice was your typical Fifties mom, always cooking something and running the house. Dean was the father and grandpa who laid low, always tinkering with things in the garage.

They married young, in their early twenties, in Mobile, Alabama. When their son, David, was just a boy, they headed on a road trip to Colorado, passing through the then-tiny town of Raton, New Mexico.

Stopping on top of the pass for a scenic view, Dean saw a for-sale sign, with an arrow pointing west. *Priced to sell ~ five acres with house ~ 10 miles*, read the sign. He didn't have to talk an adventurous Beatrice into looking at the property, as she was way ahead of him.

“Let’s go, boys!” she called out. “I want to see this property.” The side road quickly disappeared into the trees and wound through thick woods. Beatrice fell in love with the property right away, as soon as they crossed the bridge. Dean loved it, too, and was looking to find a quiet place for his writing.

As an accomplished nonfiction World War I and II writer, he longed for a slower pace. Returning to Raton, they found a small hotel and he immediately dialed his agent. They were shown the property the very next day and moved in six weeks later. Dean would always joke that they never made it across the Colorado line that ran only a few miles north of their property. It would be another three months before they would make the first shopping trip to Pueblo.

* * * *

Weston, Colorado

James and Janice VanFleet

At 250 pounds and jet-black hair, Jim could seem intimidating to some. His wife, Janice, also in her fifties, had the look of a former beauty queen turned rancher. She was still quite pretty but had some wear on her.

James grew up on the south side of Chicago with his father, an OBGYN, and a housewife mother who juggled four kids and the home.

James was the youngest of two boys, with his brother Michael being two years older and always watching out for him. Michael joined the local gang at age 14, after his freshman year and with a 3.8 grade point average.

Their father lost his position when the defunct hospital where he was employed went belly-up financially. He eventually found work in a small clinic with a steep pay cut and deep wounds to his pride.

With the family in dire straits, Michael weighed his options and chose his family. The gang offered him the protection he didn't care about, but it was also a steady pay he could count on

week-in and week-out. He never told his dad but gave almost everything he made to his mom by slipping money into her purse on a regular basis. Sometimes it was \$20, and on a good week it was \$400. Within a year, James was helping out as well.

After high school, as a big guy with excellent negotiation skills, he was the muscle of the gang around town, collecting protection money from local businesses.

James was fair but occasionally had to intimidate a business when a shop owner had a sob story of not being able to pay.

He met his match one day in Janice, in a pizza parlor. She was a new hire and told him and his boys their protection was no longer needed at her restaurant. Several members wanted to teach her a lesson, but James made them back off. He saw something in that girl.

Janice showed him the error of his ways and introduced him to church. They would slowly build a life on Second Chances Ranch.

As a saved former gang member, James and his wife had longed for a family of their own for years. They would soon have their home filled with new friends, children, and a loyal dog; and they would stop at nothing to protect them all.

Jason and Lauren Davis

Jason, Lauren, and children Carla (7), Candice (5), and Jenna (4) mostly kept to themselves.

With medium-length blonde hair and a face that men had always found attractive, Lauren was smart, beautiful, and took good care of her family.

Both grew up in the city of Pueblo, Colorado, just an hour and 45 minutes' drive north of Weston, but had never met.

Jason attended CSU Pueblo, majoring in Forestry and Wildlife Management. After graduation, he was hired by the State and was one of several men assigned to Great Sand Dunes National Park and Reserve. While he loved the park and its great sand dunes, he grew weary of tourists with their ATVs and RVs. At his request, he was transferred just southeast, to the San Isabel National Forest, and settled in Weston.

On a Saturday night in early June, he met a free-spirited Lauren while out on a camping trip with friends. They hit it off straightaway, and she soon moved from Pueblo to Weston to be

with Jason.

They had built a family and a good life, owning a new double-wide trailer and six wooded acres of land running right up to the river, until the lights went dark.

It happened just two days before their monthly wholesale food club membership run, so they found themselves nearly out of food the first day.

Jason would meet James soon after, in the worst of circumstances.

Chance

Chance was a large black dog—about a thousand pounds, according to Jenna. He was 135 pounds and the sweetest Chocolate Lab you would ever find...as long as you're not a stranger.

He made protecting his family his highest priority.

Sheriff Johnson

Sheriff Johnson sat out in front of the police station most days, with his feet propped up, smoking a cigar. He looked straight out of an Old West cowboy movie, wearing black cowboy boots, a gunslinger vest, and a large black cowboy hat. The Sheriff was intimidating, even to James.

He loved the ladies, having married and divorced four of them in the past ten years.

He grew up right in Weston and always wanted to be Sheriff. At the legal age of 21, he launched the first of two failed campaigns to unseat the longstanding Sheriff of Weston. Two terms later, at the age of 29, he would be elected Sheriff of Weston and would keep his post from then on.

Judge Lowry

Judge Lowry was always an outdoor man. Hailing from Pittsburg, he opted for a smaller town. Never marrying, he was still conflicted about his preferences. He had a slight build and craved the power of the gavel. The Judges' Oath meant nothing to him, as he always had the final say in the small town of Weston.