Normal

By

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While the story is complete and will not be changed or "upgraded" as world events dictate, I will still clean up any typographical or formatting errors as they are pointed out. Please contact the author with any of these changes that need to be made.

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Thank you for taking the time to read it. Enjoy

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PROLOGUE

America, much less the world was unprepared for the events of the early 21st century. After years of continuing debt and inflation, global political polarization and balkanization of nations around the world, conflicts in every region, devastation from Mother Nature the likes never seen before; the "civilized" world has a long fall ahead. Nobody knew when, how or even if, but make no mistake, the fall would come like a meteor crashing into the earth. With the world's economies tangled together like fishing nets, one country could set in motion a series of events which would plunge the world into chaos.

One country did…

Time since attacks: 7 Months, 9 days
Date/Time: 29 November/0259 Local
Location: Near Cañon City, Colorado

Like a tiger waiting to pounce on unsuspecting prey, he waited in the tall grass outside the target area. Patiently, silently, he watched every detail his trained mind could remember. For the past three days and nights, he and his team had observed all manner of activity at the target location. They had avoided all detection by the sentries, evaded the half attempts at the short range patrols and found every weakness they could in the defenses of the target. The individuals in the target location were by no means professional military so they already had the upper hand. At best, they had received some training in military tactics, but were more used to the role of armed bully, intimidating their victims through violence while wearing camouflage, more for looks than actual practicality. As warriors for generations had done before, the man and his team had discussed the best plan of attack, established roles and responsibilities and prepared to engage the forces at the target. Looking at his watch, the man knew the diversion team would be clear momentarily. The main assault team was lined up on him, waiting for the radio call which would signal the attack to begin. A thousand concerns swept through his mind. *What is the diversion isn't successful? What if there were other defensive positions we didn't discover? What if the target isn't as easy to take down as we have planned?* Only a whispered "ready and green" over the earpiece of the radio ended the thoughts and concerns.

He pulled the carbine mounted with a short range optic and night vision device into his shoulder and took careful aim at the sentry posted near the front of the house. Softly he spoke into the radio "Ten seconds" and flipped the selector lever to "SEMI." Although equipped with Burst fire, he knew one head shot would be all he needed to take out the sentry. His target was agreeably still from eighty meters away, as close as the group could get without being detected. They had crawled the last two hundred meters from the tree line in the tall unmowed grass to approach the target. He and his team had enjoyed the advantage of night vision to see the target while the posted sentry and those inside of the house would be hampered by an overcast sky.

As he had in countless shots before, he drew in a half a breath, aligned the middle dot of the scope on the target and gently squeezed the trigger. The shot, as it should, came as a surprise to

the man, but training enforced throughout his military career caused him not to jump, but to realign the sight on target and verify the round had struck home. There was nothing visible in the scope he could see as the match round had done its job effectively. He rose out of the grass to one knee and verified the man was down on the ground, not moving. The sudden explosion of the shot and disappearance of the sentry had energized the other members of the team. The six man diversion team now began firing controlled shots with their rifles and one M-240 machine gun at the objective. Firing was limited to single shots from the rifles and five to seven round bursts from the machine gun. The six man main team, lined up on the leader would wait until the defenses of the objective came on line and engaged the diversionary group. The plan was to catch the target's defenses in an ambush, with the main force waiting to fire until the group emerged from the house. Activity from the target building was limited to three rifles firing, two from the second story and one from the first story. The fire was random and undisciplined, shooting at everything across the front, not concentrating on the muzzle flashes like they should have been. The firing was short however; as well aimed shots from the attackers began to find their mark.

The front door facing the main team flew open as four men carrying rifles ran out the door and towards cover. In an attempt to flank the attackers, they were unknowingly bringing themselves closer to the main team, who, with the exception of the first shot, had yet to engage. When the defenders reached a point approximately fifty meters from their front, the leader of the attackers yelled "FIRE!" and engaged the lead man. Three shots to the chest and the man went down immediately. The other three gunmen were dispatched almost as quickly as the leader momentarily noticed and focused back on the target. Knowing five of the original twelve known individuals at the target were down for sure, he placed a call to the secondary team leader for a situation report. His radio barked in his ear almost immediately "We got three for sure in the windows, and possibly a fourth as well. They were firing from the windows and after some massed fire, they never came back." Figuring at least two of the three were his mortally, that left either four or five left inside the target building. Peering through his scope he could see no signs of anyone on his side of the target.

Leaving the two individuals in place for external security and overwatch, he took the remaining members to clear the building. They ran the short distance to the farmhouse quickly and stopped by the front door. Though he hated to deplete the already meager supply of M-84 stun grenades, the assault team felt they needed the distraction before entering the target building. After he pulled the pin, he kept the safety spoon in place, while the team "stacked up" behind him and prepared to enter the building. A soft squeeze on his left shoulder knew that everyone was in place behind them. The door was still open from where the individuals had left the building earlier. Calling for his diversionary team to lift all fires on the first floor, the team prepared to enter the building. He released the spoon and tossed the grenade into the doorway and mentally prepared himself for the intense noise that would follow. He and his team prepared themselves by closing their eyes and covering one ear. After what seemed like eternity, but in reality, a little over one second, manmade thunder and lightning erupted from the interior of the target and propelled the team into action. Unfamiliar with the interior layout, the team still cleared the room with well oiled precision, looking for any signs of interior resistance.

The leader went right and checked the corner, just as he had trained prior to taking this mission.

On finding the corner empty, he immediately shifted his focus onto his remaining sectors of fire. The room opened up from a hallway into a living room area and he saw the figure of a man through the greenish glow of the night vision sight. The man was holding his hands over his eyes, evidently blinded by the flash-bang grenade that had gone off seconds before. The leader immediately looked at the hands covering the eyes and saw a pistol in the right hand. Two shots center mass and one to the head ended the momentary blindness for good.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a figure running towards an interior staircase on the second floor. He did not turn to negate the threat since the person was in someone else's sector of fire and he needed to concentrate on his own. Another member of the team negated the threat less than half a second after he appeared with several busts from another M-4. As the shooter watched the body fall, his rifle bouncing off the floor, they heard another voice scream from upstairs "They're in the house!" The leader found this rather amusing since only moments before the entire house had shaken with the detonation of the stun grenade announcing their presence to the occupants. Still, surprise lost, the remaining targets in the house would be harder to take down. Leaving two of the assault team to watch the stairwell and their backs, he and another member methodically cleared the remainder of the bottom floor.

Finding nobody else, they were returning to the living room area and the front door when they heard gunfire and a man cursing from the second floor. The cursing was followed closely by several more bursts and single shots from the living room and a loud thud from the second floor. Announcing themselves before entering the living room, they waited on a reply before moving into the room. After hearing an "all clear" they rounded the hallway into the living room. The one of the two left for security stated without being prompted "He shoved his rifle around the corner like he was in some sort of movie. Guess he thought drywall would stop rifle fire or something." Looking up, the leader saw one bare foot sticking out from behind the wall. Now down to two or three left.

Suddenly the exterior team he had left in place fired on some unknown targets. The distinctive sound of an M-249 firing well controlled bursts and an AK-74 firing single shots echoed for several seconds. As he was about to call, the radio came alive with a SITREP. "Two of them tried to sneak out a lower window on our side of the house. We got them both." The leader paused for a moment to evaluate the situation. There could be one more upstairs playing possum for all they knew.

"Might as well crack this nut and see what's left," he said aloud, more to himself rather than his team. He made the radio call to lift all fires on the house and prepared his team to move up the stairs. As they slinked silently up the stairs, he noticed the dead individuals at the top of the staircase. The no shoes guy had died of a lucky headshot and the other had bled out from six chest wounds. Sheer luck had taken the man down, but not that they were complaining.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs he went to the left side of the hallway. The remaining members of the team moved in behind him, one looking the same way he had and the other two for security in the opposite direction. There were two rooms in the end of the hallway one with an open door and one with a closed one. Moving to the first door, which was the one with the closed door, he waited until his partner squeezed him on the shoulder before entering. He threw

the door open and immediately moved left, scanning the room and moved down the left wall. His partner, only one step behind him, moved right and cleared the other half of the room. Both stated "CLEAR" at the same moment, announced themselves and reentered the hallway. Repeating this action for the other rooms in the upstairs, there wasn't an uncovered area they had missed.

The final room contained the last body he was worried about. The face he saw looked familiar, but he could not tell from where. He had wondered who the individual was from the recon they had performed over the previous weeks and still couldn't place where he knew him from. The leader went to check on the young man's pulse and found a very faint one in his neck. He was suffering from at least seven wounds in his chest and three more through his abdomen. Although the face was young, it had a heavy growth of beard, but the eyes…the eyes were very familiar to him. He couldn't place it right then and needed to concentrate on other matters. The young man looked at him and coughed up blood while trying to exhale. His eyes suddenly snapped wide open in recognition before he attempted to take another breath in. Even if they wanted to help the young man, there was little that could be done without the immediate medical attention a surgeon could provide. There wasn't a hospital or anything else nearby and the man was near death. One last look at his attackers and he closed his eyes, his head falling on the floor with a loud thud.

Since the threat was negated and stealth was no longer a concern, he announced to the members of the team he would be putting on white light. He also called the security and diversion teams over the radio and announced the facility was all clear. Everyone inside the old farmhouse turned off their night vision and pulled out flashlights. He heard over the radio from the diversion team they were entering the house through the front door. Gathering everyone up in the living room he told them from the upper staircase "OK, let's get started searching the house. Weapons and ammo first, followed by food, gas and then anything else that looks useful. We load up the food, gasoline and other supplies into the Dodge so we can turn it over. The weapons go into one of ours. Any questions? Okay, let's get to it."

Shining his light down at the floor, he noticed the two weapons dropped by the individuals in the upper hallway. He found two rifles, one of which was fairly beat up. Knowing no matter how beat up it was, the weapon could still prove useful, if not for parts then perhaps after some cleaning it could be used for trading value. He did not subscribe to the old theory "You trade a gun off and it could be shooting at you the next day" as many survivalists did. He took a more practical approach to trading and the weapon would fit into those schemes. Clearing it out, he removed the ammo and checked the chamber. After completion of this task he pointed the weapon at the ceiling and dry fired the weapon making it "rack safe." He set it against the wall and moved onto the next one.

After twenty minutes, the members gathered back in the entry and living room, piling the gathered goods together in a semblance of order and like items with like items. Someone had found and lit a white gas lantern, setting the mantles on low, both to conserve fuel and to provide a little light discipline. To the untrained eye, the stack of weapons might have been impressive. However, to the man and his group, the weapons were visibly in bad shape, not having been cleaned in some time with various spots of rust and corrosion visible even in the dim light. It

was a varied pile of weapons, ranging from military issue rifles and pistols to civilian hunting rifles, shotguns and autoloading rifles. The leader looked around the group and asked a question he already knew the answer to. "Survivors?" Everyone either shook their head or responded negative.

"Food?" Another member answered "These guys were down to about four or five days worth, at least from what we found in the kitchen. I figure they were about to go out causing trouble again. Most of the stuff they have is crap anyway." The team leader paused for a moment before giving additional orders, looking around the room. His eyes came to rest on a pack of cigarettes lying on a coffee table in the living room. Although he had "quit" after the Fall, more due to his supply running out than for actual health reasons, he felt a familiar urge for a nicotine fix. He picked up the pack, took one out for himself and offered it around for those inclined. Several more members took one as the leader offered his butane lighter to the others before lighting the cancer stick himself. He still carried in his pocket, more out of habit than for the purpose of lighting a cigarette, and was still a reminder of normal times. After lighting the stale cigarette and taking a drag, his mind flashed back to a movie set in the apocalyptic future where the hero finds several cartons of cigarettes and exclaims "I'm rich!" Smiling to himself, he remembered those times with fond nostalgia…the better times, when the world was different. When the world was "normal."

Snapping back into the present, he began to give out orders again. "OK, bring the truck up to the house and load the weapons and ammo first. We have just 'disarmed' these people and no sense arming someone else up with the same horrible intentions on their mind. After daybreak, we can do a more thorough search of the house, but I want to get back home as soon as possible. We will put the bodies in that outbuilding and fire it up before we leave; find wood and flammable stuff to put in there with them. Even though this place is safe now, we should be out of here as soon after daybreak as possible. We need to get everything ready to transfer to the others on our way back if we can. I'm sending two back to base camp to get it ready to move." As an afterthought and partially as a joke, "Oh yeah, look for toilet paper as well."

He asked one of the members to assist him with the bodies. He remembered seeing a wheelbarrow on a previous trip; he knew it would be easier to move the bodies with that instead of by hand. He sent the other member back to the shed to retrieve it while they finished policing up in the house. Although overall leader for this mission, he knew he couldn't pawn off the detail onto someone else. As an old sergeant once told him "Do the crappy details at least once, and be seen doing it. That way, nobody can say you haven't done it before when you tell them to do it." He began dragging the bodies through the house towards the rear door. By the time he had finished moving two of the previous occupants, the vehicles had been moved closer to the house and were being loaded. As he and the other member continued to move the bodies to the out building, the others continued to load the vehicles and sweep the house and barn.

The chores took them well past dawn to complete and each took a final walk through the house not only to look for additional items, but to remember what had brought them here in the first place. Before pulling out, one of the members had taken several cans of flammable liquids out of the outbuilding to help start the fire. As the leader and the team member poured and sloshed the liquids over the outbuilding, the leader almost called it to a stop. By burning these bodies,

they were not really given the dignity of a proper burial, even though they didn't really deserve it. Before he had made his mind up, the team member had already lit the trail of fuel and started moving away. The leader made a promise to come back at a later time and bury what was left properly. Even though the men they had just killed were indeed a bad sort of people, they still deserved a better burial than that. Upon arriving at the waiting vehicles, each member took the time to look at the building that was engulfing itself in flames. Someone had thoughtfully poured water around the shed to make sure the grass didn't catch on fire.

That was when the leader remembered where he had seen the face before. He had only had a glimpse of that face in the low light on a deserted highway one night, but the face was etched in his memory forever. He had not taken the leader's advice and gone off to start trouble again, or been convinced the trouble was all right by someone else. *This time you have paid the price, my young friend. Your past mistakes always catch up to you. You learned another lesson here tonight, only this time the payment for your lesson was death.*

As they were driving off, each person watched the smoke and flames rise and thought to themselves of the last time they had watched smoke and flames as large as the ones they were seeing. They all remembered the smoke and flames from Atlanta, Denver, Boston, Seattle, and Dallas as seen on the television before the channels went off the air. They also remembered seeing the smoke and flames firsthand as Colorado Springs joined every other city in the world in riots and looting. As the vehicles rounded a bend in the road, the leader couldn't see the flames any longer, but the black smoke was still there. Maybe in that smoke was a signal. *Play nice, be friendly, don't think you can get away with anything anymore, don't be a jackass or this will be you next.* As much as he wanted to believe it wouldn't happen again, he knew someone somewhere would try this again and he would be asked for help again. Above all, he knew he and his friends would help again, no matter what. *How strange this world has become,* he thought to himself, *how strange indeed. In six months we have managed to practically destroy ourselves. This wouldn't have happened if everything was still "normal." My team and I would not have just killed twelve people if everything was still "normal." My neighbor's children would still have a father and a sister if everything was "normal." People would not be afraid of everyone they met if everything was still "normal." One could actually plan and look forward to tomorrow if everything was still "normal." How strange indeed is "normal."* His thoughts drifted off to how it all began as they continued the drive away from the farm.

CHAPTER 1 – BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Time before attacks: 22 minutes
Date/Time: 20 April/2038 Local
Location: Near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

As the man stared into the fading sunset, thoughts raced through his mind like Formula One cars on a racetrack. Although still considered a younger man by his peers, a lifetime of fighting showed on his face with the worry lines and graying hair giving the appearance of a man who might have been much older. His piercing brown eyes were still sharp as a hawk's, even after forty-eight years of life. A man not unaccustomed to confrontation, the battles he had fought in his lifetime were in corporate boardrooms around the world. A rich man from birth, he had become even wealthier after inheriting his father's oil company empire at age twenty-five upon his father's untimely death. When he took over, he threw out the antiquated methods of business of only selling oil to wealthy western nations so prevalent in his father's business and began selling oil to emerging nations such as China and those in South East Asia and founded companies ranging from aerospace industry to communications and alternate forms of energy. Although there had been some token research in this area by the world's major fossil fuels corporations, his companies had made genuine progress and surpassed all expectations. Like a general surveying a battlefield to find the advantageous high ground, he surveyed the world markets and saw the high grounds of profit.

Although a Muslim from birth, for most of his life he had only given his religion the attention necessary to remain in the good graces of his countries leaders. This all changed one day prior to his fortieth birthday when his wife and children were killed in an airplane crash over the Alps in Europe. For the first time in many years, he did not know what to do or how to go on in his life. The sing-song evening call to prayer of an Imam at a local mosque beckoned him and, for the first time in many years, he found solace in prayer.

He entered a small mosque, not one of the larger or trendier of his capital city, which was tended to by a cleric whose three sons had been killed defending the Islamic faith. Two had died in Afghanistan, one in the 1980s by the godless Russians and one most recently near Tora Bora by the hated Americans. The other son had been killed in southern Iraq by the British forces while defending his faith. The cleric, although a supposed man of faith and forgiveness, contained enough hatred to last ten men a lifetime. Upon seeing the well known oil magnate enter his mosque in distress, he put his personal feelings aside to tend to the man's immediate needs. This man needed comfort right now, not a sermon on the great evils of the western world.

After several hours of speaking and quoting the Koran at length, the oil man found what he had been missing all his life, faith. He had all manner of material possessions money could buy, but no faith to base it on. He asked for God's forgiveness for being so selfish in his life and made a promise to return to his faith. The man departed the mosque with a new found vigor for life he had been missing all these years.

He returned to the Mosque every Sabbath, offering generously to have a new, larger one built for the cleric that had helped him in his time of need. The Imam told him not to bother as he was content in the Mosque that had served him for his life. He only took a little money to make repairs and to provide assistance for the less fortunate of his congregation. "What is money or a large mosque to me? Nothing except Satan's ways to greed, temptation and jealousy. No, my brother, only faith to guide you and me in this world, not the material possessions that make men fall away from the true faith."

The corporate man was surprised, but he kept it to himself. *What I have found is a man of principle, not worried about money or anything else in the world except his faith. I can learn from this man,* thought the corporate man to himself. He started crying to himself as he thought of the vast wealth he had accumulated for himself, never giving any thought to his religion while doing it. *We are a nation of believers in the all mighty American dollar, and not of our most precious resource, religion,* he thought again to himself. He confessed the sins of turning his back on his religion to the Imam only to be rebutted.

"What you have done is provide a better life for the faithful around the world. The companies you own here and around the world make the faithful more comfortable in a land filled with harshness towards our religion. Your many contributions to charity have always pleased Allah and his followers. It is now, my friend, only now that you must decide to do with your money. You have rediscovered the faith inside of you and only now can you make a difference to the faithful around the world."

"What can I do to help the faithful around the world that I have not done already?" asked the man, unsure of where the Imam was going with this speech.

"Nothing as of now, but we will talk over time and you will see what must be done to help true Islam prosper," said the cleric with resolve in his voice.

Over time, the Imam and the man became good friends and the man a steadfast follower of Islam. Also, over time, the Imam began to slowly educate the man to the evils of the world and what must be done. "We must keep our religion true against the unbelievers who would destroy us. The Jews in Israel have made it their life's work to keep the faithful under their boot. The Americans and Europeans have propped up the Jews and make it possible for them to continue persecuting the faithful. Americans have been enemies of Islam since their creation, killing the faithful all over the Persian Gulf region just so they can fill their gas tanks. The Europeans have followed suit as well. The hated Russians killed off countless millions of the faithful over time and the Islamic faith has always been persecuted in China and India. The faithful are not welcome anywhere except here, and with the American and European presence here, we will still be prisoners. We even have heretics in our own religion in our own Mosques. Those that teach equality with the Christians and Jews are an abomination to Allah and Mohammed, his true prophet. We must destroy the non-believers in this world and return Islam to its true course, for there is but one God and Mohammed is his prophet." Although the man had heard such talk before and dismissed it, his knew these words to be true based on his newfound faith. He was moved in his heart as he knew the faithful needed to be freed from the domination of the west. He knew what needed to be done, but it was nearly impossible. Even with Allah's help, it would

be very difficult. Over time, his educated mind started to form a plan…

Almost seven years later, the man saw his dreams coming to fruition. *How would one destroy the enemies of Islam? Better to have them destroy themselves instead of us trying to do it.* With the major world powers out of the way, true Islam could flourish. Get the Europeans, Russians, Chinese and above all, the hated Americans to destroy themselves after his plan was set in motion. It had been a long and complicated process to get this far and not without dangers. He had spent quite a bit of his fortune getting to where they were today, but after today, material wealth would no longer be important. Most of the world's terrorists seemed content to plan and execute attacks with little to gain except the wrath of a nation. Afghanistan was a prime example of this theory. Attack the United States and they will invade your country. While he admired Osama Bin Laden for his defense of the faith, his methods would not help true Islam prosper. Crashing airplanes into buildings might be a good message to the Great Satan that true Islam would no longer tolerate the globalization of anti-Islamic ways. However, it did little to change the way the United States conducted business.

Knowing this, the man looked at out of the box thinking and methods as he often did in finances. Finances were the key to America's, and the rest of the world, fall. With them out of the way, the faithful could prosper without having the rest of the world interfere. But how to break the back of America's financial backbone? Oil…oil was the key to defeating America and the rest of the world. If he cut off his oil shipments to the world, other companies would just jump in and take his place. How could he make the other companies stop? A plan was formed those many years ago to inflame the Islamic world to America's hatred of the Muslim people. With the economies of the world intertwined, it would only take a simple push in the right direction to have the chain of events put in motion. One economy falls, others go with it. America's falls, the rest of the world goes with them. The master stroke of the plan was the countries he targeted would destroy themselves with little interference from the outside. His teams and equipment were now in place to give that little "push" in the right direction. All it would take now was a little help from Allah and one other country and the plan would be unstoppable. His friend, the cleric, was now Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, given the office after the revolution the corporate president helped to start behind the scenes. The faithful in another country would have to be sacrificed, but their sacrifices would be in the defense of Islam. Their deaths, although tragic and unavoidable, would be seen as martyrdom by future generations of the faithful. Once his plan was set in motion, the faithful would spread around the world, sometimes with force, sometimes without. The man's name would never be in any history book, but he knew he would be just as valuable as Saladin had been in Jerusalem during the Crusades. He would begin a new crusade of Islam against the unbelievers. He glanced at his watch and turned to an assistant and calmly gave the command which would change the world forever.

"It is time."

CHAPTER 2 – LOSS OF INNOCENCE

Time since attacks: 9 minutes
Date/Time: 20 April/1414 Local
Location: Atlanta, Georgia, USA

GNN Breaking News

A frazzled man with a look of horror on his face appeared at the desk of Atlanta's head office. "Ladies and gentleman, GNN has just received reports of nuclear explosions in the following US cities: Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia and New York City. Communications with these cities is currently down. Reports are coming in from neighboring towns and cities that still have communications capability and from inside sources at the Department of Defense. The explosions were, in our sources words, "almost simultaneous." *[Paper slides across desk to the man]* We now have reports of the military Defense Condition or DEFCON, being raised to its highest level of 'One.' Homeland Security Condition has been raised to 'Red.' The President, Vice President and selected members of the nation's leadership are reportedly being evacuated from Washington. No government statement so far has been released.

"To recap what has already been reported, nuclear explosions have been registered in six U.S. cities. Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia and New York City are reportedly the victims of attacks by nuclear weapons. Military and Homeland Security alert levels have been raised to their highest levels. *[More paper slides down the desk]* The Department of Defense has just announced that all leaves have been cancelled; all reserve and National Guard forces are hereby called to active duty and have been ordered to report to their respective places of duty. The FAA has just announced all aircraft currently airborne over the United States are being ordered to land immediately at the nearest airport. International airliners are being diverted to either their point of origin or to an alternate field outside the United States. The airspace over the United States has been closed to all airborne traffic. *[More pages of paper sliding across desk]* Our rival news service, Wolf News, is reporting that Russian strategic rocket and defensive forces are being raised to their highest level, a level not seen since 1962. A government statement has been made asking American citizens not to attempt to enter the following locations or the surrounding areas: Houston, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia and New York City…This is not part of my scheduled broadcast, but I ask that all Americans pray, stay calm and wait for more information. We here at GNN will continue to bring you every bit of information we have on this incident as it comes to us.

Again, to recap what we know so far…"

Time since attacks: 3 hours, 21 minutes
Date/Time: 20 April/1721 Local
Location: Unknown, classified for security purposes

"Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

"My fellow Americans, a tragedy unlike anything we have ever endured before has happened in six American cities. We have been the victims of an unprovoked nuclear attack on our own soil. Since these attacks, I have been in contact with our senior military commanders, the Russian President and the Chinese Premier. All have assured me this was not, and I repeat NOT an attack by China, North Korea or Russia. None of our intelligence forces or our satellite surveillance detected any missiles launched at the United States from those countries. These three nations, as well as NATO, Japan and our steadfast allies from around the world have promised assistance in bringing those responsible to justice. And I promise you, justice and vengeance will be brought to those responsible who would dare attack our nation in such a cowardly fashion. Citizens of this great nation, I ask for you at this time to reserve judgment until our investigation is complete. I also ask you provide restraint on your feelings and do not take aggression or retribution out on any group or person just because of their race, nationality or religion. When the time is right, we will avenge our loved ones lost in those great cities. I also ask that you pray, pray for the lost and their families, and pray for the valiant rescue workers in those American cities which were attacked. I ask all Americans come together in this time of need, to help each other weather this crisis. The very foundation of our liberty has been attacked, but those responsible will find our foundations built upon the rock as the Bible tells us. Your government is doing everything in its power to help those in the affected cities. Please do not attempt to enter those cities or the surrounding areas. If you desire to help, please report to the nearest Federal Emergency Management Agency headquarters or to the nearest Red Cross organization. We will be sending you additional information as we receive it. May God bless all of you and keep you safe, and may God bless America."

Time since attacks: 4 days
Date/Time: 24 April/0046 Local
Location: Forward Operating Base, near Tikrit, Iraq

The American sentry manning the Listening Post/Observation Post (LP/OP) near Tikrit yawned and attempted to keep himself awake. After five months in country, he now knew what fatigue was. He walked back to the post manned by him and his best friend. "Here is what I get for not going to college," Private First Class John White said to his friend Specialist Al Winfield.

Winfield yawned and replied in an extreme Boston accent. "Yeah, if you was an offisuh, you might be asleep right now."

White chuckled to himself every time his friend talked, especially the way he never used any of the letter R's in his speech. "No kidding bro, if I was an officer, I might get five hours of sleep instead of my normal four."

Both young men chuckled as Winfield brought a thermal imager back to his eye and scanned the

area. Trivial banter may seem useless and inappropriate to an outside observer, but is actually critical to a posted sentry. Useless conversation between sentries often keeps them awake and alert. A sentry doing what they aren't supposed to be doing is often times more alert to their surroundings. A sentry carrying on a conversation is often on the lookout for the odd NCO or officer who would, in the words of their platoon sergeant "tear their butt off the frame for making too much noise. SO SHUT UP AND KEEP YOUR MIND ON THE JOB!" In watching for the unit leadership, they were also watching for the enemy. Of course, most of the talk lately had been the attacks in America, worrying about their families and possible redeployment. Rumors often abound in any military unit, and more often than not, are not true. These rumors were somewhat substantiated by the fact U.S. forces assigned to train and observe Iraqi security forces were being "reassigned and redeployed to other critical missions." Everyone knew the military was the largest agency in the rescue and recovery mission in the attacked cities. Even with the manpower, they were being stretched thin as one could only work for a given amount of time in a radioactive environment before having to be taken out of the rotation. Both soldiers this night thought of their families back home and worried about them being safe.

All of the sudden, they saw a lone figure walking across the desert towards their position. White picked up the field phone in the LP/OP and cranked it to call his Tactical Operations Center, or TOC as Winfield shouldered the light machine gun and switched on the night vision scope mounted on the top. The man stopped about one hundred-twenty five meters away from their position and pulled a bag off his shoulders, set it on the ground and raised his hands. Both the soldiers knew the bag was too small for the mortar rounds that had hit the base the previous two nights, but was about the right size for a suicide bombing attack. White had reached a TOC controller and was relaying a SALUTE report on the figure. He was waiting on an acknowledgement when the figure stated "Do not worry my friends; I have not come this far to harm you or be harmed by you. I have information critical to your military and government. I will wait as long as I need to but time and my security are in jeopardy. I must see your commander at once."

Both the soldier's jaws hit the floor of the bunker position. Not only did this man know exactly where they were, but spoke perfect English. Having been in Iraq for five months and dealing with the broken, heavily accented English of the locals, this man spoke as if he was from Ohio. White relayed the request to the TOC and requested they wake up the Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant First Class Summers or the Platoon Leader and send back up. After several minutes of waiting, the Platoon Sergeant came on the line. A grizzled veteran of several conflicts, he was one of those good platoon sergeants that wanted nothing more than to get the mission done and keep his people alive. He was a good teacher, although very salty "White, this had better be good. I was having a dream about the Hooter Girls swimsuit pageant and I was a judge."

PFC White relayed what the unknown individual had said, word for word and again requested backup. SFC Summers thought for a moment then stated "Might be another haji wanting to take an officer out before he visits Allah and the seventy-two virgins. Give me a few minutes while I get the ball rolling out here."

After twelve minutes, White and Winfield heard two HMMWVs pulling to the rear of their position. Winfield attempted to challenge the vehicles, but was cut short by "Winfield; it's me

for crying out loud! How many hajis do you know of that roll around in squad strength in HMMWVs inside the perimeter?" Without waiting for a reply, the Sergeant strolled past the LP/OP towards the intruder.

When he reached a point about fifty meters away, he asked "Okay friend, who are you and what do you want?"

The intruder replied "I am Colonel Parshand of the Iranian Special Forces assigned to the Revolutionary Guards council. I have documents in this bag proving the Iranian government attacked your cities with nuclear weapons. I also know they intend to strike again. I must get these documents to your government so we, together, can stop them and avoid more loss of life."

The platoon sergeant, although shocked, did not let his amazement show. With a face that would have done him well at the finals table of the World Poker Tour he stated, "Well, pal, that's some story. Let's just see what we can do for ya. Why don't you go ahead and lie down there and put your hands on your head while we figure out what to do with ya." With that, the sergeant went back to the HMMWV and got on the radio to the TOC. He relayed the gist of the story to his platoon leader, Second Lieutenant Markinson.

The young officer had only been in the Army two months before being shipped over to Iraq and furthermore did the right thing. "What do you think we should do, Sergeant Summers?"

The platoon sergeant had already formed a plan in his mind and told the platoon leader not to worry about it but to wake up the company commander and the S-2 (intelligence specialist) and let them know they might have something hot. He also requested a spare PT uniform be sent out along with a pair of shower shoes.

"Umm, Going for a run this morning, Sergeant?" said the confused Lieutenant.

"Umm, no L-T, I'm worried about the guy wearing a dynamite vest, and not dynamite like a three dollar queer from Beverly Hills would wear. He will wear that stuff and leave his stuff out here," the Sergeant said patiently.

The platoon leader gave his sergeant a "Roger WILCO" over the radio and Sergeant Summers heard the on-duty TOC personnel laughing in the background. After fifteen minutes, another HMMWV rolled up to join the other two sitting there. Out of the passenger seats jumped the company commander and the Lieutenant. Walking up to the Sergeant, the company commander asked "So, Sergeant First Class Summers, what's the story out here?" The platoon sergeant relayed the conversation he had been involved with earlier while taking the PT uniform and shower shoes from the Lieutenant. Upon finishing, the Sergeant said "Captain, this is a little more unusual than the normal intel we get around here, so I figured let the fobbits at the S-2 shop get a crack at him."

The Captain thought about what was just said, and if it was true, unusual would be the understatement of the millennium. He also thanked the stars again he was given a bunch of good NCOs and young officers in his company and not the itchy trigger finger gung ho types some of

his peers had to deal with. The three walked over to where Colonel Parshand was still lying on the ground, but still keeping their distance. The Captain asked him to tell him what he had told the Sergeant. Colonel Parshand relayed the conversation, not omitting any details from the story. The Captain continued "Well, well, well. If you are legit, we will get you to the people you need to talk to. If not, we turn you over to the Iraqi Police to run you as an illegal. The Sergeant will take care of you from here on out. By the way, how did you find us anyway?"

Colonel Parshand didn't hesitate to cover for the sentries. "I heard your soldiers talking in that outpost over there and I walked towards the noise. Pretty poor discipline for soldiers to be talking on guard duty."

Both White and Winfield winced at that statement knowing full well that the Sergeant would take issue with that. They both looked in the direction of the Sergeant and could swear they could see his face get beet red despite the darkness around them.

The platoon sergeant turned to the two officers and said "With all due respect, I think you two should head on back over to the HMMWVs while our friend gets on his new duds. Captain, your wife would cover me in honey and stake me to an anthill if you got killed. And Lieutenant, I have high hopes of seeing you reach puberty and learn how to shave without getting greased."

Both officers laughed and started to move away as Colonel Parshand thought to himself *the Americans surely are unusual creatures. A noticeable lack of discipline in their enlisted corps and the officer doesn't take issue with it. It's a wonder they have won so many wars.* He had to admit the Lieutenant did look young, barely old enough to shave, much like he did when he was fighting in the swamps against the Iraqis in 1985.

The platoon sergeant approached the Colonel and handed him the flip flops, pants, t-shirt and jacket. He then asked "Are the papers you want to give us in that bag?" The Iranian Colonel nodded and the Sergeant continued "Okay pal, we are going to transfer them to another bag and I will watch you real close like before while you do it. Understand me?" The Colonel again nodded. "Good…WHITE! Bring me that patrol bag you always carry on post with your unauthorized reading materials and MP3 player in it, empty it first!"

Shocked the platoon sergeant knew about his unauthorized items, White quickly complied and ran the bag out to the Sergeant. After the Colonel had completed changing clothes, he was watched very closely as he took about an inch stack of papers out of the bag he had been carrying and put them in the soldiers patrol pack. He also transferred over seven CD-ROM disks, an external hard drive and two thumb drives to the bag as well. After he was finished, the platoon sergeant took the back and said "Now pal, we are going to handcuff you and blindfold you as well before taking you back to the camp."

"Very sensible of you. But one thing, *Sergeant*, I am a Colonel, our nations might be at war, but I am still a Colonel in the service of my country. You calling me 'pal' and 'friend' is bothersome. Would you address me by my rank at least?" the Iranian Colonel responded.

"No problem, *Colonel*, right this way please…"

Almost three hours later at the FOB S-2 shop, a Master Sergeant E-8 turned to a Major, the FOB commander, tossed the papers down on the table and said “Sorry, sir, but I can’t decipher this Farsi crap. I do Arabic only and I can’t make heads or tails of it. You would have better luck at Brigade or Division, or maybe even the embassy, but I just can’t do it. Sorry.”

The Arabic interpreter, a US Government contractor, also took a stab at trying to read it since he had some basic Farsi skills and said much the same thing. “I don’t read much Farsi either, but the words I do recognize are on all the sheets. It has ‘Most Secret’ printed on almost everything. Other than that, the maps and other documents look remarkably like official Iranian documents.”

The major looked out the door and into the next room where Colonel Parshand sat with an armed guard. “Don’t worry, gentlemen, if this tall tale the good colonel told us is true, I don’t think we need to be worried about whether or not you speak Farsi.”

The Master Sergeant peered along with the Major into the next room “You got that right, Major. If it’s true, I doubt there will be that many Farsi speakers in the world left when we get through with them.”

CHAPTER 3 - MISINFORMATION

Time since attacks: 10 days
Date/Time: 30 April/1649 Local
Location: Cheyenne Mountain Air Station, Colorado Springs, Colorado

"But why?!" demanded the President of the United States at the assembled group.

"I'm sorry Mister President, we can only tell you the what at this point, but not the why. That's the hard part about intelligence, more often than not; we know the what and not the why. Besides the fact that Iran has never been predictable at all makes this even harder. We just can't give you a good answer as to the why at this point," said the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The President thought silently on this point as he gazed at the far wall of the conference room being used at the NORAD facility deep within Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado. He and the cabinet had been moved here not long after the attacks since this was the hardest facility in the United States. He knew the intelligence agencies were giving him the best information in the time allotted, but the question still echoed in his mind. *Why would anyone want to cause such grave devastation to a civilian population? Why would Iran support a terror group which would cause this much destruction knowing we would retaliate if we found out they were behind it? Why couldn't we avoid this? Why is my most painfully obvious course of action the worst course we could possibly use? Why must it be me that makes this decision?* The President, winner of the closest Presidential race in American history, turned to the assembled staff. "Let's start from the top beginning with what we know about the explosions."

An Air Force General, commander of the US Northern Command, answered the question. "Mister President, the detonations couldn't have come at a worse time. The targeted cities were still in the middle of their work days so casualties were at a maximum. The detonations all came within four minutes of each other, meaning this attack was planned out to the smallest detail. The data received on the attacks came from our own satellite surveillance and was confirmed by Russian strategic forces which monitor our country. Times for the detonations are as follows: Philadelphia and New York were 2:02 and 2:04 local respectively; Houston 1:01, Chicago 1:05 and New Orleans 1:02 local; Los Angeles 11:03 local. We do know the bombs were delivered by aircraft, in most cases small civilian type aircraft which were possibly stolen from remote airfields outside of the targeted cities. By the time it was noticed the aircraft were heading towards the cities and air defense forces were notified, it was too late. Each aircraft climbed between four and five thousand feet before setting off the bombs, thus maximizing the damage inflicted. Other than that, we know the bombs were detonated somewhat near the center of the city, but also destroying the port facilities in the coastal areas in most cases. However, with the size of the blasts, they didn't need to be that close to much of anything to cause grave damage."

The President interrupted the General before he could continue. "We know the damage inflicted on the cities, General. What do we know about the bombs?"

The General paused before continuing, knowing the President was not going to like the next bit of news. "Sir, the bombs were five hundred-fifty kiloton devices…the same warheads carried on the Russian SS-18 type rockets…" said the General as he paused for effect before delivering the next statement. "The bombs were Russian, sir."

The President as well as everyone else in the room sat straight up and popped their eyes open at this revelation. The President was the first to ask the question. "General, you mean to tell me six American cities were just destroyed with *Russian* nuclear warheads? Why wasn't I told this immediately?!" screamed the President, who had not had any good news for the past ten days.

The General took a deep breath before responding to give everyone in the room time to digest what he was about to tell them. "Sir, we only received confirmation on this point about an hour and a half ago. We were waiting on the Russians to confirm the data we gave to them via our embassy in Moscow. The Russian President himself delivered the data to our ambassador and promised to start a complete investigation into the matter. The question the Russians seem to be asking is why the warheads were missing in the first place."

"General Moresby, do we believe the Russians were involved at all? It was their weapons that were used, so is it possible they helped plan this?" asked the Vice-President, teleconferenced in from a remote location.

"No sir, with the information we have gotten from both the Russians and Colonel Parshand, it is extremely unlikely they helped in the attacks. They seem very frightened about the turn of events in America knowing full well we would respond in kind without hesitation if we found they were involved at any level," answered the General, keeping his calm. "CIA, DIA and the Department of Energy are investigating the angle of their involvement at this time, but it seems to be a dry hole."

"Did the Russians give us any more data on the warheads?" asked he Secretary of Defense, speaking for the first time since the meeting had started.

"Yes, Mister Secretary. The Russians have not held back any information nor refused to answer any questions about the affairs. They have even volunteered information which, under normal circumstances, would have been denied or hidden. What they have given us so far has helped create the chain of events prior to the attacks. The warheads were originally in Kazakhstan being dismantled in accordance with our START agreements. In 2005, there was a fire at the dismantling facility in which all the workers were killed and, at that time, it was thought sixteen warheads waiting to be dismantled were destroyed. Evidence was found of four of the warheads in the remains of the fire, so the Russians guessed the other twelve must have been destroyed as well. The matter wasn't pursued any further. In their defense, the fire completely gutted the plant and made it extremely difficult to determine if the warheads had in fact, been destroyed," answered the General.

"Well, General, we just found out they were wrong! Why didn't they investigate further?" asked a red faced Secretary of Defense.

"Sir, our own START verification team concluded the bombs must have been destroyed as well. It appears this was an oversight of both our governments that all the weapons were destroyed since none of them were found," answered the General.

"Well, General, we just found six of them in American cities! That means there might be six more out there just waiting to be detonated over more of our citizens! Mister President, we need to find those remaining bombs before it's too late," said the Secretary of Defense who was almost livid at this point.

"Begging the group's permission, we think we already have found them," stated the Director of the CIA. All members of the assembled group turned to the man. "The intelligence brought out by Colonel Parshand indicates the bombs were stolen and-or bought in 2005 by the Iranian government. We knew for years they had been trying to purchase nuclear weapons from the Russians and the republics of the former Soviet Union, but didn't have much success. After securing the weapons, they were moved to a secure site near Qom, Iran. Six of the weapons were transferred to Al Qaeda with the intent to destroy Israeli targets, which was obviously not the case. Although Iran publicly stated it 'abhors the attacks as an affront to Allah,' information given by Colonel Parshand indicates that the Iranian government not only sponsored the attacks, but helped plan them as well."

"Tell us more about this Iranian Colonel, Bob," ordered the Secretary of State.

"The debriefing is nowhere near complete, but I will tell you what we have learned to this point. Colonel Parshand was picked up by Army units in the Al-Anbar province of northern Iraq six days ago after traveling cross border from Tehran. He was passed on to us from the Army in Baghdad and from there he was moved to a safe site here in the States. His claims to have been a decorated Special Forces officer and his standing in their Ministry of Defense had been confirmed by both German and Israeli intelligence services. He was conscripted into the Iranian Army during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and moved his way up the ladder into his current position. Israel had a pretty thick file on his duties within the Revolutionary Council, which included intelligence operations, infiltration and other unspecified special projects. He did claim to have participated in a theoretical planning of attacks of this nature, but thought they would never go beyond the drawing board. He stated his department was never in the loop before the attacks that he knew of, but considered it entirely possible some factions inside the Special Projects branch might have helped coordinate the attacks. He further stated after the attacks, the Revolutionary Council held a meeting in which they rejoiced at the turn of events and started making plans for further attacks."

"Colonel Parshand told us he defected in order to help stop these further attacks because of his 'heartfelt sorrow for the suffering of innocent civilians.' The documents he brought out with him appear to be genuine when compared to other official Iranian documents we have on file and make out the theoretical plans for the attacks that happened. We have no reason to doubt the authenticity of his story at this time. On the other hand, we will have a very hard time confirming his story as well. We have made requests to NATO, Israeli and other Middle Eastern nation's intelligence services to make inquiries, but this type of operation would have been compartmented to the max, with the utmost security being the ultimate goal," stated the Director.

The Speaker of the House, a member of the other party, spoke up for the first time. “Is it possible that this Colonel Parshand might be an agent of Al Qaeda, like a red herring, trying to get us to look at Iran instead of a terror group?”

“That, Madam Speaker, is a possibility that is being investigated by my agency. Nothing is impossible at this point, but is seems unlikely at this point since his standing in the Iranian military has been confirmed by German, French, Kuwaiti and Israeli intelligence services,” stated the Director.

“What if he is an Al Qaeda operative inside the Iranian military?” asked the Speaker.

“Again, this is a possibility that is being investigated by the CIA and DIA. We currently aren’t discounting any possibility,” answered the Director.

“What if Al Qaeda wants us to target Iran instead of them?” continued the Speaker.

“For what reason, Madam Speaker? If we target Iran, the group loses some financial backing, but more important, their training camps and bases. It would not be beneficial to them to have us target Iran,” said the Vice-President.

“But what if-” began the Speaker before she was cut off.

“Madam Speaker, I don’t think it’s the proper time for us to what if every possible scenario. We have agencies that do that for us and present us with the information after the fact. We need to concentrate on right now instead of what if. Right now, we have good intelligence that Al Qaeda launched the attacks, not only with the support of Iran, but they gave them the bombs! The American people will demand action on our part in retaliation on Iran *and* Al Qaeda. I think you need to remember millions of our citizens were incinerated by nuclear blasts in attacks probably planned and sponsored by Iran. I think it’s a disgrace to sit here ‘what iffing’ every scenario and gabbing like a bunch of old mother hens while Iran may be planning more attacks against our country,” said the President angrily.

The Speaker of the House sat very quietly after the rebuke, her eyes drilling holes in the head of the President. He didn’t seem concerned at the moment and continued asking questions. “Do we have the coordinates of the other weapons in Iran?”

“Yes, Mister President, Colonel Parshand gave us the coordinates of the bunker site where he said the weapons were stored and we have had the location under constant surveillance since we learned this,” answered the Director of the CIA.

“And?” asked a President who was on the verge of losing control again.

“Mister President, the site is located on the outskirts of Qom and is very secure. From what we can tell from satellite intelligence, the Iranians took the lessons of Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom to heart. The bunkers are buried underground and are hardened so much that

nothing in our conventional arsenal could penetrate that deep. Only a nuclear strike of our own could get to that level…" answered the Navy Admiral in charge of the US Strategic Command.

The Admiral let the last statement sink in with the group as they silently contemplated what he had just said. The Speaker of the House was the first to respond. "You can't be serious! You people are seriously contemplating a nuclear strike on the basis of unconfirmed intelligence?"

"Madam Speaker, it is the job of the military to plan for all possibilities. This is just one of the scenarios we have planned right now. There are other options that are being planned out as well. I was merely pointing out that nothing in our conventional arsenal would be able to take those weapons out of play," answered the Admiral.

"I cannot believe this! Millions of our citizens were just killed by weapons of mass destruction and you people are considering the use of those same weapons of mass destruction to retaliate! This is absurd!" exclaimed the Speaker.

"Madam Speaker, we were not proposing a nuclear strike on Iran! The Admiral was just letting the collective group know it was an option! There are other conventional options for taking those weapons out that are being explored right now. If you don't mind, let us get everything planned out prior to you jumping the gun thinking the military is advocating a nuclear strike as the only option," said the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, whose disdain for the Speaker was no secret.

"Where exactly is Colonel Parshand at this time?" asked the Vice President in an attempt to change the subject to get the two away from each other's throats.

"He is currently in a safe location in East Tennessee surrounded by enough Federal Marshals and Marines to keep everyone and everything in or out. We are continuing to debrief him and gain as much knowledge as we can about the remaining bombs. As we get more information, we will get it to you immediately," answered the CIA Director.

"All right, we have to wait and see on the rest of the intelligence. What other factors are we looking at?" asked the President as he got back into the discussion.

"Mister President, something we haven't considered so far is the oil angle. Refineries in the targeted cities and nearby areas either have been destroyed or are too badly damaged to continue operations. We are looking at a gas and diesel shortage in the next two weeks or so since we have lost the ability to process over five million barrels of oil a day. Since our demand for oil is about twenty million per day, that is over a quarter of our daily domestic consumption. The country will be looking at seriously higher pump prices for vehicles and, down the road, increased costs of fuel oils this winter. My department has already started planning for rationing if it becomes necessary and have contacted the OPEC countries to see if they could take up the slack in our refining capacity. It doesn't look good as most of them are already maxed out as it is. The exact figures are still being formulated, but for at least five years we are looking at a serious shortage of fuels and petroleum products until the refining capability can be rebuilt or we get serious about alternate energy. Better estimates will be available in a few days," answered

the Secretary of Energy.

“Mister President, with the loss of New York, Chicago and, to a lesser extent, Philadelphia, the American markets are frozen. The stock exchanges in each of those cities were destroyed, as well as the EMP destroying the backup systems. Nobody is sure who owns what or what it is worth for the time being until a full evaluation can be done. The Tokyo and London exchanges, the largest after ours, are closed as well as most exchanges around the world. There are some rumors the Tokyo exchange might reopen this week, but the Japanese aren’t sure about that. Even with the decline of the dollar around the world, American markets are still the benchmark everyone uses. I’m afraid the world markets are suffering because of the destruction of our own markets,” said the Secretary of the Treasury.

“So financially, the world is in a downfall because of the loss of our exchanges?” asked the President.

“Not necessarily a downfall, Mister President. With the destruction of our markets, the foreign markets knew how much they had in there, but with no real way to prove it without us being able to confirm it. Everyone knows exactly how much they have, but because there aren’t any records, there is just no way of proving their money was or was not lost on Wall Street. Currency speculation in the toilet since nobody can prove how much they spent in our markets. The prices of gold, silver and platinum, which don’t really depend on our exchanges, have doubled in the preceding week. Furthermore, with the destruction of the markets, there was a banking run afterwards. Many banks were forced to close since they ran out of cash for the customers. Several riots were started after the banks closed, but in most cases, police were able to restore order,” answered the Secretary.

Everyone thought for a moment about what was just said. Between the markets destruction and the fossil fuel shortages, it was going to get very difficult in the months to come. Plus, after the attacks, riots and looting had started in several American cities. In most cases, local police were able to get things back under control, but in Miami and Atlanta, National Guard forces were moved in to restore order. The President thought about this before making his next point.

“Jack, we ought to think about bringing home some of the troops in the Middle East to help with the rescue operations and for possible assistance in restoring order if they need to be used,” he said to the Secretary of Defense.

“Mister President, you aren’t considering using the armed forces to restore order in American cities are you? What about Posse Comitatus?” asked the Speaker.

“Madam Speaker, we aren’t considering using the military to police our nation. It is better to plan ahead, however, and bring them home now instead of waiting until the last minute to do so where they can help in rescue operations in the targeted cities,” said the President in a tone which said he was tired of the interruptions by the Speaker. “Jack, what kind of force levels could we have in the Middle East and still accomplish the missions?”

The Secretary quietly conferred for a few moments with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and

several other military members. "Sir, we believe a force of four thousand in Afghanistan would be sufficient along with the NATO allies. In Iraq, the security forces have made good progress since the surge operations from 2007 and have almost completely taken over the security operations. We figure an end-strength of between five and ten thousand in Iraq and the Gulf States. This gives us about a hundred thousand troops to get back to the United States. Since the Air Force is heavily involved with relief operations, strategic airlift will be a problem. We could enact the CRAF plan and charter friendly foreign airlines, like the British, which cuts the time down considerably. We can't give you a good estimate on how long it will take, but with the CRAF plan it will take less time. That's just the troops and their personal gear and equipment. The heavy equipment will have to be placed in storage, which will probably take the better part of a year to get back here. The equipment is, as you all well know, normally too heavy for airliners to bring out, so it has to go by sea. This is why it will take the better part of a year to get everything home. We can work out storage agreements with the host nations and bring it back at a later date."

The President thought about that for a moment before deciding on a plan of action. "Let's get that plan started, get the troops redeployed and bring their equipment home as soon as we can get it done. Ralph, do you think the information we got from Colonel Parshand is good enough to present to the United Nations?" he asked the CIA Director.

The Director wondered if the President remembered the UN was destroyed in New York along with everything else, but wisely decided not to point out that detail. "Mister President, again, this is the only source of this intelligence we have. The Iranians are not stupid enough to holler about it to the world, but at the same time, we could present it at an assembly just to see Iran's reaction to what we bring up."

"That sounds reasonable," stated the President and turned to the Secretary of State. "Find a suitable place for the UN to meet, preferably in a country which has somewhat less controversial ties with the Iranians. Bring the world to that meeting. I want the entire world to be witness to the evidence we will put out there."

A man walked into the room and went over to the CIA Director, handed him a note and whispered something in his ear. The Director's head snapped around as if he had received a right hook from Mike Tyson as he looked at the aide for confirmation. The aide nodded and spoke softly before receiving his answer.

"Get it in here now! Mister President, I'm sorry for interrupting, but this needs to be seen now," said the CIA Director. The aide turned on a television set located on the far wall to the Wolf News channel. At first all they saw were three men in ski masks and dressed in clothing denoting them as typical insurgents or terrorists. A voice over was completing a translation of the Arabic dialog given by the members of the tape. All the gathered men and women heard by the time the volume was turned up was the voice over saying "you have one week to comply."

The Wolf News anchor appeared on the screen visibly shaken at whatever had been on the tape. "Ladies and gentlemen, you have just heard a communiqué from the terrorist group Al Qaeda. In this videotape, sent anonymously to Wolf News, Al Qaeda claims responsibility for the deadly

nuclear attacks in the United States just ten days ago. The group went on to state they have plans for more attacks unless the United States and all European nations do not 'immediately and unconditionally' remove their military forces from the Persian Gulf region and Afghanistan."

The anchor's voice continued but was ignored as heated conversations and debates erupted around the room. Everyone seemed to be holding three conversations at once, but the President was not participating in any of them. He sat there, ashen faced, looking at the now muted television. As the pitch of the conversations started to get louder, the President surprised everyone, mainly himself, by screaming "SHUT UP!" at the top of his lungs. It wasn't everyday a cabinet saw the President lose control like that, but something was needed to bring the group back under control. Conversations stopped immediately and all eyes turned to the President.

He paused for a moment and took a deep breath before continuing. "Okay people, let's analyze what just happened. CIA?"

"Of course we will have to analyze the tape, but from first appearances and from previous Al Qaeda tapes, this appears to be genuine. Wolf News has agreed to hand over the original tape to us for analysis. No other terror group has even remotely claimed responsibility for the attacks and it says a lot for Al Qaeda to have the guts to actually admit it. Most of the world figured they were on the ropes after we killed off Bin Laden, but apparently they were not. They know we will redouble our efforts to kill every single one of them now, but I suppose this was too much of a propaganda victory for them not to announce it," said the CIA Director.

"The tape will be in one of our agent's hands and in a lab within the hour. I need the DoD and the CIA to send me over their best Arabic speakers and well as their top terrorism folks," said the FBI Director after finishing a phone call. Both agencies told the FBI they would do anything that was requested since the FBI had the best laboratories to do the testing required on the tape.

"Now that this is out, there might be, probably will be a panic. Does anyone think statements or reactions would be justified in this matter? There will be a lot of scared people out there after seeing this," said the President.

"Mister President, I don't think it's wise to release a definitive statement until we have analyzed the tape ourselves," said the FBI Director.

"I'm not looking for anything definitive, just some statement of reassurance," said the President.

"Mister President, I think the Director is correct in some points. I think we have to give a statement of calming everyone down, but don't give any more credibility to the tape until it is analyzed. More of a 'let us investigate the matter to find out if it is valid and keep your faith in the government' kind of statement more than anything," suggested the Vice President.

"That should do nicely; have the Press Secretary get on that immediately," said the President after thinking the suggestion through. "Does this statement give any more credibility to the information Colonel Parshand brought out?"

"Mister President, this might be the first real confirmation of the information he gave us. Of course, we will wait for it to be evaluated, but if it is true, it certainly links Iran to the Al Qaeda and the bombs in between. We need to keep pushing on all fronts to get the intelligence brought out by him confirmed," said the CIA Director.

"Jack, enact the CRAF plan and start getting troops home. We will need them close at home in case something else happens. Make sure the Press Secretary includes in his statement the troops are being brought home for domestic concerns and are not being withdrawn in response to this statement. We are still committed to the security of the Persian Gulf region. Also, have them add in we have not negotiated with terrorists for over thirty years and will not start now," ordered the President.

"Mister President, is it wise not to negotiate when a terrorist group has a loaded nuclear gun at our heads?" asked the Speaker.

"Madam Speaker, we want to make sure the tape is for real and not some nut job in his basement in North Dakota before we call it a loaded gun. Before we get cracking on our jobs, is there anything else?" he asked.

"Yes, Mister President. We have a plan for shutting down all ports of entry and inspecting ships ten miles off the coast for any more weapons. Right now, we are doing a hundred percent inspection on all vessels, but feel it would be safer doing it offshore in case one gets into port and then detonates another bomb. I have talked to Canadian and Mexican officials who would also enact similar plans. Additionally, non-US originating flights would land at remote airfields outside the United States and have their cargo checked or be checked by US personnel at their point of departure. This includes aircraft from our allies delivering humanitarian aid as well. I doubt in light of recent events anyone would object. We also have to coordinate with Canadian and Mexican officials to get the borders shut down of illegal traffic and create rules of engagement for ships and planes entering our airspace without being cleared first."

"If unknown ships or aircraft violate the ten mile limit they will be challenged and if they proceed, at five miles they will be shot down or sunk. I think these measures are necessary to protect the country right now. Also, if we assume there might be additional nuclear devices in country, we need to step up domestic surveillance of suspected terrorist groups. And last, but not least, this video from Al Qaeda is going to create panic whether or not we prove it wrong. We should consider sending those troops being redeployed from the Gulf close to the major metropolitan areas of the country in case they will be needed. If rioting and looting get out of hand, those troops can be available within hours instead of the normal time of days," said the Secretary of Homeland Security.

The President contemplated what had been proposed and looked around the room for contrary opinions. He drew towards the Speaker of the House, who looked as if she had something to say. He called on her and asked whether or not she agreed.

"Mister President, although you and I don't agree on everything, this decision is yours and I cannot think of any contrary plans at this time," she said, but her eyes told a different story

entirely.

That's the biggest lie I've seen in some time, the President thought to himself. *You won't object to my decisions in public, but you will leak it to the press that you don't support it*. An aide to the Secretary of State came back in the room and handed him a note. The Secretary read it quickly and turned to the President. "Ron, Sweden has agreed to host the UN until a more suitable place can be found. They also told us the special meeting we want to have can be done at any time of our choosing."

"Let's set it up for three days from now and invite the world. Ask, beg, do whatever you have to do to get everyone in the world there," said the President after thinking the matter over. "Now, let's get to work people."

The meeting broke up with each department leaving the room and going to work. The Speaker of the House remained behind, probably to complain about something he said. "What's on your mind, Madam Speaker?"

She was a little uncomfortable being alone in the room with the President, but this was the only time she could state her case one-on-one with the President and not have a room full of his supporters to bash on every word she said. "Mister President, it's no big secret you and I cannot agree on anything. Having said that, I believe you pulling the military out of the Persian Gulf is a good move, although late, but a good move none-the-less. It's not exactly the reason they should come home, mind you, and I hate to see them coming home in this light. But moving them back to the United States and closer to major American cities is a bad move. It is like invoking martial law without the formal declaration. Putting them in charge of policing the population of the United States goes against every principle of this government since the 19th century. And this idea of monitoring our own citizens will be seen as an invasion of privacy. It will be all too easy to take away peoples civil rights with the military in charge of the cities and monitoring dissidents. That's a job for the FBI and local law enforcement, not the military."

"Madam Speaker, it is not my intent to have to military in charge of any US city, nor policing our cities. We never decided to declare martial law, nor did we decide to move the military into the cities at all. All we did was put them in a position to be closer to the cities in case they were needed. And if they are needed, they will only be moved in after the governor formally requests it. And *if* they do move in, they will not be controlling the area they move into, but rather assisting the local law enforcement and civil government. As for the surveillance of the potential terrorists in this country, I believe that most, if not all, of the American people will support this program. We are only talking about surveillance of them, not dragging them into holding camps or putting them in jail. We will attempt to prevent further attacks from happening in this country, not trample on anyone's civil rights," said the President, trying to control his anger. After he concluded his statement, he looked down at the pile of dispatches on the desk in front of him as a silent sign the meeting was over.

The signal also included the caveat there would be no debate, no more talk and no more ideas to be brought up today. *The nerve of that woman to talk about taking away Constitutional rights when she probably wanted to rescind the Second, Fifth and Tenth Amendments,* the President

thought as he watched her walk out of that room from the corner of his eye. *And speaking so callously about bringing home the troops was a good thing. Sure, bring them from one hell hole in Iraq to see firsthand the devastation caused by terrorists in their own homes. Yeah, right, Madam Speaker, that's just a peachy plan, now isn't it*? He attempted to forget her comments as he went back to the pile of paper in front of him. He had a job to do running the country and didn't need to let her get under his skin that much.

As she walked along one of the corridors in NORAD, she thought about the abrupt meeting that had taken place between her and the President. *The nerve of that man to talk to me like I was some college freshman in Political Science 101. Anyone with a brain can see he is after the civil rights and the privacy of Americans. Moving troops into American cities to back up his policy at bayonet point if necessary. Bring them back from Iraq and Afghanistan where they got first hand training in urban combat and policing tactics straight into American cities where they would apply the same practices. Ahhh, I see your plan. You think I'm too stupid to realize what you are doing, but I'm not. Well, we will just see about that won't we, Mister President?* She kept thinking as she walked down the hallway silently making a plan to stop him in her head.

Time since attacks: 14 days
Date/Time: 4 May/1430 Local
Location: UN Emergency Meeting, Stockholm, Sweden

"I now give the floor to the representative of the United States of America," said the Swedish Foreign Minister took his seat among the gathered ambassadors, foreign ministers and various heads of state gathered in Stockholm. The Vice President of the United States walked to the podium with a grim look of determination on his face. The determined look on his face belied the butterflies in his stomach. He was about to give one of the most important speeches in his life and quite possibly one of the most important in American history. He took a small sip of water out of a glass left for him before beginning his well rehearsed speech.

"My fellow delegates, I wish to take the time to thanks the nations of the world for accepting invitations to this emergency assembly of the United Nations. I would also like to thank the nation of Sweden for graciously accepting to host the United Nations until such time as a more permanent home can be established."

"Fellow delegates, two weeks ago the United States of America was the victim of one of the most heinous act of terrorism the world has ever seen. Six cities were utterly destroyed by the nuclear fire of terrorist bombs; killing and maiming millions and leaving countless more without food, water or shelter. Today America is prepared to present indisputable proof of the masterminds behind these attacks and ask the world to assist us in bringing them to justice."

"Since the attacks, the United States has been working nonstop with governments around the world to recreate the events prior to 20 April. We must start several years ago in 2005 in Kazakhstan when a fire broke out in a nuclear warhead decommissioning facility, destroying the facility and killing the majority of the on duty staff. While it was originally thought by both the

governments of the United States and Russia all the warheads in the facility were destroyed in the fire, it was later learned some of these warheads were stolen. Stolen by a government with a history of hatred for the United States. Stolen by a government with long standing ties to terror groups around the globe. Stolen by a government with hatred for peace and democracy. Stolen by a government who is still in possession of some of those nuclear weapons. That government, honored delegates, is the government of Iran."

The gathered delegates started murmuring to each other, but the Vice-President continued prior to the conversations getting out of hand. "The United States, while working with her allies, has received secret documents from the inner council of the Iranian government acknowledging the existence of those weapons. This information, gathered by an honorable defector from within the council provides a clear line between the 2005 accident and Iran's theft of those devices. Earlier this year, six of those devices were transferred to the terrorist group Al Qaeda, with the intent they be used to destroy cities within Israel. The government and military of Iran also provided training and logistical support to this group to strike at Israel. Instead of attacking Israel, these devices ended up in Houston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New Orleans and New York, where many of your delegates to the UN perished in the fires of anarchy and hatred."

"These devices were found to have been transported to the Mexican port of Vera Cruz on board an Iranian flagged oil tanker. They were then smuggled across the border of our two nations where they would wait until fourteen days ago. Almost as one, these devices were loaded onto stolen civilian aircraft, flown above the targeted cities and then detonated. Millions of our citizens have perished in that moment of hatred. What has been kept a secret until this point is two of the groups responsible for launching the attacks have been located. Although none of the group's members have been taken alive, we have been able to identify three members of the groups as being current Iranian Special Forces officers. Evidence obtained in laboratory analysis has confirmed the shipping crates used to transport the weapons originated in Iran. The videotape, recently seen on the media worldwide, indicates its point of origin was the city of Qom, Iran. We also have intelligence indicating the remaining weapons are stored in a bunker outside that city."

"Let me make one thing clear fellow delegates; the United States does not hold either the government of Mexico or the government of Russia responsible for any part of these attacks. Their corporation in the investigations has been complete and without compromise. America is proud to call these nations her friends and will look forward to working with them to resolve this crisis. America would also like to take the time to thank all the nations of the world for their generous humanitarian aid and notes of condolence. America only holds one nation accountable for the actions of 20 April, the Islamic Republic of Iran. In response to the vicious attacks made in cooperation with Al Qaeda, the government of the United States makes the following unconditional and immediate demands."

"One: the government of Iran must, without condition or compromise, turn over all remaining nuclear weapons in its possession or inform the world the location of the remaining weapons if they no longer control them."

"Two: Iran will turn over all those responsible for planning the attacks and those responsible for

the thefts and destruction of the Russian dismantling facility in 2005. These individuals will be tried in the World Court for crimes against humanity."

"Three: Iran must dismantle any atomic weapons projects, uranium enrichment and or weapons of mass destruction manufacturing facility with full inspection rights given to the IAEA council, UN inspectors and other applicable agencies."

"Four: Iran will release information pertaining to state sponsored and state directed terrorist groups it supports so these groups can be brought to justice."

"Five: Iran will cease all logistical, financial, training and 'safe havens' for terrorist groups."

"Six: The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran must dissolve and call for new elections. These elections would be internationally supervised and under the provisions of a timetable set forth in a general assembly of the United Nations."

"The United States has prepared copies of these demands as well as copies of the pertinent intelligence documents collected. Again, fellow delegates, the United States only holds one nation accountable. America does not hold any other nation or any religion in account. The attacked carried out were by so called 'Islamic militants.' These individuals have perverted the peaceful and tolerant religion of Islam to suit their need for violence, hatred and anarchy. The United States will not negotiate with these groups nor will it negotiate the demands set forth today with the government of Iran. We give the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran exactly five days from today at noon Eastern Standard Time in Washington D.C. to comply with these demands. On 9 May at 12:00 PM, if the government of Iran has not complied, America will seek resolution of this matter through other means, up to and including military force, *in kind*. Possession by the government of Iran of nuclear weapons is a threat to all nations of the world and will not be tolerated. America will not sit idly by while a hostile government committed an unprovoked act of war using weapons of mass destruction against innocent civilians. Know this; the United States will retaliate if the demands are not met, by any and all means necessary if you fail to comply."

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your time," said the Vice President as he turned away to walk off the dais and out of the chamber. One could hear a pin drop as he walked out of the room. America had just told the world it was contemplating the use of nuclear weapons if the demands were not met. The Vice President walked to the nearest bathroom and proceeded to leave his lunch in the nearest stall.

After the Vice President had departed, all eyes in the assembly chamber turned to look at the Iranian delegation. The Iranian Foreign Minister, although shocked at the announcements and demands set forth, kept his expression in a mask of stone. *These is no need to speak here today, nothing can be said. Tomorrow perhaps, after I have spoken with the council,* thought the Minister. He calmly gathered his papers into his briefcase and walked out of the building to his embassy.

CHAPTER 4 – COLLISION COURSE

Time since attacks: 16 days
Date/Time: 6 May/1830 Local
Time until US deadline: 3 days
Location: Tehran, Iran

"So what do we know exactly?" asked the Iranian President to the assembled council.

"Mister President, we know Colonel Parshand has been missing from his duty section for over a week and a half now. As director of special projects, it is not unusual for him to be missing for some time, so his absence was not immediately noticed by his staff. We have learned he was responsible for taking the intelligence documents to the Americans. We obtained copies of these documents at the emergency meeting in Stockholm and have concluded that it was a *theoretical* plan for destroying American cities *if* we had nuclear weapons and *if* the Americans struck us first. The ridiculous accusation of the Americans suggesting we have acquired nuclear weapons is madness and there is no changing their minds. In any case, we do not possess the weapons nor do we know the location of the missing Russian bombs," answered the Minister of Defense.

The Supreme Leader spoke up to the group next. An old man, he was instrumental in the 1979 takeover of the American embassy and his rhetoric of anti-Americanism was well known. "What more do we know of Colonel Parshand, Minister?"

The Minister of Defense was prepared for this question, having guessed it would be asked. "As leader of the Special Projects Department of the Revolutionary Council, Parshand was tasked with the evaluation of either buying or stealing Russian nuclear weapons or the components of these weapons. The extensive study lasted several years with the Colonel making several trips to Russia and the Islamic Republics himself to evaluate the possibility. The program was dismissed by this council in 2003 on the recommendation of Colonel Parshand himself on the basis it was unfeasible. Parshand has been a valuable member of the Iranian Armed Forces since 1983. He was originally conscripted and given a field commission for bravery to lieutenant in 1984 and has been steadily promoted since. He is an officer of high intelligence and, until now, a dedicated member of the Special Forces branch. His functional areas within the Special Projects branch included special operations raids behind enemy lines, intelligence and subversion. He has also been our liaison between several Islamic freedom fighters around the world. Until now, his political affiliations have never been in question, since he appeared to be a non-political career soldier. He generally does his duties well and rarely declines a mission although he did not agree to our covert support of insurgents in Iraq. As for the Islamic groups, he has met with Hamas, Hezbollah and Abu Sayyaf among other various pro-Islamic groups in the world. To our knowledge, he has never met with Al Qaeda on any occasion, but we cannot rule out the possibility of his association. We typically have little contact with that group except for providing training areas in the eastern part of our country. Having given you his background, I will say this; if there was a member of our Armed Forces which could have planned and executed the attacks, it would have been him. His operations rarely fail."

The Iranian President was almost offended by the last comment, but contained his anger. "So explain this to me, Minister…why would he plan and execute the attacks and then tell the Americans about it? Can you answer that?"

"That is what is perplexing, President. Why tell them at all? What is to gain? He knew the ramifications of telling the Americans better than the rest of us. He knows the Americans will use nuclear weapons in response to nuclear weapons. Our very survival is to attempt to convince the Americans he is a rouge agent and we have nothing to do with him," said the Defense Minister.

"And what of this bunker complex, Minister? What is stored there?" asked the President.

"President Farnad, the bunker site was immediately searched when we learned the location from the American documents. We found no traces of any atomic devices there. As most of you well know, this was the site we chose to store the Iraqi chemical weapons prior to the American invasion in 2003, but have never been returned. I can assure you, there are no nuclear weapons in those bunkers," answered the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces.

The Supreme Leader paused while a debate ensued in the room. Many times he was able to think of the problem in abstract terms which helped him find the solution. As the arguments continued throughout the room, the Supreme Leader continued to think of the problem…*it couldn't be that easy could it?* He thought about the answer for several moments before interrupting the group.

"My brothers, we are looking at this from the wrong perspective. We are looking at this from the standpoint that we did not have the bombs to begin with. But what if we actually did have the bombs, but did not know it?" he asked and turned to the Minister of Defense. "Minister, you said yourself he was in charge of attempting to steal or buy atomic arms from Russia. Who is to say he did not acquire them without our knowledge? You also said he was the one who could plan and execute the attacks on the Great Satan. Who is to say he did not? But the question still begs of why? Why would he want the Americans to strike? If they do strike, it would only reduce their stature in the world since we are the innocent party here. If they strike, it will only revive the jihad against them. If they strike, we will embargo their oil and close the Strait of Hormuz. We would send warriors to strike at them as well. He knows this, but is that what he wants?"

Everyone in the room fell silent as they contemplated what had just been said. Each of them attempted to find their own answer to the questions posed by the Supreme Leader, but the questions remained, why had Parshand done it and could they convince the Americans it was not of their doing? The Minister of Energy was the next to speak in the assembled group.

"Friends, if what the Supreme Leader has proposed is true and we can convince them we do not have the bombs, then what? As he has proposed, it is entirely possible the bombs could have been sitting under our noses for years with us none the wiser. How do we convince the Americans we knew nothing about it? While this may be the truth, a lie is much easier to

believe. Our lies and past falsehoods may be returning to haunt us," said the Minister of Energy. He was an intelligent and outspoken man who supported greater ties with America. He was also one of the few men in the council who could say such things and get away with it.

"The past is of no concern to us, only the present and the future are what matters. We must discuss this point instead of focusing on what we might have done in the past. What can be done to placate the Great Satan?" asked the President.

"We can show the Americans we do not have the weapons, although they will be doubtful. We can sow the seeds of doubt on Colonel Parshand's story in the international press to gain support and confuse the Americans. Hopefully, we can gain international support showing we are the victims of a vicious plot to undermine the ruling body here. We could even invite an international team of inspectors to the site to show them they are indeed empty. We must move the chemicals stored there of course, but show them there is nothing to be had in those bunkers. As for shutting down our uranium enrichment plant, that is a matter better settled through the IAEA, as we all know its purpose serves peaceful intentions. For our support of these so called terror networks, this will be hard to prove from anyone. We can say we have shut off support but in reality, having never done anything. This complete change of government is laughable at best and will never happen. They said the same thing in 2003 prior to their invasion of Iraq and look where it has gotten them. My friends, the Americans would not dare strike at us with nuclear arms. They would be condemned throughout the world as aggressors more so than they already are," said the Foreign Minister.

"Minister, you are lying to yourself as well as this group! Eighty-nine percent of the American people support retaliation *right now* against us. Of that percentage, sixty-six percent support retaliation with nuclear arms! Do you think for one moment the American President will hesitate with such overwhelming support? The American people are demanding blood! They have always wanted to strike at us and with these attacks they have been given the reason to!" exclaimed the Minister of Energy while pounding his fist on the table. "They will strike, I can guarantee that. The future of our nation is at the mercy and hope that American President is one of the eleven percent that actually opposes strikes. I urge the council to consider this as we cannot allow delusional thinking to cloud our minds!"

"Brothers, we will send a delegation to speak with the Americans. We will make our case that we are the victims of a great lie perpetuated by Colonel Parshand. The ability to convince them of this lie is our only survival. We must convince the Americans we did not support these attacks and we will allow inspectors to view these bunkers. However, our uranium enrichment will continue since this was an issue long before the attacks on America took place. Our support for these so called terror groups will temporarily be put on hold as well as our support for insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, the government will not change. We are elected by the people and will remain in office according to our laws. Minister Behnam, you will lead the delegation to Washington," said the Supreme Leader in reaching a decision and commanded the group.

The Minister of Energy showed his surprise as did several others around the table as the Supreme Leader continued. "My friend, you are well known as being pro-west as well as being a

moderate. It will be easier for you to negotiate with the Americans from that position than from one of distrust. The Great Satan knows and respects you. You will agree to the first two demands unconditionally. Since they have Colonel Parshand, they already have the person responsible for planning the attacks. You must convince them the ruling council never had control of those weapons. You must debate, but do not abase yourself to the foreign devils. Inform them if they do attempt any military action, we will embargo their oil and close the Strait of Hormuz. That is all we agree to."

"Supreme Leader, I will try, but of the other demands, what if they become an issue?" asked the Minister of Energy.

"Give them nothing; those demands are not a part of our deal. The Foreign Minister will contact the United States through the German Embassy and set up the meeting. I want you to leave in the next two hours. Go with God, my friend as our survival depends on you," said the Supreme Leader.

The gathered council prepared to leave while the President and the Minister of Defense followed by his Chief of Staff gravitated towards a doorway. The President caught the attention of the Minister and said "Friends, let us speak alone outside." The President knew every room and hallway in the building was bugged and monitored. Upon reaching an exterior courtyard, the President asked a question, "When, not if, the Americans strike and I know they will, what then?"

"Mister President, as was stated, we will embargo their oil and close the Persian Gulf to shipping traffic from all nations. This will not however, stop other OPEC members from taking up the slack from us. Their greed for the almighty dollar will see to it. However, I think we should send delegations to the other OPEC countries to attempt to gather support and explain our actions. We might get a few allies out of it. It is a strike against Islam and that is what we base our negotiations off of. There is something else to consider…" said the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces as his voice trailed off.

"Go ahead, General, your loyalties are well known and you may speak freely. Please continue," said the President, knowing the Chief of Staff was waiting for approval.

The Chief of Staff took a deep breath before continuing. "Very well, another duty of Colonel Parshand's staff was to evaluate ideas on how to defeat America if we were ever to come to conflict. It was also directed to present ideas which might bring about the demise of America without direct armed intervention or a major commitment of our Armed Forces. As you well know, since the 1990s the political scene in America has become polarized, with two distinct camps of followers along political lines. Xenophobia has also become an issue within certain circles, but that works to our advantage more than to theirs. The staff feels that it would only require a spark on our part to ignite a civil war in their nation. Unlike the last war, this one would not be fought over slavery or geographic lines, but rather along cultural, political and ethnic lines. It is surprisingly easy to make Americans forget about external threats and get them fighting among themselves. Less than two years after September 11th, Americans were already back to normal, fighting along political lines over trivial problems. Instead of whipping their

people into a jihad against terrorism, they fell back into a life of decadence and lack of caring."

"The plan is called Operation Lion Claw and assists in getting the Americans to fight with themselves instead of us. This plan would speed up their demise by elevating the political and racial conflicts in their country and get them focused on each other instead of us. I won't bore you with details, but it involves specially trained teams from the Special Forces branch trained to operate in America. These teams would be inserted covertly and fan out attacking cultural, racial and economic targets, but bringing the blame onto hate groups already existing in the United States. With the lack of oil and general hatred among the population, they will likely turn on each other and ignore the teams already on the ground. Take away a man's food and gasoline and he will fight anyone to get more. You will see how quickly they forget about us and start fighting each other. Along the way, they attempt to recruit bands of extremists from both sides, train and equip them to fight in their place. It is a very simple plan and has a good chance of success. It focuses on taking the pressure off our country and getting the Americans to fight each other instead," explained the Chief of Staff.

In reality, the teams were not traditional members of the Armed Forces of Iran, but rather people recruited from around the world dedicated to the cause of Islam. They consisted of anywhere from eight to twelve individuals trained to attack specific target and lay the blame on their western counterparts. As for the attacks on the racial groups, the teams were comprised of members of opposite races, such as African males would be members of radical African-American groups and Caucasian members would be members of white supremacy hate groups. Other members were trained to act as violent members of environmental extremist groups, militias and fringe political groups. The teams had been collected carefully over time and were trained well in the arts of subversion and guerrilla warfare.

Both the President and Minister of Defense paused and thought in silence. It was always an underlying goal of the Iranian government since 1979 to stop American influence in the Persian Gulf region. If this plan succeeded it would have the Americans fighting each other on their home soil instead of fighting brother Muslims in Iran's backyard. The Minister spoke first, "Mister President, with your permission, I will instruct the General to begin implementing the plan immediately, waiting your final approval to proceed."

The President thought for a moment and walked slowly across the courtyard. He thought about the plan and about the lessons he had learned in the 1970s during the time of the Shah from American advisors. *Always attack your enemy where he least expects it then fade away in order to be able to strike again. Always attack the weak points and watch his strength fade away. Perhaps this plan was attacking the weak point of America. Perhaps attacking America in this fashion would end American presence in the gulf region. What would we have to lose if we proceed with this plan? The Americans already consider themselves at war with us, why would we not consider it back?* "Yes, General, begin implementing the plan immediately. If the Americans do strike, implement it fully and send our holy warriors into their midst. You have my authority to make any preparations you feel are necessary to continue our way of life. However, no one outside the three of us is to know about this. Too many spies in our country would tell the world what is going on and then the plan would be useless."

The General took his leave of the two men and went off at once to begin planning of this operation. The plan was ambitious as were the results. However, for the thirty teams trained to operate in America alone, there were over two hundred additional teams trained to operate around the world, where ever there was anti-Muslim sentiment. *The President said "make any preparations you feel are necessary to continue our way of life" and so why wouldn't we unleash our holy warriors all over the world where people of the True Faith were persecuted*, thought the Chief of Staff. Germany, France, Spain, America, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and a host of other countries would learn the harsh lessons for suppressing Islam. The General considered what he was doing was for the greater glory of Islam and with Allah's blessing, they would succeed.

Time since attacks: 19 days
Date/Time: 9 May/0437 Local
Time until US deadline: 8 Hours, 17 Minutes
Location: NORAD, Colorado Springs, Colorado

"Mister President, negotiations have failed. The Iranian delegation was recalled just now and is en route to their aircraft as we speak. Negotiations have been suspended due to 'unnecessary claims and demands by the US government' by the Iranian President," said the Undersecretary of State for Middle Eastern Affairs.

The President thought about what was just said for a moment before going on. "Is there any reason to believe what the delegation proposed? That this is all a sham?"

The Secretary of State, on a video conference from Stockholm, answered the question. "Mister President, the Iranian Minister of Energy is a man known for his pro-west attitudes and integrity. He was probably sent here to negotiate with us on purpose. As of right now, we have no reason to doubt his story, but at the same time, our intelligence says otherwise. Iran has misled the world for over twenty-five years, Ron, and this latest deal might be a dodge, a sham to keep us from attacking." The Secretary was waiting in Sweden for last minute negotiations within the United Nations, a meeting scheduled for 4:00 PM local time in Stockholm.

The President contemplated what was next, but temporized by asking another question. "What about the inspection teams results?" The team, organized by the UN, contained members of the armed forces of America, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom. They had been sent to Qom immediately after the emergency meeting from five days ago to inspect the bunker site.

"Mister President, after Colonel Parshand told us the location of the site, we have had it under constant surveillance. After our ultimatum in Sweden, and prior to the inspection team's arrival, we monitored a large convoy of trucks at the site loading what appear to be SS-18 warhead shipping containers. The convoy rolled off into the Elburz Mountains and disappeared from our satellite imagery. Several hours after the team had concluded its inspection; the same convoy rolled back in and unloaded the same containers into the bunkers. The inspection team concluded that nuclear weapons had been stored there recently, but did not find any conclusive

evidence of them being the actual weapons stolen from Russia. Having said that, there were definite traces that weapons grade uranium and plutonium were in the bunkers recently and the signature seems to suggest the weapons were Russian in design. That Mister President, is a smoking gun, or as close as we can get to one," said the CIA Director.

"Tell me about the bunker area," ordered the President.

"Sir, the bunker complex is approximately one point six kilometers from the outskirts of the city of Qom. There are a series of four bunkers, approximately five hundred meters between each, in the complex used to store the devices. The bunkers, as best we can tell are underneath two-hundred feet of earth, reinforced concrete and steel. Security at the site is extremely tight and, from what it appears, a very good defensive plan. It would be very difficult to take the site in a special operations type raid and as you already know, nothing in our conventional arsenal will penetrate to that depth through the overhead armor," answered the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"So you are telling me a nuclear strike is the only guaranteed success of us taking those weapons out of play?" asked the President.

"Yes, Mister President, if you want those weapons completely destroyed with no questions asked and with the minimum risk to US service members, that's the only way," he answered frankly.

"Are we positive the weapons are there?" asked the President, trying to find a way out of the situation they were getting into.

"As sure as we can be without having eyes on the weapons themselves, sir," answered the CIA Director.

"If we decide to strike, what kind of collateral damage are we looking at?" asked the President.

"Sir, as you well know, the city of Qom is heavily populated and is a religious city along the same lines as Mecca and Medina. If we strike, it depends on what kind of strike we order. If we launch a Minuteman III, we look at the damage to Qom to be between forty and sixty percent destroyed. It would take two warheads, two missiles, to ensure complete destruction of the target. A B-2 strike with two B61 bombs with the penetrating warheads will also destroy the site, and we can be certain it will destroy every bunker. The Minuteman strike seems to be the best way to go sir, since it releases less contamination into the atmosphere and can be assured of hitting all four bunkers in the complex. We can always follow up if needs be with a B-2 strike. The assets and the personnel are standing by in Diego Garcia and the missile complexes in Montana and North Dakota. The personnel were carefully selected because they were from the target cities and will not hesitate to push the button or drop the bomb," answered the General.

"It may have been easy for some bastard to pull the trigger on six American cities, but this decision sucks for me. Harry Truman had it easy compared to this," said the President.

The Speaker of the House spoke up. Quiet until this point, she was waiting for an opening to

convince the President of the wrongness of his decision to strike. "General, how hard would it be to stage a conventional raid?"

"Madam Speaker, it would be highly difficult if not impossible. The magnitude of the raid itself as well as the support involved makes it more prone to disaster than to success. It is large, complicated and by no means a guaranteed success. However, we preparing for an assault right now. Computer simulations are showing between eighty-five and ninety percent of the strike force being killed before moving the weapons. That may not sound like a lot, but we are forecasting about two thousand troops needed in the raid. So nineteen hundred out of two thousand would be killed. That is the best case scenario. Worst case, they never even make it to the bunkers and are destroyed. With our hand tipped that we know where they are stored, the Iranians have added more defenses at the site, making it highly difficult to reach the objective," said the General in charge of the US Special Operations Command.

"Mister President, we should extend the deadline and reopen negotiations with the Iranians. Anything to avoid a confrontation," said the Speaker.

"Madam Speaker, that plan is just dumb! We have been deceived by the Iranian government at every turn. We know there were weapons at that site, a fact confirmed by five nations. We know from intelligence they gave Al Qaeda six of those weapons. After that, Al Qaeda used those same weapons to destroy *six* American cities and kill millions of our citizens! Our inspection teams arrived in Iran to find nothing more than empty bunkers and traces of atomic weapons. And afterwards, they Iranians moved the bombs back to the bunkers in full view of our satellites! They know we know and they think we aren't going to do anything about it!" said the Secretary of State. "Mister President, diplomacy has failed. I hate to think that I failed in my mission as lead diplomat, but now is the time to consider other means of taking those weapons out of play. We should strike, Mister President. Plus, we should take this opportunity to make additional strikes against other WMD facilities, using nuclear weapons if needed. If they gave Al Qaeda nuclear bombs, who says they won't give them chemical or biological weapons as well? Now is the time Mister President. One minute after the deadline, if an agreement has not been made, we should strike."

The President stared at the clock on the wall set to Washington DC time. *How many more innocents will die of I make the choice to strike with nuclear weapons? What choice do I have? The American people are demanding blood, but my hands will be the bloody ones, not theirs. Will history forgive me?* "Are the assets in place for a strike?"

"Yes, Mister President, we have the assets in place for either a lone strike or with an expanded strike package at Diego Garcia. Plus we have the attaché in Moscow standing by to coordinate the strike with Russian strategic forces. We have him on direct line to be able to notify them of a strike with the Minuteman missile if you order it. The Russian President called on our ambassador after we broke the news about the strike and told him they would not object to any retaliatory strikes we might have, including a missile launch over their territory," answered the Chairman of the JCS.

The President rose out of his chair and turned to the Secret Service agent standing behind him.

"I need to take a break and get some fresh air. Right now."

The Agent, whose sole purpose in life was to ensure the President was protected from all threats, objected. "Mister President, it's not that safe up top. Better to stay down here under protection."

The President gave the agent a look that meant "right now or call your relief" and turned towards the door, leaving his staff behind. The Agent spoke into his radio letting everyone know the Principal was moving outside. Upon reaching the outer tunnel for the hardened facility, the President took in a breath of fresh air. He had forgotten how long it had been since he saw the sky and had a breath of air not circulated through air filters. It was early morning in Colorado, and a little chilly, but the President didn't notice. A million thoughts went through his mind as he took in another deep breath of high altitude air. The same thought kept going through his head, *what makes me better than them if I order the strikes?* He turned to the Secret Service agent and said "George, sometimes I envy you."

"Sir, I have it easy; I only have to protect you. You have to protect three hundred million. It's easy for me, I know the threats and I know how to counter them. You never know the threats until they already have already struck and whatever decision you make to counter them will be debated from now to eternity. I know this sir; I trust you will make a good decision to keep my family safe. You are a man of honor and will make the right choice even though some won't agree with you," said the Agent, knowing what was on the President's mind. It was not often an agent could speak frankly to the President, but if there was ever a time, it was now.

The President thought on what the Agent had just said. More often than not, the White House personnel thought of the Secret Service as knuckle dragging Neanderthals, but this one had read his mind and told him whatever decision he made would be all right. The Agent had basically told him what was on the mind of the American people. *How strange, I don't know anything about this man, but he gave me the advice I needed in my hour of doubt.* Although still not convinced, the President now had the resolve to do what needed to be done. He was enjoying the moment and decided to continue the conversation. "You are married right?"

"Yes, Mister President, been married for nine years now," slightly worried after speaking his mind.

"Children?" asked the President, enjoying a slight moment of normalcy in having an ordinary conversation.

"Yes sir, eight year old son and five year old daughter. They are down in North Carolina with their Momma staying at their Grandparents place. I guess they got a bit nervous being in D.C. after the attacks," answered the Agent.

"Your daughter into boys yet?" asked the President. The Agent saw it as an escape to forget about the madness sweeping the planet for a moment.

"Mister President, she looks like her momma, which is to say beautiful. I think she has about three boyfriends right now, or at least that's the number of really nice Valentine's Day cards she

got this year from the boys in her class. By the time she is fifteen, Daddy will be a very gray haired man," answered the Agent with a chuckle.

"Nice to know I wasn't the only one that had the gray hair problem with my daughters," laughed the President, thinking of the time his own daughters had started dating.

"Sir, my father always told me daughters were God's revenge on your for being a man. You always live in fear of them showing up with someone just like you were at seventeen, and having the same thoughts on their mind that you did when you were seventeen. The only difference now, I can shoot them and say they were a threat to the White House and get away with it legally," the Agent laughed, starting to feel more comfortable around the principal.

The President had a good laugh at that one, knowing the agent was probably only partly joking. He fell silent trying to remember the last time he had a normal conversation with a human being, like now, father to father, and not President to Agent. But there was something he had to ask. "George? Am I doing the right thing?"

The agent was taken aback by the question, but answered it frankly and with respect. "Mister President, I cannot tell you that. Only you know the difference in right and wrong. My parents used to tell me that was the difference in good and evil, knowing the difference in right and wrong. I can only tell you this, we all believe you will make a decision you believe is right. It may seem like it was wrong afterwards and an evil thing to do. But this decision is not being made for evil purposes. If you believe the decision is the right one, then so be it. You aren't an evil man; at least none of us think so. If you follow your heart and you cannot go wrong."

The rest of the walk outside the bunker was spent in silence. After about twenty minutes of aimless wandering, they finally came back to the portal into the mountain. "George, thanks for making me feel normal, if only for a few minutes."

"No problem, Mister President" said the Agent with a smile. "It's nice to feel like a normal human being around the principal as well. You will be okay sir, we have faith in you."

"I hope so George, for your family's sake."

Time since attacks: 19 days
Date/Time: 9 May/1600 Local
Time until US deadline: 2 Hours
Location: Stockholm, Sweden

The US Secretary of State walked to the lectern to face the assembled diplomats from the world in this emergency session of the United Nations. The meeting had been called by the United States in an attempt at one more round of diplomatic talks to bring Iran to its senses. He didn't have a prepared speech and would go solely on improvisation. The President originally had objected to this format, but had remembered the Secretary was an exceptional public speaker

prior to being in his post and if anyone could pull it off, it was him. The President consented to the manner of the improvisation and had the Secretary give the Iranians one final chance. The Secretary, unlike the Vice-President, was not nervous and was fairly sure how the Iranians would react to his speech. He placed his hands on the podium and began to speak.

"Honored delegates; the United States has called this emergency meeting because of the impasse between the governments of Iran and the US. We were in the middle of negotiations when Iran recalled its delegation and broke off further talks. Today the United States will show final evidence in the deception Iran has seen fit to show the world." A projector screen behind the Secretary suddenly illuminated showing a picture. "Here we have the site containing the remaining nuclear weapons stolen by the government of Iran from the Russian armed forces. After the Vice-President spoke here several days ago, this is what happened."

Another picture appeared on the screen, this one showing several trucks around the bunkers at the site. Clearly men were seen loading crates onto the trucks. Another photo, enhanced by computer, showed a close up of one of the crates, with exceptional detail to the size and shape. "That fellow delegates, is the exact same shape and size of the shipping crate used by Russia to transport SS-18 warheads, and it positively the same crate seen by our surveillance in Iran." More photos showed on the screen, these provided by the Russian government of file photos of the shipping crates they used to transport the warheads, an exact match of the previously seen photos.

"After the inspection team from Russian, France, the United Kingdom, the People's Republic of China and the United States visited the site, here is what we saw." More photos were seen with the crates being moved back into the bunkers. "These photos are just an outline of Iran's attempt to deceive the world into believing the world they do not possess the nuclear weapons stolen from Russia in 2005. I now call on the representatives from Iran to answer the following questions…one, why are you lying to the world about your government's involvement in the theft of the weapons; and two, why are you still lying about being in possession of those same weapons?" asked the Secretary.

All eyes in the gallery turned to the Iranian Foreign Minister. "We have not deceived anyone here as in fact the crates removed were chemical weapons, not a negotiable item here. Your team was looking for nuclear weapons and we felt it prudent to remove any other weapons from the bunker prior to your visit. And your second question, since we do not have the weapons you seek, we cannot give them up. Your team of international observers has checked the bunkers and come up empty. I do not know why you persist in claiming we do."

"Will you permit another team to inspect these crates?" asked the Secretary who was prepared for that response.

"As I have stated, these crates are for chemical warheads. We found the storage container useful and copied the design. These chemical weapons are not an issue here. You could look until your heart is content, but not find anything. Your team had looked and come up empty handed. Just like your search in Iraq for weapons of mass destruction came up empty, so will the search in our country for nuclear weapons." That the weapons stored in the bunkers were in fact Iraqi was a

detail left out by the Foreign Minister. "We will deny any other requests for an inspection since your team has come away empty handed."

"In that case, let me tell the government of Iran what we have learned. We know for a fact there were nuclear weapons stored in that bunker, a fact confirmed by five different nations. We know you moved those weapons prior to the UN team's arrival and moved them back only minutes after they departed to file their report. We know you are lying about not having the weapons as our intelligence had indicated. The United States cannot sit idly by and wait for your government to provide another group with more weapons to strike at innocent targets. We demand the surrender of those weapons. We demand those responsible for the attacks be brought to justice. We demand your government dissolve and call for new elections. We demand immediate and unconditional discontinuation of support for terror groups around the world who would target innocent lives so callously. If these demands are not met within the next hour and forty-four minutes, the United States will strike and destroy that site. If our surveillance detects any movement at that site or attempts to move those weapons, we will strike both the site and any vehicles moving away from that site. Since the government of Iran has seen fit to equip terror groups with weapons of mass destruction, we will destroy any site in the country of Iran which we feel is a threat to the national security of the United States. We will use any and all force necessary to protect ourselves and the world from the threat you have created," stated the Secretary in an even voice.

"If you strike, we will embargo your oil and the oil of the world. A state of war will exist between our countries!" stated the Iranian Foreign Minister as his face went pale at the proclamation of the Americans.

"A state of war already exists between the government of Iran and the United States. It was never declared formally, but was started in the dastardly attacks made by a group you armed with nuclear weapons, a group you assisted in helping plan the attacks, and by groups which your own military helped to carry out the attacks. Your regime has seen fit to give terrorists the means to inflict pain, suffering and death on innocent lives around the globe. We will take action by noon Washington DC time if the demands are not met. We will no longer talk or propose sanctions. We will strike. We will strike to ensure the security of our nation and other nations in the world. Are these demands clear, Minister?" asked the Secretary in the same even voice.

The Iranian Minister closed the binder he had brought with him, stood up and walked out of the chamber. Iran had just silently told the world it too was tired of negotiating and would talk no further. The American Secretary of State left the dais, although returning to his seat. Several nations talked of tolerance and offered to mediate. Several more talked of not rushing blindly into conflict. The rest of the nations knew there was no alternative, that a conflict between the United States and Iran was inevitable. The meeting was adjourned by the acting Secretary General, a man from Brazil, who wished the governments of Iran and the United States would talk further and not go hacking away at each other. There was nothing left to discuss since the Iranian Delegation had left and the American Delegation was in no mood to cut another deal. The line had been drawn and they were just waiting for Iran to blink or step over it. As the assembled delegates left the chamber, only the soft murmurs of concern in their voices could be heard as they departed.

CHAPTER 5 – DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Following the UN meeting

"*…Kilo…Tango…Niner…Fife…X-Ray…November…One…Niner…Niner…Message ends*."

The senior officer in the Launch Control Facility of Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota looked through the codebook at the instructions he and his partner had just received from the SATCOM radio. A chill went down his spine as he read the proper instructions and verified the code. "Message is authentic."

"I agree the message is authentic. Target coordinates are located in Annex Delta, Appendix Four. I'm inputting the coordinates now," said the Lieutenant as he punched in numbers on a keyboard after he finished verifying the code.

"Stand by to turn keys…"

As so it began…the United States struck as promised, retaliating with a nuclear strike against the complex near Qom, but also one additional nuclear strike against the uranium enrichment plant and four conventional strikes against chemical/biological processing plants and storage sites. Iran made good on its promise to embargo the United States, but added a chilling twist, it stopped shipping oil altogether to the world. Its reasoning was to stop shipping oil to any country in the world that supported the United States. The move was soon followed by Saudi Arabia, Oman, Libya, Iraq, Nigeria and Algeria. Although these nations needed the hard currency the oil revenues would produce, it was the start of solidarity for the Islamic nations of the world. Plus, Iran and Saudi Arabia had been working behind the scenes in diplomatic channels, telling everyone their innocence and working on a coalition to counter the Americans. For far too long, America was seen as the aggressor in the Middle East and now the Iranians had full proof of the aggression in the nuclear strikes. It spoke to everyone who would listen that Al Qaeda was responsible and the current government had no knowledge of the weapons deployment. And in speaking, nations started to believe they were actually the innocent party. Several more moderate nations in the Middle East tried getting the Iranians to reason, but the stage had been set and they were in the minority.

As feared, the Iranians had been able to convince the Islamic nations of the world the strikes were of a religious war, a jihad against the Islamic people of the world. Added in were the retribution attacks against Muslim people from around the world. American hate groups, as well as those from other nations, started a wholesale killing of anyone who even remotely looked like they were from the Middle East. Mosques were burned, Imams were murdered and stores owned by immigrants from Middle Eastern countries were destroyed and looted. These actions were pointed to by the Iranians as positive proof the Americans would stop at nothing to eliminate the Muslim people from the planet. And during those turbulent times, the idea started making sense to many and even though they had serious concerns with the Iranians, they felt the need to

counter American aggression. And for once in their violent history, Shiite and Sunni stood together in a solidified front facing America and her allies.

The Strait of Hormuz was closed to all shipping traffic and a dozen tankers coming from Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were sunk by Iranian warplanes and missiles. But there was a chilling twist as well. Saudi Arabia, a long time ally of the United States in the Middle East suddenly turned hostile and forced the American personnel out of their country into Kuwait. They coordinated with Iran for strikes against American and British Naval forces in the Persian Gulf and the area became a free fire zone for both sides. As several more targets were hit by European and American forces, the countries used this as an example of American imperialism and brought more nations under the fold. For far too long the Americans have exploited our people, the leaders of Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Syria said in televised addresses. They showed solidarity by sitting together and showing the world that despite their differences, they would stand together when attacked. For far too long have we been subservient to the nonbelievers. Now is the time to act in solidarity. Now is the time to remove the Americans and Europeans from our homeland. Now is the time to honor our religion and Allah and push out the nonbelievers as Mohammed has ordered in the Koran. Now is the time we stand up, not as Arabians or Persians or Iraqis or Egyptians or Syrians, but as brothers united under Allah and Mohammed his prophet.

And so the beginnings of the Islamic Union were conceived. While several nations had attempted to do so under the guise of religion before, they had never had the actions of an outside influence to help spark the movement. And the American retaliation against Iran provided that spark. And the further strikes against targets in once friends provided fuel to the fire as general public opinion started to sway towards the idea the Islamic people were being persecuted. The previous attempts at a union had failed because of the different nationalities. But this time? This time the continued actions of the Americans and Europeans assisted the leaders in showing it wasn't about oil or profits, but about the wholesale slaughter of the Islamic people in the holy lands they occupied. It was the final crusade, the reckoning that had been foretold in the Koran. And so they struck against the naval forces within the Persian Gulf. Several naval vessels were sunk on both sides, but the American carrier battle group had to eventually withdraw to the Indian Ocean since it had no safe harbor within the Gulf region. With oil being embargoed to the nations of the world, economies began to falter and fall. Gas prices began to soar and those nations with oil reserves attempted to get along with what they had.

America was in a curious position. It should have been able to meet most of its needs from oil reserves and untapped resources in the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska, but these resources had not been tapped due to political infighting, government regulations and environmental group's protests. Added in was the destruction of the refineries which would take years to rebuild. Nations of the world turned their back on America, switching them from the victims to the aggressors, but in fact, it was too late to save their economies. America's economy faltered and was quickly coming to a halt. Thousands of workers were laid off by industry every day. Gasoline was rationed by the government and became its own black market virtually overnight with a gallon of gas costing a minimum of $25. Americans spent every penny of savings they had to buy the fuel they needed for vehicles and fuel oil for the next winter. No money was spent on "creature comforts" and with that market drying up; Asian markets soon began to fall.

With America no longer buying their products and no new clients to ship their goods, the industries of China, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and other Asian countries began to close their doors. Europe wasn't much better. Even with them denouncing the actions of the Americans, they also needed American markets for their goods. The OPEC countries grouped the European nations with America and stopped shipping oil there as well. The tiny push of the world markets foreseen by the Arabian oil company president worked as nations began to teeter on the brink of collapse. The Alaskan pipeline was cut on a dozen occasions, the credit being taken by Greenpeace and Earth First. Refineries all over the United States were also targets, with the credit of the damage going to these same groups, although they publically denied the actions. With the refining capacity of the United States being hit as hard as it was in the initial strikes and with the subsequent eco-terror attacks, enough fuel could not be refined quickly enough to meet the needs of an oil hungry nation.

Riots in major American cities began for fuel and food, necessitating the need for military forces to be moved in to help restore order. Tanker trucks in America were being hijacked so often, it was necessary to guard them in military convoys. Iraq demanded the immediate withdrawal of all coalition forces within sixty days from their country or "be faced with the anger and rage of a hostile nation." Those forces were rushed home immediately into the American cities to help bring law and order back into the lives of most Americans. Other American service members from Asia and Europe were rushed home, Korea and Japan being first and Europe being last. Although the European governments publicly denounced the United States' actions, it privately assured the US government their troops would be safe in their countries until they could be transported back home. After the withdrawal of American troops from South Korea, the North attacked. America was in no position to help the South Koreans, but the South managed to counter attack and take back the territory lost in the initial attacks. They were going north of the old DMZ when a revolt of North Koreas military leaders deposed the sitting so called 'Dear Leader,' called for an immediate cease fire and surrendered their country. Talks were underway about reunification, but most of the world did not care, as they had their own problems to deal with.

Mexico looked to be on the verge of a revolution as its government leaders did not spend the treasury to help its citizens. Local civilian leaders and military officers that advocated open revolt against the government were being jailed at an alarming rate. Politicians were still being bribed by large corporations and criminal elements of the Mexican nation and it looked like the citizens had just about had enough. Additionally, the cartel violence that had gripped that nation for so long was suddenly focused on by the general population who just about had all they could stand in their lives. Communities were starting to form alliances against the cartels and against the corrupt politicians who had sat in the seats for far too long. And open warfare gripped the Mexican nation before long.

Other nations took advantage of the void left by the US and the UN since they were not in a position to assist. Long held grudges came to armed conflict across Africa and Asia, but still the world did not care. India and Pakistan were at each other's throats again and daily battles ensued in the Kashmir province. Famine swept across Africa since regular shipments of aid from the world could not be gotten there due to fuel shortages. Bands of gangs roamed the nations of the

world, not stealing for material wealth, but for gasoline and food.

Iran's Lion Claw teams swept across the world and spread violence and death on anyone who dared defy the Islamic religion, but the credit went to local hate groups in each of the nations they were operating in. They also trained and equipped militant groups who attacked in their stead. In some countries, the original teams were located and defeated, but the groups they trained and equipped carried on with the attacks and spread Islam by the sword. America's cities were joined by large cities around the world in riots and devastation. Russian cities under martial law burned on the nightly newscasts; still most people did not care. Armed conflict began between Russian military forces and that country slid into a virtual state of civil war. China moved in two divisions of troops to Beijing to suppress riots there making the Tiananmen Square massacre pale in comparison. Soon the Chinese troops began to disobey the orders to fire on their countrymen and China seemed to be on the brink of a civil war itself.

Military forces of over one hundred nations were mobilized and sent into cities to restore order, often with deadly results. Iraq was plunged into a state of civil war until Iran interceded and almost completely annexed that country. Violence still continued as Kurdish and Sunni rebels continued their fight against the Shiite forces. Kuwait was invaded and overrun in a matter of days; annexed as a state within Iraq. The Balkans started fighting against each other again with genocide and atrocities being committed by both sides. Latin American countries fell into fighting each other, both internally and externally. Europe was paralyzed by lack of fuel and food. Asia and Australia weren't much better off. Africa, never a garden spot of the world, was torn apart by tribal warfare except in the North African regions and South Africa. With the lack of fuel, South African mines slowed production of diamonds, gold and other valuable minerals for which the world's economies depended. Still, the rest of the world did not care as they tended to their own problems. Some countries managed to get by, such as Brazil, who, for the most part, did not depend heavily on imported oil to get along. But these nations were the exception rather than the rule.

Among this, the American Vice-President committed suicide. After confirming the launch order for the nuclear strikes on Iran and seeing the devastation they caused, he became mentally unstable. During one meeting, he quietly excused himself, went to the nearest restroom and shot himself in the head with a concealed pistol. In a spirit of bipartisan cooperation, the President nominated the Speaker of the House to succeed the Vice-President. It was a hard sell to the members of his party, but he managed to garner enough favors to confirm the appointment. In a nationally televised address, he reaffirmed the need for solidarity of all Americans and for the two parties to unite in this time of strife. We need to put behind the days of partisan politics and push forward to work out our differences. We need to stand as one to get the nation back on its feet and continue the prosperity of our forefathers. This is our time to stand united as Americans and not as Democrats or Republicans. This is our time for us to show the world we cannot and will not be ripped apart by politics and work together to accomplish our goals he said during the confirmation speeches.

And although not well like by himself or his party, the President felt the move would help heal the partisan infighting so rampant in the Washington political scene and help make necessary reforms to keep the United States from going further down into the abyss. During her swearing

in ceremony, she promised to work with the President and his staff to help stabilize the country and find an honorable way out of the crisis. Iran's Lion Claw teams took full advantage of the crisis in America and the attacks they performed were aimed at tearing away America's social fabric. Acts of violence, blamed on domestic terrorists caused hate crimes to rise exponentially and spread rapidly through the country.

Major American cities became virtual war zones as gangs fought each other and the Armed Forces for control of territory and resources. Religious leaders, ranging from Jewish Rabbis to Christian Ministers to Muslim Imams decreed a defense of their people and the destruction of anyone who did not believe their faith. Others preached of peaceful intentions and for everyone to work together to end the crisis. Small communities formed militias in the spirit of the founding fathers, but instead of communities combining to defeat external threats, they often formed along political and racial lines, further polarizing the country. The President spoke of tolerance, but citizens were too concerned with getting enough food to listen.

Martial Law was declared nationwide and the military was placed in charge of policing the nation. A dusk-till-dawn curfew was put into effect, but this did not stop the violence. More than a few groups attacked the military secured convoys of food, fuel and medical supplies, occasionally meeting with victory, but more often with deadly results. These efforts of securing the nation began in earnest as troops, mainly from the National Guard and Reserves at first, started deserting to ensure the safety of their families first before trying to help others. It was hard for a person to help other families while their own were going hungry. Active duty forces followed them and America's armed forces started to slowly disintegrate from within as those with families wanted to protect them and get them out of the large cities.

These actions in only eight weeks since the retaliation by America.

Time since attacks: 61 days
Date/Time: 20 June/0912 Local
Location: NORAD, Colorado Springs, CO

An aide running down a corridor in the NORAD facility nearly ran over several people as he rushed in to the President's makeshift office. He barged in unannounced with horrid news.

"Sir! We have CRITIC traffic! It will probably be on the news in a couple of minutes! The following cities were just attacked by nuclear weapons: Tokyo, Saint Petersburg, London, Shanghai, Paris and Bremen. It appears the detonations were on the surface, not airborne like ours but near the waterfront possibly on the ocean, except in Paris which it was close to the Eiffel Tower. The CIA thinks these weapons might have been brought in by ship for the most part. We don't have any damage reports yet, but we can expect major devastation to these cities," he said almost running out of breath, but continuing his news.

"Additionally, there were major terrorist attacks using chemical weapons in Sydney, Rome, Stockholm, Tel Aviv, Madrid, Ottawa, Buenos Ares, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City and Cape

Town. No group has claimed credit so far, but we figure that it will only be a matter of time before Al Qaeda claims credit. Where they got the chemical or nuclear weapons is a guess, but all indications will probably point to Iran. The Russian President will probably call on the hotline in a few minutes and requested a conference with you about possible retaliation. That's what we know for now, Mister President."

The President, seemingly aged twenty years in the past month, put on his reading glasses and looked through the dispatch. He called for the entire staff to meet in the conference room and have the Vice-President video-conferenced in. The aide answered "Sir, the staff is being assembled as we speak and should be in place in the next few minutes. They are meeting in conference room B."

The President stood and walked down the hallway to the room, already starting to fill up with the Secretaries and various aides. The formal government had temporarily relocated back to Cheyenne Mountain almost a month before after several "dirty bombs" containing radiological materials had been discovered in Washington D.C. The room stood on his entrance and he walked to the head of the table before telling them all to sit. The video link for the Vice-President had not been established yet, but a staff member was working on it. The President looked around the table, finding the necessary Cabinet members before starting. He looked at the Secretary of Defense to start the meeting. "Reactions?"

The Secretary of Defense was also a man who had aged considerably since the initial attacks. He knew job was to defend the United States and he had ultimately failed. He also never thought he would ever have had to send the Armed Forces into the major American cities. "Mister President, the Russians and the Chinese are probably going through the roof right now. Even with the civil war going on, the strategic forces of both the countries have remained loyal to the governments in Moscow and Beijing respectively. Honestly, there is no telling what may happen in the days to come if it's discovered that Iran was behind the attacks. China will probably be the most passive since they do not posses nearly enough of the long range rockets to hit Iran without decreasing their strategic posture, but Russia does and will probably strike wherever they feel like. There is really no way of knowing just how far the Russian President will go."

"Plus, British and French strategic forces may strike in retaliation as well. I would expect calls from their leaders, not for approval, but to let us know where and when they will strike. Additionally, anywhere in this so called Islamic Union could become a target for retaliation. Since the inception, the nations have continued to solidify command structures and work together militarily. There is a potential for the British, French, Russian and Chinese to strike in just about any of them. Israel will also strike, not probably, but almost certainly. They don't posses chemical weapons and I can guarantee you they wills strike at just about any location they feel is necessary," said the Secretary of Defense.

"Can we work with Israel to hold off in order to not inflame the situation more than it already is?" asked the President.

“We could hold them back about as easy as holding back the tides sir,” said the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. “We already are seeing activity at the Jericho missile sites and believe they will launch without warning.”

“Where will they strike?” asked the President.

“Probably Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran, Riyadh or Cairo. Tel Aviv was their capital and they will trade city for city with the Islamic Union. More likely targets east of them with the wind patterns,” said the Secretary of Defense.

“Can we contain this to just a regional exchange?” asked the President, meaning a nuclear exchange.

“Chances are the Islamic Union cannot go exchange for exchange unless they get the Pakistanis on board. There have been contacts with them, but for the moment, Pakistan is content to sit on the sidelines. Plus, the majority of their nuclear weapons are tied into Indian targets,” said the CIA Director. “So we are looking at chemical weapons retaliations more than a nuclear exchange.”

A TV in the room told the assembled staff the same thing the intelligence summary just had. Mass devastation, hysteria and panic soon enveloped those cities that were attacked and major urban centers throughout the world. A mass exodus out of major cities was anticipated, even in America. Since there was no fuel to be had, many people would travel by foot. FEMA camps would fill quicker than they had already since people were being evicted from their homes or their homes were being destroyed by the riots and fires. The Vice-President appeared on the video screen at the rear of the room. She had a content “I told you so” look on her face as she looked into the camera at the President. “Mister President, from the look on your face, you just received the news I did.”

“Yes, Madam Vice-President, it appears our intelligence was wrong about those warheads being in Iran or there were more than twelve missing to begin with,” said the President, ignoring her smug look and icy remarks.

The Vice-President answered quickly before the President could continue. “More the former statement than the latter, Mister President. If it is true and those weapons were not in Iran, than you committed an unprovoked nuclear attack on Iran and murdered those innocent people for no reason but to gratify your need for revenge.”

The President stood up before continuing, pointing his finger at the camera before letting loose on the Vice-President. “Excuse me?! How dare you accuse me of murder! We had reliable intelligence those weapons were in Iran! It was not murder, but a defensive strike to keep the world safe from terrorists! How dare-”

The Vice President cut him off before going off on her own tirade. “How dare you, sir! Going off half cocked and attacking innocent people with weapons of mass destruction! How dare you attack that country on the basis of poor intelligence! How dare you murder millions of innocent

people! You spoke so high and mighty of the so called cowardly terrorists, 'attempt to reserve judgment and restrain yourselves' you told the American people! Your attacks on Iran were just as low as the attacks made by the terrorists originally. You are nothing more than a terrorist bully yourself by attacking Iran in that fashion! Don't bother defending yourself now, Ron; just be ready to do it at your impeachment trial which I am going to call for!" The connection was ended as the screen went blank, terminated by the Vice President.

"Sir! We have activity in Israel! Three distinct launches from known Jericho Missile sites! No known targets yet, but the missiles are on an easterly heading!" said a member over the intercom into the room.

The phone rang on the desk, the hotline from Moscow. The Russian President was calling to let them know of the Russian answer to the terrorist attack on their city. Again, the Russians would go city for city with the Iranians or whomever they felt was a threat to their security. And they would not stop until the other side surrendered. The President knew he needed to take the call and attempt to contain the nuclear exchanges to just the Middle East. But with the next announcement, he knew that moment was quickly slipping away.

"We have a radio transmission from the forces in Iraq waiting to depart! They are being attacked by chemical weapons!" exclaimed a voice from the intercom.

"Chinese strategic forces are spinning up! Road mobile ICBMs are going out of garrison to preplanned launch locations!" announced another voice from the intercom.

"Sir, we have a call from the British Prime Minister. He needs to speak with you immediately about possible counterstrikes," said the Secretary of State after ending a phone call. "Also, the German Chancellor is waiting for a call as well. The Germans have invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Charter."

The President sat back down in his chair slowly as the room was silent. The staff looked at him waiting for a response to the Vice President's statements and the further news. His head was filled with a million thoughts…*What a fine mess we have gotten ourselves into here. How could the world come apart like it has in the past six weeks? Is this the end for me? Will history see me as a terrorist or as a man justified in his actions? Will history show the American people supported me? Do I need to put this nation through an impeachment trial? Will they even care? What is the honorable thing to do?*

CHAPTER 6 - POLITICS

After the additional attacks:

Time since attacks: 76 days
Date/Time: 5 July/1430 Local
Location: Washington DC

The Vice President was good on her promise calling for an impeachment trial of the President on the basis of the unprovoked attacks on Iran and incompetent leadership which was leading the nation to destruction. Additionally, the President had ordered an additional five strikes against targets in the Middle East for retaliation for the mass murder of the American troops waiting to depart as well as the response in accordance with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. When it was determined the chemical weapons used were produced by nations within the Islamic Union, they too became targets for retaliation by French, British, Russian and Chinese strategic forces. Cities in Iran, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria were destroyed and caused a wholesale rift in relations with many of the North African and Middle Eastern nations. An additional sixteen cities and military targets were struck by nations that had been targeted by the terror attacks, which in turn promoted more solidarity within the new Islamic Union and further polarized efforts to secure a peace. The Vice President used this to her advantage as the world started heading into a downward spiral with no end in sight. Public opinion, as much as the Americans had in the days following the attacks, turned against the President since many felt the violence could have been stopped instead of escalating further.

The Vice President pointed to the additional retaliation as 'not our problems' and the mass devastation caused by the nuclear weapons used to destroy the targeted cities. And even though the numbers were somewhat closely matched in terms of dead, many felt our continued use of nuclear weapons was unjustified as we had already extracted our pound of flesh and had our own problems to deal with. And when the President claimed the response was for the Latin American cities that were attacked, there was a general uproar as we had no treaties in place committing our strategic forces in defense of their interests. This information, more than anything, was used by the Vice President to bring the trial into the Senate and House where the political makeup favored her party and not that of the sitting President.

Rather than go through with the trial, the President quietly resigned and vacated the office to the Vice-President. For the first time in history, American had a female President, but very few cared. Most Americans only cared about eating, having safe water to drink and security for themselves and their families. Upon taking over, the new President fired every member of the old President's staff, replacing them with members of her own party, loyal to her and who would do her bidding. The only exception to this was a Senator from Connecticut, probably the least liberal member of that party, who she asked to fill the role of Vice-President. He considered the offer at first, but knew he would be little more than a figurehead with no real power. He turned her down, remaining in the Senate where he would attempt to influence decisions from there.

She then chose a Senator, defeated in the 2004 elections, to serve as her Vice-President. Upon assuming the office, she promised the American people she would work to end the violence and restore America's place in the world. But again, most people either did not hear the speech or did not care. Power outages were becoming more commonplace in the country and armed bandits roamed the nation at will. The Americans who had the means to stay clear of such violence did so and decided instead to defend their communities. Small towns across America formed defensive groups that tried to stop the rampant crime waves and the teams recruited by the Lion Claw groups. For the most part, they were successful, but in some cases, the groups decided to take matters into their own hands holding trials for the captured criminals and executing them on the spot. Others decided to raid other towns looking for fuel, food, whatever items they felt they needed to live. However, these were the minority and most Americans worked together to keep each other fed, clothed and protected from groups that would cause harm to them.

As in the 18th century, Americans turned to the firearm to protect their freedoms and their families. And like those colonists that used the firearm to ward off unwanted visitors, those communities with established defenses remained undefeated for the most part. Criminals and terrorists looked onward to softer, less defended targets to get what they needed. The military was hard pressed to be everywhere at one time, so they relied on these communities to give them warning of attacks and hold the attackers at bay until sufficient forces could be brought to bear to apprehend those criminals. Even those that felt gun control was necessary started arming themselves, turning against their political ideals due to the situation. It was one thing to hold a political ideal up in normal times, but for now, protection of their families and possessions was the first priority. Since the military was not in a position to respond quickly, the citizens relied mainly on their Second Amendment right to bear arms and protect themselves until military or police could respond. Americans armed themselves and prepared to meet their attackers.

The new President saw this as a threat to her continued position of power. This along with several other items. So in her first two days as President, she drafted and signed two dozen new Executive Orders and chose to inform her new staff at the meeting she called for. She had summoned the entire temporary Cabinet and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the White House to discuss what might be done to stop the downfall of the United States.

"I have called you all here today to discuss the Executive Orders I signed when I became President. We need drastic actions on our part to stop the violence gripping our nation and begin to rebuild. The orders are being passed out at this time and I need ideas on the best way to implement them," said the President.

The assembled group started looking through the summarized agenda for the meeting. Looks ranged from glee to downright horror as they continued reading into the second page. Before anyone else spoke, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs spoke up.

"Nationalization of key industries, corporations and farms?" he asked.

“No knock searches of residences, storage and other like facilities for weapons, horded food, water and other items deemed as critical to national survival?” asked the Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

“Assimilation of civilian groups such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army and other like charity groups into government agencies and run by government appointed leaders?” asked the Chairman.

“Government assimilation of State funded and sponsored agencies for emergency management?” asked the Chief of Naval Operations.

“Holding camps for resistive members of the civilian population?” asked the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. “Without a definition of ‘resistive members?’ And without any probable cause?”

“FEMA control of military operations within areas declared by the government to be potential disaster sites to include possible insurgencies?” asked the Commandant of the Marine Corps. “These are fairly vague and far reaching here, Madam President.”

“They are clear to me and the discussion today will focus on how best to implement them. The American people are demanding we act and these Orders will help bring the nation back on its feet,” said the President.

“Let’s start with nationalization of the key industries and corporations. Do we have a list?” asked the Chairman.

“I’m appointing a new advisor to identify those. But for the moment, all hospitals, mines for strategic minerals, oil companies and refineries, automotive, airline and electronics industries, all airlines and assets therein and food processing industries for the moment. The list will probably grow as soon as the new advisor looks into it further,” said the President.

“And the government pays the wages of the workers?” asked the Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

“Another advisor is working on a pay plan right now. For the moment, the workers in this nation don’t need to be concerned with profits and government oversight is badly needed. We are working with the unions to determine what pay scale we will use,” said the President.

“The unions will dictate pay?” asked the Chief of Naval Operations.

“The unions will assist in government oversight of industries as well as helping run critical industries,” said the President.

“And farms?” asked the Chairman.

“Any farm over three acres will come under the supervision of the Department of Agriculture and turn over all crops to representatives of the government,” said the President.

“Three acres?” asked the Chief of Naval Operations. “And if they don’t turn them over or refuse to plant?”

“Their lands will be taken by the government in an imminent domain clause and they will be replaced by government workers. Additionally, those that refuse will be placed in detainee camps awaiting trial for violating my orders,” said the President.

“No knock search warrants?” asked the Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

“Based on the Patriot Act and in accordance with the Executive Order. No single person will keep more than a week’s worth of food, water or material items deemed as critical to national survival and surrender the remainder for distribution to the general population,” said the President.

“Doesn’t this violate the Fourth Amendment?” asked the Chairman.

“The Attorney General informed me the Patriot Act supersedes the Fourth Amendment along with my Executive Order. When the nation returns to normal, we will reevaluate the Order,” said the President.

“And confiscation of firearms?” asked the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

“It is my belief that we can help stop the violence gripping our nation by confiscating firearms from the general population. By these confiscations, we can limit the violence and help our Armed Forces and police bring back order and discipline to the citizens of this nation. Without weapons in their hands, they will be little looting and killing. Violence will end and people will start working together to bring an end to this madness,” she said.

“And this assimilation of civilian charity agencies as well as State funded emergency management agencies?” asked the Chairman.

“In order to get this nation back on its feet, we need to be working together and not in fifty different directions. With government control, we can establish priorities of work and get help where it’s needed the most,” said the President.

“And these holding camps? Who controls those?” asked the Chairman.

“The military of course along with private contractors who will be put under government control. They are listed as critical corporations and subject to nationalization,” said the President. “Now if we are done asking senseless questions, let’s get on with how best to implement them. I have a few ideas-”

“Madam President, what role will the Armed Forces play in these decisions?” asked the Chairman.

"You will enforce the Executive Orders I signed into law," said the President. "Now, if we can get back to-" she started to say but was interrupted again.

"That's fairly broad reaching Madam President. It's an open ended commitment for the majority of our troops," said the Commandant of the Marine Corps and added "As well as being potentially dangerous."

"You get paid to work in dangerous situations," said the new Defense Secretary.

"And to go around kicking in doors and looking for firearms and food stashes? Some folks won't like that fact and use those same firearms against our troops," said the Chief of Staff of the Army, silent until this point.

"I don't care if they like it or not. They will either submit to the common good or be arrested and placed into camps. Some may die, but it will bring countless others to their senses. Once they see a few of the raids on TV, they will see the common good and probably won't resist any more. As I see it, those firearms represent a threat to the continued national survival and need to be removed from the equation," said the President, who was tiring of being interrupted.

"Madam President, we are already collecting firearms at all FEMA camps and confiscating from those who commit illegal acts like attacking convoys or those we catch looting. This accounts for a large percentage of the violence in the country. What more would you have us do?" asked the Chairman.

The President was about to become irate with who she considered simple minded creatures in the military, but kept her cool. "I'm not just talking about those, but a complete disarmament across America. It's not a big secret I'm a fan of gun control, but this has nothing to do with that. Those legal firearms possessed by law abiding Americans will be returned once the crisis is over, but for now, I think the American people will see they the greater danger in having those firearms which could be taken away and used against them rather than have them at all," What was unsaid was the President could introduce legislation and get it passed outlawing the majority of firearms before they could be returned. Plus, she would determine exactly how long the "crisis" might last. Once confiscations started, it was very hard to get back what you gave up.

"Madam President, many of our own citizens are using those firearms for their own protection. Only a small minority are using them for criminal acts. By removing those weapons from law abiding citizens we will enable roving gangs to rape and pillage at will, leaving our citizens defenseless. Besides that fact, the right to bear arms and form militias is a guaranteed right under the Second Amendment of the Constitution. Forming militias and defending their homes is what many towns have done," said the Chairman, speaking for the group as nods of approval came from the gathered Generals and Admiral.

"Additionally, we place our troops are great risk by doing some of these items. Take the nationalization of farms for instance. We risk ending up in a shooting situation with farmer Bob when he doesn't want to give up the crops he worked hard to produce," said the Chief of Naval Operations.

"As well as the government run industries. Some people won't like the fact they are going under union control or on government dictated wages," said the Chairman.

"I don't care if they don't like it. I see the bigger picture here and a flat rate of certain professions makes sense. I mean, how many doctors do you know actually earn their salaries? In order to get this nation back on the right track, we need to look at everything across the board. And the government can help in making the determination for what needs to be done," said the President.

"And in clear violation of Constitutional Rights of the American people?" asked the Chairman, dangerously close to insubordination.

"This isn't a meeting where we discuss Constitutional Rights, General. The items I signed into law with my Executive Orders are for the common good and will be implemented," said the President angrily.

"And if the public resists?" asked the Chief of Staff of the Air Force.

"They won't resist for long. We have you to assist in the implementation of the Orders and enforcement of the policies," said the President.

"Shouldn't we be focusing on taking out the roving bands of looters, disaster relief and security of convoys before kicking down doors enforcing what could be questioned as legal?" asked the Chairman.

"Which is still your duties along with what I've mentioned here," said the President.

"Madam President, our ability to do all of this has been seriously degraded. Between casualties and wholesale desertions, the military had lost between thirty to thirty-five percent of its overall strength, with that number growing every day. We actually depend more on hometown militias to provide us warning and keep criminal gangs engaged until available military units can respond. Even then, we still don't get there in time to make a difference," said the Chairman before thinking. He was referring to the massacre of a small town in Indiana where several gangs had united and overpowered the residents. A Marine unit had responded at the first call but was unable to get there before the residents were all killed and mutilated. The gangs were still in the town when the Marines arrived and were dealt with, but not before the unit took fifty percent casualties and the town burned to the ground.

"Then get the local police to help!" exclaimed the President.

"Which we do for the most part. We are working with local law enforcement and generally follow their advice in the matter," said the Chairman.

"Which in turn, they will now work for you," said the President.

"And many won't like it," said the Chairman.

"General, I don't think the President was making it an option nor did she ask for a debate. You will carry out the orders she put forward here today! The orders will lessen the threat to the American people! Local militias are a threat to the security of this nation! Firearms are a threat to this nation! And those who would oppose the President's decisions are a threat to this nation!" exclaimed the new Vice President, speaking for the first time.

The Chairman knew he would never survive the meeting with his job with his next statements, but decided to say them anyway. He was not going to be responsible for shredding people's Constitutional rights without a fight. "A threat to whom? To you? To the government? To the Armed Forces? I seriously doubt it. You say the militias are a threat to us? That is a complete fabrication! In fact, most of those militias formed have treated our military better than we can treat them, providing them with food, water and medical attention when we could not. I do not think the majority are a threat to the security of this nation, but in fact just following the principles of our founding fathers. I believe the military could be better spent on other missions besides confiscating firearms, door to door searches and running law enforcement. Besides that, what happens when someone resists? Do we take them to a camp? Set up concentration camps for those who resist? Or do we just pass judgment and kill them outright?"

The President's voice became low and she squinted her eyes at the General before continuing. "Take caution in your remarks, General. I am the one responsible for making policy decisions for the military up to and including who I pick to serve as my Chairman. I think you should remember this before trying to hold on to a principle I don't believe in."

The Chairman was positive he would not survive this meeting, so he wanted to go on record with his thoughts on the matter. "Madam President, I am also responsible for telling you what the military can and cannot do. I believe taking them away from the missions they are already performing will put their lives at risk from ordinary Americans who, to this point, have helped us and are on our side in trying to return the United States to a somewhat normal condition. These same Americans will feel threatened by this policy and will defend themselves and their rights. They will see the military as the enemy instead of their friend who helps them in time of need. Our military will be behind enemy lines any time they set foot off a secured military installation. You want the military to carry out these missions? Be prepared to write a lot of letters to the families of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines killed while carrying out your orders."

"Listen here! My orders are clear! You will implement the conditions we set forth in these Executive Orders. You will begin the searches! You will confiscate all items deemed as contraband as well as horded food, water, medicine and any other materials we deem as vital! Now get to it, mister or find your replacement!" screamed the President as she pointed her finger at the General and stood up.

The General took a sheet of paper from a notepad and began writing. The President wasn't sure if he was forming the plan or what he was doing. She calmed down and inquired what he was writing. He ignored the question, looked at the clock on the wall and continued writing on the pad.

"Are you following my orders General? Is that the beginnings of the plan?" she asked.

"No ma'am, this isn't a plan, it's my resignation from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the military," said the Chairman as he handed over the handwritten letter.

"Request denied General, now sit down and do as I ordered you to do. Under federal law you have to obey my orders. Now you will do it, do you hear me?" she stated after a brief stunned look crossed her face. But she snapped back and squinted her eyes before replying.

"Yes ma'am, under federal law I am to follow your orders. But under the same federal law, I am allowed to resign my commission. A commissioned officer serving in the armed forces can resign their commission at any time. My resignation goes effective in twelve minutes. Get someone else to implement your plan," said the Chairman as he gathered his various papers into an attaché case.

The room was slightly stunned as his sudden announcement as well as the complete disrespect for the position of President. The gathered Joint Chiefs looked at each other before the President turned to the Vice Chairman. "That is fine, but my orders still stand. You will implement them immediately."

"I will follow your orders for as long as it takes me to write out my resignation as well, Madam President," said the Vice Chairman as he took out his own sheet of paper. Every other General and Admiral in the room looked at each other and peer pressure took hold. Peer pressure was not the only factor, but knowing in their minds they were doing the right thing. Each began writing out their resignations as well. The rest of the assembled staff could not believe their eyes. The entire Joint Chiefs of Staff were resigning in front of their very eyes. The new Secretary of Defense was the only one who spoke.

"You people are all resigning? In a time of crisis when America needs you the most you are going to abandon your country?" he stated with eyes wide open.

"Sir, I took an oath over thirty years ago to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. I have no problems following orders to protect the American people. But the orders the President has issued along with the plans she is making here today are far from legal. They are in violation of the Constitution I have sworn my life to uphold and defend. And in turn, your actions here today make you an enemy of the very liberties millions of service members who came before me have fought and died to protect and uphold. Your actions are an affront to the principles this nation was founded on and I believe you have now become a domestic enemy of the Constitution. None of us will do your bidding. May God have mercy on your souls for attempting to destroy this great nation and turn it into a communist paradise," said the Commandant of the Marine Corps.

With that, every person in uniform exited the room, but not before the President turned to the Secret Service Agent and ordered him to stop them. "On my orders, the Chairman, Vice Chairman and the Joint Chiefs are to be arrested on charges of insubordination. Arrest them

before word gets out of the White House about what just happened."

The Secret Service Agent was unsure of what to do since he didn't feel the orders were legal either, but obeyed until someone else could make a judgment. The Joint Chiefs were arrested and placed in custody before they could leave, but there were no orders with what to do with the aides. They were allowed to leave the building and go back to their place of work. After leaving, each of them pulled out an available cell phone and started spreading the news…

By 8:00 AM the next day, word had spread to almost the entire Pentagon. Many of the staff members assigned there had families and those families had firearms to protect themselves against the lawlessness outside of the nation's capital. They also were able to save up some food, water and medicine for their families and more than the week's worth the President stated. They did not agree to leave their families defenseless and with just enough food to barely survive and starting resigning or deserting as well. Some resigned formally, appearing before their superiors, other just leaving a simple letter on their desk to be found. Fully half the Pentagon staff had vacated by 5:00 that day, leaving to see to the safety and survival of their families. Word also spread around the country by word of mouth and by unconfirmed news broadcasts, but it wasn't until the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs appeared they heard their new orders officially. Since the rumors had not been confirmed until that time, most of the Armed Forces continued doing their duties of convoy support, refugee operations, rescue operations and assisting local law enforcement in policing America. The President and the Secretary of Defense had found a three star Admiral in the Pentagon to serve as the Chairman and implement the Executive Orders. The Admiral, a man with political ambitions, was promoted to four stars by Executive Order and appointed to the position until he could be confirmed by the Senate.

After briefing the formal plan for implementing the Orders to senior military commanders around the country, there was an outcry from many. Many military commanders saw this as an infringement on the civil rights of Americans, while others blindly followed their orders. Some commanders ordered their units to begin implementing the new orders almost immediately, while others ignored the orders or placed them lower on the list of priorities and continued with security and humanitarian efforts. Even then, as the orders got lower, about half the military disobeyed the orders. More desertions and resignations came about, with fully a third of the military leaving in a three day period. The division in the American military was very pronounced, with half supporting the Constitution and the other half not caring since they were being taken care of by the Federal Government. Some states were soon to follow the military's lead.

The Governor of Texas, after a heated conversation with the President, ordered the Texas National Guard not to follow her orders. The conversation, which lasted almost a half an hour, ended up with the Governor calling the President "criminally incompetent" and "neglecting the needs of the People" before she slammed the phone down in his ear. For the most part, the units still intact did this and continued with their previous duties. The units also ignored orders coming from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, instead following the orders of their Governor. The President ordered active duty forces into the state of Texas to enforce her policy by any and all means necessary and to apprehend the commanders responsible for starting the "mutiny" in not following her orders. She also ordered the immediate disarming of the Texas National Guard, by

force if necessary. Troops loyal to the state of Texas quickly formed battle lines and found many of their comrades who left to see to their family's safety returning to their units to protect their rights.

A standoff ensued outside of Fort Hood, with the active duty troops still loyal to Washington on one side and the National Guard on the other. In one minute, it appeared a civil war was about to start between the Armed Forces of America, but cooler heads prevailed. Rifles were slung, machine guns put on safe and the soldiers stood down. Some officers ordered their men to shoot, but were ignored and arrested by the units they considered loyal to their leadership only moments before. Those active duty forces not in the Texas National Guard were placed on base restriction until a determination could be made on their status. The Governor ordered all troops loyal to the state of Texas to be prepared to defend against any incursion by the "Loyalist" forces still under the control of Washington. He also formalized town militias and brought a motion before the state legislature to secede from the United States.

Even those liberal democrats in Texas began to see the President was trying to advance a political agenda during the current crisis and sided with their Governor. They saw her as using a crisis to further subjugate Americans and broke faith with the party since they were using the same firearms to defend their families that she wanted to confiscate. Those that had waited and waited on the Federal Government to help during the crisis now saw FEMA and other government agencies bungling things up with orders such as: "provided food, shelter and water relief to those in need" coming far down on the list after "confiscate all weapon(s) upon entry into FEMA relief camps and identify households which own firearms in the local area," "identify aggressive personalities in local communities which could constitute a threat to continued government rule" and "identify and confiscate all excess food, water and fuel sources to be utilized by Federal Agencies."

A little too late, they saw the Federal Government was not coming to help them and they were now on their own to survive. Luckily enough, the Texas State Emergency Management was in a far better position to help and provided relief to those that helped themselves. In order to be a recipient of the relief efforts, one had to volunteer to assist as part of that help, whether it was manual labor or assisting in whatever specialized field they had knowledge of. Whatever skills the individual possessed, they were put to good use by Texas. FEMA, on orders from the President, attempted to incorporate the Texas Department of Public Safety, the American Red Cross and other civilian charity organizations into the federal group, which caused outcry in return. Washington was power grabbing more and more and those organizations that were a threat to consolidated Federal rule were quickly cut off.

A special radio and television broadcast was made by the Governor calling upon the citizens of the State of Texas to support their Representatives in the State Legislature and his decision to call for Succession from the United States. Those that heard the speech and still had the ability quickly called in their support for the Declaration to their Representatives and the Governor's office. A vote in a special session as held at 9:00 PM that night with a very short debate prior to the vote. The measure passed with a full ninety-five percent of the vote in favor of Texas withdrawing from the United States. At midnight Central Standard Time, Texas became an independent nation once again, with the capital in Austin.

The President called this action illegal; stating the Constitution signed by Texas after the Civil War prohibited them from leaving the Union. She ordered Federal Marshals to arrest the Governor of Texas and bring him to Washington to stand trial. These Marshals, from Texas for the most part, ignored her orders and sided with their new Republic. The President then ordered military forces inside and outside the state of Texas to take control of the government, but still, they were not responding. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen in Texas upon the Declaration of Intent to Secede were given two choices: either pledge loyalty to the new government or be granted safe passage out of the state. For many of the active duty soldiers, their families were in the State on and around the bases where they served. About two-thirds chose to become citizens of the new nation, with the other third leaving the state to try and either rejoin loyal forces or go to wherever they called home.

And so it began, after over two centuries of nationhood, the United States was beginning to fall. Texas was the first to leave, but not the last. Soon after Texas declared its intent to leave the Union, the President attempted to use Oklahoma as an area to stage loyal troops to invade the new Republic. The Governor of Oklahoma refused to let her State become a base of operations to threaten Texas and cut her ties with Washington. It soon allied itself with Texas and the Legislation of Oklahoma voted itself to break away from the United States and merge with Texas entirely in a new nation of the two former states. They too, had enough of the political posturing in Washington and followed the Texan lead. Military forces in that state were given the same options as the ones from Texas, join us or get out. Those soldiers that had gone to Oklahoma to rejoin the Loyalist forces now had to try and escape to Arkansas or Missouri. Little did they know, they were quickly getting further and further away from Loyalist territory.

The so called "red states" of the south quickly followed the lead of Texas and Oklahoma and what they perceived as unlawful orders from the White House. Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas and part of north Florida all broke contact with Washington, recalled their Congressmen, Congresswomen and Senators and talked of seceding. Colorful local leaders helped this cause along, blaming Washington D.C. for the current crisis and calling on their States to leave the Union. Only after President, again, used Loyalist forces to threaten the states did they actually disaffiliate with the United States and form their own nation, named on paper the Alliance of Free North American States. The new government was to be based on the Jeffersonian principles of a very limited central government to be based in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Thousands of "refugees" who still wanted to be part of the United States moved north, mainly on foot, into Virginia and Kentucky. Although North Florida became part of the Alliance, south Florida became a virtual war zone with Cuban, Haitian, Dominican and Jamaican gangs fighting over territory. A flood of refugees went north to seek sanctuary in the Alliance and the United States.

In a surprise move, California, Oregon and Washington State all voted to remove themselves from the United States and form their own government. They were also soon joined by Nevada and cut ties to the Federal Government. Kentucky, Missouri and West Virginia eventually jumped on the bandwagon and held referendums on joining the Alliance. Louisiana briefly talked of forming its own independent nation, but found its citizens demanding to be either part of the Alliance or the Texas Republic. They joined the Alliance since the government could still

exercise the majority of control over the State. Alaska formalized its existing government and cut ties with Washington, as did Hawaii. The American provinces in the Caribbean and the Pacific all started governing themselves.

This left only the Midwest, Southwest and Northeast states as valid members of the United States. The President, in hopes up drumming up painful memories of the Confederacy of the last Civil War, called these states which broke away from the Union "Rebel States" and also called them the "Confederacy." The historical reference did not do her any good as most of the members of these states didn't care any longer what Washington thought. She sent no ambassadors to the new nations, claiming they were still part of the Union. It was only when Virginia was considering joining the Alliance was she prompted into action. She sent delegations to the respective capitals of the new nations and tried to reason with them to rejoin the Union. The delegations were ignored for the most part as the new nations still had the problems of violence and widespread hunger to deal with. They were sent back to Washington to tell the President the new nations were not interested in anything she had to offer with the exception of the revocation of the Executive Orders and her immediate resignation to be followed by special elections. Of course, this was unacceptable to her and no attempts at compromise were made. After long talks with her delegations it was determined the new nations were no threat to what was left of the United States and she recalled her staff.

Little did she know the rest of the unaligned states were still considering leaving the United States and forming their own nations. The President planned to withdraw the remaining loyal units of the military closer to the east coast and eventually invade the States that chose to ignore her rule. Loyalist forces were ordered eastward towards Pennsylvania and the Northeast out of the Midwest and Rocky Mountain states. While moving, the units lost another quarter of their forces as the "strategic repositioning" took some of the convoy routes close to their hometowns where they jumped ship and took weapons and equipment to guard their families. All in all, only token military forces and federal agencies remained west of the Mississippi, guarding supplies and critical military bases, mostly having to fend for themselves in hostile territory.

This left Colorado for the most part unprotected…

CHAPTER 7 – BEGINNINGS

Time since attacks: 16 days
Date/Time: 6 May/1133 Local
Location: Peterson AFB, Colorado Springs, CO

Although many military forces were leaving the Midwest, enough forces remained in the States to guard critical military installations, facilities and secure the convoys and refugee camps. At Peterson AFB, a FEMA camp had been set up on the north-east side of base near the end of runway and spilled out onto civilian property now controlled by the military in an imminent domain grab. At this base, we found a band of brothers and sisters. Not family in the traditional sense, but a family of military service. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines and Airmen in every country know of this family as a group of friends from military service often become closer to you than your actual family. Hollywood often tries to portray it and for the general public, sometimes part of the message gets across. But it is a family that has to be experienced rather than told about. This family would willingly die for you and you for them, a family that knows more about you than your own genetic family does, a family that would gladly help you in your time of need and you them without any reservations or questions. Air Force Security Forces are a much closer knit "family" than the rest of the Air Force when it comes to this. This is mainly due to an "us versus them" mentality drilled into every Airman's head from day one of their Technical Training School. Although most of these cops have friends outside the career field, most feel closer to the people they work with than the Air Force at large. This family often fights with each other, picks on each other and makes life a living hell sometimes, but only on the inside. If someone from outside the family was to step in, they would turn on them like an enraged tiger defending their cubs.

One man, Thomas Dayfield, felt closer to this family than most did as he was mainly alone in this world. His only brother had died in a car crash in 1996 and his parents had died less than three months apart four years ago. His father died during a routine surgery in which an experimental medicine was used without his consent. He experienced complications during surgery and died before the allergic reaction could be stopped in time. Dayfield's mother, never one to justify a frivolous lawsuit, sued the hospital and was offered $12 million in the settlement, as well as the doctor performing the surgery to have his license revoked. She spent little of the money after the settlement as wealth could not replace the man she had spent almost forty years with. She died in her sleep a short time after the lawsuit with what doctors claimed as heart complications. Thomas knew better and for the first time in her adult life she was alone. With his military duties keeping him far away from his original home in Tennessee, she was alone in a house filled with memories of a family she had spent thirty plus years around. Although the medical prognosis was for heart complications, Thomas knew his mother had died of a broken heart more. Loneliness, more than a medical reason, caused her untimely demise.

The Dayfield family was wealthier than Thomas actually knew before his parent's death. His father had started a metal working business before he was born, but had eventually branched out into recycling. That branch had started just before recycling became a major issue for Americans

and had exploded in the wake of the recycling trend. After their death, Thomas had sat down with the family lawyer and accountant and finally found out just how much the company was worth. It was not that Thomas was not interested in continuing the family business, but his military commitments would prohibit him from keeping a close eye on it. He chose a close family friend, the vice president of the corporation, to take over the business and keep the company alive. The friend, with close financial backing from several banks, promised to keep the business and shops open to provide the local economy with jobs. After selling the company and paying the required government taxes, his net value grew to over $40 million dollars. There was more invested in various stocks and mutual funds that had grown exponentially over the years. Although wealthy, his family never flashed their money and lived simply. He didn't know why until he read a letter found in a safety deposit box hand written by his father and signed by both his parents.

Our Dearest Thomas,

If you are reading this letter, we have come to pass on this Earth. I hope by reading this, you can understand why we did what we did and hope you can continue the trend. Every family has secrets and our wealth has been our secret.

We never let on just how wealthy we were since we both came from simple backgrounds and never wanted anything more than to live in this world without any problems. We Dayfields and Briggs have always been independent and self reliant and we wanted to impress on you the importance of these traits. Since you turned the age of 18, you have always had to be independent and live off what you had and not what you thought you "needed." While we were always there to help, you never required our assistance to get by and learned that hard work will do more in the long run than hand-outs ever will.

If we could ever teach you anything in this world, it is to be independent and never rely on your wealth or anyone else to get you by. We know times will be tough on occasion, but as long as you have a roof over your head and food on the table, things aren't as bad as they seem. Hard work, dedication and a positive mindset will pull you through these times.

Remember we loved you more than anything in this world and wanted to make you learn about how to get by with what you had. You have exceeded our expectations and are now ready to take care of our fortunes.

Alan & Lori Dayfield

With little to go to in the place he grew up, Thomas sold his parent's house and what possessions he would not need, took the family heirlooms and settled in Colorado, where he was stationed in the USAF. He kept in touch with his extended family that still lived in Tennessee, but he felt closer to his family in the military now. After being stationed in Colorado, he became enchanted with the Rocky Mountains and Colorado in general. Colorado Springs did not have the big city mentality of Denver or the liberal attitudes of Boulder. For a city of almost five hundred

thousand people, the pace of life was much slower. Many referred to Colorado Springs as being "a big city with a small town attitude."

After inheriting his family's wealth, he bought a ranch north of Cañon City bordering the Pikes Peak National Forrest. The ranch covered over five hundred acres of farm or grazing capable lands, forests and a stream. He bought the place as a fall back retreat in case the world ever turned upside down. Thomas had gotten into preparedness many years before after being stationed in Florida for several hurricane seasons, but had been taught this trait from his family long ago. Growing up, his parents often kept a summer garden and had canned and preserved many of the vegetables grown. On his assignment to Colorado, he continued the preparations for himself and also continued to look for others who would share his ideas. He also planned to get out of the Air Force at the end of his current enlistment. The Air Force had changed much in his years of service, and not all the changes being good. The leadership in the Air Force still enforced a "do more with less" mentality even in the face of other armed services getting more manpower. These attitudes that people were not as important as some fancy flying machine grated on Thomas every time he heard the Air Force speak of initiatives to streamline service and do more with less. After having the means to get out of the service, he planned to do so. He would have to wait a while since his current enlistment date was four years away, but made plans for a second career and the ranch fit into those plans.

Although initially buying the land for himself, he soon found the place could be used for more profitable means. He set up the ranch to be a hunting retreat and a business conference center so popular within the business community that liked to "rough it" every once in a while. He had eight two story, three bedroom cabins built on the grounds surrounding the old cattle pond in a semi circle. The old ranch house was torn down and a new larger Conference Center with a central kitchen was built in its place with additional living space on the second floor. Although modern and efficient, each of the structures was built with off the grid living in mind. They relied heavily on solar power with each of the cabins having photovoltaic panels installed on the roof that fed into sets of submarine batteries in the basements. Each cabin was also fed by large propane tanks into the furnaces and kitchen stoves. In the event of a power failure, the furnaces could be unhooked from the propane and wood and coal stoves and a large fireplace would be used to provide heat, two in the main areas and one each in the bedrooms. The propane tank would also run the kitchen stove as well, being fed off a separate bank of batteries which again, were recharged from a set of solar panels.

Generator hook ups were added onto the back of each cabin to recharge the batteries if the solar panels could not provide the electricity. A low power deep freezer and efficient refrigerator were added to each as well. The windows were large and offered good lighting into the house, and when opened, ventilated the house extremely efficiently. They also had large pull down shutters for the winter months to keep the heat in or for times during storms where they could protect the windows. There were also battery operated fans which could either blow warm air off the stoves or cool air around the cabin. The walls were thick which provided good insulation as it kept them cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. Water pressure was kept up by a battery powered pressure tank for each of the cabins and tanks partially assisted by gravity from the freshwater tanks at the pumping station. The cabins were also installed with an energy efficient water heater, set a little lower than normal, but still provided hot enough water for most

purposes. Each cabin fed into its own large septic tank which was emptied every spring in anticipation of the corporate retreats coming up. Each of the cabins was a model of off the grid living with the utmost effort going into making them stand alone. Not an expense was spared in preparing them for a time of emergency as well as fitting into the other plans of Thomas.

When asked about why the troubles with the alternate forms of power, Thomas would often tell people it was because he lived so far away from the city and didn't want to inconvenience his customers during summer retreats or hunting parties if the power or water was to go out. A few of his customers figured out why he was doing what he did, but never brought up the point to him. Some of these customers were also in the preparedness mindset and often went away with tips to improve their own retreats.

The Conference Center was built much the same as cabins, but with more battery banks to supply a larger area. He had installed a large commercial sized kitchen to feed the groups that came for both the hunting parties and the corporate retreats, Wi-Fi connections, a complete computer controlled Audio-Visual system and a large dining area along with smaller rooms on the first floor which could be used for small private meetings. In the event of an emergency, a large central fireplace could warm the dining and kitchen areas and each of the rooms upstairs had their own small stove for heat. Again, large windows provided ample light and had a shutter system installed for winter times and storm season.

His home was also set up like this, but with more to it than the rest. He had extra items installed there, also run off the batteries when needed. An energy efficient washing machine stood in his basement, using only about a third of the water and power normal washers would need.

After the second hunting season, he added a Trading Post stocked with hunting and camping gear, ammunition, firearms and supplies. Due to his unexpected business boom after the first year, he had to bring in some full time help to keep the Ranch running as well as assisting with the operations. Another friend, George Taylor, had recently been released from his job as a contractor with the Military's NORTHCOM. Although he was highly competent in his duties, one of the best in fact, he did not have the seniority necessary to save his job. Taylor was a dedicated career Special Forces NCO while he was in the military and continued that work after he got out.

Upon being released by the company, he was job hunting when Thomas approached him about running the lodge and Conference Center. George was a man who had been raised in the outdoors and spent about two seconds contemplating the opportunity before agreeing to take it on. With Dayfield's assistance, Taylor secured some property bordering his, an old farmhouse sitting on five acres of land and only three quarters of a mile away from the Dayfield Ranch on the same gravel road. He moved his family in the next month and took on the job with the same dedication he had shown his military duties. The house was somewhat secluded from the roadway since it had a stand of trees between it and the nearest observation, but was still somewhat exposed to direct view.

His wife, Cynthia, was an accomplished cook and assisted with the duties during corporate retreats and hunting parties. George worked as guide, cook, facility manager and sometimes just

one to entertain the guests with his various stories over a beer. George and Cynthia were the kinds of people that had never met a stranger in their lives. They made friends easily and everyone felt immediately comfortable around them. The business showed as well, with both repeat and new customers filling out the reservations for the next year. George and Cynthia both received their Federal Firearm License, or FFL, and were able to sell the firearms out of the Trading Post and take special order requests.

Not only was George a good manager of the retreat, but was a top notch gunsmith on all types of firearms as well. He worked with Thomas continuously to improve the business, almost as if he were the owner. He suggested over a dozen improvements to the property which were immediately included. The five hundred meter rifle range, the one hundred meter pistol range and the skeet range were all ideas George had come up with to improve the Ranch. Although the ranges were metric standard since both had been in the military, there were also markers established for yards. Often, the local Sherriff's Office deputies and Police Department from nearby Cañon City came to the range to practice. Thomas and George had little trouble with the local law enforcement since Thomas had a good "law enforcement discount" at the Trading Post and George fine tuned some of the weapons of the officers. Both the men were fairly well known, although in a good way, with the Sherriff and his office. Generally speaking, if one of the members of the Ranch called for law enforcement support, almost every officer in the area would offer to immediately respond and help.

One night, three years prior, Thomas was visiting his property on a long weekend and was sitting with George around the outdoor fireplace on the Taylor's back deck sipping a beer. The conversation turned to one of preparedness and how people in general were little prepared for emergencies. Hoping to steer the conversation in the direction he wanted, Thomas probed for information before going any further. He mentioned to George the way civilization was going and how it could possibly fall…and fall hard. He didn't mention his own preparations or mention the word survivalist. More often than not, the word 'survivalist' conjures up the image of some bearded anti-government type sitting on crates of MREs and ammunition just waiting for the apocalypse.

Thomas was the kind of person that believed in preparedness for all emergencies and tried to plan accordingly to those situations. Since the beginning of the 21st century however, he started having a bad feeling something was going to happen in the world and civilization would fall. So he began preparing for that fall and the Ranch was a big part of it. Most of his supplies were in the basement and attic of his new house up the road or scattered around his property in several buildings. Prior to receiving his inheritance, he expanded his stocks slowly, like most people. But with a sudden influx in funds, he was able to obtain his supplies at a faster rate. Instead of years to obtain the supplies, it was taking months to get what he needed. At this point, he figured he had about eight to twelve months of supplies just for himself, not counting what he could raise as crops or the game he could hunt. He wanted to be able to get eighteen months of supplies on hand for emergencies if he could and was well on his way to accomplishing that goal.

Although a wealthy man, he was fairly frugal with his money even after receiving his inheritance, except for two areas, his property and his weapons. An avid gun collector for his life, he went a little crazy with his purchases as soon as he was able to do so. By this time he

also had his FFL and was able to purchase what he wanted at dealer prices. He had over one hundred fifty firearms in his personal collection and had the Trading Post well stocked with rifles, shotguns and pistols of all calibers. The collection of firearms in the Trading Post also included quite a few center fire autoloading rifles, some to be used as "demonstrator" models for the local law enforcement.

He and George continued the conversation when Thomas was suddenly surprised by George's announcement. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Cynthia and I have been stocking up for years preparing for the worst. In fact, this house fits right into our plan of preparing. It's secure, out of the way, and most of all, away from major urban centers. I figure we already have enough to hole up here for six months without leaving. Also, we plant crops and live off the land. What? You think I don't know what you have in your basement? I know what it is because mine looks much the same. Come on in and have a peek."

The two entered the house and went into George's basement. Upon entering, Thomas saw buckets and boxes of dry goods, crates of MREs and camping foods, ammunition crates and cans, some military, some civilian, a weapons safe, propane bottles and boxes and bins of various items one might need to live off the grid for some time.

Beside the doorway were two backpacks, both were military style packs loaded out to about thirty or forty pounds apiece. Thomas could only come up with one use for those. George answered his unspoken question. "Yeah, those are what you might call Bug Out Bags. We put them in the car any time we go more than ten miles from home. We have enough stuff in there to last five days, maybe more, we're not really sure. Five days is the longest we have lived out of them. Are you surprised yet?" he asked with a chuckle.

Thomas was more than surprised, he was astounded. He had found someone with a similar mindset totally by accident. But George continued to surprise him with his knowledge. "So, this makes it very easy now. Since we are on the same playbook, let's talk about what we can do together to prepare." They walked out of the house and back onto the deck where they continued the conversation well into the night.

Over the next three years, their preparations were made together. George's house was retrofit much like the cabins were, going to off the grid living. The small pond fed by the stream was drained, dug out deeper and wider, refilled and was now home to a large school of the mountain trout so abundant in Colorado's lakes and streams. A five thousand gallon cistern was added to the well which was now run by a solar pump. Gravity fed water lines ran to each of the houses, cabins and Trading Post. George paid to have a well dug on his property and had a five hundred gallon tank installed as well. Since dry weather was always a concern in Colorado, an irrigation system was put in place by the fields that would be used to raise crops.

Although the land bordered the National Forrest where firewood could be easily obtained, Thomas had bought three truckloads of seasoned hardwood and had it shipped in the first summer and another truckload every summer after that. Two destroyed chainsaw blades, several dozen splinters and blisters and several more broken axe handles later, the wood had been sawed, split and was now neatly stacked in the old barn behind the Trading Post. Thomas had also

expanded the gasoline storage of the Ranch by adding a second five thousand gallon gasoline tank to the existing one and adding a ten thousand gallon tank for diesel storage and a two thousand gallon kerosene tank. Each could be run by a generator or by a hand operated pump and were kept topped off every spring.

Along the way, Thomas was introduced to a friend of George named Ryan Meeks. He casually knew Ryan before, but was surprised when George asked him what he thought about Ryan joining the Ranch, both as an employee and as a kindred spirit of being prepared. Although not really knowing Ryan, being vouched by George went a long way with Thomas. He learned Ryan had also been into the preparedness lifestyle for quite a while and already had a solo retreat set up out in the mountains. Ryan informed the two of them he preferred to be with other people that would share his views than out alone in the mountains. He and George had served together in the same units during his time in the Army, although Ryan was not Special Forces. His area of expertise was communications. He also brought in a wealth of knowledge about hunting, fishing and farming that would help the small group in case of troubles. Ryan sold his property in the mountains, moved his preps to the Ranch and had a house built with Thomas' permission on his property. He immediately took to his new job on the Ranch with the same vigor as George and Cynthia and helped make several improvements.

After Ryan joined the group, Thomas made several attempts to recruit others to be on the Ranch with them. He went to some of his close friends he had worked with over the years and, after carefully approaching them, invited them into the group. He also told several more of the Ranch and let them know they had "a place to crash in case anything goes bad." The first person Thomas approached was Darren Thompson and his wife Janet. Darren had actually brought the matter up to Thomas before on several occasions and made comments that he was into the preparedness lifestyle.

Darren was a fellow security policeman with Thomas and was good at bow hunting, small engine mechanics and was a crack shot with any type of firearm. His wife was a physical therapist at a local hospital and also went along with the lifestyle of being prepared. They gave as much money as they could to Thomas for an investment on their preparations and moved what stores they had to the Ranch. Darren and Janet had two children, a son of twelve and a daughter of nine so Thomas ensured their money was put to good use and not a penny was wasted. He knew of the best deals to get for the long life foods and other preparations so he made sure they got the best deals possible.

Rick and Michelle Jones were the next two on the list of friends Thomas was inviting. Thomas had invited them up for a relaxing weekend and brought them in on the idea of the retreat. At first, Michelle was skeptical, but Rick was all for it. Although they gave money, it was not always on time, but Rick and Michelle made up for it in other means, like supplies. Sometimes he would show up with crates of ammo with military headstamps. Although Thomas figured the ammo was misappropriated from Government stockpiles, he never said anything and sanded off the lot numbers from the crates and cans, repainted them and placed the ammo in a hard to find place.

Rick was a Combat Arms Training and Maintenance specialist in the same unit that Thomas was

in. His military specialty was repairing and maintaining military firearms and teaching others to use them. Although being a trained gunsmith, George was his superior by his own admittance. The two spent many an hour building custom firearms and Rick learned a lot from George. He was also an avid hunter and reloader who owned a complete set of reloading equipment. He was very meticulous in his work of reloading and sold his shells in the Trading Post, offering to replace a defective cartridge with ten if they failed. The sales from the rounds offset the money he was to provide so he just about broke even.

Michelle, not really hip to the idea of the preparedness thing in the beginning, had valuable knowledge that could help the group. Originally from Alabama, she grew up on a farm where from a young age she learned to grow crops, tend animals, sew, cook, and store foods. More often than not, she would rarely admit to these talents, almost as if she wanted to forget her past. None the less, she helped out George and Cynthia in their garden and helped with the major fields when they planted them. She grew more comfortable with time and became a valuable member of the team. Along with Rick and Michelle came their two children, both daughters of six and two. Often overlooked in most prepared stocks, Thomas had George add some children's vitamins into the prepared stocks after the request was made by Michelle.

The final family Thomas invited into the Ranch was one of his oldest friends, Dave Lawson and his family. Thomas and Dave had been friends for almost ten years and he had also known Renee for nearly that long. Upon informing him of the Ranch and its purpose, Dave readily joined and Renee also felt the idea was a good one. Dave admitted to Thomas "I don't like the way things are going in the world and it would be nice to have a place to send Renee and the kids in case something went wrong."

Dave and Renee were both expert fishermen, growing up on the coast of Maine, but it was Renee who was the better of the two. It was said Renee didn't even need bait on a hook to catch a fish, but Thomas figured this was only a tall tale. He doubted it until Renee came back from a local stream with a dozen fish after only an hour of work, much to the disgust of Thomas and Dave who had been working for several hours with the same results. Dave was also an accomplished carpenter, having worked in his father and grandfather's carpentry shops growing up. He was also a good cook and pretty fair with repairing engines. Renee was exceptional with electronics and electrical work. It was her living before an injury forced her off the job and they had their second child. In a pinch, she could also work on small engines. All in all, the Lawsons had much to offer the Ranch and were welcomed by Thomas, the Taylors and Ryan.

Each of the families came up to the Ranch and picked out one of the cabins on the property, laying claim as their "own" in case they had to relocate there. They had brought up various personal items like clothing and weapons and stored them in small sheds behind the cabins and in the locked basements. The major preparations like food and supplies were taken care of by the Taylors and Thomas, but each family had marked their own so they knew when to rotate it out. Thomas also brought up several other friends to the Ranch, but had not fully extended the invitation yet until it could be determined if they could become valuable members of the group. Most of them understood the unspoken message of "you have a place to go in case all hell breaks loose."

During the springs and summer, Thomas came up to the Ranch as often as he could, helping out with the corporate retreats and the farms. Thomas tilled the ground behind his house and planted small crops each summer, but was unable to tend it all that much. Cynthia helped him out in this area and got what she could from his garden, helping him preserve the food. In the fall, crops were harvested from the gardens and fields and stored for the winter while George and Ryan lead hunting parties out into the nearby national forest. More often than not, Thomas was unable to help much with the hunting parties, but managed to get one or two in every year.

During the winter, every family helped perform maintenance on the grounds and prepared for the next year and helped increase the stocks and supplies of the collective community. Over the four years, Thomas, the Taylors, the Thompsons, the Lawsons, the Jones and Ryan managed to collect enough goods to live safely off the grid for at least two years, probably more. At the beginning of this year, George and Thomas had gone on a buying spree for major items and were nearing completion of the stockpile of these items when the attacks happened. They both got a bad feeling about the near future and wanted to be as set as possible in case something happened. Most of these items were not really necessary and more of nice to have items than real necessities.

Spring came and gardens were planted, last minute reservations for the corporate retreat and hunting camps were made, but the bombs detonated before any of them could come to pass. As soon as it was possible, Thomas called the Taylors at their home and got Cynthia on the phone. Knowing she was the more organized of the two; she would know as much or more than George on the status of the preparations. "Is everything okay up there with you folks?"

"Of course, George and Ryan are down at the main ranch making sure everything is in place in case you come running this way soon," she said, expecting this phone call.

"Were the fuel deliveries made?" asked Thomas.

"Yes and you caught a break on that. They were delivered a week before the attacks and before gas prices went through the roof. We were able to get all the tanks filled as well as our own and also all the spare jerry cans and the kerosene tank. We paid in cash and bought from several different sources so it doesn't look like we are hording gas," answered Cynthia who knew Thomas was a bit of a worry wart when it came to the preps.

"So we are sitting okay on the fuel?" he asked, just to be sure.

"Yes, we are, so stop worrying. All the tanks and cans have been filled and stabilized. The kero tank and all the kero cans are all filled. The propane tanks were filled after the winter and most are still topped off. The food is ready and everything is in place. Stop worrying, silly," said Cynthia in a patient voice.

Thomas laughed at the perceived calmness in her voice when everything else was going crazy in the world. "All right, I will stop worrying so much about it. Everything is mass chaos up here in the Springs, so I wouldn't bother making a trip here unless you absolutely had too."

"Don't I know it, Cañon City is much the same so we are sticking close to home for now. Are you planning on coming up soon?" she asked after a moment of pause.

"I'm not sure if I will be able to just yet. They have us all jumping around here and have stop-lossed us as well. Two weeks before I start my terminal leave and I get stuck here," said Thomas who was a bit peeved at the turn of events.

"Well, honey, that's the government for you. Just when you think everything is going good, they go and do that to you. Just let us know when you are going to come running this way," she replied.

"Will do…oh wait! Some families might be coming that way in the next bit. Will that be a problem?" asked Thomas.

"No, shouldn't be a problem. Just tell them to call if they can before coming here or at least check in with us before going down to the Ranch. George can go ahead and start distributing the food stores if they want," she replied after thinking over the question.

"That sounds like a good plan. You folks take care up there" said Thomas as he was finishing the phone call.

"Of course. You get your butt up here and don't play the hero if things get worse," said a concerned Cynthia.

"You know I will," stated Thomas.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," stated Cynthia before he hung up. "The guy we always buy the hardwood from called yesterday. He said if we wanted to get an order in, we needed to get it done in the next week. After that, he doesn't think he will have enough fuel to make the trip all the way out here. Do you want us to place the order?"

"Yes, for sure. As a matter of fact, see if he can get two or three loads," stated Thomas. "Actually, make it worth his while. Help pay him off with filling the trucks with diesel for the return trip."

"That's not a bad idea, Tom. I'll give him a call when I get off here," said Cynthia.

They said their goodbyes and hung up the phone. Thomas was about to go about his duties when he was paid a semi-unexpected visit from Dave Lawson. Since the detonations, he had expected the families to pay him a visit about moving down to the safety of the Ranch. Dave started the conversation without being prompted. "Been on the phone with George?"

"Cynthia," corrected Thomas. "I presume you are here to ask about whether or not Renee can head on down there?"

"You presume right, o wise one. Are they ready to get visitors?" asked Dave who was very

concerned for the safety of his family, especially since they were sitting in a fairly large target for a terrorist attack.

"Yeah, I talked to Cynthia and she said everything was in order for people to come on down," answered Thomas.

"Well, I know Renee has the Rodeo packed as well as the trailer. It seems as if she is planning to move down there permanently. Same thing with Janet Thompson. They are going to wait a few days before going down to let the madness stop," said Dave. After the attacks, people had fled many of the large metropolitan areas since the threat of attack was still out there. Many had started returning since the motel rooms and relatives in other areas did not have the creature comforts of their own homes.

"Shouldn't be a problem although I would give someone a call down there to let them know you all are coming," he said.

At this point the two men were joined by a worried looking Staff Sergeant. His name was Brian Holmes and he was a good friend of both the men sitting in the office. Sensing something was troubling him; they invited him to sit down and asked what was going on. "Everything okay, dude?"

"No, Janie is freaking out right now, especially with El Presidente in town. She told me she doesn't feel safe at all right now and would like to go someplace safe," he said after slumping into a chair. The fact the President was in town at the NORAD facility was supposed to be a secret, but one of the news agencies had broken the news of the location yesterday on the afternoon broadcast and the cat was out of the bag. "I mean, what am I supposed to do to calm her down? Her folks are in Portland and even if I could get plane tickets or enough money for gas, that place is probably worse off than here. I don't know what to do."

Dave and Thomas looked at each other before answering. The idea of inviting Brian to join the group had been tossed around before, but they wanted to break him in slowly. However, current events had pretty much wrecked the timetables. Before making a decision, they silently decided to discuss it first. Thomas and Dave had been friends long enough that they could almost read each other's minds by the expressions on their faces. They told Brian to wait in the office so they could discuss the issue and walked out of the building. On the way out, they grabbed Rick out of the armory, but could not find Darren. They walked out the back door of the Security Forces Squadron building to the smoking area and lit up cigarettes, with Rick having to bum one off the other men. He had quit many years before, but since the attacks had recently started the bad habit again. Thomas reminded him of what his wife would do if she found out he was smoking again. The reply was something to the effect of "don't worry and give me a smoke" before Thomas handed over the pack. Perfect timing was with the group as Darren was pulling into the parking lot just as they were about to discuss the problems. He parked his patrol vehicle and walked over to the group.

"Hey guys, what's going on?" he asked as he found a seat on the picnic table.

Thomas answered and brought the other two up to speed on the problem. "Dave and I were just talking to Brian Holmes and he says his family is scared to death about what is happening. He doesn't know where to send them too that might be safe. I know we talked about inviting him in to the group, but were going to take it slower. I think we just moved from slow to fast and we should be thinking about who else we might want to invite and start talking to them. Remember, space is limited as we have five cabins left on the Ranch."

"Are we going to have enough food for another five families on the Ranch?" asked Rick.

Thomas did some mental calculations in his head before answering. "We should, we always overplant the farm, planting out about three acres of crops. More often than not, they harvest them and set them off to fatten up the elk out there, sell at the farmers market or store them for the winter. I wouldn't imagine this year to be any different. Plus, we have been buying more than usual this past year for everything, including food. I think we should be okay for this year, but would cut it close next year if we didn't plant anything."

"Are we going to be looking for specific skill sets to get into the group? Or will just anyone do?" asked Darren.

"I think some things more than others might help us; but for now, we would be looking for some people who would be loyal and willing to help out without reservations," answered Dave.

"Well, I think Brian would be good along with his family. Who else?" asked Rick.

The group thought for a moment before Thomas brought up the next name "What about Tim? I figure we won't get Brian without him and he can keep us in good spirits. Other than that, he's pretty handy with a firearm and knows how to defend himself. I don't know what other talents he has, but I think he is good to go."

"Tim would be good, but with his ex wife in Washington State, I figure he would head on out there to pick her up but it won't hurt to extend the invitation. What about Stu?" said Dave.

"You mean MacGyver? Of course him! Give him a Leatherman, a pack of thumbtacks and a case of beer cans and he can create a Volkswagen.," said Darren with a laugh. "He would be a fine addition. What about Frank Zimmer? He is good people."

"He grew up on a ranch, chasing cows and sheep around. Plus, he went to the CPEC course a while back. He will do," said Rick.

"So let's see…Darren, you are in Cabin 1, Rick in Cabin 2, and Dave in Cabin 4. With Tim, Brian, Stu and Frank, that leaves one cabin open unless one of our single folks wants to live upstairs in the Conference Center, then we can support three more since there are four bedrooms there. Who else? What about Derrick Mansford?" asked Darren.

"Derrick Mansford? I'm not so sure about him. He is an alcoholic from way back and only does what he has to do to get by. I'm not sure if he should be included" stated Rick.

"Scratch that idea, I'm not so sure he will work out. How about Stephen and Kristy Garcia?" asked Dave.

"Yeah, he speaks fluent Spanish which would be a help in case we needed that particular talent. He's a hunter from way back and almost always gets his mark. You remember a couple of years ago he almost made the Boone and Crockett List? Kristy is good with engines and numbers as well as being that martial arts freak. Her talents with numbers would be good in helping monitor the supply situation," said Dave after thinking about the idea.

"Besides being smoking hot as well?" asked a semi-joking Thomas. It was true that Kristy Garcia was arguable one of the most physically attractive women they had ever met. Her beauty was only surpassed by her sparkling personality and no ego to go along with it. But she never understood why she got most of the attention she did concerning her looks. She was a good friend of the small group gathered outside the building and she was completely off limits to them. They thought of her more like a little sister than anything else. She also never knew why they would treat her like that since she could take care of herself. They often had to protect her against those "gentlemen" who didn't care that she was married. They would get a polite notification first, then a stern warning and finally an offer to settle things in the parking lot if they didn't leave her alone. She often didn't know what the fuss was about, but appreciated the help in the fact she didn't have to settle matters herself. It would be too embarrassing for some guy who put his hands on her to get a hospital visit from a woman only five foot, five inches and weighed in at one hundred twenty pounds.

"Yeah, those two would fit right in with our little circus. How about Michael Parsons? I think he is already into the preparedness thing I think, or at least from the comments he has made," said Darren.

"He will do, or we could at least ask him the question. I'm not sure what he is good at, but if he already is into the preparedness lifestyle, I'm sure he has a trick or two up his sleeve. He and his wife both are good people," said Dave.

"Okay, those two work. We have more spots. What about Heather Davis?" asked Thomas.

The group got a little silent. Heather Davis was a young Airman in their unit and had been in and out of trouble since joining the Air Force a little over a year before. Thomas had immediately taken an interest in the young Airman and attempted to help her as much as possible. The group of friends also knew Thomas had taken an interest into helping the young lady adapt to the military lifestyle and wanted to guarantee her a career if she chose to reenlist. He was her mentor, but furthermore, she had adopted him as her surrogate father. He could get her to perform when others failed miserably. They didn't agree she might have been a good choice and their silence showed the negative thoughts they all had.

Rick, possibly the most outspoken of the group, said what was on everyone's mind. "Tom, she is a little immature and has had problems in the past. We know you think a lot of her and probably see something we don't. You know her better than the rest of us do, but is now the

opportunity to take a chance on her with so much at stake?"

"Come on guys, you know I don't mind when you guys bring up opposite opinions. If you've got a problem, bring it up. Yes, I took an interest in her career and have tried to mold her into a functioning member of the military. Yes, she is a little immature and has an attitude problem from time to time. But I know for a fact she is loyal and a hard worker. She only needs to be shown once how to do something and gets it done as quickly as possible. As for other talents, I don't know. But, I'm not going to argue with the group here. If you all don't think she can hack it, I can go with that," said Thomas.

"Can we think about it and get back to you?" asked Darren. "Or let us talk to her without you around? We aren't going to backdoor you, Tom, but the rest of us need to be convinced as well."

Thomas thought about the proposal for a minute before deciding it was a good idea. He knew his friends well enough to know they could form an opinion not based on previous encounters with her. He also knew if they said they didn't agree with it, they would have a really good reason for doing so.

Another name was brought up, John Fergusson, and was agreed on by the group. He was a hard worker the same age as Stuart Donaldson. He was a good shot and was into hunting big time. He also had basic woodworking, carpentry and metal working skills. He would be a nice addition to the group if he chose to become a member.

The group discussed the list of names for a few minutes adding and dismissing several more before deciding on those already discussed. Brian Holmes and his family, Michael Parsons and his wife, Tim Daniels, Stu Donaldson, John Fergusson, Heather Davis, Stephen and Kristy Garcia and Frank Zimmer would all be approached separately and told about the Ranch. If they agreed, the families could move to the Ranch immediately, but the military members would remain at the base until released or circumstances dictated otherwise. Dave and Thomas returned inside to inform Brian of the plan and tell him about the Ranch.

"Just remember, it's only temporary and your family will be asked to help out around the Ranch. They should take enough stuff for a month and can come back for more if they will be there longer," said Dave.

"I will have to run this by Janie, but I think she will go with it. Can I let you know the first thing in the morning?" asked Brian, already forming a plan in his mind to convince his wife to accept the invitation.

"Tomorrow morning should do, but don't wait too much longer since the rest of the families are probably leaving day after tomorrow," instructed Thomas.

The three left the office and encountered the Operations Officer in the hallway outside of the office. He was a newly promoted Captain who had a bad habit for being nosey and getting involved in matters that should be resolved at a lower level. "Sergeant Dayfield, Sergeant Lawson, what were your two doing in there with Sergeant Holmes?"

"Nothing much sir. Just a little problem he needed some help with. Nothing we couldn't handle," said Dave.

"You mean it takes two NCOs to solve a problem?" said the sneering Captain before turning to the USAF Academy Cadets standing behind him. "See, I told you enlisted troops can't do anything without officers. So what was the problem?"

"Oh nothing we couldn't handle at our level, *sir,*" stated Thomas who accented the sir to make the point the Captain was treading on grounds he didn't need to be.

"And the problem was?" asked the Captain who wasn't being put off.

"His wife was a little jittery since the attacks and everything. We told him to tell her to talk to the Chaplain," answered Thomas.

"And the meeting between you two and Sergeants Thompson and Jones outside? What was that all about?" inquired the Captain.

"Not a meeting Captain, just a break and needed to talk to Jones about an arming issue," answered Dave and instantly regretting the latter part as soon as he said it.

"Oh, what issue might that be?" asked the Captain.

"Nothing much, just checking to see if Airman Jackson was qualified on the M-249 before we made out the roster," answered Thomas quickly. Even if the Captain checked on it, Rick would cover for them.

"Sure, whatever," said the Captain before turning to the cadets following him around. "Let's go to the armory to make sure this doesn't get more screwed up more than it already is."

After the Captain walked away, Dave turned to Thomas. "You know, it's hard to think of that man being the end result of countless hours of leadership training."

"It's hard to think of that man at all without having the urge to hit something. Come on let's go find the next person on our little hit list," said Thomas as he turned to walk out the door.

The next person they talked to was Staff Sergeant Michael Parsons. An African-American man originally from Alabama, he always kept himself in Olympic class shape. He played football in college before a knee injury cost him his scholarship and his spot on the team. After rehab, he joined the Air Force to become a Pararescue Jumper. He reinjured the same knee and washed out of training and became a cop. He still had plans to try out for the PJ career field so he kept himself in top physical condition, just waiting for the opportunity to try out again. After his wedding to his high school sweetheart, his plans to become a PJ wavered a bit, but he still kept himself in shape. He knew by becoming a PJ he would spend more time away from his wife, Shannon, so he had to choose between his wife and career plans. For the time being, he was

content to be a cop. When Thomas and Dave generically told him about the Ranch and the preparations, he immediately wanted in.

"Are you kidding? I have relatives that weren't prepared down in Mississippi that almost got wiped out during Hurricane Katrina. I've been stashing away stuff since then. Of course I want in, but one question, why me?" asked Michael.

"Darren Thompson suggested you. We didn't know you were into the whole preparedness thing until now. Having said that, we figured you would fit in the group with no problems," said Thomas.

"Well, that's good. I thought you wanted me for the token black guy. But since it's because I'm into the preparedness thing, that will work instead," stated a laughing Michael. Parsons was a man who would make fun of his own race and get away with it. They gave him the same speech they had given Brian Holmes earlier about helping out and that the arrangement was probably only temporary. Michael asked how soon he could send his wife down to the Ranch. He was worried about the turns in the world and could see the clouds on the horizon. His paranoia was also fueled by the sensationalist claims of several threads on the preparedness websites he often frequented. As usual, the "Chicken Littles" of the websites had predicted mass chaos, outright mayhem and The End Of The World As We Know It, or TEOTWAWKI. Maybe this time they were right for a change.

"My wife is planning on leaving the day after tomorrow, maybe the day after that at the latest," answered Dave.

"You think my wife could catch a ride from someone? We only have my truck and I need a way of getting around," asked Michael.

"Shouldn't be a problem, but let me get back to you on that," answered Dave. "How much stuff will she be taking?"

"Hmm, well, it will take more than a few trips to get all our preps moved there. Maybe we can take a moving van down," said Michael after thinking about it for a moment.

"Mike, this could blow over soon, we don't know. Are you sure about that?" asked Thomas.

"Boys, I think this is going to go on for years and not some month long thing like Hurricane Katrina was," Michael said with a smile. "For now, I will have her take enough food and stuff for a month, but I'm seriously making plans to move everything there if we can. If you agree to that."

"It shouldn't be a problem and if you are invited, you can move anything you want down there," said Thomas.

"Okay, for now, I'll just have her take the basics and maybe more later. She can catch a ride with someone?" asked Michael again.

"Let me set that up. I think we can bring someone up with a truck to get her stuff moved," answered Thomas, making a mental note to call the Ranch again.

The next person they ran into was Stephen Garcia. When informed of the idea, he asked Dave and Thomas to hold on while he got his wife to listen in. After several minutes of explaining, Kristy had several questions.

"So, let me get this straight, we are welcome at your Ranch just in case something happens?" she asked.

"That's about the skinny of it," answered Thomas.

"And we are still welcome even if we are both still here and can't move?" she continued.

"Yes," answered Thomas.

Kristy was silent for a moment, contemplating something in her mind. She looked at Stephen with a worried expression and a silent conversation came over the two. As the facial expressions continued, Thomas told her to speak freely.

"Well, in order for us to move down there full time, we would be looking at something really bad happening in the local area, like some sort of long term Hurricane Katrina looting non-sense. I mean if that is the case, for sure, but if it is only short term, then it really won't make much sense to move all our belongings down there just to turn around and move right back," she explained.

"Kristy, have you ever heard the Boy Scout Motto of Be Prepared?" asked Dave.

"Sure I have, why?" she asked.

"That's all this place is, it's a 'Be Prepared' location for folks. Wouldn't it be nice to have a place to go just in case there was long term looting here?" said Dave.

"But that would mean we would be deserting, leaving our posts," she answered in a whisper.

"Kristy, I guarantee you, if and when the time comes for us to leave, we will not be worrying about deserting. We will be more worried about getting out of here alive more than anything else," stated Thomas.

The Garcia's asked for a few minutes to discuss the matter in private. They walked over to a secluded spot and talked for close to ten minutes before returning.

"Okay, we agree we would like to have a spot to go to until the worst blows over. But, I would like to see it before making any kind of permanent decision. I've got a couple of days off coming up and would like to see the place if that's possible," said Kristy.

Dave and Thomas told her about the families leaving in two days time to go down and how she was welcome to go with them to look over the cabin and the Ranch. Kristy agreed and left to go back to her office. After she left, Stephen talked further on the matter.

"She is kind of leery about the whole thing since she thinks it won't be that big a deal. I honestly can see the storm clouds on the horizon and this won't blow over any time too soon like she does. This is not going to be some post 9-11 thing where we are back to normal in a month or so. This is probably going to go on for years and I, for one, would like to have a place of safety for us," he stated.

"No problem, that's why we asked if you wanted to come along," said Thomas.

"I do have a small favor to ask though," he said. "Not that you haven't already done enough."

"Now is the time to ask," said Thomas.

"Well," he began sheepishly. "I do have my collection of hunting rifles and shotguns with plenty of ammo for each, but only one rifle I might use to protect my property. The problem is, I don't have that much ammo for it. I've got a few magazines, but maybe a hundred rounds or so. I know you can get your hands on ammunition a lot easier than I can. I can pay for it, no problem; just getting it might be a problem. How much would it be?"

"You need some ammo? I think we might be able to come up with some. We probably already have some, but I haven't got a clue as to how much. And as for price, I'm thinking $150 should cover a case and some. Let me call George and see what he can come up with," said Thomas.

Stephen pulled out his wallet and passed over five $100 bills. "Who needs one case when I can get three? Besides, this is my emergency fund and if there is ever going to be an emergency time, this would be it."

Thomas collected the money and the three broke up. He called back again and relayed the new order request to Cynthia who promised she would try to get a hold of the distributor. He also made a request for one of the three to come to the Springs to pick up Shannon Parsons. Cynthia told him someone would be there with a truck when the other families moved down.

And they continued to contact every other member they had named. Each of the members they contacted agreed to join the group at the Ranch. The only member that hadn't agreed was Dayfield's girlfriend, Sharon. They had known each other for several years, but only had dated seriously for the past eight months. In normal times, he might have been thinking of proposing to her, but things were not normal right now. He had only talked to her twice since the attacks and had not seen her at all. She sounded frightened at the happenings in the world, but more worried about him and his safety then her own well being. But his invitation to go to the Ranch was turned down. She didn't want to move away from her home in Pueblo just yet to a place where she did know anyone. He told her he would talk to her again in a couple of days and try and see her then as well.

Darren and Dave approached Heather Davis quietly without interference from Thomas. She was immediately apprehensive of the two NCOs coming to talk to her since she thought she was in trouble again. After talking for almost half an hour, they both decided she might be worth the risk and would continue to think on the matter, giving an answer to Thomas in a day or two.

Two days later, the family members of Brian, Rick, Dave, Darren and Michael met at a central point in Colorado Springs to convoy down to the Ranch. Kristy tagged along as well, driving her own vehicle and taking an overnight bag. Ryan Meeks had come up a day early to pick up Shannon Parsons and her items. Sharon had also driven up to Colorado Springs to see Thomas. After another long conversation with her, Thomas begged her to go to the Ranch with the rest of the group. She decided to stay in Pueblo with her daughter until she could think about it some more. He promised to keep in touch and asked her to think about it more. She promised to keep it in mind and also told him she loved him for the first time. Shocked at the announcement, he told her he loved her as well and ended the conversation.

Time since attacks: 81 days
Date/Time: 10 July/2053 Local
Location: Peterson AFB, Colorado Springs, CO

Events unfolded before the group's eyes. The US ultimatum and retaliation. The oil embargo and the resulting violence. The increased security and mass desertions. The States leaving the Union. When it became apparent the United States would never be the same, families started moving more items down to the Ranch and those members that didn't have any items there started moving down what they could. Even Kristy Garcia, who originally didn't think anything would happen after the attacks, began to see the coming collapse. She and Stephen moved their entire apartment down in one weekend with the help of the other members. More often than not, the group tried to obtain the gasoline and diesel for their private vehicles from the base supply instead of using what was on the Ranch. It wasn't looked at as stealing, but rather re-appropriating goods for the survival of their families. On the rare day off, the military members visited their families at the Ranch. Movement by the military was then restricted by Executive Order since the mass desertions of military members. It would take a Movement Control Order, or MCO to get past the checkpoints being set up by the military in the nation. More bombs went off around the world. More desertions. Several group members started talking about leaving for the Ranch for good.

The group, minus John Fergusson who had been killed a week prior on a convoy mission, gathered together one night to discuss the affairs. Fergusson's killing sobered up the entire group and many thought about the relative safety of the Ranch. They also knew it would be hard to get there under the current conditions.

"I'm thinking of heading down to the Ranch soon. The riots haven't started here yet, but I figure it will only be a matter of time. I'm getting tired of guarding milk trucks and getting shot at while I'm doing it. My family needs me and I need to be there to protect them," voiced a concerned Brian. He had returned earlier from a convoy mission that he had picked up in

Burlington and had been attacked near Limon on Highway 24. The convoy was able to fight off the ambush, at the cost of three of their own wounded, one seriously.

Voices around the group agreed with him. Stephen was the next to voice his opinion. "The problem isn't one of wanting to go, but getting there. There are at least eight checkpoints between here and Cañon City. Since we don't have MCOs to get us there and the only way to get them is to have a Captain or better sign them. Good luck getting Captain America to sign off anything that he hasn't staffed, planned, reviewed and will personally lead. It will be almost impossible to get there from here without shooting our way out."

A small debate ensued, with each member proposing a different approach to getting through the checkpoints. Darren Thomson got them back under control by explaining the procedure to them.

"It's not impossible. As most of you know, the orders are written up by me or a member of my pitifully small staff of me and signed by Captain Bradley. But a few of the times, I've had Major Starkes or Captain Johansson sign them. It just depends on how busy Captain Bradley is at the moment or if he is away. I could arrange to have someone else sign them, but the problem is sometimes the checkpoints call either the point of origin or the destination to confirm the orders. If they call here, the calls are automatically routed to Captain Bradley on his orders, no matter who signed them. There, ladies and gentlemen, lies the problem," he explained.

"So even if we get a signed order, there is a chance of us getting called in and turned around?" asked Michael, trying to think of a way through.

"The checkpoints call in about a quarter of the time. Sometimes half, but with communications breaking down, a quarter is more likely," sated Darren. "So out of the eight checkpoints, at least two will call us in. Those are not good odds."

"There has to be a better way of getting this done," stated Thomas, who also was trying to think of a way through it.

"Well, there are emergency codes, which change of a daily basis, for convoys that don't have the time to clear a proper MCO. Only the Commander and Operations Officer have a listing of these codes, which they both keep locked in a safe. I don't have the combination and getting the daily code will be virtually impossible since all calls are automatically routed to Captain Bradley. There is no chance of us eavesdropping on the line when he gets the call. Also breaking in to his safe will be quite impossible since he sleeps in his office," said Darren after thinking for a moment.

"So we are faced with three decisions. One, go ahead and leave, take our chances and have a twenty five percent chance of getting sent back. Two, stay here until everything breaks down completely and try to get out then. Not a real big fan of that choice. Three, run like hell and try and go cross country, which is also patrolled by Army units around here. At least the back country mountain roads we would need to use are being patrolled. They aren't frequent patrols, but enough that we stand a good chance of getting caught and sent back," said Rick.

"So with choices one and three we risk being detected as deserters and apprehended, or at the very least getting sent back to the unit where we would then be apprehended. We could shoot our way through, but I don't think any of us are that kind of people. And even if we did shoot our way through, we would end up being challenged at the next checkpoint. Bad idea. And with choice two, we run the risk of getting stuck here with no transportation and having to cross Colorado Springs with whatever we could carry on our backs. Not a real good idea," said Dave.

"The back country roads aren't a bad idea since there is a way into the Ranch from here using the fire roads, jeep trails and cow paths. It takes us about a hundred miles more on the trip, but from what I heard, the Army is only sticking to the main routes that lead into other communities. Once we get past them, the chances of us getting out go up quite a bit," said Thomas.

"Yeah, but look at the vehicles we would be using. If we have to, we are going to take whatever we have available. This includes the police cruisers. Do you think one of those is going to get us across Rampart Range Road in one piece? Especially since the roads have probably not been kept up since the springtime," said Darren.

"Yeah, but if push comes to shove, we get out any way we can," said Rick.

"There is the fourth option we haven't discussed. We get a hold of the codes somehow and use them to get by," stated Tim.

"Are we going to be able to get out of here even with faked codes? Is there enough gas and vehicles to be had to get us there?" asked Heather Davis. She had been accepted as a last minute addition to the group when Darren and Dave convinced the others she could hack it. She knew these men had offered her a place to safety and didn't want to wreck the potential for a new place to live if everything came crashing down, like it seemed to be doing now. Since the attacks, she had matured quite a bit and proved herself to be an unstoppable force when given a task to perform. She still had an attitude problem from time to time, but for the most part, a quick bark from one of the NCOs made her up shut up and drive on. She, too, had moved her possessions to the Ranch along with Stu and John Fergusson before the movement was restricted.

"Yes, I think there will be. All you need is an MCO to get fuel here in both the vehicles and additional in jerry cans. With the distances I can set on the MCOs, getting enough fuel shouldn't be a problem. There still is the problem of getting the proper codes," said Darren.

"And I can take care of the vehicles portion. I have a good rapport with the LRS guys here on base and can get pretty much whatever I want from them when I ask," stated Kristy. She didn't tell anyone, especially her husband, she often flirted with the vehicle dispatchers in order to get what she wanted. However, she saw the need to do so in order for everyone to make it out of here safe. If she needed to use her looks to get what they needed, she would do what was needed.

"All we can do is try. And of those four options, I like three and four the best. Darren, just keep trying to get that codes. That's all we can do for now," said Thomas, bringing the meeting to a close.

CHAPTER 8 – CHOICES

Time since attacks: 90 days
Date/Time: 19 July/1604 Local
Location: Peterson AFB, Colorado Springs, CO

By now, news had come down about the resignation and apprehension of the entire Joint Chiefs of Staff. Also, news had gotten down about the orders to begin the door to door searches and other infringements on the rights of ordinary Americans. They also learned second hand about the violence that was happening due to it. Americans were resisting the searches and being put into makeshift jail camps for refusing to comply. Others were holing up and making the military units attack them in force to get their supplies "for the common good." Most of the people in these raids died and of course, it was right in real time on the nightly news until military censors put an end to the reports. Virtually overnight, the military went from helpful service to hated henchmen as foreseen by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Some units in the Colorado area were starting the confiscations, others seemed like they were stalling for more time in hopes of new orders that would not place them more in harm's way than they already were. About half the unit to which the group belonged were against the Executive Orders and the other half not really caring about it as long as they had food and water. Their unit hadn't started the searches yet and had no plans to do so even though they had orders telling them to do it. The first confirmation that there was dissention in the upper leadership of the units in Colorado was a commander's call held by Major Starkes, the unit commander.

"Ladies and gentlemen, today I received another message from the new Chairman ordering the confiscation of privately owned supplies through door to door searches in the general public of this nation. As most of you already know and have heard, the old Chairman and the entire Joint Chiefs were arrested for failing to follow orders for implementation of this plan along with the other Executive Orders put in place by the new President. I will follow their lead on this and not begin to implement any of these orders until such time as the Executive Orders can be reviewed by the Supreme Court and a finding can be made. I have no plans to follow this order as I believe it is in violation of the Constitution. I cannot ask you to follow me in my decision, but I ask of you to think of this. You will have to make a choice on the decision to follow the orders. Both the communist governments of the world and the Nazis were guilty of the very same things the President has ordered so the government could rest easy their populations could not rise up against them. Unlawful searches, nationalization of industry, arrest and imprisonment of dissenters…it all looks much like the way Russia did fifty years ago."

"I ask all of you to consider this before making a decision. Consider your oath of enlistment, to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Nothing in our oath says we have to blindly follow the illegal orders of our leadership and I ask you not blindly follow the orders given by the President and the Chairman until such time as you have considered your oath. To protect, preserve and defend the Constitution. The Constitution includes rights that must be preserved, protected and defended by

the military until such time as the majority of Americans decide otherwise. And the President, in my eyes, has clearly violated many of the God given rights in our Constitution."

"For now, we will continue the tasks of humanitarian support, convoy operations and security support for the installations in the Pikes Peak region. If anyone disagrees with my decision not to follow the orders until they are clarified, please feel free to speak with me about it in private. That is all."

The First Sergeant called the room to attention as the commander walked out saying "carry on" as he departed. Everyone in the room was filled with thoughts as the departed the room. Thomas looked at the Operations Officer, who looked as if he was about to burst from anger. It was unsaid the Captain was unhappy about the decision the commander had just made. Knowing the total collapse was only a short time away and the possibility of one of the group getting killed on a disarming raid was getting very real, Thomas sought out Darren simply stating "Get the code. Whatever you have to do, get the codes to get us out of here!"

Time since attacks: 91 Days
Date/Time: 20 July/0904 Local
Location: Peterson AFB, Colorado Springs, CO

The next day was a shock to everyone as another commander's call was ordered. Instead of Major Starkes entering the room, it was Captain Bradley instead. He kept the room standing at attention while he began his speech.

"As most of you have heard yesterday, an order was given by the President and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordering the confiscation of supplies, weapons and other materials from the general public. You also heard Major Starkes tell everyone he was not willing to follow the orders of his superiors and carry out the plan. He also attempted to convince you of the rightness of his decision and sway you away from the discipline of following orders. Last night, acting on orders from the Chairman, I apprehended Major Starkes for six violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and assumed command of this unit. The order to relieve your commander for violations and failing to carry out policy was an order sent by the CJCS three days ago, so I was within my legal rights and duties to relieve him of command."

"The following actions will be taken immediately. The 21st Security Forces Squadron will begin immediate operations for searches of private residences in and around the Colorado Springs areas. All members of the unit will participate in these operations, whether you support the decision or not. Your choices do not matter, only the obedience to the chain of command matters. As your oath of enlistment also says, you will follow the orders of the officers appointed over you as well as the President of the United States. You will not question these orders are they are legal and straight from the White House."

"This also means those of you with supplies will bring them in and turn them over to the government for distribution for the common good. If we are to enforce the law, we must first be

in compliance with the law. There are no objections that will make us sway from our proper duties and following the orders of our Commander-in-Chief. These are lawful Executive Orders and will be followed to the fullest extent. That is all."

As the commander's call broke up, Thomas was on his way out of the training room when he noticed Captain Johansson in one corner looking visibly upset. Dayfield had a lot of respect for Johansson. He was a fair, even tempered officer who let the NCOs in his section run things. He was also not in favor with Captain Bradley and had supported the commander's decisions not to begin implementing the Executive Orders. On a whim, Thomas walked over to the Captain and asked if anything was wrong. The Captain remembered Dayfield as a dedicated NCO, good at his job and willing to go above and beyond to get the job done. He also remembered Dayfield was not the kind to stab a fellow cop in the back unless they really had it coming. From the times they had worked together, he also remembered Dayfield as being somewhat of a gun nut, very pro Second Amendment so he probably wasn't happy with the orders in hand. Knowing all of this, he felt Dayfield wasn't a threat, but he would still need to play it careful. "What do you think of Captain Bradley's orders?"

Thomas thought carefully before going on. He knew the Captain, but did not know him all that well. Still, he was playing a hunch, "Sir, I think the Executive Orders to conduct the searches are illegal and in direct violation of the US Constitution. Both the Second and Fourth Amendments are being violated."

"Yeah, too bad I won't be around to implement them," said the Captain.

"Sir, you aren't thinking of leaving are you?" asked Thomas, looking the Captain directly in the eyes.

"Just forget what I said, Sergeant. For both our sakes," said the Captain sternly, but knew he had said too much already.

Thomas saw an opening to get what they needed and jumped at it. "Captain, your secret to leave is safe with me…for a price."

"What are you talking about Sergeant?" said the Captain, slightly worried now since he really didn't know Dayfield and the mere hint of impropriety would have him apprehended by Captain Bradley.

"Just that some of us might be thinking along the same lines as you. Better we talk in private, sir. These walls have ears," stated Thomas, silently hoping he hadn't made a mistake about the Captain. They walked the short distance to the back door and walked outside and across the street. Even so, they kept their tones low in case someone was listening. "Sir, if you are considering leaving, we might have a plan that can help you out. It all has to do with the access to the either Captain Bradley's or the Major's safe."

"I have access to the Operations Officer's safe, but I never said I was leaving. Whatever gave you that idea?" stated the Captain matter-of-fact.

Thomas would have to be very careful from this point on, but would make the try. "I beg to differ, sir. You said you would not be around to implement the plan, hence, meaning you are going to be going someplace else here real soon. I figure you don't like that order any more than you like him arresting Major Starkes on some trumped up charge. If you don't, help us. If you do support the order, than this conversation never took place."

The Captain turned away staring blindly at a nearby tree while thinking of the NCO standing behind him. He could play a hunch and help the NCO, or he could do his duty and have him brought in for questioning. *What makes me better than Bradley if I bring him in for not following an order I don't believe is legal* myself? thought the Captain. He played out his hand as he turned around. "If you have some sort of plan for being able to get away unnoticed, then, yes, I want in on it. If you have some harebrained scheme that won't work, forget about it."

Dayfield was quiet for the moment and would not disclose any of the names involved in the plan. He explained the general overview of the plan to the Captain and what was involved in making it work. After several moments of thinking, the Captain agreed to help.

"Yes, I have the combination to his safe. I don't think he remembers he gave it to me when he went on leave this spring. I can get the listing tonight, at least a copy of it. What I want in return is my own set of orders to get out of here as well. And some for Major Starkes. I will take him and his family with me to a safe place," said Captain Johansson.

"It will be hard to get into his safe. He sleeps in his office," said Thomas.

"Not anymore," replied the Captain. "After he apprehended Major Starkes, he moved in to his office right way. By tomorrow morning, I will get you the listing."

CHAPTER 9 - ESCAPE

Time since attacks: 92 Days
Date/Time: 21 July/1641 Local
Location: Peterson AFB, Colorado Springs, CO

The Captain was good on his promises to get copies of the codebook to the group of men and women willing to risk all to get to their families. Thomas took the copies to Darren in his office, which scanned over each piece of paper. After getting past the index, Darren exclaimed "That man is good! Not only did he get us the emergency codes for unscheduled convoys, but also the ones for intelligence, transportation, surveillance operations, weapons and ammo movement, refugee relocation, the works!"

"How long will it take to get the ball rolling?" asked Thomas.

"It will take about twenty minutes to get the necessary paperwork typed up, get it to Captain Johansson to sign and we will be in business," stated Darren who was already typing away on the computer.

"Okay, let's get it set up for three nights from tonight, everyone will roll. Spread the word," instructed Thomas. As he departed the office a very strange thing happened, his cell phone rang. Lately, cell phone service had been sporadic at best and he was surprised when it rang, especially since the ring tone was Sharon's. He answered with a simple "Hello?" All Thomas caught in the receiver was "This is Sharon!" followed by a crying hysterical gibberish. Thomas attempted to calm her. "Baby, slow down and tell me what is happening." Sharon took a moment to compose herself before going on.

"Some soldiers came in about two hours ago, just barged in and started ripping the house apart. They said they were looking for firearms and supplies! I told them I didn't have any, but they kept searching anyway. Angel started crying and I went to calm her down. Some soldier pushed me on the floor and pointed a gun in my face telling me if I moved again he would kill me! I was so scared! They didn't find anything in the house but they did take some of my jewelry out of the box on my nightstand. After they left, they went next door to my neighbor's house. I heard some shouting and then shooting! They killed my neighbor because he resisted! I'm really scared and I want to get out of here! What if they come back? They threatened to kill me! I'm really scared and I want to go to that place you said I would be safe! Can you come get me?" she said rapid fire.

Thomas thought for a split second about planning on going down in three days to pick her up on their way to the Ranch, but decided in a New York minute to get her out of there tonight. His decision carried move resolve in his voice than it did in his mind. "Of course I will come get you, probably early tomorrow morning. Be ready to be picked up by midnight. Get everything you can pack and be ready to move by then. Only clothing, valuables and whatever you would want to keep for both you and Angel. We might not ever be coming back there so make sure you

get everything you can by then, and seriously, pack light if you can."

"Baby, I'm really scared and am ready to move out of here tonight! Angel and I will be ready when you get here. I love you and please make sure you hurry! I can't wait to get out of here!" responded Sharon as she still had excitement in her voice.

"If I don't get there, I will be dead. Just have everything ready to move. I love you more than the world, baby," responded Thomas, already making plans in his head to get everything lined up for her evacuation. He spent the next few minutes telling her what all to pack and what all could be left behind for the moment. He told her what to be dressed in and other items he knew she had to bring out. She asked few questions and repeated everything he told her to pack. They said goodbye and he reiterated his promise to get her that night.

It was almost 1700 hours already and he wanted to be ready to move before midnight. He headed back towards Darren's office where he was met by Frank Zimmer who was helping out Darren on the computer. Thomas made the announcement "I'm leaving tonight. Sharon's house was searched and her neighbor was killed this afternoon, she wants to leave like right now. I'm heading down there tonight to get her and Angel out of there. Can you make up some MCOs for me for tonight?"

"Yeah sure, shouldn't be a problem, but wouldn't you want to wait until we all go and pick her up along the way?" asked Darren.

"No, she is scared and I'm heading out tonight. Can you get the papers ready?" answered Thomas with resolve.

"Sure we can, as long as you let me put my name down on there as well," said Frank.

"Why would you want to go? You are already heading out with the main group in three nights. You don't need to go out with me," said Thomas.

"Because I want to go, and besides, you need someone to ride shotgun there, Superman. Also, we can take two vehicles; hence the ability to get more of her stuff and just in case one breaks down. You go and get the vehicles squared away and I will let Rick know we are heading out early," declared Frank. He was not one to make demands like that and it surprised Thomas somewhat. By nature, a quiet fellow, Thomas knew he would not be able to talk him out of it.

"We can use the code for covert intelligence operations to get there. Two guys heading to a classified destination looks a lot less suspicious and we can pretty much bluff our way through, especially when you throw the classified covert portion into it. Most checkpoints will not question that when they see the orders. And for after we pick them up we can use the MCO orders for refugee relocation. That way it won't look as suspicious if we are driving around with a bunch of boxes and bags in trucks," said Frank. Darren agreed and started typing away like mad.

Thomas informed Frank he needed to stop by his apartment on the way out and pick up three

footlockers that he had packed the last time he had gone home. Frank agreed and told him he didn't have anything left at his house that needed to be moved. They both left the office and went off to do their individual tasks. Making his way towards the vehicles section, he ran into Captain Johansson in the hallway. Knowing after tonight, he probably wouldn't ever see the Captain again, he said his goodbyes "Captain Johansson, it's been a pleasure."

"You leaving out here soon?" asked the Captain, surprised at the announcement.

Without giving any details about the where or why, Thomas answered. "Something has come up and I have to leave tonight…" Thomas paused and didn't even think before asking the next question. "Sir, you have a place to go, don't you?"

"Yeah, my wife has a cousin on a farm east of Cheyenne, Wyoming just across the state line in Nebraska. We will be headed there in a couple of days. Sergeant Thompson said he could get me the MCO tomorrow and we will be on our way. Godspeed to you Thomas," concluded the Captain, with sorrow in his voice as if he was losing a friend.

"And to you as well, Troy, get with Thompson or Jones to get directions to our place just in case the other place falls through," said Thomas.

I knew he was a good man, wish he was coming with us out to the Ranch, though Thomas as he entered the office where the vehicle NCO was working. Kristy Garcia was working on the computer when he made his request for the vehicles. She asked what and where they were heading before giving him two vehicles, a blue Ford F350 6-pack diesel truck and an M-998 HMMWV in a cargo configuration with only two seats and an M101 trailer. He went out to check on the vehicles, ensuring they were topped off with diesel and went to find Frank. He caught him coming out the door where Frank told him Rick would have everything in place by 1930, giving them a chance to get their gear cleared out of the temporary dormitory where they were currently staying and pick up the additional supplies. They took the 6-pack over to the dorm, each going their separate way to their rooms and packed up what little they had left, mainly uniforms, military clothing and equipment. After military movements were restricted, all military forces and critical civilian personnel had been moved on base and housed in dormitories, vacant military housing and in some cases, tents and individual work centers.

After arriving in his room, Thomas packed the clothing away in a military style bad and the remainder of his equipment into a duffel bag. He also grabbed his work pack which was his unofficial "bug out bag." The pack generally served him on duty by carrying his typical load of "war gear" of helmet, Interceptor vest, gas mask and foul weather gear. In recent weeks since a bug out was seemingly impending, he had taken the gear out, placed additional pouches on the bag and loaded it up with the equipment he felt necessary for a bug out.

What little remained in the room was not useful and was not packed. Heading down to the truck, he tossed the bags in the back seat and was met by Frank. The dress and appearance regulations had been somewhat relaxed since the attacks and both had on desert tan boots that had seen serious service over the past weeks. Both their pairs of boots showed the various nicks and scratches associated with serious duty, but were well broken in. Frank threw his gear in the bed

of the truck and would move it to the HMMWV when they got back to the squadron to arm up. They went over to the mobility warehouse and got six jerry cans for diesel fuel, three for each vehicle, and went to the gas pumps to fill them up. Very little fuel remained on base, but since convoy duties were regular as of late, the fuels attendant didn't ask too many questions before filling each of them up along with topping off the truck. They went back to the mobility warehouse and picked up a case of MREs and a five gallon jerry can of water.

By this time, it was close to 1930 and they returned to the armory to get fitted out. Thomas grabbed his pack and a second pack add some items before they went out. They went to the door and knocked, waiting on Rick to meet them. He peered out a peephole and opened the door to let them in.

"I kicked the armorer out earlier told him to take a few hours to get some rest, that way I was alone when I got your stuff together. I've got everything hooked up for you," he said with a sweep of his hand. The armory, already small before the attacks, seemed crammed with cases and boxes filled with supplies and ordnance lining the walls and sitting out on the floor. Rick had already taken out the two individual's carbines and set them off to the side. Before taking the weapons, each man went to an overflowing box of MREs and picked through each until they had found four they liked and dropped them into their respective packs even though they had acquired the case from the mobility warehouse. Thomas also grabbed four more at random and dropped them into the second pack he had brought in for Sharon. The water bladders in both the packs were already filled, but Thomas added three additional one liter bottles to each bag as a "just in case" measure. Thomas had already packed the Camelbak several weeks prior with various items left over from his apartment in town and outfitted it for a bug out in case he needed a secondary pack.

The remainder of the packs had items Thomas felt was critical to the survival in case they had to bug out on foot. Food, water, water purification, clothing, waterproof jackets, a first aid kit and a small hiking stove were already packed away along with other tools and items. Two emergency ponchos and one GI camouflaged poncho were rolled up in the bottom pouch. As Thomas dropped the MREs into the pack at various points, he wondered what he was missing from the bag for her. Thomas knew he didn't have many items in the bag for Sharon, but he hoped they wouldn't need to use them for their journey to the Ranch.

He moved around the room, looking for additional items for his pack, which already had a considerable amount of goods in it. His pack, carried with him on duty, served as a Bug Out Bag in case he ever needed to move on foot back to the base during one of his convoy missions or for situations like this. It was a basic survival bag, but not just the basics. While his kit was much the same as Sharon's bag, he had added different items or more of certain things he knew he might need for an extended hike to the Ranch. On the bottom of the bag, he had attached a two man tent in case of foul weather so they could have a place to stay. All in all, his pack was fairly heavy, but he hoped he wouldn't have to use it.

Frank had set up his bag similar, but had less of the items since he was new to the group and had not been able to prepare a bug out bag like the regular members of the group already had a long time ago. However, he had an item which Thomas did not have in his bag, a lightweight .22

caliber pistol with four magazines and two fifty round boxes of ammunition. In a case where they were on foot for an extended period of time, Frank could use the pistol to shoot small game to keep them going. Thomas had seen him shoot the pistol before and knew he could hit game reliably out to thirty yards with it, plenty enough distance for the squirrels and rabbits in the Colorado region. Thomas had loaned him his spare backpacking tent from the beginning and he had it strapped to the outside of his pack.

"You know, I wish I could have been brought on sooner to the group. I would have some of the neat Gucci gear like you have," said Frank, looking over Thomas' pack.

"I'll admit, it took a while to learn everything I needed, but I finally found everything," said Thomas. "Don't worry; you are probably better prepared than ninety-five percent of Americans out there right now."

"Yeah, but I still wish I had been into survival sooner, instead of living in a dream world where I thought everything would be okay," said Frank, rearranging some gear in his pack to make room for more items. He had the basics they might need for a five to seven day trek, but would have problems going longer.

Thomas moved to an adjacent shelf and grabbed four smoke grenades to toss into his pack. He removed them from the shipping containers, discarding the extra cardboard the manufacturer always put in the tubes to keep them in place, and replaced two of the grenades back in the containers before dropping them into the top of the pack. The other two would be attached to his web gear if he could find a place. Before closing up the pack, he spied a set of night vision goggles sitting unused on a desktop. He replaced the AA batteries, placed them back in their bag and attached them to the back of his pack. Looking around he found a pair of binoculars and put them into the bag as well. He also grabbed two extra sets of batteries for each of the items he was taking, placed them in a Ziploc bag and put them in a pouch on the back of his pack. Rounding out the equipment he grabbed a commercial GPS loaded with the software for the United States. Both of the men grabbed an extra radio apiece and dropped it into their respective packs.

Before arming up with his individual weapons, Thomas checked his old canvas map case. Soon after he had bought the property, he had gotten 1:50,000 and 1:25,000 scale military grid reference system maps of the property and the surrounding areas from another military friend. Since the attacks, he had added maps of Colorado Springs and Pueblo to the stack. He also kept a couple of gallon sized Ziploc bags handy to put the maps in to keep them dry. In case they had to bug out of foot, he wanted to be able to navigate on foot to the Ranch with little trouble. The case would go in last on the bag, near the top where he could get it quickly.

Feeling he was finished getting the gear for his pack, he began to put on his web gear and arm up. Rick stopped him and gave him a small subcompact pistol in a leather holster. The pistol was already loaded with a magazine, which Thomas cleared it out of habit. Thomas reloaded the pistol and slid it inside his waistband in the small of his back, the holster fitting nicely along the contours of his spine. Rick also handed over three additional magazines for the pistol. Thomas dropped these magazines into a side pouch on his pack, making sure they were readily available.

Frank was given something similar and concealed it as best as he could. The pistols were both Rick's personal weapons and they tried to give them back. Rick showed him another concealed pistol he would use and told them he needed the two to help carry out his assortment of firearms.

Thomas pulled on his vest and holster and looked them over briefly before putting them on to check for damage. After finding everything in order, he zipped up the front and got the magazines ready to put into the individual pouches along with one of the small radios. The radio fit snugly against the sides of one of the pouches, but the top still closed without too much effort. All in all, the vest carried a heavy load, but nothing was left to chance and he felt this load had the basic items he needed to survive. Plus, he had become accustomed to carrying it over the last few weeks of convoy duties, general security operations and raids. The magazines would only make it heavier, but hopefully, it would only be for a short time.

He had slid the vest on over a bullet proof vest, which was worn on the outside of his BDU shirt. He grabbed the magazines that had been laid out by Rick before they had entered the armory. Thomas loaded all but two of the magazines into the vest pouches and put the other two into his pack. With the magazines in place, the vest became much heavier, but not unbearable.

The final stop for each man was to grab four fragmentation grenades. These had only recently been issued to the forces, since their use was well suited in defeating barriers and roadblocks and clearing hasty foxholes dug by people raiding convoys. Thomas placed two in the outer pouches of a magazine pouch, making sure to keep the spoons inward. The other two he placed inside the pouch, with the spoons facing downward. The two smoke grenades he had kept out were run through two slits he had made in the left upper pocket of his vest. Although not the best place to keep them, he had tried it on several occasions and found they would not slip out that easily. Each man jumped up and down several times making sure the gear and magazines were secure and the noise was minimal. They picked up their M-4s and packs and started walking out the door. Rick grabbed several additional items on his way out to the trucks.

When they arrived at their vehicles, each man checked the rest of their gear in the truck. Each had grabbed his "war bag" of an helmet, gas mask and Interceptor vest with the armor plates and placed it on the front seat. Thomas's vest carrier had a hole in the middle where he had been shot on a convoy mission two weeks earlier by a .rifle round. He had replaced the Level IV plate, which had stopped the round, but kept the vest carrier out of superstition and good luck. Although suffering from bruised ribs, he was not injured further and counted himself lucky the plate had stopped the round cold. Military members are often superstitious creatures, keeping sentimental items because they think it brings them good luck. His vest was an example of that. Although he should have replaced the entire vest, the hole, as well as the spent round in his Bug Out Bag, served to remind him of how close he had come to death.

Both men started their trucks to let the diesel engines warm up and waited outside the vehicles. Thomas lit a cigarette and watched as Rick walked over to him carrying three weapons cases, a shotgun and an M-249 light machine gun. He gave Thomas a shotgun with a side saddle of six extra rounds and a case which contained a rifle.

"There is already one in the pipe and a full tube of buck, safety is on. If you need it in a hurry, just flip the safety off and let the big dog eat. There are two extra boxes of ammo in case you need it as well," stated Rick as he handed over the shotgun and ammo.

Next he pulled a soft side rifle case off his shoulder and unzipped it partially to show Thomas what was inside. It was Rick's personal precision rifle that he wouldn't have traded the world for. Thomas started to object, but was cut short by Rick.

"I won't be able to carry it with the rest of the stuff I am already carrying; besides, it's almost sighted in for you anyway," he said with a smile. Thomas had fired the precision rifle on several occasions and found the scope was only about two inches to the right at two hundred meters from his own zero and dead on in elevation. He could Kentucky windage a round into a target in a pinch if he needed to. Rick had put another two twenty round boxes of ammunition in the outer compartment of the carrying case.

And last, he opened the carbine sized soft case and showed Thomas commercial caliber for Sharon along with four loaded magazines. Again, Thomas objected only to be rebutted by Ryan. Thomas was familiar with the weapon and ensured the carbine was unloaded and cleared before putting it back into the soft side case. He placed it into the back seat with the other two firearms.

"Now remember, I'm only loaning these to you and I expect them back when we get up there," stated Rick. "I also want you to tell Michelle I love her and will see her soon. If anything was to happen to me, I want you to be the one to tell her and take care of my family."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, ya big dumb animal. You won't get shot because the enemy will see how dumb you are and let you live to make our lives miserable. But just in case, I will take care of them for you," said Thomas with a grin. Both men shook hands and Rick moved to the HMMWV where Frank was standing and gave him the M-249 and the M-24 sniper rifle Frank had qualified with and zeroed to his eye. Rick handed Frank five boxes of spare ammunition which Frank placed in his bag. Each man shook hands and Frank got into his vehicle telling Thomas over the radio he was ready to roll. As they departed the parking lot adjacent to the Security Forces building, Thomas looked in the rear view mirror at Rick who was watching the vehicles go until they were out of sight.

It was a little after 2030 hours when both vehicles were stopped at the East Gate where their paperwork was checked. Although the MCO was supposed to be called in, these two were members of their unit and were surely authorized. The two vehicles rolled out the gate and headed north bound into Colorado Springs proper, turning left onto Platt Avenue, then turning north onto Academy Boulevard. They hit another checkpoint at the intersection of Austin Bluffs and Academy, where the story was repeated by the sentries. They never called the MCO in to verify with Captain Bradley.

They arrived at Thomas's apartment several minutes later where Thomas stepped back to the HMMWV. "There is no need for you to come up with me; I only have three things I need to grab. Besides, you should stay with the vehicles and watch over them." Although the apartment complex was dark, Thomas and Frank both got the eerie feeling they were being watched. Frank

grabbed the shotgun out of the front truck since it posed a more intimidating sight than an M-4 alone would do and stood guard outside, watching the windows of the darkened apartments. Thomas made three trips upstairs to get the pre-packed plastic footlockers and move them downstairs. Taking one last look around the apartment, he found all that was left was some furniture and other items he could part with without any remorse. He had moved the important stuff down to the Ranch before the attacks and the rest during days off before movement was restricted. He locked the apartment out of habit and went down to the waiting vehicles. Frank handed the shotgun back to him and they departed the complex.

Thomas felt a feeling of sadness as he departed the complex, as this was probably the last time he would see it for quite some time, if ever. Little did he know, Frank was feeling the same thing in the vehicle behind him. The two vehicles moved out onto Interstate 25 and proceeded south. They passed what appeared to be a checkpoint at the exit, but it was either not manned or abandoned. Approaching the I-25 and South Academy exit, they finally ran into a checkpoint that was manned. Thomas stopped short and waited for the soldiers manning the checkpoint to wave him forward. An Army Specialist approached the vehicle, shining an angle head flashlight into the cab. Thomas shut down the engine and grabbed the forged MCO and handed over his ID card. The soldier briefed over the MCO and got to the destination portion before stopping. "Sergeant, you do not have a destination listed on your MCO. It says classified."

"That's right, soldier, my destination is classified. It's on a need to know basis, and you do not need to know," said Thomas very cryptically.

"Sir, I'm going to need to confirm this with your point of origin. Do you have your emergency MCO authenticator?" asked the soldier, having never seen the covert operations orders before.

Thomas pulled out the small green notepad he carried in his left vest pocket, looked at the time and gave the correct code for the day which should work. The soldier stepped back, asking Thomas to standby and went to a phone. Although normal phone services were on the fritz, the military network in and around Colorado Springs was still up and running pretty well. The soldier punched in the line for the Control Center at Peterson AFB and told the controller he had an emergency MCO to verify. The controller transferred the call to the telephone in Captain Bradley's new office…

2149 Local Time:

The ringing phone woke Captain Bradley out of a deep sleep, the first good sleep he had gotten in several days. Wanting to scream at the telephone for interrupting his sleep, he restrained himself to a simple "Captain Bradley" in a gruff voice. A voice on the other end of the telephone answered back.

"Sir, this is Specialist Ahern of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team at Checkpoint Kilo Seven-Two. I have an MCO which needs to be verified by the point of origin," said the soldier.

The half awake officer gave the soldier a disgusted "stand by" and went to open the safe containing the emergency authenticators. It took him three attempts to get the combination right and retrieve a folder with SECRET markings on the cover. He went back to the telephone and instructed the soldier "Go ahead and send the code."

"Sir, I have Emergency MCO number Alpha dash two-three-two-eight, section Twilight Green, code Zulu Seven Delta Five November. Do you need me to repeat, sir?" asked Ahern.

"No, hold on a minute," the Captain stated as he flipped through the various tabs in the folder until he reached the section marked Twilight Green and checked the daily code. *Hmmmm, a covert intelligence operation at night? And point of origin was here? Wonder what that is all about?* thought the captain. "They are valid, soldier, what is their destination?"

"Sir, the destination on the MCO is labeled 'classified.' I asked the driver, but he told me I didn't need to know. I can hold them until you can verify further," stated the Specialist.

The Captain paused for a moment and thought about it. It would certainly answer the question on why an Intel Op was going out in the middle of the night, but then again, trying to track it down at this hour would be hard to do. All MCOs and EMCOs were coordinated out of the Security Forces, no matter what unit they were with and this one was probably with another unit. Captain Bradley wasn't very popular with the other agencies which performed those clandestine operations and they would probably blow him off anyway at this hour. Better to try tomorrow to find out who these guys are and what they were doing. "No, just get their MCO number and other information and send it up here."

The soldier gave the Captain a "WILCO" before hanging up the phone and going back outside. He wrote down their MCO number, license plate number, and in the case of the HMMWV, the unit identifier on the bumper. He handed the papers back to Dayfield before telling a Private to open the swing gate to let the vehicles pass. He went back into the small guard shack, only then realizing he had forgotten to write down the names of the drivers. He looked out the window and saw the vehicles were too far down the road to stop. *Oh well, what are they going to do? Fire me?* thought the specialist as he jotted down the information onto a contact report and filed it in a bin that was picked up by the HHC in the morning. At 0700, the report was picked up by an orderly. It got mixed in with several other papers where it was forgotten for several days. Four days after Dayfield and Zimmer passed through the checkpoint, the report arrived on Captain Bradley's desk…too late to be of help to anyone.

Thomas and Frank arrived in the north side of Pueblo about an hour after clearing the checkpoint. They arrived at a checkpoint on the north side of town and were able to get past without being checked too closely. The posted sentries there told Thomas they were used to seeing strange MCOs come through and could not confirm his orders since the telephone lines between Pueblo and Colorado Springs were currently down. Seeing the two men loaded for bear and off on a "classified mission" with a "classified destination" the Army Reservists decided not probe too deep.

When they had passed and gotten to within two blocks of Sharon's house, Thomas pulled off the

side of the road and shut off the vehicle. He and Frank met at the back of the truck and made a plan to go in on foot, making sure the area was safe before bringing the vehicles in. They locked up all the extra weapons in the 6-pack and proceeded slowly on foot, staying in the shadows as much as possible. For some reason, the power was still on in this neighborhood, possibly due to the sweeps and raids that were going on right now. About half the streetlights were operational, creating long shadows the men used to their advantage as they closed in on the house. Sharon lived in a neighborhood on the edge of town where the houses were not as close together and had decent sized yards.

When they arrived at the house, Thomas moved up to the door while Frank took a position in the front yard behind a tree where he could watch the roadway and the adjacent houses. Thomas, not wanting to make too much noise, wrapped softly on the front door, looking through the glass to see movement. When he thought he heard someone close to the door, he softly asked "Sharon? It's me baby; I've come to get you out of here."

The door cracked open revealing Sharon in the dim light of the distant streetlight. As soon as she recognized Thomas, the door flew open and she leaped into his arms. Even with all the equipment he had on, she grasped him like a boa constrictor squeezing its prey. He heard her crying softly on his shoulder as he moved the two of them back into the house. Once inside, he closed the door and let her back down. A small lamp in an adjacent room provided a small amount of light into the foyer area. He took in the moment to look at her since it had been close to a month since he had seen her. Although she had been crying, her hair a mess and had dark circles under her eyes, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever known. He kissed her on the forehead and said "Everything is going to be okay now, my queen. We are going to get out of here."

She embraced him again and it was only now that he saw the claw hammer in her right hand. Only after she released him and saw him looking at the hammer did she explain. "I didn't know who was at the door, but if it wasn't you, I was going to give them a good whack before running away."

He chuckled and knew with her temper, she would have done it without hesitation. They moved through the house to where her daughter, Angel, was sleeping on a pad in the floor since her crib had already been packed up. In the same room, quite a few boxes and bags sat packed. It was a lot, but not more than the 6-pack and the HMMWV could handle if they packed it right. Since that room was closer to the back of the house, Thomas made the decision to move the vehicles around the back and load them through the back door, out of sight of the street. He told Sharon the plan and told her to have Angel ready to move as soon as they were finished loading.

Angel was a fast growing girl of two and soon going on three year old born to Sharon and another man. This didn't bother Thomas that much since the biological father hadn't been around in almost two years to take care of either of them. Angel woke up and saw Thomas, who she adored, standing in the room. She said "TOMMY!" excitedly and bounded up off the pad to grab him around the leg. He picked her up and gave her a good hug while she stared at the equipment on his chest and waist. Thomas handed her over to Sharon and went out the front door to get Frank and the vehicles.

They walked back to the vehicles, a little faster but still keeping to the shadows, and moved them to the rear of the house from the alleyway and closed the gate into her backyard behind them. Frank quickly refilled the tanks of the vehicles with one can of diesel each before taking his position in the front of the house while Sharon and Thomas packed away the trucks. She still had to pack several more bags and boxes while he was carrying everything out and packing it away. Thomas had no clue how she had packed everything away so quickly since it was only six hours since they talked, but she had somehow managed it.

While they were moving, Thomas went over the plan for them and the story she needed to remember. "You turned in your neighbors to the authorities because they were hiding guns and food. Your neighbors found out about it and threatened to kill you over it. You are being relocated to an area near Gunnison by us." He had her repeat it back to him word for word several times as she got the story straight.

At close to 2:30 AM they finished loaded the vehicles and were ready to move. Thomas noticed the last item to be packed was her kitty carrier. He had completely forgotten about Sharon's three year old cat, Harley, a rather large gray tiger stripped tabby. "Sharon, I don't have any cat food stored up."

"Well, I have quite a bit stored already since I used to buy in bulk, but he is also a good mouser and he can eat table scraps as well," she replied. "I am not abandoning him here."

Thomas and the cat didn't have the best relationship, but tolerated each other. Harley was fairly possessive of Sharon and let Thomas know he was just a visitor in his house most of the time. It was fairly silly competing with a cat, but Thomas knew he wouldn't abandon the cat either. "I wasn't thinking of abandoning him. Is he declawed?"

"No, so he will be fine in or outdoors. I love this cat and so does Angel. You wouldn't want to tell her we couldn't bring him do you?" asked Sharon.

"The cat is coming sweetie, I never thought for a moment he wouldn't be," replied Thomas. "Let's go ahead and grab Angel and him and get going."

Angel was not happy about being woken up again, much less being told she was going on a trip. Before leaving, Thomas asked Sharon if she had everything she needed.

"Well, not everything I would want, but I have everything we need. Is there a way of making another trip?" she asked in a hopeful voice.

"Honey, it is dangerous enough making one trip right now considering I am AWOL from the military and with all the bad folks out there shooting at anything that moves. But I promise, once it calms down a bit, we will come back and get the rest of it," he said.

They went out to the truck and he showed her the pack she needed to grab if they had to leave on foot. As they prepared to leave, Thomas drained one of his one-quart canteens and returned to

the house to refill it from one of the numerous containers sitting out in Sharon's kitchen. Apparently, water shortages were becoming more and more of a problem forcing residents to keep water stored for use. He was replacing the canteen in the pouch when the radio earpiece came to life in his left ear. He heard Frank's voice say "Contact, one vehicle approaching, diesel engine, unknown number of occupants, looks like a CUCV in desert tan, just pulled onto this block and shut off the lights." Thomas sprang into action, going to the front of the house and exiting the front door where he met Frank. He peered down the block to see the vehicle sitting about two hundred and fifty meters away from them, just past the intersection, idling with the lights off.

"Anything else yet?" asked Thomas.

"Not that I can tell; just sitting there like it has been since it arrived" answered Frank in his usual calm voice.

"You think someone around here tipped us off and they are waiting for us?" asked Thomas.

"I don't think so or they probably would have more than one vehicle. Maybe just a routine patrol pulling over to rest for a minute," said Frank.

"I think we should sit here for a moment and keep an eye on them," said Thomas. The diesel engine could be heard clearly in the still night air, idling with a pronounced knock. Suddenly, it shut off and four individuals dismounted the vehicle. Even at the distance, the ACU pattern camouflage uniforms could be seen in the faint light. The individuals fanned out, walking down the street in the direction of Sharon's house.

"Let's slip over by the edge of the house and keep an eye on these fellows," whispered Frank. One at a time, the men moved silently to the side of the house, overwatching each other as they moved. The unknown Army fire team was one hundred and fifty meters away from their location when they started angling towards her house. This was all they needed to make the decision to start moving.

"You go out back and get ready to move your HMMWV, flip over the starter on both the vehicles, but don't start them up just yet, just get the glow plugs warmed up. There is the alleyway behind her house that connects to the street down there. When I say the word, you crank it over and crash through the fence to the alley. I will be right behind you. You remember how to get back to Highway 50 right?" asked Thomas. Frank nodded as he departed down the house to the backyard. The HMMWV was better suited with its larger tires and wider frame to bash through the small wooden fence than the Ford would be.

A few moments passed and the four men were about one hundred meters away now, slowing down and being more careful about their approach. Frank should have been in position by now, ready to go. Seventy-five meters now and they were definitely headed this way. For what exact reason he didn't know, but could give it a good guess. An attractive woman lives here by herself and these four were heading to her house in the dead of night when they wouldn't be seen or heard. *I hope there isn't a lot of this going on,* Thomas thought as he made his way down the

side of the house and jumped into the driver's seat of the big Ford. If they were making the same time, they would be within fifty meters now. He shouted "GO!" into the radio and turned over the ignition of the truck. He heard the starter crank for the HMMWV for about a second before it caught. Frank mashed the accelerator to the floor and dropped it into drive.

The HMMWV lurched forward, gathering speed as it closed the hundred feet between where it sat and the short wood fence surrounding the backyard and smashed through the fence, throwing splinters and pieces of wood in all directions. Thomas mashed down the gas pedal of the Ford and shot forward. Even with the load in the back, the V8 engine raced the truck forward and covered the distance quickly. He heard shouting over the engine and saw two figures running around to the back of the house.

As he sped through the gap created by the HMMWV, he saw a muzzle flash and heard the report of a shot. He quickly caught up to the HMMWV who was nearing the end of the alley and the road junction. *At least we have thirty seconds for them to run back and grab their vehicle started and thirty seconds is about all we will need to lose them,* he thought as they turned onto the road.

As they passed the entrance to the housing area, Thomas noticed the CUCV was missing. *They had another person waiting at the vehicle, so much for our thirty second advantage* thought Thomas as they rounded the curve in the road. Remembering they had been shot at already, he told Sharon to put on the Interceptor vest and the helmet. He had on his second chance vest, which wouldn't stop rifle rounds, but possibly in combination with the vehicle itself, might slow them down quite a bit. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw the CUCV rounding the corner and turning to pursue them about four hundred meters behind them.

Sharon had located the vest and helmet but was unfamiliar with how to put it on. After some trying, she finally got it slipped over her head without undoing the Velcro in the front. He silently urged Frank to make the HMMWV go faster, but he knew they were built for utility, not speed. The CUCV started eating up the distance between the two.

Thomas saw winks of light coming from the passenger side and from over the top of the cab of the vehicle. He started making random turns to throw off the aim of the gunmen pursuing them. He radioed to Frank they were being fired on and asked him to go faster. The HMMWV was topped out at 58 MPH on its old engine and could go no faster and even so, they were making turns through the neighborhood roads and the top speed could only be obtained for brief periods of time.

Thomas decided to give the following vehicle something to think about as they started turning to reach Highway 50. Grabbing his M-4, he told Sharon to take the wheel and keep up with Frank. She slid over to the driver's seat as he slid out the window. Like something off of a movie, he came completely out of the vehicle and got one leg into the rear window before a random turn threw him off balance and almost out of the vehicle. Luckily he had been holding on to the seatbelt and was able to regain his footing before carefully balancing himself in the back window.

Thomas sat on the edge of the door and wrapped the seatbelt around his left leg. He chambered a

round into the carbine, flipped the selector lever to semi and took aim at the pursuing vehicle. The vehicle showed clearly through the night vision device attached and was three hundred meters away from them. He squeezed off a round, aiming at the windshield between the driver and passenger. It was his intent to simply scare these men off and not seriously harm them. More muzzle flashes from the CUCV were seen as they were not impressed by his return fire. He repeated firing five more times, taking aim at the passenger and drivers side now. The truck made several swerves so he knew his rounds were impacting, but they were not being put off.

The Ford made a long sweeping turn and suddenly, they were on Highway 50. A long straight stretch of road was in front of them now and he knew it would only be a matter of time before the CUCV either caught up with them or one of them was hit. The distance between the two was back to four hundred meters now, but Thomas kept firing.

Suddenly, a bright flash was seen from the top and a line of red tracers reaching out for their vehicles. The tracer fire fell short, but it wouldn't take long for the gunner to adjust fire into the vehicles. *Enough is enough; we have to lose these guys*, thought Thomas as the bolt locked to the rear on an empty magazine in his M-4. He grabbed the empty magazine, hit the release and yanked it out, dropping it into the back seat. With one fluid motion, he grabbed a new magazine from his vest and slammed it into the carbine, tapped the bottom and hit the bolt catch release.

He fired one shot when he realized he had forgotten the fragmentation grenades in the pouch. He saw a tall tree passing them by on the roadway in the moonlight and silently counted the time between their vehicle and the pursers. He fired another two rounds and came up with four seconds and decided it would be enough. He fired several rounds in rapid succession and then laid the M-4 across his lap and made sure the sling was attached to the carabineer.

Unsnapping the pouch, he withdrew one of the grenades from the inside. He was familiar with the small sphere of explosives, having thrown live ones several times in training and a couple more recently. Instead of making a long toss, he pulled the pin and let the spoon fly before gently tossing it just behind his back bumper with the fuse pointing out. He wanted the grenade to stay in the road as much as possible before exploding and the protruding fuse might make it bounce out off the asphalt. He silently counted the seconds as he picked his M-4 back up and prepared to fire again. The grenade detonated one hundred meters in front of the CUCV, not like the massive explosions that Hollywood portrayed, but impressive enough at this distance. Apparently, the grenade had bounced along the roadway faster than he thought, so he prepared another after firing more shots off. The second grenade was lobbed further behind the vehicle and Thomas hoped it would be enough. It went off about ten meters in front of the CUCV, the shrapnel exploding in all directions.

The CUCV immediately started swerving to the right and left and before long the distance between the two started increasing. The distance grew to five hundred…six hundred…eight hundred meters and continued growing. They still were following but at a much slower pace. Thomas radioed to Frank to find a suitable long straight stretch where they could pour some effective fire onto the vehicle to make them stop. Frank radioed back they were on a long flat straight stretch and would stop at the end of it. Thomas radioed back to tell him to get the machine gun ready as he unzipped the bag for the precision rifle and pulled it out.

They reached the end of the road where it started a slight climb and curve. The CUCV was almost a mile behind them at that point, the distance between them decreasing slowly. Coming to a stop, Thomas jumped out of the truck and unfolded the bipod legs on the rifle. He quickly showed Sharon how to operate the safety on the carbine Rick had included for her, handed her the weapon, her Bug Out Bag and told her to grab Angel and get into the woods next to the truck.

Frank had turned his HMMWV perpendicular to the roadway and was setting up the M-249 across the hood. He got the light machine gun ready for use after loading it up. He flipped down the bipod legs and took aim over the sights at the truck, now at about thirteen hundred meters. Thomas readied the precision rifle, working the bolt to chamber a round and flipped open the scope covers. Frank relayed distance to him as he turned the scope to maximum magnification and found the CUCV through the sight.

"Eleven hundred meters, winds from left to right, about seven miles per hour…ten-fifty…one thousand meters, fire!" said Frank as the CUCV came into range. Thomas adjusted for the windage and pulled the trigger. The rifle barked, sending the match hollow point bullet downrange. Thomas doubted if the round hit the vehicle at that range, but worked the bolt preparing to fire again. The vehicle was larger in his sight now and he was able to send a round downrange aimed at the driver's side of the vehicle.

When the range reached seven hundred meters, Frank stopped calling out range for him and let a burst fly from the M-249. The line of tracers fell short of the truck, but Frank immediately corrected and sent a longer burst into the vehicle. Every round found the target as the truck swerved from side to side. Thomas fired another round out of the Remington, aimed at the passenger seat. The truck slowed down considerably and stopped altogether at three hundred fifty meters away.

Through the telescopic sight, Thomas could see one individual open the driver's door and pull someone else out. The person moved them to the front of the vehicle and went back for another, pulling them to the same place. The individual then grabbed what appeared to be a medical kit out of the truck and ran back to the unmoving figures in the one working headlight. Frank and Thomas observed the individuals actions for a few minutes, watching him work furiously on the two figures lying down. "Want to go check them out?"

"Could be a way of suckering us in and taking us out" said Frank and requested to look through the sight on the rifle. Thomas relinquished control of the rifle and took Frank's place on the M-249.

Frank got behind the rifle and peered through the scope for several seconds. "Looks like two down for sure in front of the truck with another doing self aid and buddy care on them…another slumped over the roof of the truck. That makes four, we are missing one. I think it's worth the risk, just to disarm these guys if nothing else."

Thomas wondered how Frank could make out so much through the dark sight, but figured right now was not the time to ask. "Okay, we will head up the tree line beside the road, that way of

something goes wrong, we will have some cover," said Thomas while picking up the rifle and clearing it out. Frank took the M-249 down and did the same.

Thomas walked over to the Ford and set the rifle in the back seat and grabbed his patrol bag and the truck keys. Gathering everything up, he walked over to the nearby trees and called for Sharon. He told her what they were going to do and gave her his bag and the truck keys. He gave her the spare radio out of his pack, switched to the correct channel and told her to listen to it. If he radioed to her or if he did not answer the radio if she heard shooting, she was to take the truck to the Ranch. He told her to leave his bag in the trees and he would find it.

Frank joined them and set his bag next to Thomas's. Thomas, only having fired twelve rounds out of the new magazine in his M-4, replaced it with a full one out of habit. The two men set out and smoothly made their way up the tree line beside the road, keeping the vehicle and the one moving individual in their view at all times. The early morning dew on the grass muffled the footsteps of the men and they were able to close within fifty feet of the vehicle before challenging the individual.

Thomas yelled at the one moving individual to halt and put his hands up as he flipped on the flashlight mounted to his M-4. Startled, a young nineteen year old Private E-2 complied and looked to where the voice came from. Thomas and Frank rushed in, one pointing his M-4 at the Private and the other at the truck. The vehicle had suffered severe damage and Thomas and Frank saw why it had stopped. The front two tires were completely flat, with one almost running on the rim. Steam rolled out of the perforated radiator, the windshield was almost entirely shot out and the hood looked like Swiss cheese. It was a wonder the CUCV had made it as far as it had and Thomas wondered why they had kept up the chase with the vehicle in such disrepair.

Frank cleared out the truck while Thomas watched the young Private on his knees at the front of the vehicle in the headlights. "Where are the rest of your buddies?" asked Thomas.

"Dead! You killed them!" said the Private in a scared voice. Frank checked for a pulse on both and did not find one. Both had suffered from several wounds before dying.

"What about those two?" asked Thomas, pointing at the two lying in front of the truck.

"Both of them are wounded, chest wounds. You were trying to kill us!" said the young soldier. "Oh my God, you were trying to kill us! You are going to kill me aren't you?!"

"Hadn't planned on it just yet. What were you doing at that house in Pueblo?" inquired Thomas.

The soldier, feeling fear and watching the two men who had just killed two of his friends and wounded two more, answered without even thinking to lie first. "We were making a social call. It was the Sarge's idea."

Both Thomas and Frank were puzzled by the answer, but it was Thomas who asked the question. "Social call? What do you mean by social call?"

The soldier answered, wondering why these two didn't get it. "You know…a social call. You know, like to borrow some sugar. Come on, you two are military aren't you? You know what I'm talking about."

No, I don't know, though Thomas as he was suddenly disgusted with the conversation, the Private and the dead and wounded men.

"Hey, come on now, since we started the door to door searches, everyone is doing it. I mean, she's just a dumb civilian right? Nobody cares," continued the Private, trying to reason with the man to his front.

Oh really? I care, thought Thomas as he moved on pure reflex rather than on thought. He moved towards the Private who was still on his knees and grabbed him but the throat. Pulling out his pistol, he jammed it into the soldier's head, right between the eyes and cocked the hammer. "Listen here you poor excuse for a soldier! That just happens to be a dumb civilian evacuee you and your pals were about to rape! You had better come up with a good reason in the next two seconds for why I don't blow your head off!"

Frank was already moving out of the truck to stop Thomas, but knew he wouldn't get there in time. The soldier turned as pale as a ghost and Thomas smelled where he had defecated himself from fear. He threw the Private by his throat onto the ground and walked away, trying to compose himself before his killed the young man in cold blood. Frank walked up to the soldier and continued the questioning.

"Why were you chasing us anyway?" asked Frank when he got to the soldier.

The soldier coughed and rubbed on his neck where Thomas had grabbed him. "We were scared you would get away from us and report us for being out of the zone we were assigned. The Sarge said we couldn't let you get away or we would be in serious trouble. We were just trying to stop you."

"You mean stop us by killing us? Killing two NCOs and a civilian just to save your own butt? Is that what you mean by stopping us?" asked Frank with a glare.

"Sarge said it had to be done," said the soldier timidly.

Frank felt like kicking the young man's teeth in but refrained and went back to make sure Thomas had calmed down. "I will start clearing out the weapons and stuff in the back if you want to check these guys."

Thomas agreed and ordered the soldier to the ground on his face. He went over to the two wounded men on the ground and started removing all the weapons he could find on them. The Private had done a decent job with his first aid, but if these men didn't get to a hospital soon, they would probably die, but Thomas didn't care that much about it right then. On the wounded soldiers he found a non-issue pistols and knives. The knives he tossed in the direction of the woods and the pistols into the cab of the truck. Thomas took the magazines, grenades and

surprisingly enough, MP5 magazines from the gear of the men. Thomas replaced the one magazine he had used during the firefight with a full one taken off the wounded men. He also replaced the frag grenade in the pouch and closed it up.

When Thomas finished searching the two wounded men and the Private, Frank looked through the bed of the truck and at the two dead soldiers taking everything as he went. Frank found a ruck sack and emptied the contents into the bed of the truck. He began to toss the magazines, both full and empty into the ruck along with several frag, smoke and flashbang grenades. He found two rifles and the M-249. He gathered the spare belts of ammo and dumped them in as well. When he finished, he was getting out of the bed of the CUCV when he spied two more boxes, one of MREs and the other of slap flares. He dumped everything into the ruck before sweeping it once again just in case. Jumping out of the bed of the truck, he took the place of Thomas and gathered the equipment he had found as well.

"You all have the normal issue rifles, but why not pistols?" asked Frank.

"Some are personally owned and some are those we confiscated. Our Captain said it would be okay to use them since our unit didn't have enough pistols," said the soldier.

"You are using the same items you confiscated from the citizens to further disarm citizens?" asked Frank more to himself than to the soldier. "Hypocrisy at its best."

"Who are you guys anyway?" asked the Private, looking over their unusual uniforms and rifles with the "ninja" equipment hanging on the rails.

"It doesn't matter who we are, we are NCOs in the United States Military and our unit was charged with protecting a material witness. We do covert work and we do it well. You and your buddies messed with the wrong folks, young man. Really, really bad luck on your part," said Frank, hoping to throw off the idea they weren't who he thought they were.

Thomas searched through the cab of the CUCV finding an M-4 carbine and the MP5A3. He wanted to ask the soldier where the MP5 had come from, but didn't want to speak to him at all. He grabbed up the rest of the empty magazines and a codebook for radio communications and dropped it all into the ruck sack. He also disabled the radio in the front of the ruck by first putting the zero into the SINCGARS set and then ripping the wires out of the back and cutting the wire to the hand set with his Leatherman. He considered shooting the set with a pistol, but decided not to since they were somewhat pressed for time. He returned to the soldier after gathering everything and putting it in the rucksack.

Thomas, who still had thoughts of choking the life out of the soldier, contained himself for the moment and started speaking. He wanted to continue the façade of having the young soldier believe they were a part of a unit charged with covert ops. "Listen to me and listen good. You are a soldier, start acting like one. That house you went to just happened to be a woman who is being relocated, and you were going to rape her. That is not what soldiers do. Soldiers are there to protect people who cannot protect themselves. You were going to rape a defenseless woman in the middle of the night just because you said everyone is doing it. Well, tonight your friends

paid the price for acting out of line. Next time, it will be you getting killed. I am going to leave you alive for the moment to take care of your friends there and tell your other friends what happens to your despicable people who prey on innocent victims. Maybe if they are lucky, they will live. I don't care if you all live or die, but know this, I hear of you raping any more defenseless women; I will put the bullet into your head that kills you. This is after I have inflicted enough pain on you that you beg to die first. And don't think I won't find out. You will die if it happens again. Our unit will make you disappear in the middle of the night and nobody will ever know how. Believe that."

"What about my friends? You can at least take them to a hospital before they die," said the soldier.

"We already told you we don't care if they live or die. We don't have the time to worry about a courtroom, so we found them guilty as we have done before. The maximum penalty under the UCMJ for rape is death. If they die, they get their punishment, if they don't; they got the message not to do it again," said Frank before Thomas got the chance to respond.

"But, sir, you're NCOs, you can't just leave them here to die and you can't leave me here defenseless either!" pleaded the soldier.

"I can and will leave them here to die. It's up to you and God to determine whether or not they live. As for leaving you defenseless, we will leave the revolver with six rounds in the middle of the road where our vehicles are at. You can explain to your commander how you lost your other weapons to us," said Thomas coldly.

Both Frank and Thomas gathered the rifles and machine guns between them. Frank grabbed the ruck and slung it over his shoulders while Thomas grabbed the other rifles and the M-249. Leaving instructions to the private not to move until he heard the vehicles drive away or they would shoot him as a threat. They moved straight up the road, turning every once in a while to see the soldier still lying on the ground in front of the now dead CUCV. When they reached their vehicles, everything was placed in the back seat of the Ford. Thomas went over to the woods to call for Sharon and retrieve both his and Frank's packs. Sharon emerged from the woods, looking a little shaky, but not any worse for the wear. Thomas took back the carbine and cleared it out before setting it on the floor on the back seat on her side of the vehicle. Sharon shrugged off the body armor with a thud and removed the helmet. Thomas set the additional gear back into the backseat and went to the driver's seat to get ready to go. By this time, Frank had started his HMMWV and was ready to move. Sharon silently strapped Angel back into the car seat and got into the front seat with Thomas. Thomas had her lock the doors on her side while he did the same on his side.

Thomas put the vehicle into drive and started driving away, slowly at first to give Frank enough time to turn the HMMWV back onto the road. They were driving for about five minutes when Sharon broke the silence. "Those men were going to rape and kill me weren't they?"

"Probably so, but it didn't happen and won't happen as long as you are with me," he said honestly and to put her at ease.

She silently thought of what had happened tonight if Thomas had not killed the men responsible for the now aborted attempt to cause her harm. She wondered what might have happened if she wasn't able to get through to him on the phone earlier that day, or hadn't been able to pick her up that night. Something needed to be said though. "Thank you."

"Thank you for what?" he asked.

"For saving Angel's and my life," said Sharon as she slid across the cabin seat to him.

Thomas reached down and took her hand and squeezed it. She squeezed back even tighter and didn't let go. *Yes, this is the one, just like I thought several years ago,* she thought as they continued down the dark road.

Although he was holding on to the woman he loved, his thoughts drifted back to the mobile fire fight they had just been involved in. He and Frank had killed two US military members and if those other two didn't get help soon, they would probably die as well. He and Frank had condemned them to death without a trial. But it was kill or be killed, preserve your own life and try not to think about what happened until after the fact. It was the same primal instinct he had felt when he had been shot two weeks prior. The man had shot him and then gone to check his kill. Thomas remembered hurting all over but still having enough instinct to draw his M-9 and take the man out before he could correct his mistake of not killing his target with the first round.

This situation was the same but different. He had just reacted to a threat. However, now that he had the time to think about it, it was quite disturbing. Just three days ago, he might have been working alongside these very same soldiers they had just left behind for dead on the road. But tonight, they had tried to kill each other, with one side getting lucky, and the other dead. Thomas didn't know why the men had made the decision to chase them, or fired on them, or why they just simply hadn't called their headquarters to have Frank and him picked up at the next checkpoint, but once the firing commenced, it was kill or be killed. Sadly, he felt no remorse about killing the soldiers, not because they were trying to harm someone he loved, but because he was so used to protecting people as a cop. Protect the innocent and those who cannot protect themselves. Thomas considered the fact they were once on the same side and would have worked together for a common cause, but with them going off to prey on innocents, they were no longer members of the proud profession of arms the military once was. He hoped this was only an isolated incident and not the military as a whole. His thoughts continued as they drove onward towards safety.

<u>0431 Local Time:</u>

About five miles from the Ranch, Thomas pulled off the county road on they were currently traveling and onto a dirt path leading into the woods. He moved in two hundred yards before stopping in an area with enough space for them to get the vehicles turned around. Frank shut off his vehicle and went to the Ford. "What's the deal?"

"I don't want to go cruising into the Ranch prior to dawn. We have about an hour or so before daybreak and we are fifteen minutes away. I figure we stay here about hour or hour and a half before we move on in. What do you think?" asked Thomas.

"Yeah, sounds like a plan. If I remember correctly, George would come out blazing at the sign of a military vehicle roaring up his driveway in the middle of the night. Why don't you catch a nap? You look like you could use it," said Frank.

"I was going to tell you to catch some shut eye," said a yawning Thomas.

"Come on, you are yawning so much flies could make your mouth their home. I'm fine, younger and you could use the beauty rest," said Frank who never seemed to tire.

"Okay, I'm not going to argue with you. Wake me up about six o'clock or so," said Thomas with another yawn. Sharon snuggled in close to Thomas, having heard the decision to stop for a little while. Angel was sleeping peacefully in the car seat covered by her blanky after having an eventful night. Thomas was hungry and could not remember the last time he had eaten anything. Sharon was hungry too and softly asked Thomas where he had something to eat in the truck. He didn't answer her and she looked up to see why. In the five seconds it had taken her to think and ask the question, he had fallen asleep. She slid back in next to him, closed her eyes and was asleep in the same amount of time.

Thomas awoke to Frank knocking on the driver's window of the truck. Not wanting to disturb Sharon just yet, he waved his left hand at the window and looked at his watch. The digital display read 7:48. He tried to move Sharon without waking her, but was unsuccessful. She yawned and stretched her arms over her head, poking him in the face accidentally.

"Well, one way to make sure I'm awake is by picking my nose," said Thomas, rubbing the spot she had hit.

"I'm sorry, baby, it was an accident. What time is it?" said a yawning Sharon, trying to clear the cobwebs from her mind.

"It's 7:45, we should have been there by now," said Thomas as he gently opened the truck door. Angel was still asleep, and he wanted her to remain that way until they got moving. Leaving the truck door cracked, he went to Frank standing next to his HMMWV. "I thought I asked you to wake me up at six o'clock."

"I did try to wake you up at six; somehow you locked the doors on the truck. I knocked pretty hard too. Neither one of you budged an inch. Angel kind of opened her eyes and gave me a dirty look before going right back to sleep. I tried again at 6:15, 6:30 and 7:00 but finally got you among the land of the living just now. I figured it didn't matter that much, what's an extra hour and forty-five minutes to us anyway?" said Frank looking very tired himself.

"Yeah, you are right, let me get jump started here and we can be on our way, say in about ten

minutes," said Thomas as he stretched out. Sleeping in an odd position and with all the gear on had his back twisted into some uncomfortable positions. He stretched to try and work them out but found unless he dropped the gear it would never work. He walked over to a nearby tree out of sight and relieved himself. Lighting a cigarette, he started returning to the vehicles when Sharon asked him if he had any toilet paper. He got into his bag and pulled out the toilet paper and handed it over. She saw the cigarette in his mouth and frowned. Sharon had been after him for a while to quit. *Like I have a choice now, I have to quit, there aren't any more supplies,* thought Thomas as he took a drag off of the cancer stick. Returning to the truck a few minutes later, Sharon asked him about food while starting to change Angel's diaper.

"We are only about fifteen minutes away from the Ranch where we can eat in peace. Think you will starve by then?" he asked.

"I think I can make it, but just to let you know, at sixteen minutes, I start gnawing on your arm," said a playful Sharon. It was good to see her sense of humor coming back after the happenings of the previous twenty-four hours. After she was done changing Angel, everyone got into their respective vehicles and started to turn them around. This was a little trickier than it sounded since the HMMWV was so wide and had the trailer and the 6-pack so long. It took almost ten minutes to get the vehicles turned around and pointed back towards the roadway. They moved back out onto the paved surface of the county roadway and made their way northwest towards the Ranch. They pulled off the road onto a single lane gravel road leading towards the Taylor's house. The house could not be seen clearly, four hundred yards off the main hardtop roadway.

Thomas didn't want to go roaring up the driveway to the house so he made it a point to stop halfway there and identify themselves and walk the rest of the way. He slowed down both to make them look non-threatening and to keep the dust from the gravel down. Picking a point that was about halfway to the house; he stopped the truck and got out. Removing his boonie hat, he waved at the house, but could not see anyone. A female voice from his right surprised him.

"Well, howdy stranger, it's about time you showed up," said the voice from inside a small spot of brushy oak trees. He saw a small figure emerge from the trees wearing a hunting pattern suit and web gear and carrying rifle. It was Renee Lawson, Dave's wife. They had made it. They were safe.

CHAPTER 10 – SAFETY

Time since attacks: 93 days
Date/Time: 22 July/0812 Local
Location: The Ranch, near Cañon City, Colorado

Renee pulled out a small radio and spoke into the front. "It's Thomas, his girlfriend and what appears to be Frank in the rear vehicle. They are all secure." Thomas looked at the house and saw George emerge from the front door holding a rifle with a scope and waving them on up to the house. Renee asked over the radio is she could join the group for a few minutes and was told to proceed. She jumped into the HMMWV with Frank and they drove the two hundred yards to the house where they parked in back.

After coming to a stop and shutting off the vehicles, they walked the short distance to the back door of the house. Shannon Parsons took a couple of quick digital pictures of the three while they were walking towards the house. Each looked haggard and dirty, but had smiles on their faces as they knew they were done with their short, although tiresome journey. They were greeted by Cynthia, Ryan, George, Janie Holmes, Janet Thompson, Michelle Jones, Shannon Parsons and two others Thomas recognized as the Taylor's daughters, Amber and Misty. Hugs were given around the group as Sharon was introduced to those who didn't know her. Everyone in the room bombarded Thomas and Frank with questions about their loved ones still missing and the details of their escape.

George somewhat calmed them by barging in front of the small group and shaking hands before shoving cups of coffee into the two men's hands. He politely asked if Sharon wanted a cup, but she declined and asked for some milk or juice to give to Angel. George, an experienced father, took Angel from Sharon and waded back through the crowd to get a sippy cup filled. Although initially a little nervous of the bearlike man she didn't really remember from a previous visit, Angel was intrigued by his goatee and soon was giggling at him.

Thomas and Frank dropped their weapons by the back door and went over to a table where Cynthia was setting out some breakfast for everyone. Sharon joined after looking over to check on Angel, but she need not have bothered. George was busy feeding her some cut up apples and cherries and listening to her tale of the escape, as only a two year old can tell it.

Sharon relaxed a bit since Angel appeared to be in good hands and the three sat down and started wolfing down the eggs, sausage, biscuits and gravy. Between bites of breakfast, Thomas and Frank explained the details of their escape and the plans for the rest of the group to come in three more days. After finishing what seemed like the best breakfast any of them had ever had, the three made their way down the gravel road to the Ranch proper where their new homes were. The drive to the Ranch was thankfully short as they were still very tired after the night's adventures. Frank parked the HMMWV at Thomas's house so it could be unloaded later and walked the rest of the way to his cabin.

Thomas opened the door to his house, the only home he had now since he had left everything behind in Colorado Springs. There was nothing to go back to now, and even if they wanted to, they would be apprehended on sight by Loyalist forces. Sharon showed Thomas what boxes and bags had to absolutely be brought in that morning before they settled in. While Thomas was unloading the boxes, Sharon took Angel off to get her cleaned up and ready for another nap time.

Sharon, having been to the Ranch several times, knew the layout of the house, but didn't know exactly which bedroom was going to be for Angel. Thomas entered the house and dropped off his carbine, second chance vest and web gear inside of his bedroom. Feeling a hundred pounds lighter, he took off his BDU top and began to unload the boxes and bags designated by Sharon. The first package he grabbed was the cat carrier with a sleeping cat inside. He took the cat carrier into the living room and opened the door of the kennel. Harley woke up and slowly got out of the carrier and stretched, unaware of his new surroundings. Thomas let him be and went on to get the rest of the boxes unloaded.

After he finished unloading everything, Thomas grabbed his small toolbox from the closet and started putting the crib together in a bedroom across the hallway from his. By the time he was finished setting up the crib, Sharon was done in the bathroom with herself and Angel and was preparing to set Angel down for another nap. Thomas headed for the shower, feeling and smelling quite funky after being in the same clothes and gear for over twenty-four hours and with all the sweating he had done last night both moving the items and the running gun battle. The shower felt exceptionally nice as his back muscles started to unkink after being relieved of the extra gear he had been carrying.

After finishing, he found Sharon had left him out some shorts, underwear and a t-shirt to put on. After drying off and dressing, he went into his bedroom and crawled into bed. He had only closed his eyes for a moment when he heard someone tip toeing into his bedroom. Opening his eyes, he saw Sharon slipping into the bed beside him. "I'm sorry to wake you sweetie. I didn't think you would notice me coming in."

"No baby, I wasn't asleep yet. I thought you would plan on staying in the room with Angel," said Thomas with a bit of surprise.

"I left both the doors open so I can hear her if something goes wrong. I just want you to be able to hold me, if that's okay with you," replied Sharon.

"Ummm, I'm okay with it as long as you are comfortable with it," said a semi-confused Thomas.

"My, my, Thomas Dayfield, you sure are nervous having me in your bed. It's not like I haven't been here before," she said with a chuckle.

"Well, it's been a while and I wasn't sure if you wanted to be alone or not," said Thomas.

Sharon crawled up next to him, lying on her side before grabbing him around the chest. "No, I feel safe with you. Like my very own teddy bear. I mean we are safe now, right?"

Hoping to allay her fears, he responded with confidence. "Yes, baby. We are safe for now."

"Well, that's good, and I have one more question. Do you want to get married?" asked Sharon.

Thomas was a bit taken back by such a forward question. "Isn't that kind of my question to ask? I mean I am kind of old fashioned like that."

"Will you just answer the question?! I love you and I kind of figure you love me. So what about it? I've come to realize how much I do love you over the past year. And we have known each other for five years! I loved you the whole time, just never realized it. Even when I was with Cody, I always wished he could be more like someone like you. I want my daughter to have a good father and someone who will love her. I want a good husband who will love me. I think you fit the bill nicely on both of those items. This isn't because you rescued me or brought me to a place of safety. It's because you have shown more love and devotion to my daughter and me than any other man ever has. I know you love us. Now is there any other reason or excuse you can think of for us not to get married?" asked a somewhat irate Sharon.

Thomas thought about what she had said and knew she was right. He was in love with her and loved her daughter as well. He would have proposed to her by now if the world had not been turned completely upside down. "Yes, of course I will marry you as long as we can find a preacher to make it legal. Now my new fiancée, let's get some sleep before that little blond haired, blue eyed cherub of yours wakes up and keeps us both awake all day. I love you."

She replied in kind and they both drifted off to sleep. For the first time since the attacks he felt safe. He also knew his new family was safe as well. Feeling pretty good about the situation, he fell asleep with a smile on his face.

It was a little after 4:00 PM when he woke up. Sometime while he was asleep, Sharon had slipped out of bed without waking him. He could hear her and Angel in the other bedroom giggling at something. He quietly walked out of the bedroom and looked at his new family. Their backs were to the door so he wasn't immediately noticed. He just stood there watching them, thinking of how to plan out this marriage to the woman he loved. The tranquility of the moment was broken by Ryan, who had obviously come over to visit. "Congratulations my friend. I heard the news."

"You heard already?" replied a surprised Thomas as he walked over to shake his friend's hand.

"Yeah, Angel woke up around noon and I kept her company until about an hour ago when she insisted she see her mommy. Sharon and I talked for a few minutes after she woke up. I was over here unloading your trucks and filling the pantry. Congratulations, brother, I'm happy for you," stated a smiling Ryan.

"You didn't have to unload the trucks. I could have gotten that," said Thomas.

"No problem at all, man. It's a good workout for these old bones. Besides, your pantry was a little bare and I have a lot of stuff that needs to be gotten rid of before it goes bad. Plus, there is

an obvious story about the extra weapons in the vehicles. I didn't have the combination to the vault in your basement so I stashed them in the Trading Post except for the carbine which I figured was Sharon's. Anyway, Cynthia told me to tell you the three of you are invited up to their place for dinner, around six or so," said Ryan.

"Dinner at their place? Is this a formal occasion or casual? Tux and tails or will jeans do?" asked Thomas with a laugh.

"Semi formal or mess dress I think. Come on now, it's the Taylors. Are they ever formal?" asked Ryan.

"True, very true," laughed Thomas.

"Speaking of formal, how do you plan to go about your wedding?" asked Ryan.

"I haven't the first clue about that. Got any ideas?" asked Thomas.

"Sure," stated Ryan. "Matter of fact, George and Cynthia know some guy from around here who is a preacher, or a retired one at least. Lives close to here I think. I've never met him, but George thinks he is a good guy."

"Well, that takes a load off my mind," said Thomas.

"Before you go down there, you will probably want to take a firearm," said Ryan. "We have been seeing some rough looking refugees coming up the road lately and everyone has taken to carrying at least a pistol, most of them rifles. I'm not sure if you have taught Sharon to shoot yet, but it would be a good idea for her to take something as well. We are pretty sure nothing will happen, but it never hurts to be ready anyway. There are also some rumors of a large armed gang working around somewhere in Southern Colorado, but that hasn't been confirmed. Not really sure of the details, but apparently they are taking advantage of the firearms confiscations to rape, pillage and steal at random. So in light of that, the residents have willingly taken to carrying a firearm everywhere. George can brief you in on the rest of the security measures we put in place not long after the first group arrived. Plus, after dinner, if you swing by the Conference Center, I can show you the communication set up I have been putting in."

"You aren't coming to dinner?" asked Thomas.

"Nah, I have some work to do and I think it's a welcome home thing for you anyway," stated Ryan.

"Thanks for unloading the vehicles; that was really cool. I don't care what they say about you. You are a pretty good guy," said Thomas with a grin, but genuinely appreciated the gesture.

"Those bad things they say about me just make me look better than I really am," said Ryan with a laugh. "See you this evening."

Ryan walked off and Thomas headed back to the bedroom where he had left Sharon and Angel. He heard Sharon explaining to her daughter that this was her new home and trying to explain the impending wedding to Thomas. As with most children that age, it was broken down into simple terms. "Is Tommy going to be my Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetie, Tommy is going to be your daddy," answered Sharon.

"Good, I need a Daddy and Mommy needs a man," stated Angel.

Sharon gave her daughter a big hug and Thomas cleared his throat to let them know he was in the room. Both the women in his life turned and looked at the sound coming from behind them. Angel was the first to react by yelling "TOMMY!" and running across the room to grab hold of his leg. "Daddy?"

Thomas was a little unsure of what to say and looked at Sharon for guidance. "Of course you can call him Daddy. Now we are going to supper soon, so we need to get you cleaned up." Sharon walked out of the room giving Thomas a smile so warm it would have melted an iceberg.

So strange, the events of the past few months. A woman and a child I have fallen in love with and agreed to marry under circumstances which at best could be seen as unusual. We are trying to destroy ourselves in this world, but maybe there is a glimmer of hope for us. This is a good thing, something to work towards the future for. Something to look forward to. Someone for me to love and protect. Even though the world is turning mad, there is still that ray of hope and sanity in the love that we will share. His thoughts drifted off as he started preparing to go to dinner at the Taylor's house. It was not every day he would arm up prior to going to a friend's house for dinner, but again, things are not normal. He decided to take the M-4 with him tonight since he didn't feel like digging around through the walk in vault where the rest of his long guns were stored. He didn't need all the magazines he brought out with him, so he grabbed six of them to transfer into another set of web gear from a footlocker in his closet.

However, he did change out his pistol. Although the Beretta was a good pistol, Thomas was just not that fond of it. Instead he grabbed a pistol case from the top of the shelf, another bag and a box of ammo. He pulled out a stainless steel Kimber 1911 pistol and looked it over. He locked the slide back on the pistol and got ready to load the magazines. Loading one magazine into the pistol, he let the slide go forward chambering a round. Placing the pistol on safe, he unloaded the magazine and replaced the round in the magazine. He reloaded the magazine and placed the pistol and spare magazines in a leather shoulder holster. He also grabbed a carbine for Sharon, one she had fired on a previous visit and somehow knew how to operate.

Although he had showered that morning, he still felt a little dirty and went to take another shower. Sharon and Angel were finishing up in the bathroom and went into her bedroom to get dressed. He got a quick shower and returned to his bedroom where he found Sharon had laid out some clothes for him. He found a pair of blue jeans and a black polo shirt waiting for him on the bed. His taste in clothing was a point that Sharon had attempted to correct in him since they had been together. His taste was purely in his mouth, as she was fond of saying. And, as with a lot of men around the world, his new fiancée would be picking out his clothing, although those same

men in the world would never admit it. He dressed quickly and grabbed a pair of hiking boots to wear. He told her about the carbine he had picked out for her and waited for the "what for" look he was expected. Instead of that look, he was surprised when she agreed and also asked "Is there any chance of you giving me some shooting lessons tomorrow?"

"Of course, as long as there isn't any more pressing business tomorrow. Ready to go?" he said and concealed his surprise.

"Of course, I'm ready to go. I'm practically starving," she stated.

He grabbed the two carbines and his web gear and walked down to the side of the house where his Ford Explorer was parked. The vehicle had sat for well over a month when he had visited last and gotten a ride back into Colorado Springs from Brian Holmes. It took two cranks, but caught after a few seconds of trying.

Remembering Sharon was wearing a white shirt, he ran back into the house to grab two fatigue tops for the two of them. Thomas grabbed two woodland BDU pattern shirts for himself and Sharon and rolled them up. On second thought, he grabbed his patrol bag and went out of the house. Dropping the additional gear in the cargo area, he jumped into the driver's seat and took off up the road.

Upon arriving at the Taylor's house, he parked out back, again, out of sight, out of mind. Going to the back door, they were greeted by Amber Villier, the Taylor's oldest daughter. She was twenty-two years old and married to a Frenchman who became a US national after joining the US Army. The last thing he knew, she was stationed with her husband in Germany. Wondering how she had gotten to here, he asked her the question.

"I was in Germany, and after the attacks, the military ordered an evacuation of all dependents. I was evaced into Dover, but I was able to catch a hop into Peterson. Dad came down there and picked me up. I've been here ever since. I'm supposed to entertain you all until dinner, but there isn't that much entertainment to be had these days," she said with a smile. They were joined by Cynthia and George.

"Dinner should be in about twenty minutes, want anything beforehand?" asked Cynthia after greetings were exchanged.

George lumbered up to Thomas and slapped a bottle of beer into his hand. "I know it's been a while since you had a beer, so enjoy, and besides, it will go bad after a while." Thomas popped open the beer and took a long pull, savoring the coldness. Since the attacks, he had not had any alcohol so he was enjoying his first beer in over three months.

George took the long guns away from him, cleared them out and placed them on a coat rack beside the back door, out of reach of Angel. Thomas asked George where his other daughter, Misty, was at. "Oh, she is out at the LP/OP near the house. I suppose I need to bring you up to speed on what we have done around here. Since the first wave of refugees came past and the armed ones started eyeballing the property, we started pulling some security out here. We put in

the LP/OP in that small copse of trees halfway down the road, built by the family members at their own request I might add, and Ryan and I added in some tools to help out. It's sighted in to watch the main hardball road for almost a mile southeast and half mile northwest."

"Another one was dug in down by your place to watch the road coming in, but we aren't manning that one for now. Everyone has taken to carrying around at least a rifle or a shotgun, but more of the former. I took the liberty of raiding the Trading Post for some of the semi-auto rifles you had down there. Anyway, each of the family members has popped off about five or six hundred rounds apiece in marksmanship training and shoot as well as I could get them in the time allotted. They are just a hair off regular infantry out to three hundred meters, and they fired full distance. There is some fine tuning to be done, but they are good to go for now. Ryan and I taught them LP/OP operations and they all know what to report. The big surprise has been Michelle. Without her, I'm sure we would have been lost. Between her gardening and farming experience, she has been a godsend. She is the one that has taken point on the chicken coops and getting them all ready," said George.

"Chickens? Did you say chickens?" asked Thomas with surprise.

"Yeah, chickens, you know, those things that lay eggs. Cynthia knows this guy down the road that has some chickens and instead of trading for eggs all the time, we are letting him hatch us some and move them on over. He only asked for two of the Russian rifles with eight hundred rounds apiece. He got the pick of the litter on those and in return, we get twenty chickens, two rosters and enough feed for three months. I would say that evened out in that trade. He also is throwing in some chicken wire to help out although we have plenty ourselves. We don't ever complain about getting more stuff. I hope you don't mind us trading off the guns for them," said George.

"Sounds like a good deal and I'm surprised he didn't go for more. And besides, that's why I bought those rifles in the first place in case of trading or if the price went up on them. Sounds like you did all right. Does he have a cow?" asked Thomas.

"Don't think we are going to get a cow for an old bolt action rifle, but we can try. But no, he doesn't have a cow," said Cynthia as she jumped into the conversation. "Anyway, everyone has gotten settled in for the most part and everyone seems to be accepting the fact they are not going to be going home anytime soon. Most of them were able to bring up everything they wanted over the last few months. They have been really helpful since they got here, working their tails off to get this place going. Shannon Parsons has been tending to your garden behind your house since you have been gone, so you will need to thank her for that."

"And Ryan just about has all the communications stuff set up. I won't attempt to tell you exactly what he has done since I'm not sure of everything, so I will wait for him to tell you. He and I did some short range patrolling around the Ranch, looking for squatters or refugees staking a claim, but we haven't seen anything so far. We haven't done extensive patrolling yet, so there might be some out there we have missed. The rest of the folks want to get involved in that part of it, but we were waiting on everyone to show up before doing anything extensive, training wise. Oh yeah, I just remembered, you need a preacher. Congratulations!" said George.

"Good grief! Does everyone know already?" asked Thomas.

"Pretty much, Ryan called around and told everyone, so expect a lot of congratulations from everyone when they see you. No secrets around here you know. But, you are in luck; there is a minister that lives close to here. Retired minister though, not currently practicing, but under the circumstances, I think he will oblige. Nice fellow, got cancer and retired from his church. He went through treatment and it went into remission, but I figure he liked the retired life too much and decided not to go back to preaching. He lost his wife about a year and a half ago and lives by himself now. I haven't seen him since everything went to hell, but I wouldn't imagine he would have gone anywhere since his little house was pretty self sufficient. In a few days we can go down and ask him the favor," said George.

Amber returned into the living room and announced that dinner was ready and everyone needed to come and get seated. Cynthia brought out some great looking and smelling food and placed it on the table. From his trips before, he knew she was an exceptional cook, but she had outdone herself this time. George said a blessing for the food, the friendship and the safety of the families yet to come and those still missing, especially his son-in-law somewhere in France. They had not heard from him in over six weeks and it did not look promising for them to hear from him again. The last they knew he was on his way to Le Harve to get his family out of the city and to safety. George didn't discuss the matter with his daughter that much but he knew it bothered her not knowing. Dinner began and everyone complimented Cynthia on her exceptional cooking this evening. "Well, it's kind of a celebration for both you returning here safe and for your upcoming wedding, whenever that might be. When would you be looking at having the wedding?"

"The sooner the better, if Thomas doesn't have a problem with that," said Sharon before Thomas could answer.

"Of course I don't have a problem with that. She is entirely right," said Thomas.

"It seems like you are off to a good start; you already have him trained not to argue," said Cynthia with a laugh.

Everyone laughed at Thomas, who dropped his head in mock shame and held up his hands. "I know better than to argue with my soon to be wife…especially my bad-tempered, soon to be wife. You know the old joke, the only difference in a wife and a terrorist is the terrorist will typically negotiate with you."

More laughter from around the table as a red faced Sharon turned and punched Thomas in the arm. Small talk continued throughout the dinner, with George, Cynthia and Amber wanting to know the news from Colorado Springs. Thomas filled them in on what he could, adding in some of the stories of what he had experienced over the last couple of months. For things he was unsure of, he told them he didn't know.

Before dinner was over, Amber excused herself and walked out of the room. "She is going out to

relieve Misty from the LP/OP to get a bite to eat. The post outside works eight hour shifts, from 6 AM to 2 PM, 2 PM to 10 PM and 10 PM to 6 AM. Everyone rotates the duty except for the mid shift which is covered by Amber and Shannon Parsons since they don't have kids. The rest of the folks rotate the day and afternoon shifts on a schedule made by Janet Thompson. When the parents are away at work the others chip in to watch their kids. The older kids, fourteen and up help out as well. We trained them on their weapons and what to report. They all volunteered to work, including Nicole Thompson. We think she is a little young at thirteen years old to be working, but she is eager. She did the marksmanship classes and the LP/OP class as well, did pretty good for her age, but she is just too young as of right now. All in all, everything is going well, no serious hang-ups so far," explained George.

Amber reentered the room, now wearing a commercial hunting camouflage shirt and carrying an folding stock rifle. She was putting on some web gear containing eight more magazines for the weapon and said goodbye to her parents and to Sharon and Thomas.

After she left the house, Cynthia spoke up "She is pretty torn up over not being able to reach Tom in France. She felt pretty abandoned when he went to them instead of coming here to be with her. I'm not really happy with that choice, but under the same circumstances, I'm not sure what I might have done either. We can only hope he is all right and is trying to make his way here. But since he is in deserter status, he would be picked up at whatever port in the United States he tried to get into. If he came into an Alliance port, or in Texas, maybe he might have a better chance, but most of the boats coming from Europe are sailing into Boston or Baltimore. It just doesn't look good."

Everyone in the room knew what the chances of his returning to America were; slim and none, although each person hoped sincerely he could somehow return here. After a few moments of awkward silence, the conversation returned to small talk. Talk about how the crops were doing in the planted fields, what preps could not be completed in time, how the pond was almost overfilling due to the above average rains.

Soon they were joined by Misty, George and Cynthia's youngest daughter at nineteen. She cleared out her rifle and set it next to the door before being asked to put it on the coat rack out of reach of Angel. She was wearing a camouflage shirt and worn blue jean pants. Her red hair was tied up in a green triangle bandage. It was fairly obvious she was Cynthia's daughter since she was the younger clone of her mother. She had been completing her freshman year on a full scholarship to the University of Colorado when the attacks happened. She was majoring in pre-med and was going to pursue a degree in medicine to become a doctor after graduation. After the attacks, most colleges had put their students on an accelerated schedule and gotten done early so the students could go to their families. Misty had originally planned on going to the summer semester, but with the turn of events, no schools were in this summer. She returned to her parent's home and immediately started working on learning everything she could about medicine from textbooks and medical journals. It was hoped she would become proficient, in theory at least, on some medical procedures the Ranch might need. She had immediately taken up with Janie Holmes who was a Registered Nurse at one of Colorado Springs busiest hospitals before the attacks.

After dinner was finished, Misty returned to her post and the others moved into the living room except for Cynthia and Thomas who remained behind to clean up the kitchen. After cleaning the dishes, he was about to drain the water used to boil the corn when he was stopped by Cynthia. "We try and save as much water as we can and reuse it. George used your corporate credit cards to buy a bunch of solar distillers and other heat operated distillers to reclaim the water we are using. Both the water used here and the water used to wash dishes is being put through the distiller and used to water the garden or to flush the toilets. We did get all the septic tanks emptied this spring, but whatever we can do to slow down the fill rate will be good. The solar distiller is quite a simple setup and I think George bought a minimum of two per cabin and house. He hasn't had the time to set all of them up yet, but over the next week, he should be able to get them done."

Thomas helped her finish and the remaining dishwater was scooped out with a plastic cup and the rest was soaked up with a large sponge and emptied into a two gallon bucket. Cynthia grabbed another round of beers for everyone and the two went into the living room. George had lit some candles and oil lamps creating long shadows in the room. Cynthia offered the beers around the room, only being turned down by Sharon, who did not want to drink in front of Angel. Thomas started to put down his beer when he was stopped by Sharon. She told him it was okay this time and was something he could work on in the future.

George continued with the rest of the preps that had been made last minute. "For the rest, I used your corporate credit card pretty liberally buying up stuff we thought we would need immediately after the attacks. I raided a few hardware stores and came away with enough building materials to build our own Sears Tower. Trust me; I made a salesman very happy on those days I went to the store. Some of the lumber had to come in special order, but I assure you, not a penny was wasted. We also got in some replacement things like bathtubs and sinks which could break. Plumbing supplies too and replacement things for the cabins and houses."

"In case you hadn't noticed, each cabin has its own set of garden implements and there are four tillers, one for every two gardens. We have plenty of potting soil and mulch as well as manure for the gardens. We are pretty set in the lawn and garden department," said George as he listed off the items he had purchased or upgraded.

"I also expanded your Dad's workshop with other tools he didn't have, which wasn't a lot, as well as buying some duplicate power and hand tools. Additionally, each cabin has a set of generic hand tools like hammers, pliers, screwdriver sets, etcetera. Along with the other stuff you asked for last winter, I was able to get most everything on your list. Ryan spent some money on the comm hookups and equipment and spent quite a bit of time installing it. Oh yeah, we have two Bobcat tractors and a backhoe courtesy of a rental company in the Springs. We got them in early April on a two month rental for Ryan to lay in comm line and for us to do some other odd jobs around here. They never came back to pick them up after the attacks. It's not like we wanted to keep them, but since they never came to pick them back up…" said George as his voice trailed off.

"Yeah, possession is ninety percent of the law, and since we have it, we will secure it until they come to pick it up. I get your message," said Thomas.

"So other than that, the Trading Post is still well stocked, we got in our last shipment of ammo about ten days after you called the first time but nothing more since then. I was able to get twelve thousand rounds Stephen. Plus, we got him twenty spare magazines. We have enough ammo on hand to invade Panama and even with handing out some of the semi-autos are still good to go with the inventory. We have enough to outfit the remaining group if they want and we have enough hunting rifles on hand to give everyone plenty for the hunting seasons. Although we do have these on hand, we do not have them in the Trading Post. After the Loyalist forces started confiscating firearms, we all moved them to hidden locations around the Ranch. We left enough on hand to hand them over politely so they would go away if it came to that. I suppose we are far enough outside of the cities that they won't come, but just in case," explained George.

Two years before Thomas had purchased forty old Russian surplus rifles and forty surplus Czech pistols for use in trading. He did not subscribe to the old theory of "give a person a weapon and they could shoot at you the next day." They would be careful as to who they traded the rifles and pistols away too. He was willing to take the risk of trading the weapons off to get what they needed. Cynthia trading off the rifles for the chickens was a good case in point of this. What they really needed were some cattle, both for milk and beef. They could live off the game in the forest, but they needed the milk for the children. Even some goats would be acceptable. Thomas had planned on getting some livestock and the equipment for hay baling after he got out of the Air Force, but the attacks had changed all that. This was something to look forward to after things calmed down some, after they became more "normal."

"So we are sitting good to go on ammo and weapons?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, we are good to go, although I fear hunting this fall will be a little exciting. I figure every moron in the state will be out plugging off rounds at anything that moves in the forest so we will have to be extra careful," said George.

Cynthia and George brought him up to speed over the next half hour on everything else including a surprise they hadn't discovered until recently. While out looking around for refugees and squatters, George had found an old orchard near the property lines to the southeast. Although having owned the property for four years, there were still parts that remained relatively unexplored. The orchard was apparently part of another abandoned farm nearby and had flourished even without being tended to. There were several dozen trees producing apples, pears, peaches, plums and cherries. There were also black and blue berry bushes which had also flourished nearby. Although the trees and the plants hadn't tended to in some years; human intervention had not been needed. This would indeed help out the group and supplement what they would take in from farming. George and Thomas agreed to ride out the next day to take a look and possibly see if some of the trees could be transplanted back to the Ranch.

"Since most of the families know there is probably no going back to their homes, everyone has moved in here full time. The group collectively rented moving trucks and moved their entire household goods up here. They did replace some of the furniture in the houses so we put it in storage in the new barn. I think everyone has come to terms with this now being their permanent home. It wasn't an easy transition, but I think we are past any problems. Plus, immediately after

they got here, they kind of went on a buying spree with their own money, getting wholesale food, clothing and a thousand other items. I think their bank accounts were cleared out by the time they were done but they did some good shopping between Colorado Springs, Pueblo and Cañon City," said Cynthia.

"Last, but not certainly least, Ryan and I made a quick trip to Fort Carson and to the 10th Group compound a few weeks ago. As you well know, I still have good contacts in the Group there and called a few friends. We came out with a whole truckload of gear courtesy of the US Government and the Special Forces Command. Nobody down there knows about the Ranch, but they kind of figure I'm holed up somewhere out here. Anyway, I got enough gear to outfit everyone at the Ranch and then some. Ammo by the crate which was dispersed immediately. Uniforms of all shapes, colors and sizes. Clothing by cold and hot weather. Boots, radios, some other electronic goodies like laser rangefinders, more land navigation gear; just quite a few things while we rummaged through the supply areas. The NCOIC was an old friend I helped out of a supply bind while I was still active, so he returned the favor. Trust me, Ryan and I spent the better part of a day sorting through the areas gathering what we wanted. It took another day to get everything loaded and brought up here."

"About the only thing they couldn't really let go was weapons, but we managed to score a few of them from another friend. The Armory NCOIC just turned his back and said 'I'm not looking, I'm not looking' and kept repeating that as we were putting the stuff into the carry cases. Honestly, he had his own pile of weapons and ammo so I figured he was planning on leaving as well. Since we weren't able to take a lot of weapons, we took the magazines and repair kits instead. All in all, a forty foot container that was dropped off on the property and the truck returned. No questions asked," George concluded.

They talked for a few more minutes before getting ready to turn in for the evening. Tomorrow, along with the ride out to the orchard, George, Thomas and Frank would survey the gardens and fields along with the new defensive positions. He and Sharon grabbed their respective weapons and loaded them before saying goodbye for the evening. Angel grabbed Thomas's little finger as they walked out of the house and to the vehicle. Sharon was smiling at the scene since she knew Thomas was normally very cold and reserved towards the general public because he had to be. Although this was his normal disposition towards teenagers and adults, he became a big teddy bear with children. It was as if they saw through his gruff exterior and saw the kindness underneath. Angel knew right away Thomas was a kind and gentle man, part of the reason Sharon had chosen him. Her daughter seemed to be a pretty good judge of character, even at her young age.

They drove the short distance home in silence, Sharon silently soaking in everything that had happened in the last forty-eight hours. From what was her home in Pueblo to here in less than two days. She had gone from being a single mother, barely able to keep up with her bills to being engaged to a man who not only had kept her safe but had provided her and her daughter with a future. The future was what bothered her. *What kind of future can we expect?* She had seen the world tearing itself apart on the evening news and wondered if the future would be bright for anyone. It was if the world was slipping into another dark age, where feudalism would reign and the strong would be in a power position over the weaker people. Bandits would roam

around the country; villages would pit themselves against each other in a desperate attempt to control water and food and the people you saw you didn't know whether you could trust or not. She knew the group she was with could probably protect themselves against most threats, but for how long? Even with the United States breaking up as it was, violence was still rampant, even in those states that had declared independence. *How can we ever pull ourselves out of this quagmire?* Only Thomas broke her out of her thoughts as they neared the house. "Penny for your thoughts?"

She forced a laugh before answering. "I can only give you so much and try to give you change for the rest."

"Well, you seriously look deep in thought over something," said Thomas, as they rounded the bend right before the house.

Sharon paused before answering truthfully. "Well, I was wondering what kind of future we are going to have. I mean, I know we will survive, but to what end? Surviving is good, but we have to have some sort of goal in the end besides this. Something to live for. What will be left of the world to live for? What can Angel look forward to when she grows up? Learning how to hunt? How to farm? What will be her future? I'm just wondering the why of everything. Why are we doing this and what can we do to help the future?"

Thomas had never heard her so thoughtful before, even having known her for several years. And she asked good questions. *We are going to survive, but to what end? How will we rebuild once everything has returned to "normal?" Communications, the cornerstone of modern society, are in the toilet and will not get any better anytime soon. I suppose we will have to figure this out collectively as we go along.* He answered some of her questions, but not really knowing the answer himself.

"Sharon, baby, we are going to survive, and that's the most important thing. Actually, the most important thing is to get everyone together and survive this storm. I'm sure people will eventually settle down and then we can figure out what to do. The violence can't last forever and we need to stick around long enough to help rebuild. Maybe that is her future, to fix what we have broken. Maybe with each generation comes problems made by their forefathers that keep getting passed on. Maybe our generation is finally paying the price added up over the generations."

"Maybe Angel will grow up and help fix the mistakes made by us and those generations prior to us and make the world a better place. All I know is; I want her to grow up safe and to keep you safe as well. The future we can deal with later, but for now, I'm just worried about getting through this alive with you two. Maybe if I hadn't met you, I would not have wanted to survive, but now that we are together, I want to go on and make sure you two stay alive as well. I want us to have a future, no matter what and however it may be," he concluded.

The conversation ended as they got out of the now stopped vehicle and walked towards the house. Some of the other families were out and waved at the new family. They waved back while they walked to the house. Tomorrow they could visit some but for now, they would get

ready for bed, as both were still tired from yesterday's adventures. The questions echoed in his mind as they went upstairs and Thomas put the weapons in his closet, keeping them loaded in case they needed to get them quickly. Remembering Ryan wanted him to come and see the communications set up, he got his carbine back out of the closet and started to put on the web gear to make the walk over to the Conference Center. He would make sure Sharon and Angel were settled in for the night before heading down. He was in the hallway and getting ready to head over to the Conference Center when Sharon stepped out of Angel's bedroom. "Is she sleeping now?" he asked as he slung the carbine.

"Like the dead. This evening and yesterday wore her out, so I figure she will sleep most of the night with no problems," answered Sharon. "You are heading down to meet Ryan?"

"Yes, he asked me to come by earlier. I won't be long, I promise," he answered.

Sharon turned and walked towards his bedroom, stopping to lean against the doorway. "Do you think you could take care of it tomorrow? I don't want to be alone tonight. Stay with me."

Thomas heard the plea and knew he couldn't leave her tonight. Ryan would understand if he didn't show tonight. He knew there were some things that could wait until tomorrow to accomplish. He closed the distance between them, swept her off her feet and closed the bedroom door behind them.

CHAPTER 11 – UNEXPECTED VISITORS

Time since attacks: 94 days
Date/Time: 23 July/0622 Local
Location: The Ranch, near Cañon City, Colorado

The next morning he woke up early, just as the sun rose. Not wanting to wake Sharon up, he quietly slipped out of bed, grabbed a pair of shorts, socks and a t-shirt and went downstairs. In the kitchen, he lit one of the eyes on the stove and started to get a pot of coffee ready. He then remembered there was no more propane gas to be had and turned off the eye and got the coffee ready without lighting the eye until it was totally ready. Opening the pantry, he looked for coffee to put on, hoping Ryan had dropped off a bag when he filled the pantry. He finally found a bag of coffee in the cabinet which held the spices. He placed the grounds into an old percolator style coffee pot and lit the eye for the stove. It would take several minutes to prepare so he wandered back upstairs to get the cigarettes he had left in his room. Passing by Angel's room, he saw her wrapped up in her blanky, looking very peaceful. He knew it would only be time before she woke up and became an unstoppable force like most children her age were.

He went back downstairs and checked on the coffee. It wasn't done yet, so he looked through the pantry finding quite a bit of food left there by Ryan. He would have to insist Ryan take some of it back since it was way too much for them. After several minutes, the coffee was ready and he poured himself a cup, putting cream and sugar in and stepping out on the front porch to take in the morning. He lit up a cancer stick and sat down in one of the chairs on the front porch to enjoy the tranquility of the morning. The pond below the house was very still with the occasional ripple on the surface as a fish went for a bug. Soon, he was joined by Ryan who had come over from his cabin to the east of the house. Thomas saw him approach and offered him a cup of coffee. Ryan walked into the house and reemerged a few minutes later with a cup of the strong brew. Thomas apologized for not stopping by the last night. "Sorry for not coming by brother. I was on my way over, but Sharon needed to talk."

"No problem. Everyone needs a little quality time now and then. Speaking of problems though, do you have an engagement ring for her?" asked Ryan.

Thomas sipped his coffee before answering. "No, sure don't. The engagement wasn't exactly planned and I didn't think to get one before it all went downhill."

Ryan "hmmmed" to himself before walking off the porch towards his cabin. Thomas wondered where he was heading and saw him return a few minutes later. He handed over a small box and inside was a diamond ring, about a half caret stone set on a gold band. Thomas objected and tried to hand the box back. Ryan held up his hand and pushed it back his way. "No, man, that's yours. It was my mother's before she died and I want you two to have it."

Thomas again tried to give it back. "No way. You know I can't do that. This is your family heirloom and I couldn't accept it. This is something you should keep."

"I don't have a family and I'm not married anymore," explained Ryan. "The only family I have now is the one around me living in these houses and cabins. I want you two to have it that way it stays inside of my new family. Like it or not, you are going to keep that ring. Don't make an old man kick your butt over this trivial matter."

Thomas smiled and shook his head, thanking him for it. He wondered how he would explain it to Sharon and knew she would insist he give it back. Ryan would be insistent with her as well, but probably not as forceful.

The men sat peaceful as Ryan started to explain the communications set up at the Ranch. He detailed out the communications setup and described the details and thought he had put in to make sure they had communications between the cabins and homes. He also talked about the radio setup and how they were monitoring the various radio bands for information. Thomas was impressed by the amount of work that had gone into getting everything ready. He knew very little about communications and if Ryan didn't know, the rest of them probably didn't know either. He told Ryan this and invited him into the house to refill their coffee mugs. Ryan refilled his and told Thomas he needed to get going on work today and would return the coffee mug later on.

Thomas started foraging around in the kitchen and found some breakfast items to fix up. He found some eggs and sausage in the energy efficient fridge which ran off the batteries in the house and got them ready to cook. He also found what appeared to be homemade bread and sliced off two pieces. It took about twenty minutes to get everything cooked up, and the other items set out on a tray to take upstairs. He wanted to surprise Sharon with a little breakfast in bed, it was the least he could do after last night. He rolled up a napkin and ran it through the middle of the ring for Sharon.

Taking it all upstairs, she woke up when he stepped back into the room. She was surprised at his gesture, giving him a warm smile as she began to eat. She was even more surprised when she took the napkin to wipe her mouth. "Where did you get this?"

Thomas explained the gift from Ryan and also explained how he tried to give the ring back. "We can't keep this; it needs to stay in his family. I will give it back to him. He won't argue with me," she stated. Sharon finished eating and slipped on Thomas's robe before going to check on Angel. She woke Angel up for breakfast while Thomas got ready to go out on the property survey.

Unsure of whether or not to go tactical or not, he decided to go semi-tactical and carry the rest. He changed into comfortable, but somewhat tactical clothing and remembered he also wanted a weapon with a bit more range. Looking through the mini-arsenal in his basement, he found what he was looking for, a JLD Enterprises PTR-91. Although the G-3 style rifle had a few drawbacks, it shot just as well as any rifle in its class in the world. It was also one of his favorites since it was one of the first rifles he had obtained for his preparations when money was short. He grabbed seven magazines and looked for the appropriate ammo cans to load them up. Finding, what he wanted, he set them and the magazines off to the side. He also wanted to get

another pistol. While the 1911 was a fine shooting pistol, he wanted something a he was more comfortable with. He found a Springfield XD Tactical model and pulled it out with four magazines. After shooting a friends model, he had immediately ordered and purchased one in the tactical model for himself. He found a holster and threw it in with everything else he had gotten. Finding the appropriate ammo, he took everything upstairs.

He found Sharon in the kitchen making some breakfast for Angel. He was not hungry since he had snacked on some items earlier while he was fixing Sharon's breakfast in bed. He took to loading the magazines while Sharon fixed breakfast for Angel. They were just getting finished up when George knocked at the door.

Coming inside, George set his rifle on top of a coat rack by the door and walked into the kitchen. "About time you gave up that mouse gun 5.56 and went with a real man's gun," George stated as he looked at the rifle sitting on the kitchen countertop. It was a debate he had with George many times in the past about the difference in calibers.

Thomas went upstairs and grabbed the patrol pack and unloaded some of the items from it into another pack. He planned on fitting it out entirely for day to day carry with some of the items both in the foot locker and off his other vest. He took out the woodland BDU shirt and slid it through the top straps on the pack and topped off everything with an old tan boonie cap he often used for camping or fishing.

He grabbed the bag and went downstairs to meet George and Frank, who had showed up when Thomas was upstairs getting the rest of the stuff ready. George stated he needed to stop by the Trading Post to grab a set of binoculars for himself on their way out today. The trio grabbed their weapons and started to head out. Sharon made Thomas promise to be careful and gave him a kiss goodbye. They walked the short distance to the Trading Post on the grounds near Thomas's house.

The trading post was a part camping goods, part hunting goods, part firearms and part surplus store. After the first season, they found some high end hunters preferred to use military style camouflage instead of the superior commercial camouflage items, so the Trading Post was stocked with several different surplus and new production patterns of various camouflages from around the world. Firearms, both rifles and shotguns lined one wall and pistols sat proudly in display cases in front of them, their price tags still hanging from the weapons. Ammunition of all sorts lined the wall under the rifle racks and underneath the showcases. Camping gear was in a small room in the back with more items being in the basement, attic or in the back storage room. Various styles of military boots, shoes and commercial hunting boots were along one other wall. Military surplus equipment from around the world filled bins in another small room in the back. Although the items inside seemed excessive, the store turned a tidy profit for Thomas, with customers coming all the way from Denver and Trinidad to make firearm and outdoors gear purchases. He had kept his prices lower than most other sporting goods stores since the business wasn't really necessary for Thomas to survive. However, with customers spreading the word and careful advertising, the business brought in quite a bit of money.

George found a pair of binoculars and dropped them into his backpack. They relocked the store

and headed over to the barn where the All Terrain Vehicles were kept. Looking at the other two while walking to the barn, Thomas chuckled to himself. Frank asked what was so funny.

"Look at us, the way we are dressed, nobody would recognize us as former military. We look more like third world freedom fighters than some professional branch of the military," said Thomas.

George and Frank laughed at the comments as George remembered his time in some of those third world countries working with so called freedom fighters. Thomas wasn't far off the mark as they had become freedom fighters in their own right. George continued the thoughts. "Yeah, except the freedom fighters I know of carry AK-47s and have a better understanding of their enemy."

Thomas and Frank both didn't understand what he meant and asked him what he was talking about. "Well, those freedom fighters normally know who they are fighting. The ones I encountered normally fight against government forces that either suppress their civil rights or take away what they have. But out here, is that what we are fighting against? Are we fighting against government Loyalist forces or criminals? Or is there a difference these days? Or are we fighting against others who would take our freedoms away? Or are we defending against one time friends who would kill you to take the food out of your mouth? Are we the front lines or the last line of defense? Or are we behind enemy lines? Or are we the front lines for our own little enclave? It makes for an interesting thought process." Good questions and questions each would have to answer for themselves.

They walked the short distance to the barn where the ATVs were stored. He had purchased two soon after buying the Ranch and expanded the collection when they started getting more members of the group. He now had a total of nine, all commercial work bikes. In addition, Thomas had also bought three Polaris Rangers and two John Deere Gators to supplement the ATV fleet. They all were good on gas mileage and with the addition of the trailers he bought for each, could be used to haul items which normally would have required a gas guzzling truck. Although the Ranch fuel tanks had been filled, fuel preservation was one item at the top of their list of things to do. There was no telling how long they would be without fuel, so every drop was accounted for and only used for official business.

The three picked out a bike each and stowed their bags in a cargo box strapped onto the rear. After checking the fuel, they had to top off one of them before going out for the day. Mounting the bikes, they drove slowly out of the barn and off towards the fields. The sun was shining bright that day so they stopped to don a pair of sunglasses before going further.

The Ranch had a central road which ran around the cabins in a large loop. It crossed over the stream in two points near the pond where Thomas had gotten concrete bridges built to replace the old wooden ones. One of the bridges was over by Cabin 8 and the other by the overflow dam to keep the water in the pond. As they drove towards the dam, they passed the incomplete chicken coops being built by Ryan and Michelle. Thomas would have to ask exactly how long it would take their chickens to raise so they could figure out when exactly to have it finished. They passed over the dam and turned off the gravel road turning towards southwest towards the fields

that had been planted.

George, Cynthia and Ryan always planted out the fields in early spring after the threat of snow was done and took out what they needed in the fall harvest. Often, they would either take what was left of the crops and leave it at the edge of the field or just leave it on the plants themselves. The local wildlife got fat every fall off the leftover crops in the fields, but not this year. They would be canning and preserving more this year due to the increase in the people on the Ranch. The farm normally covered about three acres, but this spring, after the attacks, George and Cynthia had planted another two. The fields appeared to be coming along well with the above average rainfall and the surface irrigation system put in place.

The irrigation system was as complex as it was simple, using gravity for the most part to provide water into the fields. A network of PVC pipes ran the distance from the tank to the fields, providing drip water onto each row of plants. The system seemed complicated but in reality was very simple. It was just hard to put in place every year since there were three acres to plant. It normally took the Taylors, Ryan and Thomas about five days to have it set up completely. With the additional help, Thomas figures it would take possibly two. Although time consuming, the system was very effective in getting water to the plants when there were periods of little rain.

Several members of the group were already out tending to the fields, weeding what was necessary and picking some early crops. The group saw Janie Holmes and her two children, Jeff and Haley, Renee Lawson, Shannon Parsons and Misty Taylor. Knowing Shannon Parsons worked the night shift in the LP/OP, Thomas asked why she was out this early. George answered the question. "She and Amber trade off duty every two days. This is her first day off, and she always helps out here in the mornings. I've never seen a person with more energy than she has. I would bet she only gets five hours of sleep a night and doesn't really need any more."

Frank commented on the variety of crops that had been planted in the fields and asked why. "Well, it does help to have variety in the diet plus when we bought the seeds for this year we grabbed a bunch of other stuff we thought we might try out just to see how it would do out here. We have enough of the normal things planted, like corn, wheat, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, etcetera to do us, but just in case, we planted another two acres this spring just in case. I don't know how well they will do since we don't have it irrigated and they were planted late, but with the rains we've had and if the weather holds, they should do okay."

Each person working in the field carried a bucket which Thomas and Frank thought were for gathering early vegetables. Again, George answered their question. "No, they are taking the weeds out of the fields and putting them into the 55 gallon trash cans over there. Once we get ten of them full, we run it through the mulcher for compost the next year. We know there are seeds in there, but it does help put some stuff back into the soil we normally might not get. It's worked in our garden the last two years and we figure it will work out here as well. We have nothing to lose by trying." Both Frank and Thomas made silent promises to themselves to come back the next day and get their hands dirty working the fields.

They remounted their ATVs, waved goodbye and moved northeast towards the northern edge of the property and the National Forrest. Eventually they linked up with an old logging trail that

ran into the National Forest and connected into the vast jeep trail network in Colorado. They traveled northwest up the trail for a few minutes before coming to a halt by a rocky spot that sat in a depression which they had all used as a landmark on their fall hunts. George stopped here to show them something else he had been planning. "Since we have been planning for defense around here, we thought it would be wise to have some fallback positions in case they were needed. This is one of the spots we think might work pretty well." The three surveyed the position and found George's military mindset had not faded in the time since he had retired. The position held a commanding view of the hillside and was not easy to approach from any direction. With some work on building defensive positions, it could be turned into a very strong retreat point. "We could even put some stuff up here like food, ammo and water, kind of like a resupply point. You know, bury them shallow in case we needed to get at them quick," said George. The two others agreed this was a good idea and asked if he had any other spots picked out. George told them he would show them the additional spots he and Ryan had found on their way around. They rode back downhill towards the Ranch, looking at several spots that would be good for defensive positions to slow an aggressor.

Upon arriving at the Ranch, they passed by the cabins on the gravel road and saw Janet Thompson working in the garden behind her house. She had the watch for the younger children today and was assisted by her daughter, Nicole. They stopped for a few moments and learning Michelle Jones was out on the LP/OP duty that morning. After ten minutes, they departed and moved northeast towards the firing range. About halfway up, George pointed out another potential fallback point. Although not as good as the first one, it had the advantage of having three sides open with grass on each side. The position itself was covered in trees and offered good concealment from the dense underbrush. It too, was workable. They went back down the trail towards the Ranch and the workshop areas where George pointed out a spot they could use to park the vehicles when not in use. Next to it was another fall back point, this one a little better than the second one, but closer to the Ranch buildings.

As they were looking around, a very large buck mule deer, followed by three does walked out of the woods about a quarter mile away. They stopped briefly to look at the humans and the noisy carts before disappearing back into the woods, wandering east. Frank brought up the point that hunters have been making for years. "I think they know when it's not hunting season. You wouldn't find them out there like that during the fall." Thomas and George laughed at the statement, knowing it was all too true.

"Yeah, but too bad for them there aren't any game wardens around this year to stop us from poaching. Little do they know the next time they come out, we just might invite them to dinner," said Thomas with a laugh.

The trio rode southeast towards the property line on what appeared to be an old farm path. They entered some light woods and again stayed on the old pathway, now overgrown by grass and weeds. The trees opened up into what was almost certainly an old orchard. A half dozen fully grown apple trees stood in front of them and about two dozen saplings and younger trees around the older ones. They continued on finding pear, cherry, plum and peach trees with much the same result. Something else encountered that George had not mentioned before was the presence of black walnut, pecan, persimmon, hazelnut and chestnut trees as well. This was also

an unexpected surprise. The black and blue berry vines were off to the south of them along the edges and covered enough ground that the residents of the Ranch would probably never be able to pick them all off before they went bad. The orchard was probably at least fifty years old judging by the size of the original fruit trees. Thomas was the first to comment. "I do believe we are off my property and I don't have the first clue who owns this. But, having said that, I figure we could collect what we need from here until someone throws us off their property."

Frank asked exactly how far away they were. "If memory serves, and I will have to check the original land deeds, my property ends about halfway through those woods we came through. I never really checked the original survey plans that closely to find out. On the map though, it showed an old farmhouse somewhere over there," he said as he pointed in a southern direction. They rode off in that direction finding what appeared to be an old foundation to a house. Thomas continued "so a half mile from this point into those woods…yeah, we are off my property."

"No problem though, like you said, we can get what we need until someone throws us off. I was kind of looking for a place to transplant some of the younger ones to your property. It would be nice not to have to come this far for apples any time we wanted them," said George.

"I can do that, we did it all the time growing up. I worked a few summers in a nursery, so that won't be a problem. Got any place picked out?" asked Frank.

"Over by the stream I would think, possibly dig an irrigation ditch coming down that reconnects as well. That's a lot of work, but we have nothing but time now," answered George. They talked it over for a few more minutes before deciding on a plan to more the trees. Frank would start looking for a suitable place to put them and get ready to move at least three, if not more, of all the varieties of the trees. The black and blue berry bushes would be more of a problem and would take a little more finesse. As they rode past the orchard, they also saw this would be a good place to harvest another type of food, squirrels. The little rodents were abundant in the trees and chattered at the intruding humans as they passed by.

They made their way directly back to the Taylor's house where they stopped and talked to Michelle Jones for a few minutes. There had been three sightings that morning, two small groups of people and one vehicle. The vehicle was overloaded with what appeared to be multiple families' household goods and moved very slow. Neither the vehicle nor the people paid any attention to the Ranch or the Taylor's house and moved on down the road.

The three stopped in at George's house where they heated some water up for a pack of Mountain House freeze dried camping food. Thomas and George picked out one they liked and Frank tried the chicken teriyaki. He wasn't impressed by his choice, but agreed to try another one before passing judgment. After lunch the trio went back to the barn where they parked the ATVs and went their separate ways. George had plans on setting up the solar distillers for each of the cabins and to have at least one at each by the time the day was over. Frank was going off to look for spots to transplant the trees to and dig an irrigation ditch. Thomas remembered he was going to start on Sharon's shooting lessons that afternoon. They all went their separate ways, each going to help improve the community as a whole.

Thomas wanted to start her off with basic rifle marksmanship before moving her up to larger caliber weapons. Returning to the house, he greeted her and went to the basement. Looking through his vault of weapons, he found a good rifle to start her out with. He had several .22 caliber rifles in his collection but was knew his choice was a good beginner rifle for anyone who was starting to learn the fundamentals of shooting. Pistol shooting would be different, but he would start with a .22 there as well. He was looking for a good pistol to start her out on when a thought struck him. He would give her a rifle and pistol of her very own. It wasn't like he didn't have enough to go around, but if she had her own, she would be responsible for cleaning and maintaining it as well. A person who owned their own firearm would be more apt to keep it clean and functional, especially if they were interested as she appeared to be.

He left the house and walked back over to the Trading Post looking for the Savage rifle. He found one with a stainless barrel and grabbed five extra magazines. He found a black range bag and dropped the rifle magazines and sling inside the main pouch.

He started looking through the pistols and found George had taken a few of them out of the Trading Post to stash them in parts unknown. He finally found a pistol that would be a good beginner pistol for anyone. Looking through a back inventory room, he found the box it came with and five additional magazines, which he put into the range bag. He put the pistol case in a shopping bag and continued looking through the gear section of the store. He found a belt and holster for the pistol and dropped them into the bag as well. On the way out, he grabbed two five hundred-fifty round boxes of .22 ammunition and the bags and box containing the rifle, relocked the store and walked the short distance home.

When he walked in the front door of the house, he found Sharon and Angel playing in the living room of the house. When they saw him Sharon said "Hey handsome, I wondered what animal carried you off."

"Oh, just out getting you a little present," he said with a sly grin.

"You mean besides the ring?" she asked.

"Yes, besides the ring; which really isn't a present from me, but from Ryan," he said as he spied the ring on her finger and figured she didn't have any better luck than he did in convincing him to take the ring back. Thomas handed over the bags and box and stated "I'm sorry I didn't have time to gift wrap it."

She looked through the first bag, finding the holster, belt and ammo pouch. A bemused look on her face, she took out the pistol case from the shopping bag and opened it up exclaiming "Oh my! You bought me a gun! You, Thomas Dayfield, are a hopeless romantic and know the quickest way to a woman's heart."

"You mean the quickest way isn't with a sharp knife like my daddy used to tell me? I thought you wanted shooting lessons?" he asked.

"Of course I do, you big goof, I was only kidding. Thank you!" she said as she stood up to give him a quick hug and a kiss before opening the rest of the items. "When can we go?"

"I have cleared my afternoon schedule just for you," said Thomas.

"What about Angel? Are you planning on bringing her as well?" asked Sharon.

"No, hadn't planned on it. Janet Thompson has the kiddy corral duties for the day and I figure she could watch Angel for a few hours while we are there," he replied.

"You know her well?" asked Sharon a little leery as the protective mother in her came out.

"Absolutely, she has two children of her own and takes care of the rest of the children in the Ranch. Besides, it will be a good chance for Angel to meet other kids around here and get to know them," answered Thomas.

"Okay then. Let me go get ready," answered Sharon. Thomas knew she wasn't really comfortable with leaving her child with a person she didn't really know, but he also figured she knew if Thomas trusted her, she would be good to go. She was going upstairs when Thomas reminded her to put on some pants as the tall grass and thorns would pick at her legs. He started packing up the items and started playing with Angel o the floor. He didn't notice Sharon had returned until her heard her giggling at the two of them romping around on the floor. Sharon began to gather up some of Angel's toys while Thomas went to get her a bag to take with them. Grabbing his own pack and rifle, they prepared to walk over to the Thompson's cabin where they would drop off Angel. Sharon reached down to take Angel's hand but found it already filled with Thomas's little finger.

They made their way around the pond to the cabin where Janet was now inside with the rest of the children. Thomas had ended up carrying Angel part of the way since her little legs could not keep up with the grownups. Janet readily agreed to keep Angel so the two could go to the range for a few hours. Angel was introduced to Janet, and while she was initially shy, soon came out of her shell as Janet, an experienced mother, made her feel more at ease. Angel saw the other children playing inside and warmed up even more as she wanted to be part of whatever shenanigans the other children were up to. Thomas and Sharon said their goodbyes and explained to Janet how long they would be gone for and where exactly they were heading.

They walked past the cabins and onto the hard packed dirt road leading out to the range. The middle of the road had long grass growing in the middle, but the tire marks were completely barren of any vegetation. The two lovers walked hand in hand talking about the little things couples talk about to make the time pass. When they had gone about three-quarters of a mile, they reached the first of the three ranges.

The first range was a pistol range, with a large berm one hundred meters to the front of the firing line. The firing line was made of concrete so the shells could be picked up easier and disposed of in the various trash receptacles. They would use this range for today but he showed her the other ranges. They walked past the pistol range to the next one, the five hundred meter rifle

range. Again, a berm, although not as large as the other one, was at the end of the range. The grass was growing pretty good here in the impact area, but was not long enough to hamper shooting for a while. George or Ryan had probably mowed the area when they brought everyone up for the training. Again, concrete slabs and various shooting tables dotted the firing line. Overhangs were built above the shooting rests, providing shade for shooters who would be out there for a while. The final range was a shotgun skeet range with no berm. Five shooting booths were present along with the tower. The grass was growing fairly tall here, covering the broken clay pigeons from the springtime.

They returned to the pistol range and took a seat at one of the shooting benches while Thomas started explaining the fundamentals of firing. Although Sharon had been shooting with Thomas before and had a basic knowledge of firearms safety, she had never received formal training. He did clear out the rifle, leaving the action open with the muzzle pointed downrange while he was instructing her. He went over the fundamentals of firing a shoulder weapon like the .22 rifle. He went over sight alignment, breath control, trigger squeeze, shoulder placement and the proper stock-cheek weld. She listened intently, asked occasional questions but for the most part, seemed to be grasping the concepts pretty well. He drew a simple sketch in the dirt about proper sight alignment for the Savage, showing her how to properly place the sight onto the target. Over the next hour, she practiced each fundamental separately then starting to combine them one at a time. Initially she was too far back on the stock and yanked the trigger, but these problems were corrected and in short order, she was able to shoulder the rifle, get a good weld and align the sights on various targets without much problem. He then added the trigger squeeze and breath control for the final touch. She practiced this over and over for twenty minutes before he felt she was ready to start sending lead downrange. Removing the magazines and a box of ammo from her bag, he showed her how to load the rimmed cartridges into the magazine and had her load up each with ten. While she was doing this, he retrieved several targets from a small shed behind the range and went downrange to hang them at the ten meter line.

After returning, they both donned earplugs to prevent ear damage. Although not really necessary for a .22 rifle, it was a good habit to get into and he wanted her to start thinking all the time of the little things to do with shooting. She loaded a magazine in her rifle, chambered a round and started sighting in on a target at the ten meter line. He picked up his rifle and increased the magnification on his scope so he could see where her rounds were impacting and make adjustments as necessary. He told her to fire when ready and she took her time to sight in on the target, aiming at the center point.

At a little over thirty feet, this wasn't a problem, but he wanted her to get used to aiming at specific points. Remembering the fundamentals, she took her time, made a small adjustment to the rifle and squeezed the trigger. A small hole appeared in the target, a little low and left of the bulls eye. A smile grew across her face as she exclaimed "It surprised me like you said it would!" He told her to fire another round at the target, this one impacting close to the first one. Firing one more, she hit between the two. One more round fired was on top of the first one. The last one completed the small hole, impacting right between the first and third shots.

He took out his Leatherman and showed her how to make sight corrections. She didn't understand at first why if she wanted the strike of the bullet to go up, she had to move the sight

down. Explaining the principle with his hands, she understood immediately and made the suggested corrections. She sighted in on another target and fired five more rounds. The elevation was almost right on, but the windage was still a little to the left. One more sight adjustment and the rifle was right on target. Her groups also started closing up as she took more time in sighting in on the target, focusing more on the front site and not on the target itself. She fired fifteen more rounds, emptying three of the magazines before he wanted to move her out to further out on the range.

They walked downrange and set up four more targets at the twenty-five meter line where she would have to start focusing more on the fundamentals, although still a very short distance. After returning, she reloaded the three magazines and prepared to fire again. He peered through his scope again and saw her groups were opening up a little bit. It wasn't much, but enough to tell she wasn't an experienced shooter. She seemed a little depressed at the fact she didn't as well as she had done at the ten meter point. Thomas explained the rifle was new and needed a "breaking in" period before it would fire accurately every time. He also explained the ammo, cheap and mass produced, was by no means match quality and would not group tightly except in the hands of an experienced shooter and a broken in rifle. She seemed to accept this, but started taking more time between shots, practicing the fundamentals she had learned.

She fired four magazines total at the targets, each shot being good enough to take a rabbit or possibly a squirrel, but she was still unhappy about the groups opening up. He went downrange and collected the targets, moving new ones out to the fifty meter line. He knew the groups would open up a lot more out this far, but again, the rifle wasn't properly broken in yet. By the time he returned, she had almost completed the reloading of the magazines she had fired.

After finishing loading, she engaged the fifty meter targets, and as expected, the groups opened up quite a bit, although a full two-thirds of them would have hit a rabbit sized target. After she fired at all four targets, they went downrange to check the target. She was upset at the larger groups at that range and vowed to do better next time. Again, he explained it really had more to do with the rifle than her. After they returned, she reloaded the magazines again while he searched through a trash can for some targets.

He found several empty soda bottles and the plastic squares which ammo came in. After tossing them at random onto the range, he told her to engage them for as long as possible. She got better and faster as she practiced more and before long could hit a target, reload, reengage and hit the same target within five seconds. After firing a total of ten magazines, what was left of the targets were near the hundred meter berm. They went out to collect the trash and police their brass. Although the .22 could not be reloaded, Thomas was just used to keeping a tidy place and there was more brass than just the .22 in the collection point. That was also another point to remember as they would be reloading as much brass as they could, no matter where it came from. It was getting late in the afternoon and they would need to leave soon to pick up Angel.

Thomas wanted to take the Ruger out for a try before they got back so he asked her if he could see it to pop off some rounds. "You wouldn't deny me the pleasure of shooting my pistol for the first time would you?" she asked. He relented and they loaded up two magazines for the pistol, one for her and one for him. She applied some of the recently learned fundamentals of firing to

the pistol and found it easy to learn on. She fired ten rounds at a piece of plastic they had missed, hitting three times. He loaded the pistol and found he did little better with hitting it only five times. The pistol was good to learn on, quick, not too heavy, but not light enough not to have excessive recoil and accurate. With time, he figured he would be able to take small game out past twenty-five yards with this pistol if he didn't already have his Browning Buckmark. They collected the rest of the brass and got ready to go home, with her loading a new magazine into the pistol with the excuse of "well, you have one for defense, its only right I have one too. And remember, since you shot it, you have to clean it as well with me."

"I don't have a choice? Like payment for the shooting lessons?" asked Thomas with a sly grin.

"Nope, you shoot it, you clean it. And it's too late to argue," she grinned back at him.

They packed up everything and got ready to walk back towards the Ranch. He checked on the brass collection can and found about three inches of expended rounds in the bottom. He contemplated taking the can right then and there, but he knew it would be a pain to carry it back to the Ranch without a vehicle. He put the lid back on the can and they walked down the road hand in hand. As they were walking he thought *this is enough to drive a liberal crazy, two heterosexual people in love walking down the road armed to the teeth, one with an "assault rifle" and definitely not depending on the government for any support during this trial of our country.* He smiled at the thought as they continued down the road through the tree line on the north edge of his property. Sharon made him promise to bring her back up at the earliest possible time so she could continue her shooting lessons. She also told him she wanted to start moving up in calibers as soon as possible so she could make a better contribution to the group. He asked her about her plans for tomorrow. "Well, I will wake up alive and kind of go from there. How about you?"

"Well, I planned on heading out into the fields and helping tend to the crops. Want to come along?" asked Thomas.

Sharon thought for a moment before answering. She planted flowers on a yearly basis but had no experience raising crops. It was something she would have to learn. "I will come out, but I'm not sure what I can do to help. What exactly are they doing?"

"Probably just weeding out some stuff, maybe getting ripe stuff off the plants. Nothing major. I think we can wait a few days to teach you how to drive the tractor," he said as he winked at her.

"Well, okay. I suppose if I have to go and get my hands dirty I will get them dirty. But just for tomorrow. After that, I go back to work in the spa," she giggled back at him.

They arrived at the Ranch and picked up Angel from Janet Thompson. Angel, upon seeing the two, screamed out "Mommy!" followed by a quick "Daddy!" and insisted Thomas give her a hug and carry her home. When they arrived at the house, they found George had installed the distiller that afternoon at their place. It seemed like a simple contraption, pouring water in one end and distilled water came out the other. It would work well for the water to use in the garden and to flush the toilet. It was already working as there was a little water in the bottom of a five

gallon jug. If he remembered correctly, George said he had two per household, possibly more. A simple principle, it should be good to use year around unless it got too cold. Thomas started walking over to the new item when George walked out from behind the house. "Yours is the last of the first to be installed. We can get another one per household and still have two left over. Not sure what to do with those two, but we can figure it out sooner or later. I'll come back tomorrow and set up your second one, then go around the loop to set up the others. If I had some help, I could do it in about half the time. Any takers?"

Sharon volunteered to help George, but said she wasn't that good with tools. He told her it was a simple job and no major tools required. He also informed the two that Cynthia had the child care duties the next day at the Conference Center and she was welcome to drop Angel off if she wanted to. Saying goodbye, they walked in the house and started feeling very hungry. Thomas told her he would make dinner, but she refused and told him to keep Angel happy while she got everything ready. She found some chicken in the freezer in the basement and some rice to go along with it. It would take a while to get going so they changed clothes and relaxed for the evening. She also had made up some shells and cheese, remembering to save the water after she drained the shells out. She also opened a can of mixed fruit to finish everything off. During dinner he told her about the property survey and the discovery of the orchard near the property lines. He also told her about the proposed defensive fallback positions around the Ranch. She asked if it was necessary and if they were in any danger. "No, we aren't in any more danger than we normally are. It just helps to be prepared, such as preparing this retreat for us in case of emergency." She seemed to accept his answer and seemed somewhat relieved.

The conversation continued until a knock at the door interrupted them. It was Renee Lawson and her children coming by to visit. Thomas knew the real reason was to find out how her husband was doing and what he had been through in the past months since they evacuated to the Ranch. Without prompting, he told her Dave was all right and was doing fine, being safe and not taking any chances. He told her about the plans to escape tomorrow night for the group and how Dave would be instrumental in that escape. He was fibbing on some of the parts of the story, about the being safe part, but knew it was all for a good reason. The conversation moved on to other subjects and Thomas asked the question of how long the power had been out.

"Only for about two weeks before you got here," answered Renee. "Strangely enough. Oh, we had some brownouts and total blackouts from time to time, but the power never went out completely until two weeks ago. I suppose the government wanted to keep it on as long as possible to keep some form of normalcy. That or they finally ran out of fuel for the plant."

"I figured the rural areas would have been cut first; the power was off in the Springs for over a month. I'm surprised they lasted this long up here," stated Thomas.

"Well, it was on here and I think some of us are hoping it will come back on. Like nothing ever happened or something and we can all go back to our normal lives. I know it won't happen, but it's like we all wish we were going to wake up from a bad dream," said Renee. "I suppose I just want Dave here safe, that's all. As soon as he gets here, everything will be okay."

They continued talking for a little while longer when Renee finally set out for home with her

kids in tow. Sharon and Thomas settled in to the living room, lighting up some candles and lamps. It started raining outside, a gentle rain that would do the gardens well. Thomas started cleaning the M-9 and wanted to finish up before he went to bed. He planned on putting the pistol into storage, but he also wanted to make sure it was cleaned and oiled first.

Grabbing the bottle of glass cleaner and the 5W-40 synthetic motor oil, he continued the job. Although using the glass cleaner was against every weapons manual known to man, it was very effective at lifting the built up carbon and oil off the weapon. The only drawback was to make sure everything was completely dry before putting it back together. The motor oil was a different matter. He had used several different types of lubricants in the past and found the motor oil was the best of the lot. Again, it wasn't in a manual anywhere, but worked more effective than the general use LSA or CLP. He hadn't used the pistol all that much lately, but wanted to give it a good scrubbing so it could be packed away and be ready for immediate use if needed in the future. Sharon finished up in the kitchen and joined Thomas and Angel in the living room. He worked on the pistol for about a half an hour while Sharon read the manual for her new rifle.

He finished up and made sure it was dry before oiling it and putting it back together. After finishing up, he placed the pistol on the mantle over the fireplace and started to break down his M-4. He wouldn't be using the pistol, but the carbine would be used at some point. He removed the optic, NVD, laser and flashlight before field stripping the weapon. Sharon had finished the manual by this point and was ready to break down the rifle to clean it.

He saw Angel watching Sharon and him intently while they were cleaning their weapons. Thomas started telling her about weapons safety, trying to break it down to terms a child her age might understand. He told her guns were dangerous and she wasn't to be touching them at all. If she saw a gun she was to tell Sharon or him immediately and not to touch it. He had her repeat it back to him and she did, close to word for word, in two year old terms. He felt she knew enough at that point and let the matter drop for the moment.

The carbine was pretty dirty; not only from the firing he had done the other night, but from the firing he had done in the past weeks. Stripping down the weapon, he found it was dirtier than it should have been. They had been hard pressed to keep them as clean as they should have been over the past months. While he started to clean his carbine, Sharon cleaned her rifle. The bolt action wasn't as dirty as his carbine and she was done quicker than he was. She took out the manual for the pistol and started cleaning it as well. She unloaded it outside on the porch and broke it down in the living room she was done cleaning the pistol when he was done cleaning and oiling the carbine. He put a little extra oil on the carbine to help break up some of the deposits of carbon which would make it easier to clean the next time. He remounted the items he had removed earlier for the cleaning and function checked the carbine before calling it good.

Thomas took the weapons upstairs to the bedroom and the two ladies in his life went upstairs to clean up before bed. After stowing the weapons he went back outside and lit up a cigarette. It was a little after 9:00 by now and he figured he needed to be getting to bed so they could get an early start in the morning. He watched the last of the light disappear from the sky as he took another puff on the cancer stick. *Well, that's one thing we haven't been able to screw up yet,* he

thought as he watched the last of the cloudy sky disappear. After the attacks on the US, there was great fear about radioactive fallout over the United States and further more fear after the additional attacks around the world. For the most part, the prevailing winds had carried what fallout had come over Colorado well north of here. They had caught a break on that and the amount of radioactivity that fell was completely minimal and no more than one would receive at a normal day at the beach. He finished up the cigarette, remembering he had only had four the whole day. He knew he would have to quit soon since his supply would slowly dwindle down. Coming back into the house, he put out all the candles and lamps before going back upstairs. He went back upstairs and found Sharon in the bedroom combing out her and Angel's wet hair. She wrinkled her nose as he came in and smelled the lingering smoke. "I wish you would quit."

"Well, put your mind at ease, I will quit soon since I will be out," replied Thomas.

"Well, that's good and you have kept it under control lately, not like the chimney you were the last time I saw you," said Sharon.

"Hey! Not fair! I was under a lot of stress then," he shot back.

"Poor excuse, besides I have other ways to deal with your stress," she said with an impish smile.

Thomas looked at her smiling and knew what *that* meant. "You naughty thing, I bet you sweat when you go to church."

Sharon got a serious look on her face and raised her eyebrows. "No mister, I go to church so I won't have to worry about being naughty."

"Okay, you win. I'm going to jump in the shower," he said with a laugh.

"Before you go, can you go downstairs and get Angel's baby monitor? It's close to the top of the last box I think," she requested.

He grabbed a flashlight and went downstairs to his study where the boxes had been stored. He found the box with little trouble, but the monitor was not on the top like it was supposed to be. He finally found it near the bottom and found out it was a battery powered one. Of course the batteries were dead, so he had to find some new ones to put in. He dug around in his desk drawers before finding the 9 volt batteries that were required. Everything came on and it seemed to be working properly. He took it back upstairs and placed the transmitter into Angel's bedroom, where Sharon was tucking Angel in to bed and the receiver in their bedroom. He took a quick shower coming back into his bedroom wearing a pair of running shorts. Waiting in the soft light of a lamp was Sharon, already in the bed. "Apparently you are going to show me an alternative to smoking."

Sharon gave off the same impish smile she gave earlier. "Maybe, come on over here and find out for yourself." Thomas obeyed and found out some things were better than nicotine…

Time since attacks: 95 days
Date/Time: 24 July/0122 Local
Location: The Ranch, near Cañon City, Colorado

Thomas awoke to a familiar sound, although not one he was expecting. A distinctive clatter was heard from the side of his bed. As groggy as he was, it took him about five seconds to figure out what the noise was. It was the "ring tone" from the TA-312 field phone set. He picked up the receiver and answered with a tired "Hello?"

"This is Ryan, possible trouble at George's place," said the voice from the other end.

Thomas wasn't fully awake yet, but was coherent enough to comprehend what was going on. Before even thinking about it, he was already out of the bed looking around for a light to turn on until he remembered there weren't any lights to turn on. "What kind of trouble?"

Sharon was already looking for a way to light the lamp. He heard Ryan's voice over the field phone again. "He has a couple of folks up at his place eyeballing things and would like a few friends around. I'm going to start getting things together down here for the families to meet at the Conference Center and I figured you and Frank could head up to his place in case something happens. Will that work?"

Thomas was already dragging the phone across the room to grab his fatigue pants when he replied. "Yeah sounds good. Call Frank back and tell him to meet over at my place and we will drive up. I'm sending Sharon your way as well." He hung up the receiver and pulled on his pants and grabbed the first dark t-shirt he could find. Sharon was already moving across the room to find clothing and get dressed. Thomas had a lot of practice over the past months and was an expert at getting dressed quickly and in the dark. He was lacing up his boots when Sharon was just pulling on her pants.

"You take Angel and yourself over to the Conference Center and arm yourself before you go. I am heading out to the Taylors to make sure they have some friends around in case they need it." He finished dressing by putting on the BDU top he had in his bag. He also replaced the rest of the items in his pack and got ready to move. He grabbed the web gear and reloaded the other magazines into the vest he had unloaded the night before. Finally everything was set and he grabbed the M-4 because it still had the NOD mounted on it. Loading a magazine, he headed out of the room before Sharon stopped him. "Please be careful."

"Piece of cake baby, I will be home before you even know I'm gone," he replied before bounding out the door. He was joined by Frank less than thirty seconds after he left the front door and headed for the vehicles. They decided to take the Explorer since it was already at the house and was quieter than the two diesels. They would dive to within a quarter mile of the Taylor's house before stopping and going the rest of the way on foot. Thomas saw lamps and candles being lit in the cabins around the Ranch while Frank jumped into the passenger seat and got ready to go. Thomas spun the vehicle around and headed out the gravel road towards the Taylors. When they got to where Thomas wanted to stop, he shut off the lights and the engine

and coasted to the stop. As they exited the vehicle, both men switched on the night vision on their carbines and made their way up the left side of the road. When they cleared the trees about two hundred meters away from the house, they stopped and viewed the area. Frank used the scope and the NOD on his rifle and Thomas used the set of goggles from inside his bag. They saw two men, one armed with a civilian AK-47 and the other with a lever action rifle. Neither of the men were threatening at the moment, their rifles slung harmlessly across their backs. The two men appeared to be having a conversation with George who was out in the roadway.

Thomas and Frank decided to make their way up to George's 10 o'clock position. They knew he would be covered at his 2 o'clock by the LP/OP and from his 6 o'clock by someone in the house. The night was still overcast and the wet grass helped muffle the sound of their footsteps as they moved up to the position designated by Thomas. When they were fifty meters away, both men stepped as silently as they could, making little noise. They knew George had seen them by now so they went to their bellies and started slowly crawling towards the two in the tall grass. When they got within ten meters of the unidentified men, they could see them clearly. One was dressed in black BDU pants and an urban pattern BDU shirt, the other in khaki cargo pants and a hunting pattern shirt. Neither of the unknown men had on web gear, but one had a pistol belt wrapped around his waist with a revolver in a leather holster. They were both in their early to mid twenties and didn't seem like they were trained in military tactics. They were discussing where they had come from and where they were headed. The first of the two, the one in the black pants was asking George if they could stay.

"I don't know; do you know anyone here?" asked George.

"I don't know; who all do you have here? We might know someone," answered the first man.

"So you don't know anyone here?" asked George.

"I don't know, but I do know there is like some sort of campground down there with cabins and stuff. Read about it in a magazine once. We could stay there," answered the second man.

"No, I don't think that's possible friend. Sorry," answered George, still being polite.

"Come on man! We came out of Denver where there isn't anything to eat. We could provide you with protection," said the first man.

"We are pretty much covered in that department, what else can you offer?" asked George.

"I was in tech support for a firm in Denver, working on computers, networks and stuff," said the first man.

"I did manpower assessments for an accounting firm in Littleton," said the second.

"We are good with firearms and stuff and could protect you for a fee. Like food, water and a place to stay for giving protection," said the first.

George wasn't going for it, but didn't want to cause a scene. "I don't know, I will have to check with my partners about it." He turned and waved to the house. Amber came walking out, carrying her rifle at a low ready and walked over to her father.

When they saw her, the first man turned to the second and attempted to whisper. The nighttime air carried the whisper for all to hear. "See dude! I told you farmer's daughters were sexy! Nice to see something that fine in the middle of the night!"

George and Amber both gave the men a look that would have frozen fire, but it was George that replied. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but that is my daughter you are talking about."

"Sorry dude, but it's been a while since we've seen a hot chick like that and it's just not something we were prepared for. Our apologies," said the second man.

The man did have a point. Amber did not look like either her mother or father as she was built like a brick outhouse. Blond, blue and curvy, she was a very attractive woman that caught the eyes of most men. But she was also married and one of their friend's daughters. The comments were completely out of line. Even though they knew they had upset George and Amber with their last statements, they still looked at her the way a hungry wolf looks at a rabbit. George caught the look and his entire demeanor changed. "Gentleman, that's my daughter, not some 'chick' for you to stare at. So come to think of it, we are all set for security here and don't need your help around here." He dismissed Amber back to the house before continuing. "Now, if you don't mind, you have come up here not causing a problem, now please leave. I don't want any trouble, but am prepared for it. So go away and never come back."

"Come on man, give us a break! Okay, so your daughter is really pretty and the first decent looking woman we have seen in a long time. We didn't know you were so touchy about it, so our bad. It's not like we said we wanted to screw her or anything," whined the first man.

It was not what the man said, but the condescending tone and the vulgar way in which he said it. George wasn't budging an inch. "Nope, sorry, you heard me, now leave."

"Well, at least give us some food and water then. We are almost out," said the second man.

"Nope, we don't have enough to go around. Now leave," said George, not budging an inch.

"Come on dude, we saw your garden. Just give us some food and we will leave. Just give us something and we will go, but not until we get some food!" said the first man.

Thomas was about to jump up at this point, but held back when George started talking again. "Okay, if that's what you want. What do you have to trade for it?"

The second man seemed a little puzzled by the question. "Trade? What do you mean by trade?"

"You know, trade something you have for food," answered George.

“Like what? What do you want to trade?” asked the second man, who was losing his temper.

“I don’t know; what do you have?” asked George.

The first man was upset now and was raising his voice. “Nothing! We have nothing at all! Everything we own is down by the road in our packs! No, we don’t have anything to trade for it! Just give us the food and we will leave!”

“It’s late, I’m tired and you are wasting my time. Leave before there’s trouble,” warned George.

The two men suddenly got silent and started to move their hands towards the long guns slung on their backs. “You know, we could just take whatever we want from you.”

This was the cue for Thomas and Frank. They popped up, chambered rounds in their M-4s, flipped the safety to SEMI and aimed the carbines at the two men.

The two heard the sudden move and danger it represented. They turned slowly to see Frank and Thomas pointing their carbines at them from thirty feet away. The man with the AK-47 stopped cold, but the second man with the lever rifle continued to move his hand slowly towards the stock of his weapon. Apparently he had watched too many movies and thought he could get a shot off before he was hit. Frank talked him out of it by pointing the rifle at the ground at the man’s feet and letting a single round fly. “I could say freeze, but I think you get the point,” said Frank in a calm voice after the noise from the shot faded away.

Both men were so still and white they might have been mistaken for marble statues. “Now that we have that settled, those rifles and pistols are much too dangerous for you two to be carrying around my friends. Why don’t you just drop them on the ground at your feet? Grab them by the muzzle and place them on the ground right now.” The two men complied; frightened of the two new men who were in no mood to negotiate like the other one was. Frank continued “You” he stated pointing his carbine at the first man “drop that pistol belt on the ground. Now.” The first man complied and dropped the pistol belt on top of the rifle he had been carrying. “Now that’s just nice of you. Take ten steps backwards and drop to the ground.”

Both men did as Frank instructed as George went over to secure their weapons. Thomas frisked both of them, finding nothing more than a pocketknife on each. Amber joined the group as Frank watched the men from a front position. George, Amber and Thomas went down the road to check on the packs the men were hauling for additional weapons. It took them a couple of minutes to walk the quarter mile down the road to where the packs were dropped. They dumped the contents onto the ground and poked through the goods with a flashlight. The stench of unwashed and mildewed clothing greeted the small group when they started poking around. Both men were true to their word as nothing of real value was in the packs. They found some loose ammunition for each of the rifles and pistol and two more AK magazines, but nothing of value that could be traded. When they were finished, Thomas grabbed a red sweatshirt from one of the piles and walked with the other two back up the road. When they arrived, Frank told George something in a low voice and took off down the road.

"Now gentlemen, you had the chance to leave quietly and didn't want to do so. So now, you are going for a walk out of here. Your weapons are much too dangerous for you to have around us, so I'm going to take them five miles down this road to stash them where you can find them. I'm going leave them under this red sweatshirt so you can find them when you get there. Just remember though, you aren't the only ones running around out here, so you might want to be quick. My friend asked you to leave and you didn't. We don't want you around here so don't come back. If we see you coming this way again, we will think you are hostile and shoot you on the spot. Any questions?" asked Thomas.

"We could get killed out there without any protection!" exclaimed the first man.

"Not my problem. Your protection will be waiting for you down the road. And remember, we will shoot first if we see you again," said Thomas calmly.

A couple of minutes passed and Frank came up the road driving the Explorer and parked it by the two men who were still on the roadway face down. Frank motioned Thomas over to the vehicle and spoke in a low tone. "I'm going to follow these two goobers down the road to make sure they don't double back."

"I want to go the full five miles with their weapons; it's going to be quite a haul," said Thomas.

"No problem, I need the GPS, the maps, your NODs and another bottle of water if you can spare it," said Frank.

Thomas didn't want him going out alone, and stated it. "It's dangerous to go out there tromping around by yourself. Besides, it's the middle of the night and you have to be tired."

"I'm not tired since I haven't gotten a decent night of sleep since I got here. I've been sleeping through the day. I took a nap this evening and was wide awake when we got the call for here. I will be okay," stated Frank, effectively ending the conversation.

Thomas knew there was no point arguing and asked if he wanted company to go along. Frank told him no, he could move faster on his own and quieter. A graduate of the Close Precision Engagement Course, the Air Force's version of a sniper course, Thomas knew he probably would only slow the man down and possibly give away his position. Thomas grabbed his pack, took out the GPS, his map case, a liter of water and handed over the set of NODs. Showing Frank the map, he pointed out their location on it and showed him the adjacent sheet in case he strayed too far out. He also showed him the waypoints in the GPS for the Conference Center, his house and the Taylor's home. Frank took the items and walked down the road, probably to find a covered position to hide while the two passed. Giving Frank a five minute head start, he wandered over to the men and stated "Now you are free to go. Your packs are at the end of the road and as soon as you pack them back up, head northwest along this road for five miles and you will find your weapons."

The two men looked at each other but didn't move. Thomas prompted them on by pointing his carbine at them. "As in leave. Adios. Goodbye. Leave now." The two men slowly got to their

feet and started walking down the road, only pausing once to turn around and look at the trio standing behind them. Thomas went to the vehicle and started to leave when George stopped him. Thomas saw why a second later as Amber came running out of the house carrying her rifle and a set of web gear for her spare magazines. As she jumped into the passenger seat of the Explorer, George came over to Thomas. "You need to take a buddy with you out there. Frank should be okay going solo since he can hide pretty effectively, but you will be in a vehicle and vehicles make good targets. Take Amber along in case you need another gun."

Thomas shifted the vehicle into gear and slowly started off down the driveway towards the main road. They reached the intersection to see the two men packing back up their backpacks and giving the vehicle a middle finger salute before they headed on their way. At the intersection, Thomas checked the odometer for the mileage, set the trip odometer and sped the vehicle up to 30 MPH. Little was known about the northwest of the roads leading away from the Ranch so he wanted to keep a keen eye out for possible trouble. Amber stared out the window as they drive along. "Thinking of something?" he asked.

"Nah, just thinking it's been a while since I was out of the house and on a roadway that wasn't dirt or gravel. Kind of exciting you know" she answered.

"Yeah, I understand. Getting cabin fever?" he asked.

"More or less. I'm just used to being able to go and do as I please. It just takes some getting used to," she answered.

The continued chatting until they reached a point just beyond five miles where there was a large tree next to the road. Stopping the Explorer, but leaving the engine running, he walked over under the tree and placed the weapons, magazines and ammo on the ground. He hung the red sweatshirt over the grass where it would be visible from the roadway. Getting back into the driver's seat, they turned the vehicle around and started back down the road. Amber asked a serious question. "Do you think it was smart to give them their guns back?"

Thomas thought for a moment before answering. They hadn't caused any trouble, but then again, they hadn't been entirely peaceful either, getting pushy when they shouldn't have. "I don't think it will be that big a deal. Five miles is a long way to go back to exact a measure of revenge on us and those two seemed smart enough to know we meant business. They don't really have enough ammo between the two of them to be much of a problem and most of the residents around here would probably shoot on sight if they saw them creeping around their house in the middle of the night. I'm surprised your dad didn't bust a cap right away, especially after the comments."

Amber's demeanor turned a little sour over the mention of the men. "Well, he might have, but they came up the road making all sorts of noise, yelling at the house. They seemed pretty harmless until they looked me over like a steak. I'm surprised Dad didn't shoot them on the spot for that. I'm twenty-two years old but he still protects me like I'm six or something. I know, he loves me and all, but he is way protective of me. I just wish he would let me settle something like that once so I can show him I'm not the little girl dressing up like a princess anymore."

"So what exactly would you have done?" he asked with a laugh.

"I dunno, maybe given them a pretty swift kick where they wouldn't have had those nasty feelings about me for a while," she answered with a laugh.

Thomas laughed again before telling her the man's perspective. "Amber, your father does love you and it's just natural for a father to be protective of his daughter. You are a very beautiful woman so that just makes him more protective."

"You think I'm beautiful?" she asked after turning to look at him.

Thomas felt secure enough in his relationship to Sharon to give her an honest answer. "Yes, Amber, you are an attractive lady and I'm not surprised those two saw it. They shouldn't have said the things they said nor looked at you the way they did, but they did admit you were very pretty. And yes, you are pretty." Thomas didn't really know her all that well and didn't want to go too far. Plus he had his new fianceé at home waiting for him and it wouldn't be right to continue to have this conversation with another woman. He didn't want to give off the wrong impression to the young lady sitting across from him. They continued down the road, finally passing the two men walking towards them. Again, they received the middle finger of the two men as they passed. They did not see Frank however, and figured he was being stealthy while he followed them. "Are you getting settled in otherwise?"

"Yeah, as much as I can. It's pretty weird. I used to think Mom and Dad were nuts for wanting to live like it was 1880, raising a garden, learning to hunt, preserve foods, all that stuff, but now I see the method in their madness. I just wish I had paid more attention than instead of worrying about which Hollywood star was going to rehab that week," said Amber.

"It definitely is different, that's for sure. But at least you have some good teachers. Your parents are top notch," he stated.

"Yes, they are pretty cool, but it's weird moving back in with them after being out on my own for three years. It will take some time to get used to unless I get my own cabin built," she said.

They pulled up the driveway adjacent to the Taylor's house where Thomas would drop off Amber before heading home. He shut off the engine to talk with George before heading back to the house.

"I already called back to camp and let the others know it was all clear. Sharon told me to tell you to get your butt back down there and stop playing hero, or something like that. This has happened before, not quite this pushy, but something similar, and the families know what to do. It's a good thing Misty had that set of old NODs in the LP/OP with her," said George.

"Misty?" Thomas asked. "I thought Shannon Parsons was on tonight."

"No, it was supposed to be me, but I got a headache earlier and Misty agreed to take my shift for

me. She was wat – what was that?!" exclaimed Amber looking southeast towards the main road.

The other two turned to look down the road where she was pointing. They did not see anything out of the ordinary and asked her what she saw.

"Headlights or at least what looked like headlights down at the tree line next to the roadway. I could have sworn I saw them then they were gone." All three looked that direction but did not see anything that might have caused the light. The sky was clearing up so lightning was not a possibility.

From behind them, they heard Cynthia call from the house. "Contact from the LP/OP, Misty wants you to take a look at something."

All three walked the two hundred yards to the LP/OP site and asked Misty what she saw. "Headlights, or something that was almost like headlights. Down the road near the bend. I swear they were there and then they were gone. No wait! Look!" she stated pointing at the curve in the roadway. Indeed it was appeared to be headlights in the trees, very dim, but distinguishable even at this distance. All four saw the pale light and then saw it disappear.

"At least two vehicles down there, no, one more! There's another set" said George as a third set of lights illuminated the trees at the roadway.

"You think it's a Loyalist sweep team?" asked Thomas, trying to come up with an explanation.

"No, I wouldn't think it would be them. I heard on the news they only operate in the daytime.," said Amber. "Is it the rest of your people?"

Thomas thought about that for a moment before dismissing the thought. "No, they aren't due in until tonight, late evening at the earliest. But we can't discount that possibility. If it is them, why not come on up here?"

"Because of the same reason you didn't when you got here. A military convoy heading towards my house in the middle of the night? What do you think would happen?" asked George.

"Yeah, you're right," answered Thomas. "There is only one way to find out, wait until it gets light and see who they are, or go down there on a small recon to figure it out."

George thought about it for a moment before replying. "Yeah, might not be a bad idea, but not alone. Amber? You up for a quick sneak and peek?"

Amber seemed a little nervous but didn't show it in front of her father. "Yes, Dad. I can do that." She ran back into the house to get changed into some camouflage pants quickly. While she was changing, Thomas walked over to the Explorer and got the camouflage paint out of his bag and applied it on his face, neck and ears. He liberally spread the black, light green and brown over his face and neck in different patterns, not trying to make any lines that would stick out. He tried to get the lighter color green into the darker areas of his face and the darker colors

on the high points. George looked him over and put some on a few spots he had missed. It would be entertaining to the outside observer for two grown men to be applying "makeup" to each other, but for military members, it was what was done. Amber came bounding back out of the house and received the same treatment by both of the men. She pulled up her blond hair into a pony tail and stuffed it under a boonie cap while the two were spreading the face paint onto her skin. When they were done, the spur of the moment job had been done well. The light greens contrasting with the darker browns and blacks creating artificial shadows that mirrored the shadows around them. George pulled out one of the radios and made sure he and Thomas were on the same channel.

After doing a radio check, Thomas laid down the plan. "Since they have stopped, we have to figure if they are military they have put out security. It's almost a mile down there, so I would guess they are only about four hundred meters or so out from the vehicles at most. We will run a half mile to that little grove of trees and move tactically from there. We will then try and move around to the north side of them, coming in from the woods. If we get fired on we will cover each other out to five hundred meters, then run like crazy to the house and go on to the Ranch from there. I'm not really sure exactly how we will get to the north side of them, so we will play that one by ear. Any questions or comments?"

"No, I think I'm ready," she said in a shaky voice.

George put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Amber, Thomas is in charge. Listen to what he says and follow his every move. This isn't much different than the times you played paintball or Airsoft. Don't worry; this is just a simple recon. As you get closer, try to be invisible and blend in. Move slowly and don't make any sudden moves. Look for movement out of the corners of your eyes. Watch for contrasting colors and light. Look for unnatural shapes. Listen to the sounds around you and try not to make any noise yourself. It's okay to be nervous; we all were our first time out. Don't worry; you will be laughing about this tomorrow."

It did little to allay her fears, but Thomas knew she would be okay if she followed him. He also knew it was way different from paintball or Airsoft since the rounds that would be fired would be real and the losers faced almost certain death in this game. He was pretty good at fieldcraft when it came to this sort of thing, both learned in the military and from growing up playing in the woods as a child and hunting later on.

They started a jog across the open field to a small group of trees between the area of the house and the roadway where they had seen the lights. They were making a little noise, but not enough to be heard past one or two hundred meters. It took about eight minutes of the slow jog to reach the trees. They would be more tactical from this point on, moving slower than a jog, but moving a little faster to a point about two hundred meters from where they were currently standing. He peered through his PVS-14 at the roadway where they had seen the lights, but couldn't make out anything at that distance.

They moved the distance quickly, keeping the next group of trees between them and the bend in the road. Upon reaching this bunch, he saw another one just beyond it that would have them within five hundred-fifty meters away. They moved to this group and again, Thomas scanned in

the distance and thought he could see some movement, but wasn't sure. He wished Amber had a pair of goggles with her so she could keep an eye out as well although the sky was starting to clear up, letting the moon shine through the broken clouds.

Thomas picked another copse of trees somewhat diagonally from their current position about one hundred-seventy meters away. When they reached that point, they would be within four hundred meters of the roadway and within detection range of sentries if the unknown group had put them out. They moved silently through the long grass of the field, hunched over, Thomas keeping one eye on the ground and one eye on the end of the road. They caught a break here as a ditch took them over three quarters of the way to the next spot so their lower bodies weren't exposed.

He reached the next stopping point and scanned the area through the NOD. He saw a figure walking about two hundred meters away in what appeared to be some sort of patrol path. He waited to see if he had a partner following him, and sure enough, another figure appeared to be following the same path, but about two minutes behind. The two appeared to be doing some form of bounding overwatch, moving from light cover to light cover. When the first would enter, he would not reemerge until the second one came up to him. It was too far to tell for sure, but it appeared the two individuals were wearing night vision goggles themselves. This would complicate matters for the two, but they needed to know who these people were.

They continued to observe the two until about ten minutes later; they came back through on the same pathway as before. After they had passed through a small group of trees and stopped, Thomas informed her he was going to that group of trees to wait for their next rounds. He would stash her under a large pine tree about fifty meters away she could crawl underneath and remain undetected while she watched over and supported him.

He decided after he moved to the trees, he would take the first one and get information before the second one arrived. Thomas would have about two minutes to gather whatever information from the first person before he would be forced to deal with the second person. If he needed more time, he would attempt to flexi-cuff and gag the first one with his handkerchief before trying to take on the second one.

Thomas and Amber moved into the next position, moving silently but swiftly to get to where they were going while the sentries backs were turned. Thomas figured he had about ten minutes before the small patrol showed up in the copse of trees where he was hiding. He used an available large tree for cover, peeking around from the trunk to watch and wait for the first individual.

Suddenly, the first sentry came into his field of view. As the first individual got closer, Thomas could see clearly through his own night vision device he had on goggles of his own. Thomas would have to be very sneaky to pull this off, if he could at all. He turned off his own NOD and placed the rifle on the ground under a tree and the figure moved closer to him. He could use his pistol on the man if the need arose since he was now within fifty meters.

The moon in the sky helped Thomas detect the frustratingly slow pace as the first sentry moved closer. He would use the large tree he was currently behind to take the man by surprise from the

side. One flaw of night vision devices was the fact they offered little to no peripheral vision. Thomas would use this to his advantage when he took the sentry down. He could hear the sentry moving through the long grass towards the spot where he was hiding. The sentry was making no great effort to be quiet and Thomas figured he was either tired, bored, didn't think there was a chance of contact or combinations of all three.

He heard the footsteps in the leaves seven feet away from him…five…three…he moved around the tree and saw the figure carrying an M-4 much like his under the bushes. Thomas had the man completely by surprise and moved in swiftly to take advantage of the fact he had the upper hand. Using a technique that will put a man on the ground before he even knew what hit him, he put his right hand on the base of the man's spine and left hand on the front of the man's face. Pushing the man's face away him while pushing backwards and pushing his hips forward with his right hand, he slammed into the ground before he even knew he was under attack. The fall knocked the wind out of the man and his night vision came off. Thomas jumped quickly, straddled the man and pinned his arms by his sides. He clamped his left hand over the man's mouth and pulled out his pistol with his right. Shoving it between the man's eyes, Thomas said in a low voice "Listen to me. If you want to live, you will do exactly as I say and answer my questions truthfully. Do you understand? Nod yes or no."

The man nodded the affirmative and Thomas continued. "Are you military?" A nod yes from the man. "Are there more than five of you?" Another nod. "Are there more than ten of you?" The head shook from side to side. "Are you communicating by radio?" Another nod. "Are you due to report in soon?" A nod. "Are you with the Loyalist forces?" A shake of the head side to side. "Are you going someplace near here?" An emphatic nod up and down. Thomas needed some information he could not get with a simple yes or no answers. "I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth. Anything more than a whisper and you will be the first to die. Your friends might get me, but not before I make your head look like a funnel. Understand?" A final nod and Thomas pulled his hand slowly away ready to place it back on the man's mouth in an instant. He kept the gun in place so the man would still be under threat of death.

"Relax, Tom. We're coming to meet you," said a familiar voice. It was Brian Holmes. The rest of the group had arrived.

CHAPTER 12 – HOMECOMING

Time since attacks: 95 days
Date/Time: 24 July/0347 Local
Location: The Ranch, near Cañon City, Colorado

Thomas immediately jumped off his long time friend and helped him up off the ground. The two men embraced like they hadn't seen each other in years, but in reality had only been a couple of days. "Good God dude! You are sneaky! You scared the crap out of me with your face all camoed up like that, coming out of the woods like something off a horror movie! I thought I was a dead man until you started talking to me and then had to play twenty questions before you would let me speak! I think my heart is only now getting started again!" said Brian rapidly and in a high pitched voice. It wasn't in Brian's nature to go on this much, but he had a pretty good scare.

"What are you all doing here? You weren't supposed to be in until tonight sometime," asked Thomas.

Brian, still not having fully come down from his adrenaline rush, answered in a quaky voice. "Things were getting worse down there so we decided to leave a day early. The rest of the details later, how are Janie and the kids?"

"They are fine. Probably a little scared since this is the second time tonight we have been woken up by visitors we weren't expecting," said Thomas, turning to look at Stu Donaldson, the second person, as he entered the copse of trees.

Greetings were exchanged and Thomas called for Amber to join them. He also called George on the radio and told him the news, but asked him to hold off on notifying the rest of the Ranch. Brian did the same thing to the rest of the group at the vehicles. The four walked over to the vehicles where they were challenged before going to meet everyone else. Warm greetings were exchanged and Amber was introduced around to the group. The group was elated they had made it to safety and huge grins grew around the group. The stress of possibly being caught or being dead was starting to bleed off and the group felt on top of the world.

Thomas wanted to bask in the moment, but knew these men and women had families up the road to see. "Well, the cat's out of the bag. Let's get you all up to see your families." With that announcement, the group broke up rapidly and remounted the vehicles. Thomas jumped in the lead vehicle with Dave Lawson and Amber in the second vehicle with Michael Parsons. They drove the short distance to the house where Amber was dropped off and Thomas picked up his Explorer to drive back to the Ranch. George took the time to walk to every vehicle to shake the new residents hands while Thomas got his vehicle turned around.

He led the procession of vehicles down the road to the Ranch, pulling them all the way in front of the Conference Center. Everyone dismounted the vehicles and the curious families peeked

out the windows at the strange vehicles. When they saw their loved ones hopping out, yells and shouts of joy were probably heard all the way to Denver as families were reunited. Those that didn't know Sharon were introduced as she looked at her fiancé strangely since he was still covered in camouflage paint. Thomas made his announcement of the pending wedding and a told them there would be a dinner and meeting that night starting at 5:00 PM. Families started to walk back to their respective homes when Tim Daniels stopped Thomas. "Where's Frank? I didn't see him tonight. He got out okay, right?"

Thomas explained the problems from earlier and that Frank was out watching their unwanted visitors to make sure they didn't double back. Tim accepted this and told Thomas he needed to speak with him today after he got some sleep. They agreed to meet in the early afternoon and shook hands before departing. Thomas carried Angel to the Explorer, who didn't really know what the deal was with the brown, black and green paint on his face. She was originally scared of him, but after he talked to her, she felt a little more comfortable. Sharon took her out of his arms so he could put his rifle into the Explorer and get in the driver's seat. On the way home he explained the reason he had the camouflage paint on.

"I wish you wouldn't go off and do that sort of thing. I understand you have to do it, but I'm afraid it will give me gray hair before long if you continue to worry me like this," said Sharon, adjusting the weight of Angel on her lap.

"Well then, you will just be a smoking hot gray haired fox that I love," he said with a smile.

"Argh, if I didn't have my hands full you would have been soooooo beat down by now. You better be glad I have a child in my arms and that she doesn't need to be witness to that sort of psychological trauma so early in her youth," she replied in feigned anger.

He put his hand on her arm as they continued the short drive home. After arriving, Sharon put Angel back to bed while Thomas took off the camouflage makeup, but not before he gave Sharon a big kiss, planting a good spot of the cream on her forehead. She wasn't impressed with his joke at 4:00 in the morning and forbade him to touch her further until he showered and got the camouflage off. He was quick to comply, taking the majority off with a washcloth and the rest off with astringent pads before taking a quick shower. Feeling clean enough to go back in with the grumpy bear, he put out the oil lamp he had been using and walked into the bedroom. He crawled into bed beside her, snuggled up and apologized for making her worry so much.

"No, it's okay baby. I understand it's a part of your life and has been for a long time. I worry because I care about you and don't want you to get hurt. But on the other hand, I realize if you don't do things like that, we won't be safe. It will just be something I will have to learn to deal with and get used to." With that, they hugged and went back asleep.

It was late in the morning when he woke up, felling a little sore from the previous nights adventures. He heard Sharon with Angel downstairs, both of them giggling at something he could only guess at. Feeling he probably needed an extra kick this morning, he got a pot of coffee ready to perk while looking around for food.

Sharon called from the living room and asked if he could get the rest of them some lunch. He found three cans of soup and the pots to warm them up with. He did some stretches to work out some of the soreness in his muscles after setting the pots on the stovetop to warm up. After the attacks with the heavy duty he had pulled, it was hard to keep in shape. He did what he could, but most of the time it was put off in favor of sleep, which he needed more and more of since the missions got longer and longer.

By the time he was done stretching out, the coffee was ready and he poured himself a cup. He made a mental note to start working out more and take a run every day if he could. During the early lunch, Sharon told him her plans for the day. "Since we obviously aren't going out to the fields, I figure I need to get everything unpacked out of the boxes and bags I brought it in. Do you think you can move them upstairs for me after lunch?"

"I can do that, but I will need to move another dresser into the bedroom for you. I have one, just in the spare bedroom upstairs and it's kind of a pain to move. But, yes, I will get them upstairs for you," he said between mouthfuls.

After eating, he went back upstairs to move the dresser into his bedroom. It was one of the antiques he had brought from his parent's home in Tennessee and had been in his family for over a hundred years. As predicted, it was quite heavy, and with Sharon's help, they were able to get it moved into the bedroom. Angel's room already had a spare dresser and closet in it for her clothing, so one problem solved. He looked around his room and found he only had one other chest of drawers for his use. He knew Sharon would probably need more room than that, so he made plans to move the large wardrobe into his room for her use. He was attempting to figure out how to move it when Sharon asked him a good question. "Without power, how are we going to wash clothes?"

"Easy, you use the wash board to clean them…" he said and his voice trailed off. She gave him a strange look before he answered seriously. "Okay, seriously, I have a low power washer in the basement that we can use, but I think we will have to share it with everyone else since I only have one more of them in the Conference Center. Other than that, we do have a bunch of washboards for everyone to use if they so prefer. Drying will have to be done on a line though as we do not have enough power to run the dryer."

"Wash board?" she asked. "You might have to show me that contraption. Remember, I'm a child of the 80s and a city girl by heart. I never learned how to do a lot of the stuff that goes on around here. Gardening I suppose I could do well at since I raised flowers every year, but the rest of the stuff is foreign to me. Washing clothes by hand, hunting, shooting, baking bread from scratch, canning. I mean, this is a whole new world for me and I'm not sure where to begin. Still want to keep me?"

"Nah, I will just wait until the next refugee group passes by and try to trade you off. If I'm lucky, I will get a goat or something for you. But after that they will bring you back because you are utterly worthless. And I still get to keep the goat," he said with a laugh.

She shot him a nasty look since she was being serious and he was making jokes about it. She

looked a little miffed and turned away before continuing to unpack. He walked across the room and put his arms around her waist. "Sharon, you know I'm only kidding. I want you here with me no matter what. There are things here you don't know how to do, sure, but then again, there might be things here we don't know how to do that you do. The most important thing is you are safe, here with me and I want you to stay, no matter how useless you might feel. As long as you are willing to learn, things will be all right," he said as Angel toddled into the room. "For her sake and yours. You just let me know what you need and I will get it for you."

Sharon turned in his arms to face him. "I do want to be here, but, I'm not sure of where to start learning stuff. I don't want to be a burden to anyone around here, but I seriously don't want to leave."

"Good, because I thought the trade for the goat was off for sure since you are completely worthless. Come here, you," he said as he embraced her. "Here is what we'll do. Let's make a list of everything you think you need to learn and start doing it. We can find you people to teach you what you don't know. You think that will work?"

"Of course, when can we start this list?" she asked.

"Once we get your stuff done we will sit down and write it out," he told her before giving her another hug. Angel looked at them, feeling a little left out so Thomas picked her up and gave her a big hug before blowing raspberries on her face. He laid her down on the bed and continued to blow them on her stomach, with her laughing and screaming in joy as only a child can.

Thomas finished up and continued to move the boxes upstairs into the hallway. He was almost finished when he heard a knock at the door. It was Tim Daniels showing up as planned. Standing in the doorway, he held up an unlit cigarette as a silent invitation for Thomas to join him on the porch to smoke. Thomas shook his head and stated he needed to finish up moving the boxes upstairs and get the wardrobe moved before he could go out. Tim followed him into the house and helped move the rest of the boxes upstairs before Thomas asked him for help in moving the large wardrobe from one room to the other. It was large, oversized for its purpose and built out of solid red oak. It was built in a time when carpenters and woodworkers didn't use veneer or particle board to make furniture. The first attempts to move it ended up in total failure since it was too heavy to lift. After putting towels and rugs underneath the legs, they were able to slide it into the bedroom without scarring up the floor in the hallway. Thomas grabbed the pack of cigarettes and lighter, with Sharon giving him a frown while he was doing it. "Sweetie, it's my first one today." She reminding him not to do it anywhere near Angel as he headed out of the room.

"Does she want you to quit or something?" Tim asked Thomas as they got to the front porch.

"Yeah, she lost her grandfather to lung cancer and emphysema, so it's a point of contention with her. But since I don't have all that many left, I will quit soon enough," said Thomas.

They took seats on the front porch and this was the first time Thomas had seen the vehicles in daylight. Of the group, there were both Air Force owned civilian style trucks and tactical

vehicles. The vehicles had, until last night, been property of the USAF, but now were part of the collective property of the Ranch. They would be put to better use than destroying the civil rights of the American people. Looking at each, they were heavily loaded down with supplies of every sort. Boxes, bags, crates, another ATV and items of all sorts filled every nook and cranny and it was a wonder that some were able to move they were loaded down so heavily. "Looks like you guys were busy doing some shopping," stated Thomas.

"Yeah, between day before and yesterday, we cleaned out some places on Pete and the Academy. We raided the mobility warehouse, base supply, clothing sales, base mobility and the ammo bunkers at the Academy. We still didn't have enough room for everything we wanted to bring, but got what we could," said Tim.

"Looks like you brought out everything but the kitchen sink, and I figure that might be underneath something in one of the trucks," said Thomas as he scanned over the trucks.

"No, we didn't get that because we couldn't find one with gold plating. Seriously though, the last two days were days off for a lot of people since they are supposed to begin the raids today. We broke up into teams to get what we could from the two bases. Me and four others were tasked with getting what we could from Peterson," said Tim.

"We got into base supply, and as expected, there wasn't much left. We were able to get about four dozen cold weather bags and all the stuff inside of them, including the nice gloves and the winter boots. Some other assorted items, but those were the main things. We ransacked our own supply and mobility warehouse and got what we could. It was deserted, guess maybe the other guys bugged out or something, so we had free reign. We broke open the mobility pallets and got out the cammy netting, tents, communications boxes, MREs, extra fuel and water cans, batteries, sandbags, pioneering kits, what night vision and thermals were left, the radio and communication kits and some other minor stuff."

"We also got another two generators, although I think you are already set for that aren't you? From the supply, we got body armor and helmets, hydration packs and normal packs, rain suits, boots, all sorts of cold weather gear, MOLLE pouches and the vests to hang them on, some uniforms, a diesel ATV…pretty much anything we thought might be useful. There was a bunch of stuff ransacked, but we still had plenty of stuff to choose from."

"We also broke into, well not broke into but requisitioned using forged forms, clothing sales where we grabbed enough uniforms to hold us over for quite some time. Also, as many boots, t-shirts, socks, underwear, jackets, thermals and gloves as we could stuff in. Lucky for us the clothing sales had just got in a shipment and Darren was able to come up with a fake form saying they had to give us whatever we needed. Four vehicles and two trailers and crammed them full. We had to leave some of the stuff behind, mainly the extra water cans and the tents, but we were able to bring up two medium tents."

"There are also twenty or so jerry cans filled with either gasoline or diesel packed away amongst the vehicles. The rest went to the Academy to get whatever ammo they could find as well as some extra weapons, but you will have to ask Rick about that. All I know is, they brought out a

crapload of ammo, guns and explosives. Just about everything we could grab that wasn't nailed down. After they got back, we packed everything we could into the ten vehicles," said Tim, a little out of breath from the explanation.

"Did you all have any trouble getting here?" asked Thomas.

Tim took a long drag on his cigarette before answering. "None what-so-ever. The only checkpoints we ran into were the gates and one on I-25 near the South Academy exit. Neither of which called us in. We got through with no problems. Captain Johansson signed the orders and was able to get us through. Lucky for us, we had MCOs for a resupply of the Gunnison area FOB, which was low on supplies and asked for help. Oh yeah, almost forgot, we were able to get the commander out of the detention cell and send him along as well. Captain Johansson took him and his family to wherever they were going. I think Darren has the directions."

"Looks like you guys did a slam up job out there," said Thomas, admiring the trucks and their loot. "What's the deal with the K-9 kennels?"

"Stephen's idea," answered Tim. "He couldn't stand the thought of leaving the dogs behind, so he grabbed four or five of them. I know he wants to give them out to some of the families, but he just couldn't abandon them on the base."

Thomas wasn't entirely comfortable with having the large dogs trained to attack around the children, but this wasn't the time or the place to discuss it. "You guys seriously did grab everything that wasn't nailed down didn't you?"

"Cops make the best thieves, you know that. But that isn't the reason I wanted to see you," said Tim.

"I figured you had another reason, what's up?" asked Thomas.

"The day after you left I got this in the mail," he handed over an envelope addressed to a T. Daniels from a location in Utah. It was from his ex-wife, Tracy. Although they had been divorced for five years, they still kept in touch and had talked of getting remarried before the attacks. Thomas pulled the letter out and began reading. I was a simple handwritten letter on plain tab paper.

Dear Tim,

As planned, little Tim and I were on our way to Colorado Springs to meet up with you when we ran out of gas. I was unable to purchase more and we have been stuck in a refugee camp in the town of Thompson on this side of the Utah border for about a week now. Little Tim and I tried to get to you, but we just couldn't make it. If you have any way of coming to get us, please do so. There is barely enough to eat here and it's very crowded. Tim misses you very much and always asks if Daddy is coming to get us. I tell him yes and hope you can make it here. I will wait another month before trying to find another way into the Springs. I only hope this letter finds you in time.

With love
Tracy

The letter was dated a little over two weeks ago. Even thought Thomas didn't need to ask, he still did. "Are you planning on going to get them?"

"If we can spare a vehicle and gas, I figure a three day trip, up there and back. What do you think?" asked Tim.

"Three or four, maybe five or six up and back. Extra gas, food, water, a partner, sounds good. Stick to the back roads and avoid towns if you can. Got anyone in mind to go along with you?" asked Thomas.

"Nah, I can make it solo. No need for anyone else to go along," answered Tim.

"Bad idea, my friend. You should take someone with you. I would go, but I think Sharon would have a hissy fit," said Thomas as he put out his cigarette.

"You think I need someone to go with me?" asked Tim.

"You remember the intel briefs we got, plus what happened to Frank and me," said Thomas as he went on to explain what had happened the night they had departed for the Ranch. "So you see, it's best to have someone riding shotgun with you. Preferably with a heavy weapon."

Tim thought about it for a moment before deciding the plan Thomas had mentioned was for the best. "When do you think I could go?"

"Day after tomorrow I think would be best, that would give us enough time to get everything straight and you to find a partner. We can give you the 6-pack and enough gas to get there and back along with some extra. Plus some trading material if you need it. How are you set for weapons?" asked Thomas.

"Set for now. I brought out my M-4 and M-9 and enough mags and ammo to do me. Nothing long range like what you all used, but I don't think I will need it," said Tim.

"Nah, we will get you something from the Trading Post tomorrow," said Thomas.

"I don't have the money for that!" objected Tim.

"Come on man, I own that store and everything under the roof. If I want to give you a rifle out of there, then it's my right to give you whatever I want to. And really, there isn't a thing you can do about it," said Thomas matter-of-factly.

"Okay then, I won't argue. Tomorrow then?" asked Tim with a laugh.

"Yes, tomorrow, but you are coming tonight right?" asked Thomas.

"Yeah, what's that all about anyway?" asked Tim.

"Just a meeting to kind of let everyone know what goes on around here and some other stuff. For dinner I thought an old fashioned barbeque would be in order," stated Thomas.

Tim looked hungry at just the thought of meat sizzling on a grill. He prepared to leave and start unpacking some things in his cabin now that business had been conducted. "Do you realize how long it's been since I've had a real burger grilled over charcoal?"

"Probably as long as it's been for me. See you tonight," said Thomas as Tim walked away.

Thomas went back inside to find Sharon pulling various items out of the walk in closet and putting hers in. "You are such a bachelor, Thomas Dayfield," she said and emphasized the word "bachelor" like it was some form of six headed alien monster. "Don't you know winter clothing is stored in the summertime?"

"Well, yeah, but I always figured a way around that by not storing it, hence less work for me year round," answered Thomas with a grin.

"Yeah, right. You have seriously been missing a woman's touch around here. Where can you put these?" she asked pointing at a group of boxes that held his winter clothing.

Thomas knew this was not a point he could argue, much less win. "In the attic I think, I can take them up there if you want."

Sharon looked through the now empty boxes and stated "If you don't mind…" Her voice trailed off before continuing. "We were lucky; I only had about a dozen items damaged beyond repair from the gunfire from the other night. I even found a couple of the spent bullets in the boxes. Nice to know it probably saved our lives."

Thomas thought silently about the gun battle the other night and examining the bullet holes in the rear of the Ford when they pulled into the woods after their escape. Yes, they were lucky not to have been hit, but how long would their luck hold out? "You lose anything you can't live without?"

"No, mainly clothing and my jewelry box, but nothing in there was broken. Yes, we are lucky," she stated, reading him mind. "I always thought the Army were pretty good shots."

"It's not that easy to fire from a moving vehicle and hit anything, even heading straight on," he answered. "I seriously doubt many of my shots hit the vehicle before we stopped. And even then, at that range, a rifle round starts loosing effectiveness. But yes, we got lucky."

"It doesn't bother you, shooting them?" asked Sharon.

Thomas thought for a moment before answering, continuing the thoughts from the other night. Yes, he had probably killed some of their attackers, but when they decided to rape a defenseless civilian woman, they gave up any latitude they might have been given as normal soldiers. They were no better than any of the other people he had either shot or arrested since the troubles began. He decided what he did was not a bad thing, but rather helped protect people in the long run from the group of men bent on causing trouble.

"Yes, it does bother me a little to know that soldiers that wear the same uniform I do were about to cause trouble like that, but no it doesn't bother me to know I killed them to help protect both you and Angel. I look at it this way, it was either them or us and I would much rather it be them that you. All I did was protect you and Angel, nothing more. Does it bother me to kill people? I've done it before and I might have to again. The other night wasn't my first time, remember, I was in Iraq and Afghanistan before we started dating," he replied.

"It never bothers you? No bad dreams or anything?" she asked after thinking about his answer.

"Well, sometimes," he answered. "But it not something that will be a problem. It hasn't happened in a long time. Just part of the job I suppose."

She walked across the room and hugged him fairly hard. A thousand thoughts went through her mind about the man she had chosen to become her husband. He was seriously different from her ex, for sure. On one hand he was a wonderful father to Angel and very loving boyfriend, but on the other hand, he had coldly dispatched five men who were determined on killing them to protect their own hides. The military side of him was still a mystery to her, as he always managed to separate the job from his personal life. She had recently gotten a glimpse of the other world she had never seen, but which she was now a part of. She knew he would protect her against all threats and never have a problem doing it. *A woman could seriously do much worse,* she finally decided in her mind. "Okay, tough guy, enough of the sentimental stuff. Go ahead and get these boxes upstairs."

"You mean I can't hold you here for a while longer?" he asked.

"No, and I know what's on your mind too, but not while Angel is watching, or even awake for that matter. God, you are a bad, bad boy. Go get those boxes upstairs, it will help work off your problem," she informed him, giving him a wink for his efforts.

He let her go and started moving the boxes to the pull down staircase leading to the attic. After pulling down the stairs, he found a spot close to the opening to put the boxes and a couple of sheets to cover them up.

After placing the boxes in the intolerably hot attic, he went to the basement and started messing around in the freezer, looking for items to grill. The freezer was based on a highly energy efficient model which ran from the batteries in the basement. In the wintertime, when the photovoltaic panels were covered with snow, the batteries could be charged from the generator outside. The submarine batteries he had acquired were some of the best investments he had made when designing the house and cabins.

He found several packs of pre-made beef patties and set them into a cooler. Continuing his digging, he found some buffalo burgers, which Darren Thompson loved, and set them in as well. He also found some boneless chicken breasts and set them down in the cooler to thaw out. He continued digging until he found what it was he was looking for, the regular bratwurst and cheddar bratwurst. After closing the cooler lid and bringing it upstairs, he would get a hold of George and Cynthia to find out what they might be able to contribute. Remembering the field phone and that Ryan was probably fooling around with something in the communications room, he wanted to see how well the hook up was. He pulled the handset of the phone and rotated the hand crank quickly to "ring" the other end at the switchboard. Shortly, Ryan came on the line from the Conference Center and said "See, I told you it would work."

"Okay, it works from here; now let's see how well you can do a patch. Can you patch me through to the Taylor's house?" asked Thomas.

A few seconds passed when Thomas heard the buzzing sound of Ryan "ringing" the phone at the Taylors. Amber answered it with a puzzled "Hello?'

"Hi, Amber. It's Tom. Is your Mom or Dad around?" asked Thomas.

"Hey, you! Yeah, Mom is out back, I'm not sure where Dad is," she said happily.

"Your Mom will do fine. Can you get her for me?" he asked.

"Sure, hon, give me a minute to get her. Now don't you go away," she said before setting the phone down.

Thomas was a bit puzzled, Amber sounded a little flirty on the phone, but maybe that's the way she always sounded on the telephone. A few minutes passed when Amber came back on the line. "You still there?"

"Yes, I'm here," answered Thomas.

"Cool, Mom will be inside in a minute. So how are you doing?" asked Amber.

Again, Thomas was a little puzzled by her flirty behavior, but again, chalked it up to not really knowing her all that well. "I'm okay, and you?"

"I'm great! Hey, about last night, I forgot to tell you, it was really cool you taking me out there with you last night. It was nice to get out even for a little bit," she replied.

"No problem, I was heading that way anyway," replied Thomas.

"So, you give rides to women all the time?" she asked with a giggle.

Okay, it was her being flirty, and he didn't know why. Some women were just natural flirts so

he wouldn't slam the lid on her too hard. "Only the ones I know, and Sharon, of course, comes at the top of that short list."

The mention of Sharon to cool her down a bit, but just a bit. She simply stated "Mom is here, see you later," and handed over the phone to Cynthia.

"Cynthia, its Tom. Got a favor to ask," said Thomas.

"And what may I do for you, sir?" asked Cynthia.

"I'm preparing a welcome home barbeque sorta thing for the folks that just got here. I've got the meat for the grill and some baked beans and some chips that need to be gotten rid of, but nothing else really to have for dinner. Got any ideas?" asked Thomas.

"Great idea Tom!" she replied. "And you are in luck. I've got some potatoes I can pan fry up with my secret recipe and the garden just put out its first yield. So pan fried potatoes and some fresh tossed salad with enough left over for the fixings for the burgers. Anything else?"

"Actually, yes, know anyone who has some bread?" asked Thomas.

Cynthia thought for a moment before replying. "Again, you are in luck. Michelle Jones just cooked up a batch of bread yesterday and I think she was planning on doing some today as well. Give her a call and see if she can help you. Are you planning on doing it at your place?"

"No, the Conference Center would be better. We can run the generators to fire up the microwave and crock pots to keep everything warm. We will be in place around 3:30 to get everything ready. If you want, you can do the fixing there," he replied.

"It's almost one o'clock now, so we will need to get cracking. See you in a bit," said Cynthia.

Instead of hanging up, Thomas "rang" the Conference Center again, getting Ryan and Cynthia back on the line. He disconnected Cynthia's line and plugged in the Jones' house where again, a puzzled Rick came on the line saying "Hello?"

"Hey man, it's Tom. Is Michelle around?" asked Thomas.

"Dude, you have field phones in your houses. This place is seriously set up for anything isn't it? Yeah, she is here, hang on a second," said an amused Rick, who smiled at the phone set up.

Michelle came on the line and Thomas explained the dilemma. She told him he was in luck and that there should be enough bread for everyone at the barbeque. Thomas also added in a favor for his new fiancé. "Michelle, can you show her how to make bread from scratch?"

"She doesn't know how?" asked Michelle.

"No, she doesn't, but wants to learn," said Thomas. "Can you show her how and be discrete

about it? She is kinda embarrassed about the things she doesn't know around here."

"Oh, no problem, Tom. And yes, I can be discrete about it. It's not embarrassing to not know how to do some of these kinds of things and I can show her whatever she needs to know," said Michelle.

Thomas hung up the phone again and went to the kitchen to put some of the chicken in some marinades. It was frozen and needed more time, but would work somewhat before he put it on the grill. He covered several pieces with a mesquite sauce and several more of a teriyaki. Although the chicken was frozen, the marinades would help thaw the pieces out. After he finished, he went upstairs to check on Sharon's progress. She was finishing the last box with her items in it and had set five more boxes out for him to put in the attic. He moved into the attic, this time bringing a marker with him to mark which boxes were his and hers. After he finished, she asked him what she should wear to the barbeque planned. "It's just a normal everyday garden variety barbeque like others you have been to, just in a little different setting," he told her.

"So anyway, I'm going to work on my list now. Got a few minutes to help?" she asked.

Over the next half hour, they made a list of the things she would probably need to know to survive up here. Here and there he would add an item onto her list and explain the reason why, like skinning animals and preserving the furs. By the time they were done, it was a full page list with several more items on the back. At the bottom, he included 'Don't be afraid to ask for help.' She took the list and looked at his entry adding 'Marry the man I love.' He looked at her and asked "Planning on finding him soon?"

"Okay, I will make a deal with you. The next man I see when I open my eyes I will marry," She made a big too do about it, feeling around like she was blind until she opened her eyes and looked at him. "I guess you will have to do, but I was hoping for Brad Pitt at least."

"Hey! I at least have his eyes!" he said in mock anger.

"Of course you will do. I'm going to give Angel a bath before the barbeque and clean up myself. Want me to pick you out some clothes?" she asked.

Again, an order in the form of a request. He told her okay, but make it pants. "I've got some running around to do before hand, so if you don't mind, I'll be back in an hour."

Thomas left the house and was getting ready to go down to the barn when he saw Ryan wearing his web gear and carrying his rifle. Thomas called to him and went over asking if anything was going on.

"Nope, just my turn for LP/OP duty, that's all," he said while shouldering his small pack.

"That's too bad; you are going to miss the barbeque. You think we could go without the security for a while?" asked Thomas.

"Well, George and I discussed that, but with what's been going on lately, we figured it would be a bad idea," he replied.

"True, very true," replied Thomas. "We can have some things brought out to you if you like."

"Nah, don't bother," he replied with the same bored voice he always used. "I've got some goodies in here and I'm not that fond of barbeque anyway."

"Not fond of barbeque? Are you an American or what?" asked Thomas in a kidding voice.

"Okay, let me rephrase that. I'm not fond of barbeque that I haven't done myself. I tend to prefer my stuff a little charred on the outside," he laughed.

"Ahhh, meteorite burgers?" asked Thomas.

"Pretty much, so I hope you understand it's an art form in the way I burn my food before eating it. I just don't trust anyone else to burn my burgers to the degree I can do it. I've got to get going or I will be late for duty. Talk to you later," he said before turning to head up the road.

Thomas walked down to the barn and attached one of the trailers to an ATV, getting it ready to go out to gather up the items he needed. He drove the bike to a shed adjacent to the cannery where he found bags of charcoal stacked up neatly against one of the walls. He grabbed several bags of the self lighting charcoal and was about to leave the shed when something else caught his eye. On the other wall were boxes of the instant start firelogs which he used in the wintertime to light up the stoves and fireplaces. The Conference Center had two outdoor fireplaces stored under the back deck and he thought it would be a nice touch to have during their meeting. He grabbed two out of a box and went back over to the wood barn to collect some firewood for the fireplaces. Filling the trailer as much as he could with pine, aspen and scrap lumber, he went over to the Conference Center to unload the charcoal and some of the wood.

Stu Donaldson came out to help since he was bored and really didn't have anything else to do. Stu had moved into one of the makeshift bedrooms in the second story of the Conference Center when he had been invited to join the group. Since he was a dormitory resident on base, he didn't have a lot of items to move. They talked for a few minutes about the Ranch and what items were on the trucks before Thomas politely excused himself and went home. He left the ATV at the Conference Center since the trailer still had some of the wood in it.

When he got home, he found both Sharon and Angel taking a nap with Angel in her crib and Sharon in the bed. Feeling a little tired himself; he crawled into bed beside her and set the alarm for 3:00, a little over an hour from now. He was asleep within minutes.

He woke up to a young blond girl of almost three tugging at his t-shirt, her eyes full of mirth. It was obvious she had recently gotten out of the shower due to her freshly combed hair and clean face. Her bright blue eyes were full of life and a large smile was across her face. *You are the reason we are doing this. You and all the other children on this Ranch. We are doing this to provide you with a future. We will instill the good morals and principles that made this country*

great for over two hundred years. We will teach you the lessons of why this great country fell and hope you take those lessons to heart when you help rebuild what your parents destroyed. But all in all, we will survive for you. To keep you safe and keep you out of harm's way. He smiled at her and was rewarded with an even larger smile and a giggle. Raising himself up, he brought her into his arms and gave her a big hug. Sharon walked into the room and took her on out. She returned a minute later saying "I've got her occupied for a few minutes and I'm heading for the shower." It almost sounded like an invitation for him to join her and they needed to conserve water anyway…

He found the pair of khaki pants and a blue polo shirt Sharon had laid out for him while he was still asleep. Although warm today, he figured he would need the pants if something was to happen and he had to go to his knees to fire. He finished drying off and quickly dressed. He found Sharon down in the living room looking through some of his DVDs and finding a few Disney flicks for the children tonight. "I thought it would be a good idea to keep them occupied while we are having our meeting." He agreed it was a good idea and was glad he had bought the movies, partially for Angel when they first started dating and partially for himself on a nostalgia whim. He went to the basement and got back inside of the freezer and pulled out several large blocks of ice which had frozen in plastic containers. He dumped them into another cooler and replaced the ice molds with water from an available tap near the washing machine. He also grabbed a hammer and a cold chisel from his toolbox. Taking everything upstairs, he washed the hammer and chisel and dropped them into the cooler with the ice.

He also grabbed the M-4 and the tactical vest before leaving out the door and threw them into the back of his Explorer. Sharon helped out grabbing the cooler of meat and the baked beans, setting them in the rear area. It was not his habit to drive such a short distance, but in this case, it would be easier than making two or three trips back and forth to the house. When they arrived at the Conference Center, they found Cynthia and Amber already preparing the salad and the potatoes. Thomas unloaded the coolers, taking the one with the ice down to the basement and setting the other on the deck with the lid open hoping to help the meat thaw a little more prior to cooking. Sharon went into the kitchen to help the other two prepared the food and to watch Cynthia make her secret recipe potatoes. Although she could cook, she wasn't that skilled at it and needed to improve her knowledge of different recipes.

Thomas set about fixing the grill, moving the large two layer charcoal grill out to the deck and laying in a bed of charcoal. He went back down to the basement and found three more blocks of ice in the freezer in the basement and a large metal tub. He brought these, along with the other three blocks of ice back to the top side and began crushing them into smaller pieces. When he was finished, he was joined by Stu and Heather, who, again, were bored and asked him if they could help with something. Thomas asked them to go to the basement and collect another tub and the cases of beer and soda he had set aside. He decided to try and get it used up before that point and dumped a case on top of a layer of ice. The drinks were already semi-cool from being stored in the basement out of the sunlight and wouldn't take long to get cold.

Stu, Heather and Thomas were soon joined by Darren Thompson as the two were just finishing putting out everything needed for the grill. Curious as to exactly how the group had made their escape from the base, he asked the two to give him the details of the trip. Darren was the one

who told the tale with occasional injects from Stu and Heather.

"Well, the night you left, Kristy Garcia was already getting the vehicles in order for us to move out. The 6-pack and the cargo HMWV were part of that group so we got lucky we have vehicles for you and Frank…speaking of which, where was he last night?" asked Darren.

Thomas explained the incident at the Taylors and how Frank had followed the group out. He had completely forgotten about him and excused himself to go inside the Center to call up his cabin. Thomas looked at the switchboard system and dredged up long unused memories on how to operate the SB-22. After a minute of fooling around, he remembered what to do and rang up Frank's cabin. Frank answered the phone, somewhat groggily and said he would be down in a few minutes to join the rest of the group. Thomas returned to the deck where Darren continued the story.

"So anyway, we originally planned on leaving tonight, but with the raids starting today, we felt it necessary to leave earlier since it would be harder for everyone to break loose. So the next morning, we made plans to get out the next night after getting what supplies we could find over the course of the two days. The raids actually helped us get out since we went to minimal manning so everyone could be fresh for the raids. The planning actually helped us get the vehicles and supplies for the raids and we were able to get Captain Bradley to sign some blanket MCOs for the group to go around and get what supplies were needed. Five went into the base and four of us went to the Academy to raid the ammo bunkers up there. For some unknown reason, none of the mobility pallets of ammo for both the reserves and active duty had been gotten into. Not that I was upset since we were able to bring out a crapload of ammo, explosives and ordnance, among other supplies in the trucks. Rick can give you exact figures on how much we got, but we picked the place dry over the two day period."

Rick was seen moving towards the group, eyeballing the tub of beer when he was stopped by Stu. "Probably not cold yet, give it a few more minutes."

"So I overheard the 'crapload' of ammo we brought out?" asked Rick as he joined the others.

"Yeah, that's the third time I've heard that quantity, 'crapload,' used. Is that an exact figure or just a generic quantity?" asked Thomas.

Rick explained what exactly they had gotten from the ammo bunkers. "Well, we pretty much cleaned out the entire mobility sets along with the CATM bunkers. Managed to get the det cord, wiring, blasting caps and blasting machines in another bunker. And just for you, we got some fifty cal, although it's linked so you'll have to delink it before we shoot it in your cannon. We also got into the Global Engagement kits and got twenty sets of nearly brand new radios along with the headsets, earpieces and throat mikes."

"We also raided our own armory, getting about fifty additional weapons in addition to the ones everyone carried out. As well as the machine guns and grenade launchers. Plus we gathered up spare magazines and accessories for everything. I also got a lot of the bench stock spare parts to fix every weapon we brought except for the M-60 we brought out. All in all, we stuffed as much

as we could into every possible space, nook and cranny before setting off last night. Now the only problem is unloading everything and getting it inventoried," said Rick.

"Yeah, supply and inventory everything in the camp so we know exactly what we have on hand for the group. I figure we can talk about that after dinner tonight" said Thomas.

"What's this meeting all about anyway?" asked Dave Lawson who joined the group.

"Just some do's and don'ts around here and what has been accomplished so far as well as what still needs to be done. What is available and what isn't and a proposal for the way things can be run around here since everyone is together now. It will take about an hour or so and Sharon brought up some movies for the kids to watch while we are talking. Darren, if you don't mind, can you have Nicole watch them while we talk?" asked Thomas.

"That shouldn't be a problem, although I want Johnny there. He will be sixteen in about four months and needs to start thinking on a grown up level," stated Darren.

Everyone agreed this was a good idea and Brian Holmes also stated he would be bringing his fourteen year old son Jeff. He used the same reasoning about his son growing up and needing to start thinking at an advanced level. It was close to 5:00 now so Thomas lit the charcoal at several points and waited for it to stop burning before throwing on the meat. Heather went inside to join the rest of the ladies and see what she might do to help. She was a fairly independent woman and had more guy friends than girl friends. However, she knew she would need the approval of the entire group before becoming a full-fledged member. She went inside to socialize and get to know some of the members she only knew in passing.

After she left, each man on the porch grabbed a cold beer out of the tub and took a long pull on their cans. They stood around the grill, not unlike millions of other men had done before them, and continued to talk.

The women, still inside in the Center, looked out the windows at the men of their lives and each had the same thought on their mind…*typical men.* Shannon Parsons was the one to voice the concerns. "You know, the world is going downhill faster than a bobsled run and we are all in survival mode. But give those men a can of beer and a grill and it's like nothing ever happened. The world changed, but boys will be boys. Good for them they have us women around to remind them which planet they are on." They all laughed at the scene in front of them and also pictured the scene that could have been in anyone of their backyards prior to the attacks. With the madness sweeping the planet, it was nice to see something even remotely normal in the world for a change. But the men weren't really thinking much about what the women were concerned with at that moment. They had a vastly higher priority conversation they were currently engaging in.

"Good grief, Tom. You are a millionaire and you still buy the cheapest beer in the world," said Rick looking at the can of Coors Light with disdain.

"You know, you are drinking free beer and who in the world ever complains about free beer, even Colorado cool-aid?" said Thomas.

"Well, if you were going cheap, you could have at least gone with Busch Light," offered Stu.

"This would be about the time any normal black man might bring up that good ole ghetto favorite, Old E. But I'll take my M-G-D instead," said Michael.

"Old E? M-G-D? Are you crazy? P-B-R baby, all the way," said Dave.

The group debated the various other beers he could have bought instead of the kind they were currently sipping on until Brian reminded them it was the last beer they might be getting for a while. This seemed to calm the group somewhat and the conversation moved on to less relevant topics.

"So anyway, when you and Frank left and didn't report in the next day, Bradley liked to have crapped out little kittens he was so mad. He flipped out and, of course, put out the BOLO for your apprehension. Of course, nobody saw you leave, or at least that's what they said. Of course someone knew you left and plenty of people were brought in for questioning, but nobody said anything. I think he thought you were going to come back eventually, and then snatch you up to put you in confinement. He never even thought to ask the rest of us where you went. I'm sure he went from crapping kittens to crapping out full grown cows when the rest of us didn't show up today."

"We only got stopped at the checkpoint on I-25 and South Academy and never got called in. There were no other checkpoints along the way for us to use our forged MCOs. Lucky for us, the checkpoint had heard about the resupply request from Gunnison and saw our loaded down trucks. I guess they figured the MCOs for a resupply mission along with vehicles about to scrape the ground loaded with gear added up to a reason not to call us in. Anyway, it was slow moving since the vehicles were so heavily loaded down, but we made good progress anyway. No contact and we were happy for it since if one of the ammo trucks caught on fire we would have been in for a wonderful fireworks show. Anyway, we made it down the road to your place this morning and figured we would hold up until daylight. That's when you found us down by the curve in the road," said Darren.

Once the coals were hot enough and the flames had died down, Thomas began to grill up the items he had brought up. The families gathered on the deck now, setting out everything for the meal. Stu went to the basement and grabbed another block of ice to break up for the five gallons of sun tea Janet had thought to bring to the meal along with plenty of sugar. Stephen Garcia offered to say grace for the group and for a spur of the moment job, it was heartfelt. He thanked God for providing the food and the friends at his side. He also thanked God for the kinds of friends who would take them in to shelter and safety in their time of need and provide them and their families with a future. He asked God's blessing on the fellowship and safety of the group in the coming times and to provide them guidance as they started a new life on the Ranch.

Everyone said a hearty "Amen" at the end and dug into the food provided by all the families. Cynthia had been at work again, since there were several more side dishes provided by other families. Strangely enough over dinner, nobody talked about current world events, focusing on

general chit chat through dinner. It seemed everyone had a good appetite that evening since Thomas had to get back on the grill and make up everything he had brought and Cynthia made another batch of her potatoes. At around 7:30, the children were corralled into the room with the large projection TV and a movie was put in with Nicole Thompson keeping an eye on them. Thomas and Rick got the fires started while everyone grabbed seating around the two fireplaces. The Taylors and Thomas and Sharon sat next to each other since they would probably be doing most of the talking.

George started out the meeting with by welcoming everyone and adding in the caveat of "I guess we would all need to thank Tom since without his help, we would all probably be in FEMA camps right now trying to survive on whatever they are serving for dinner tonight. He spent quite a bit of his fortune getting this place up and running and has asked very little in return. I'd say we all give him a hand." A hearty round of applause came from around the group and embarrassed Thomas a bit. The applause died down and George called on Thomas to continue.

"Thank you all, but that really was unnecessary. I'm just glad to have the kinds of friends I have who are in this with me to get through the insanity we all call life as of now. I would also like to welcome all of you here and add that while this may be my property; this is now our home. What is mine is now yours with one condition, everyone helps out. Other than that, I have no hidden agenda, no other conditions, no reason to throw any of you out and most of all, no reason to make myself the leader of the community. More on that later, but for now, I want to go ahead and bring everyone up to speed on what we have. I'm going to talk over three areas and if there are any questions, feel free to interrupt me at any time. We have been building up this place for the better part of four years, getting it ready for a time like this. Some of you have been along for the ride since the beginning; others are newcomers. Either way, we are all in this together now and will rely on each other to get through these trying times."

"First off, shelter. Each of you with the exception of Stu and Heather has their own cabin. The cabins were designed to be tough and each of them stood up to the windstorm that came through here last year. We have enough glass to replace a lot of the windows, but when it storms, I ask each of you to pull down the shutters to keep the windows from breaking. They are pretty tough, based on a shatterproof design, but again, please use the shutters when you can. The submarine batteries in the cabins are charged from the solar panels, but just in case, we have generators and inverters that can charge them up when the PV panels can't be used. Since gasoline is an item we won't have any more access to, I want everyone to think twice about firing them up. Always ask yourself the question 'do I really need to run the generator for power?' Just remember, when we run out of gas, there won't be any more unless we can find a supply nearby."

"Next off is water. I don't foresee this to be a problem since we are on well water out here and with the five thousand gallon tank, we should never run out. But if water does become scarce, we can always use what's in the stream by sterilizing it first. Either way, I think we will be good to go for the water. Each cabin has a battery operated pressure tank that should keep water going to the kitchen and bathroom faucets, the shower and to the hot water heater, and of course, it can be backed up by the generator. Water and water waste management is something that should always be in the back of our minds. The septic tanks were emptied this spring, so they should be close to empty. But we seriously need to remember that once they are filled, its showers outside

and outhouses. Rotor-Rooter isn't making house calls so we have to be careful not to overfill the tanks. George has installed the solar distillers at each of the cabins and we still have three left over to set up. I encourage each of you to use these to reclaim the water to use in the toilets and to water the gardens."

"What about a way to reclaim the water from the showers and sinks? Isn't there a way to run pipes to barrels and buckets where we could then run it through the distillers for use later on?" asked Stu.

"I think we have enough PVC piping to run what you are proposing, but I'm not sure what you have in mind. Do you think you could come up with a plan to brief everyone?" asked George. Stu told the group he would take a look at the current system and try and find a better way of doing things.

"Food. We think we have enough on hand for about a year without counting what we will take from the gardens. I think there might be more, but I'm not sure of the exact count since we have been stashing stuff away like mad up here for several years. We have tried to keep a good inventory, but again, we aren't sure. That year is probably a low figure and we probably have enough for eighteen months without having to hunt or tend to the fields. But, we do have plenty of crops, both in your individual gardens and out in the main fields. Plus, this area is ridden with elk, deer, antelope and a host of other wildlife. The elk and deer have gotten plenty fat over the years by grazing in the fields, eating up the leftover vegetables, so it's time for them to pay their debt to society for stealing from us." Light laughter came from around the group as Thomas continued. "I don't foresee food to be much of a problem out here so I doubt we will starve to death."

"On the notion of shelter, a couple of years ago I started buying truckloads of hardwood to use in the stoves and fireplaces in the winter. In the fall, we can start moving that closer to the cabins, but again, that won't last and we should conserve it as much as possible. We have it in the barn where is has stayed dry and off the ground. I think we should use it for nighttime only and use the soft woods; the pines, aspens and other trees for daytime fires. The hardwood we have can be stretched out to four or maybe five seasons if we only use it during the nighttime and when we really need it during the daytime. We have enough of the softwood on hand to last this winter, but probably not longer, so we will have to go out this next spring and get more. We have plenty of trees around and with the national forest bordering my property, getting more won't be a big deal."

"And security, everyone knows by now about the LP/OP out by the Taylor's house, but there is more to it than that. Everyone has made some plans for the defense around here and it's something we need to continue on. We know for a fact there have been several raids in Colorado by gangs and armed insurgents, so security is something we need to start thinking really hard about, mainly our first priority. Although there have been plenty of firearms brought out, we are too few in number to withstand any sort of massed attack. But if we plan out defenses right, we should be able to withstand the small raiding parties with no problems. Plus, with the ammo brought out and with what we already had on hand, we can afford to have some steady marksmanship training," said Thomas.

"I think we should also work on tactics, buddy, fire team and the group as a whole. If we include Johnny and Jeff Holmes, we will have twenty-five people capable of bearing arms in a defense. If we defend these building separately, we can be picked off very easily, but if we work together and plan our defenses accordingly, we will be an extremely hard target. Also, since everyone is in place now, we can start conducting some small unit patrolling and reaching out to the neighbors and making some friendly contacts. We have a large tract of land here and I figure it won't be long before we start getting some squatters around here. I believe we are off the main roads enough that this shouldn't be a huge issue, but from what Janet told me, the LP/OP has been seeing people almost daily," said Darren. The group agreed to make that a priority.

"Speaking of which, the last thing I want to cover before I turn it over to George is the Trading Post. Since I'm not really concerned with profits at a time like this, what is in there you are more than welcome to have. There are plenty of firearms, ammo, boots, clothing, and gear, whatever you might need," said Thomas and was interrupted by Janie Holmes.

"Yes, there is plenty of clothing for the adults, but what about the children? They grow fast out of their clothing and it isn't like there is a store right around the corner for children's sized clothing and shoes," she stated.

Thomas knew this was something else they had missed in their preparations and something to consider in the coming weeks. "I suppose for now we can mend and use hand me downs and try to figure something out in the near future. Did you have something else in mind?"

"No, just that it will be a real concern in the near future. Children's clothing and shoes go fast, just ask your fiancée if you don't know. Speaking of which, give Tom a big round of applause since he is finally going to get married after all this time," Janie stated. Another round of applause, this time both Thomas and Sharon being a little embarrassed.

"So for now, we use that is available in the Trading Post, in which I do have some children's sized stuff. But long term, we need to think of a plan. I only ask you take what you need and nothing more until we get that problem taken care of," said Thomas. "Any more questions?"

"I wish Ryan were here to brief about the communications systems, but most everyone knows the field phone system that had been installed in each of the cabins and houses. It works off of a 1950s style switchboard, meaning someone has to be at the panel to connect calls. Also, he has a main radio net operating in the room there in the back and can pick up the Talkabout radios up to three miles away line of sight. As for longer range communications, he has set up an AM, FM and Shortwave receiver in the room as well. He also has a ham radio set up but so far has not been able to make contact with anyone, but there has been a lot of chatter out there. Mostly just talk and rumors, but we haven't made contact so far," said George.

"Do you think it's smart to be broadcasting out of here right now? I mean, we all had the briefings about the Lion Claw teams using long range shortwave and ham radios to communicate. There might still be Loyalist direction finding teams out there listening in on those bands. At best, we will be broadcasting our position to those Loyalist forces where they

can come and get us. If we are not killed outright, we will be arrested and thrown into a confinement status awaiting court martial and our families thrown into some FEMA refugee camp. At worst, we will be letting other groups know we are out there and they might come looking. Even those Loyalist forces that have deserted still posses the knowledge, skills and possibly even the equipment to find our location. And they might have some friends come on by to see us. I say we wait some time to make sure the coast is clear before we go out making contact with people, and even then, make slow contact at neutral locations. But until that point, keep a listening watch for information," suggested Michael.

Everyone except Dave Lawson, Misty Taylor and his own wife Shannon agreed with this point. "I believe by communicating outside of the Ranch we will be able to get information and possibly coordinate our efforts against an outside aggressor. I realize it might be dangerous, but, like you said, we don't have enough people around for a proper defense. It would be nice to have some friends to call if we needed them," said Dave in the opposition.

Everyone debated the point for a few minutes before an agreement was reached. They would continue the listening watches until it could be determined if the party on the other end was non-hostile and even then proceed slowly. Contacts would be gathered slowly and meetings would take place in a neutral location. Everyone agreed this was fair and the plan was put in place. The conversation moved on to gasoline, diesel and kerosene conservation and generator use. The idea of the conservation was well received by the group and they made plans to conserve every drop they could. The two washing machines came up next. It was agreed that every family would have eight hours a day per week to use the machines if they needed it. If a family needed it, more time could be given. Thomas explained the hang drying since they could not spare the electricity for the dryers in the basements. This obviously wouldn't be a problem in the summertime but for the winter months, it could pose a problem.

The vehicles, both privately owned and government acquired would be moved to the parking lot by the well. The tanks would be drained, stabilized and then refilled. George talked about the fallback positions and the need to prepare them for possible use. Other defensive measures were discussed and the residents agreed to bring new ideas to the next meeting. Other points were discussed, garbage disposal, work details, collective food storage, guard detail, a possible reaction force, hunting parties and other small details about the Ranch.

The meeting, which had taken over two hours, was coming to a close. Tim Daniels asked for a volunteer to accompany him on his trip to get his ex-wife and child. Stephen Garcia agreed to accompany him since he had gotten to spend more time with his wife in the past few months than everyone else. Kristy Garcia agreed to begin accounting for the supplies on the Ranch and try to come up with an inventory sheet. It was decided that each family would bring in what community preps were currently stored in their house for inventory, but keep enough food and perishable supplies back for a week. Individual supplies would be kept by each family unless space became an issue and then they could store it in other buildings. Stu Donaldson and Jeff Holmes agreed to help out Kristy with the inventory while she asked for the use of a laptop computer to inventory everything out on spreadsheets. She would create a ledger for the residents to sign out items so they could track how much was being used by the Ranch. This was not being done to ensure the portions were fair, but to determine just how long the supplies

would last. Michael, Darren and Dave agreed to go out with George the next day to look at the fall back points and offer their expertise on building them. Johnny Thompson asked his parent's permission to work with Ryan and learn about the communications set up around the camp.

Stephen was the next to speak. "Pretty much everyone knows we brought out five of the K-9s with us and while I would love to keep them all, having that many dogs in one place will not be a good idea. We brought out the most docile of the bunch, three Belgian Malinois and two German Sheppards. Two of them have already been spoken for. I'll keep Jade and Nero if the needs be, but if another family wants one, I have no problems with that. The other, we want to give to you Thomas, as a small token of our appreciation for letting us come here. It's Mongo, you remember him. He is as docile as a kitten around children and not aggressive at all. He is still a young dog and not set into the Alpha dominance like a lot of the dogs are. He is the pick of the litter, if you will excuse the pun, and we agreed you should have him."

Thomas looked at Sharon and didn't get an answer from her looks. She answered for the both of them. "Can we discuss it tonight and let you know tomorrow?"

Stephen agreed, but Thomas knew that meant she didn't like the idea but was being polite in front of the group. Thomas seriously doubted she would agree to keep the dog.

As each of the other families discussed whether or not to take in the additional dog, Frank brought up a good idea. "Since most of you all just got here, why don't we take tomorrow for a family day so everyone can just relax and see their loved ones? I believe nobody around here has had any good quality time with their loved ones recently. I think a 'down day' might be in order for everyone."

Voices of agreement rose from the group and it was decided tomorrow was a day for family and catching up on the quality time they all had missed over the past three months. Thomas was the last to speak before concluding the meeting.

"Again, I would like to welcome you all to the Ranch and I stated before, I'm not I charge here. The Untied States was founded on the principles of democracy and I propose this be the way things are run around here. Decisions affecting the community as a whole should be voted on by the group of residents, eighteen and older. Sensitive votes and those of a controversial nature can be done by secret ballot. Also, we need a community leader and I think it would be best to have one on a rotating basis. Each person here over the age of eighteen can be appointed as leader by a random drawing unless they are unwilling to serve. Once everyone has had a chance to do it, we can go through the list again. I'd like each of you to think about this before our next meeting and see if you all can come up with a different way of doing things. We can debate it tomorrow if that is okay with you. Otherwise, I think it's past time to go get some quality family time and some sleep." Everyone agreed to think about the proposal and to see if there was a better way of conducting business.

As the meeting was breaking up, Thomas went over to Frank and stopped him. "So what happened this morning with our yahoos after you left?"

"Those clowns!" Frank stated with disdain. "A blind man could have followed them to where you left their guns. The whole way there, they did nothing but complain. Complain about us, complain about walking so much, complain about being hungry, complain about their packs. Anyway, it was pretty light when they finally found their guns where you stashed them and I could hear them talking about coming back and trying to steal whatever they wanted from us. I also overhead them saying they were going to take some pot shots at the folks around here and try to 'get even' with us for making them look bad. They had just about decided to do it when I talked them out of it."

"Talked them out of it?" asked Thomas.

Frank grinned as he answered. "Yeah, they had decided to move back this way and I took a shot at them. Didn't hit them, wasn't trying too. I hit a tree between them and scared them so bad one peed his pants. They had no idea I had been following them or that I was that close to them. I followed them for about two more miles before finally dropping them off. They kept looking for me, but lucky for me, I'm a sneaky sorta guy. Anyway, they only turned to come back this way once more and I had to talk them out of it again. After I dropped them off, I waited an hour to see if they doubled back but never saw them again. Instead of following the road, I made a beeline back here and eventually picked up the stream about two miles from here. Did you know you have a marsh about a mile downstream of here?"

"No, I've never really followed the stream that far down," answered Thomas.

"About a mile or so downstream it opens up to a hundred feet, maybe a hundred twenty feet wide and settles into kind of a marsh. There were plenty of ducks and geese down there plus their hatchlings. I snuck up on them pretty close before they saw me and got startled. In the fall before they migrate, they could be hunted down there. It would be nice to have some roast duck every once in a while. Plus, there were several game trails leading to and away from the same spot where it appears some game comes to water," said Frank.

"I'll have to take a stroll down there eventually to see what we have. Well, it's late and I need to get Sharon and Angel home. See you tomorrow sometime," said Thomas.

"Yeah, I'm still pretty tired from the adventures of last night and this morning. Maybe this was the trick I needed to start sleeping through the night," answered Frank.

Thomas, Sharon and Angel headed home and got ready for bed since it was almost 10:00 PM. Not that it had been an easy day, but Thomas still had some lingering fatigue from the past few months. Lying down, he was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER 13 – OLD FRIENDS, NEW FRIENDS

Time since attacks: 96 days
Date/Time: 25 July/0412 Local
Location: The Ranch

The distinctive clatter of the field phone woke Thomas again, although this time it was Stu on the other end. "George has some activity at his place, didn't pick them up until late since they aren't traveling by roads. He would like some friends around in case there is trouble. I'm calling everyone right now and we are all going to meet at the Conference Center."

"How many and what are they doing?" asked Thomas groggily as he looked at the clock.

"Four individuals, all armed and traveling in a tactical formation. Heading in the general direction of the Taylor's house," said Stu.

"Okay, we're on our way over," Thomas answered sliding out of bed. Sharon was already up and getting on some clothes and getting ready to go to Angel's room to get her ready to move. They both dressed quickly and grabbed their long guns and bags before heading out the door. They ran the short distance to the Conference Center where everyone was meeting. When the families were gathered, Sharon, Jeff and Janie Holmes, and the Thompsons were put in charge of watching the children. The rest would move out towards the Taylor's house to a point where they could effectively flank the group. Thomas noticed Rick had brought along machine gun and Stephen had a grenade launcher with grenades strapped on his chest. Most everyone had NODs and those that didn't were paired off with those that did. No updates were received from George except the fact the group was moving very slowly and carefully. They told him to switch on the radio and wait for their call or to call them if the small party changed directions.

As the group moved towards the Taylor's, Thomas heard George call over the radio to let them know Cynthia and Misty were heading back that way to meet up with them. They made contact with Cynthia and Misty and continued to move in the direction of the house, making far too much noise. "About three hundred meters now, moving slow in a tactical wedge formation. They are all carrying military style rifles and heavy packs. They are going into the far tree line…they have stopped I think," said George over the radio as an update.

The group moved directions slightly to a point which was perpendicular to the four people and moved forward again. Another report from George, "Contact. Second group of people, stand by for more."

The four person team with Michael and Shannon Parsons and Stephen and Kristy Garcia shifted to a point between the group and the Ranch and set up along a line parallel to their advance. George came back over the radio "Second group, six adults and nine children. Adults are all armed and everyone has a pack on. Not really moving in a tactical formation, and moving a lot quicker than the first group. Making a beeline toward where they stopped. There is about seven

hundred meters between the first and second group, and I figure it will take them about five or six minutes to meet up."

Thomas and the group from the Ranch stopped and set up online between the group and the Ranch. Frank and Ryan were sent on ahead to determine if the first group was moving yet. After a few minutes, Thomas heard Frank's whisper over the radio. "First group is not moving and have set up security. We are as close as we can get." Thomas wondered how close that really was, but didn't ask over the radio. Chances were, with this group traveling with children, they weren't hostile, but the Ranch residents were not taking any chances. Shortly, the second group caught up to the first and sat down to rest. Frank called over the radio again informing the group several members were conferring about something or the other. After several moments, the group appeared done with their conversation and was preparing to move…although in a different direction.

Frank called on the radio again and stated the first group of four was preparing to move 90 degrees to their right and off in the direction of the Ranch. The Ranch residents decided to intercept them at a point about two hundred and fifty meters behind their current position. Frank and Ryan were moving back to rejoin the team while the main body was moving back towards the selected ambush site. When they reached a point where good cover and concealment was offered, Thomas halted the group and was helped by Rick in setting up an L shaped ambush. He passed the word along they were not to fire until fired upon and a chance for the unknown group to surrender was going to be given. Frank and Ryan rejoined the group and stated the small party was about two hundred meters behind them and would be in sound distance very soon.

After waiting for about ten minutes, the small group of four came into the view of those with the night vision. They were moving fairly slowly and with great care. Two women were in the group as well, their long hair tied up under bandannas. Each person was burdened down by a heavy pack in a dark color, web gear or a tactical vest containing several spare magazines and additional pouches and wore camouflage clothing. Although some of the patterns matched, they mainly looked like George, Thomas and Frank had the first day out, like third world freedom fighters. With the mismatched camouflage, the children in the second group and the non-US standard weapons, there was little chance this group was with the Loyalist forces. However, every precaution was being taken. Thomas waited until they were completely inside the zone where there was little chance of escape without being hit.

"Halt! Do not move! We have you inside an ambush kill zone! We do not want to harm you but will open fire if you make a hostile gesture! Drop your rifles on the ground now!" yelled Thomas in a challenge. The small group looked surprised and hesitated before dropping their rifles. "I said drop them! You are surrounded by superior numbers and we will open fire if you do not comply!" The point man for the patrol sat his rifle on the group and ordered the rest to do the same. "Drop your packs and then your web gear! Do it now!" The group complied slowly, dropping all the equipment they had been carrying on the ground next to their rifles.

Thomas stood up and told the group to walk thirty feet to their left and drop to their knees. They slowly complied as the long leg of the L moved to a point between the four intruders and their weapons and packs. The short leg of the L moved up to a skirmish line between the first group

and the second group. Thomas walked up to the point man of the group. "So, where are you folks heading too?"

"We were heading for cover since dawn is coming in the next hour," answered the man.

"Do you realize you are on private property?" asked Thomas.

"No, sir. We didn't know and if we had known it was private land, we wouldn't be trespassing," said the man politely.

Thomas was unsure of who the small group was or what their intentions were until a thought struck him. He didn't want to ask right away, so he kept up the charade of upset landowner. "Why weren't you on the roadway?"

"The only people that travel the roads are those looking to get disarmed, robbed and killed. We have no desire to become any of those but we use the roads for navigation, paralleling them from cover to cover. Now, who are you people exactly?" asked the unofficial spokesman.

"The rightful landowners of where you are sitting right now. Where are you heading to?" asked Thomas.

"A friend's place northeast of here. I have to tell you, the group following us probably heard you and will start taking you out unless I call them off. I have a radio in my web gear I can use to let them know we are okay for the moment," the man informed Thomas.

"What assurances do I have that you will call them off instead of telling them our numbers and where we are at?" asked Thomas.

"No assurances, but I did tell you about them. Listen, I figure you all are not going to kill us; you could have done that easily enough already. I owe you the same courtesy," stated the man.

Thomas thought about this for a split second before turning to Janie Holmes "Can you see if there is a radio in his web gear and bring it here."

The man informed her exactly where on his web gear it was while she was retrieving it. She walked back to him and handed it over. "Gwenn, this is Mike."

A distorted but readable voice came over the small FRS radio, sounding very concerned. "What is going on? We heard some shouting and we are about to send down some help."

"We are just fine, ran into the property owners and haven't seen any donkeys. Will call back in a minute," replied the man.

Thomas immediately went on guard at the radio transmission and started redeploying the forces and had the four go face down on the ground. The point man was unsure of why he was being slammed into the ground or why the ambush team was setting up security facing north. He kept

Janie with him and covered the four on the ground and had Rick start setting up a skirmish line close to Frank's element. "Real bad move buddy."

"What? What's going on? Why the change of mood all the sudden?" asked the man.

"You don't think I know what a duress phrase is? 'Haven't seen any donkeys' sounds like a duress phrase if I ever heard one," answered Thomas, turning cold towards the man.

"That's my phrase for letting them know you aren't Loyalist forces, not a duress phrase. Trust me, they are wondering what is going on right now and if they don't hear from me again, they will be heading off in the opposite direction. I'm serious, that isn't a duress phrase and I won't try any funny business. My wife and children are back in that rear group and I know you probably have us outnumbered. We would be lucky to get out of here alive if you started shooting. Now please, if you don't trust me, I will tell them to come forward with their rifles slung over their backs so they can't get to them quickly," the man pleaded.

"How about this? You tell them to drop all packs, rifles and web gear where they are at and come down single file no more than three feet between them. And bring the children as well. No sane man would bring children into an ambush, but if you are sincere, you know there won't be an ambush. Deal?" asked Thomas.

"Do I have your assurance that you won't fire or do anything stupid?" asked the man.

"Yes, you do as long as your people don't do anything stupid either," answered Thomas.

The man contemplated what Thomas said before replying. "No deal. No children. The rest of the adults move down here, there are six of them, by the way, but the three teenagers stay behind with the children. Final offer or we will be here all night."

"That sounds fair, Tom. I don't think they are hostile, not with their kids around," said Janie.

"Okay, you got it. Send them on down," said Thomas after some consideration.

The man picked the radio back up and relayed the instructions. The voice on the other end, another male voice, asked him to repeat what he had said. The man repeated the conversation and told him why. The voice at the other end didn't sound very happy at the deal that had been struck, but didn't contest the decision either. Slowly but surely, the rest of the adults in the group moved down, empty handed as instructed. They joined the four on the ground and sat down themselves. The four on the ground propped themselves up and the leader asked "Okay, now what?"

"Well, here is the deal. You are on my property carrying weapons in a time when people carrying weapons on my property tends to make me nervous. Where were you heading exactly?" asked Thomas.

"Our friend has a retreat southwest of Hartsel we were heading too. We are traveling by night

and sleeping during the day to avoid the Loyalist patrols and checkpoints. Since dawn is in about a half hour, we were heading away from the roads looking for cover to set up our camp. We didn't think there was anyone around, but saw the house and figured we needed to avoid it anyway. We were heading this way because the map shows a stream nearby and where there is water, there are also animals to hunt and trap. We can move off your land and be on our way if you wish. You can even take us off your property under guard if you want to. All we want to do is get our families to safety. We are sorry for the inconvenience so early in the morning. If you point us in the right direction, we will be gone," said the spokesman.

"Give us a few minutes to discuss this with the committee," stated Thomas before walking away. "What do you all think?"

"I think we should let them move on, but don't let them see the Ranch," stated Brian.

"My thoughts exactly, although I think we should disarm them and give them their weapons back when they clear our property," said Rick.

"That's what I was planning on, making them move on. But right now or this evening?" asked Thomas.

"I don't think it would hurt to let them stay for the day, so long as someone watches them and they aren't armed," said Janie.

"I think that's a bad idea. I mean, who are these people and what do they want? I say move them on now," said Rick. "Besides, they could be looking to attack."

"What kind of person brings children out before attacking another camp?" asked Janie.

"Maybe not, but I don't know about letting them stay this close to the Ranch," said Rick.

"Something about them though, I had a thought before the donkey comment. I think I know why these folks seem good to go," said Thomas. He turned and asked the leader of the group whether he or any of his friends were members of three large Internet based survival bulletin boards.

"Yes, how did you know that?" asked the spokesman.

"Wild guess," Thomas said before turning back to the three. "Okay, here is the deal. This group is a survivalist group probably headed to a prepared retreat just like we did. Honestly, I think they made a mistake and wandered onto the property out here and will go quietly if we ask them too. I think we should let them stay, but under the conditions of not arming themselves while they are here and we guide them around the areas we don't want them to see. We can keep a watch on them until this evening when they leave. I'm just thinking of those children and making them walk another two or three miles before they can sleep. But, as we decided, we need to put this to a vote with the group."

Everyone was contacted and made aware of the situation and the possible courses of action.

George came on the radio in defense of letting them stay. “From what I saw, they have several small children, some maybe five or six years old. I say we let them stay and move out tonight with a guide.”

No other opinions were volunteered and the matter was put to the group’s first vote. It came out sixteen-five in favor of letting them stay for the day. Rick was opposed to the idea, but went along with the group vote. “Here is the deal. You can stay today and leave out of here tonight with a guide. We can arrange to have water sent out to you so you don’t have to go to the stream. Right in here is a pretty good spot to set up a camp; sheltered and under cover.”

“Some conditions though, you aren’t to be armed while you are on my property. I know this seems contrary to what you may believe, but out here, you are under our protection. I ask that you keep your weapons unloaded and in your tents. Of course we are not telling you not to defend yourselves and if someone is shooting at you, you have every right to shoot back. But again, please don’t carry them around openly. Second, I know you are probably eating hand to mouth, but I ask you not to shoot anything out here. Gunfire tends to make us nervous and that’s something neither of us needs. We can arrange to have water and rations sent out for you since you will be our ‘guests.’ Third, I ask you confine yourselves to the immediate area and not go wandering around. We will have a couple of people up here keeping an eye on you and if you need to go further, work it out with them. If you can’t live with these conditions, we will ask you leave immediately with a guide. Do you agree?” asked Thomas.

“So we can’t be armed, but we can keep our weapons in the tents?” asked the man.

“Yes, and as long as we don’t see or hear them, we will be good to go,” answered Rick.

The man spent about three seconds deciding whether or not to agree. He was nudged by a woman, probably his wife, in a physical way of saying ‘Do it!’ “We can agree to this, now can we go back and get our packs and things?”

Thomas and Rick agreed and weapons were no longer pointed at the group of visitors, but still kept at a low ready. The leader gave instructions for the group to unload and renegade their weapons before coming back down to the spot designated as the camp spot. Thomas and Rick agreed to take the first watch and would be relieved by Stephen and Kristy around 10:00 or so. Renee told the group she would bring up some water and food right after it got light so they could replenish their stock. The Ranch residents except for Frank and Ryan got together and walked away, although not in the direction of the camp. They would take a roundabout way back to the Ranch to confuse the visitors and keep them guessing on where the inhabited buildings were. Frank and Ryan walked back over their footsteps to find the NVG pouch they had dropped while doing their scout.

The point man and leader walked over to Thomas and Rick while the rest of his group was busy setting up tents and stuck out his hand. “Kind of forgot something important. Mike Dugger.”

Thomas and Rick shook his hand and introduced themselves. Mike took a look at the M-4 and M-249 the two were carrying and asked “You folks military or something?”

“Maybe once upon a time, you?” answered Thomas.

“Yeah, me too. Army, 101st Airborne and 10th Special Forces Group. You were pretty good at setting up that ambush, we didn’t even detect it until you started yelling at us,” said Mike.

Thomas pointed at the PVS-14 on his carbine. “One of the benefits of being able to see in the dark. Nice to know we were sneaky enough to take out a Quiet Professional though.”

“Seriously though, where did you guys serve? You have military weapons and infantry training. You are military right?” asked Mike.

“Would you believe we are Air Force cops, or were,” said Rick with a laugh.

“Well, you guys did good getting us into the kill zone,” said Mike.

“Radios my friend. We have a pretty good communications plan around here. We knew where you were more than you knew where you were,” said Thomas.

Frank and Ryan were returning from their walk and had found the case for the set of NODs. Ryan looked over at Thomas, Rick and Mike before exclaiming “Mike Dugger! Man, it’s been forever since I’ve seen you!”

“Ryan Meeks? What the devil are you doing here?” asked the man, slightly astonished.

“Well, they scraped the bottom of the barrel and came up with me. I thought you were in Iraq,” said Ryan.

The two men shook hands before Mike continued. “I was until last Thanksgiving. I came back and didn’t renew my contract with the company. I figured I’d served long enough and needed to spend time with the family and not in some godforsaken hellhole where I was getting shot at,” he said and turned to Rick and Thomas. “You guys sure are lucky and no kidding about your comm setup. Ryan here can make a radio out of a coat hanger, a plastic spoon and a book of matches.”

“You will never guess who else is here,” said Ryan. “George Taylor lives nearby.”

“No way!” exclaimed Dugger. “He was my team sergeant years ago. You tell that old bag of bones to haul himself down here and see me!”

The two talked for several more minutes before Ryan excused himself to return to the Ranch. Dugger gravitated back towards Rick and Thomas and continued the conversation. “So I was in the Army for about twelve years before I was tempted out by contract work in Iraq. I worked with a company over there for almost three years until the family had a good enough nest egg for us to get by without any troubles. I decided last year it was high time for me to spend some quality time with my family and upped and resigned from the company. I still do, or rather did, some contract work along the same lines as I did until the world turned upside down.”

“How did you get into the preparedness thing?” asked Rick.

“Some years ago while I was on active duty, I saw how people suffered and had to live off government handouts and were on their own following a breakdown, especially in the Balkans. I swore my family would never have to go through that, so we started preparing for a similar situation in the States or even for emergencies. We met some folks over the Internet who shared our ideals and got to be friends over time. Eventually one of the families and I worked out a deal. We stored our preps at their property and paid off for a trailer up there. Each of the other folks with us has made similar arrangements with the host,” answered Dugger.

“Why were you all on foot?” inquired Thomas.

Dugger laughed softly before answering. “Well, long story short, every family here is either from Southern Colorado, New Mexico, the panhandle of Texas or Oklahoma. We all had plans to meet at Trinidad to convoy up together. The problem was, we ran out of enough gas to get us all there. Two families took off with everything they could carry possession wise and the youngest children and went to the retreat. The rest of us hid the vehicles outside of Trinidad and started hoofing it. We have been averaging between six and eight miles a night, so we have a good ways to go before we get there. Food and water are our main concerns, but we have been getting enough off the land to get us by. So here we are, just taking it day by day.”

The three continued talking for several minutes before Rick asked if Mike was going to go to sleep. “Nah, I have the first watch. We will change out every two hours,” answered Dugger.

“We can watch for you, you are safe here,” Rick replied.

“Would you trust us if the roles were reversed? I mean, we don’t really know you and you don’t know us. Who knows what can happen?” said Mike reasonably.

“Good point and if roles were reversed, we’d do the same thing,” said Rick.

They continued to talk in low voices since the others were sleeping in the area when Renee and Heather came up riding one of the Gators carrying water jugs and two boxes of food for the travelers. Dugger looked through the offered goods before grabbing a small hiking stove and a bottle of fuel out of his pack. He got the stove started and put on a cup of rice and a small can of ham from the box for his meal. The three continued the conversation with both groups being somewhat evasive in their answers about the two groups.

“I was wondering if we could trade for some fuel for our stoves?” asked Mike.

“Maybe, what kind do you need?” asked Thomas.

“Well, we have a mix of stoves, but I think white gas would probably be best. Most of the group has a multi-fuel or something similar, so any fuel should work,” replied Mike.

“I think we can arrange something, what do you have to trade?” asked Thomas.

“Some Pre-65 silver. How much do you have?” asked Mike.

“Coleman fuel? How much do you need?” asked Thomas.

“I think everyone has at least two or three bottles for fuel. As to how much is in each, I don’t know so I would say bring up three gallons. Would you think twenty cents face would cover it?” asked Mike.

“Twenty cents? How about forty-five face value? Silver prices were out the roof the last time I checked,” said Thomas.

“Thirty five just in case we don't use all three gallons?” asked Mike.

“Okay, thirty-five in face value,” said Thomas.

Mike changed out before long and was replaced by another member of his group, a girlfriend of one of the younger men named Ashley. She seemed standoffish at first, but warmed up to Thomas and Rick after a little bit. Before long, Kristy and Brian showed up and took their place. Rick and Thomas took off back towards the camp, although not in the same direction the other groups had taken. They wanted to continue to make the others guess as to which way the Ranch was in relation to their camp. “Has there been a lot of getting woken up early like that lately?” asked Rick.

“According to George, no, but it’s happened almost every night I’ve been here,” answered Thomas.

They continued to talk for a few more minutes before Rick turned serious. “You know, Janie Holmes has a pretty good point about the other supplies we don’t have. We weren’t really prepared for children growing up.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about that myself. It’s not like we have a nearby Wal-Mart to get more stuff at,” said Thomas.

“We might not have a Target, but we do have trading material and stores in the local area. I mean, yeah, looters have probably hit the local stores, but what do they care about the children’s clothing? We make contact with owners or whoever and wheel and deal,” suggested Rick.

“If you are talking about the Springs or Pueblo, you are out of your mind. Cañon City has a Wal-Mart, if it hasn’t been looted yet, and we still have the problem of being picked up by Loyalist forces at checkpoints. We would have to be really careful,” answered Thomas.

“True, but I’m willing to bet we don’t see any more Loyalist forces and can deal with the shop owners on a basis of trade. Something to think about,” stated Rick.

Rick brought up a good point that it was something to think about. Perhaps tomorrow after they had gotten some rest they could ponder the idea more. Thomas arrived home to find Sharon heating up some water for some of the older freeze dried food that would be expiring that year. He was surprised when she smiled at him since he expected her to be mad that he decided to take the first watch. Thomas was about to add more water to the pot when Sharon stopped him. "No baby, there is enough in there already for the two of us. Janie Holmes said you would be coming home about this time so I wanted to make sure there was enough."

As he opened the pantry door, he was surprised. Since he had been gone, Sharon had stocked the shelves in anticipation of the coming inventory. She had kept back enough for them to get by while the remainder of the food sat in boxes near the back porch waiting to be picked up. He saw the water was boiling and added it to the packs. After letting them sit for the specified time, they dumped the contents into bowls and sat down with a pack of crackers to eat. Angel shared a bit of each, liking the beef stroganoff but making faces only a child her age can make at the spaghetti. Sharon also made a face at it and added some garlic salt for extra flavor. After they were done, Sharon made a strange request. "I want to learn tactics and procedures so I can go out next time. I feel kind of useless staying behind with the kids all the time and the other wives go out. I want to be able to do my part."

Thomas excused himself before going into his study and looking through some books on his shelf. He found what he was looking for, the Soldiers Manual for Common Tasks and Field Manual 7-8, Infantry Squad and Platoon. He explained what each of there were before handing them over and telling her to start reading. He pointed out the chapters which she could skip for the time being and pointed out some important chapters for her to study first. He also explained the level of training most of the family members were at and told her it wouldn't take long to catch up since they hadn't been doing that long either.

Thomas also decided it was time for her to get outfitted with some camouflage clothing of her own after lunch. After finishing and cleaning the items used, they walked the short distance to the Trading Post and started looking through the uniforms on the racks. He guessed her sizes in military lingo and pulled out several sets of uniforms. She also found a pair of boots in her size and grabbed those as well, remembering to break them in working in the fields the next day. He had enough web gear at the house to get her a rig set up, so he didn't bother to get any of that out.

While he was bagging the clothing she had picked out, she was looking through the firearms cases at the pistols. He joined her and opened the display cases so she could look closer at some of the models he had. She eyeballed a Browning Hi-Power closely before picking it up and checking to make sure it was clear. After several minutes of handling it, she commented she liked the feel of it and inquired on whether she could try it out. Thomas told her he had something similar at the house he would let her try that would do just as well or better. After they left the store, Angel started yawning, a sure sign it was her nap time for the afternoon. He was feeling a little tired himself as he laid her in the crib. Moving over to the bedroom, he laid down on his bed before Sharon walked into the room. "Tired baby?"

"Yeah, just a little. I was just going to rest for a minute," he answered.

"Take a nap sweetie. I will let you sleep for a little bit and wake you up. You aren't nineteen years old anymore and need to rest every once in a while," ordered Sharon.

Thomas smiled at his fiancée. "As always, the woman is right and there is no arguing with that. I'm glad you are so much smarter than I am and I don't know what I might do without you."

"Besides have winter clothing in your closet during the summertime?" she said with a grin.

"Of course that, I thought that was a given. You are domesticating me pretty slow, but I'll get there," he laughed in reply. An hour later Sharon woke him up and informed him Tim Daniels was waiting downstairs for him. He had completely forgotten about promising to help Tim organize some supplies for the trip, but promised her it shouldn't take too long.

He went downstairs and met up with Tim, calculating in his mind the amount of supplies necessary for two people, and eventually four people, for the trip which could last up to eight days. Extra diesel, food, water, extra ammo, a heavy weapon, extra clothing, an overnight tent, body armor, the list came quickly into his head.

The two walked out of Thomas's house to the F350 and Thomas made sure the truck was empty of his items before turning over the keys. After checking the fluid levels and making sure the belts were in order, they went to see Darren Thompson who made sure they had several sets of properly filled in MCOs in case they were stopped by Loyalist forces. After that, the two went to the Trading Post to get Tim a decent long range rifle since the ability to provide fire at standoff ranges was invaluable. There didn't seem to be any in the store, so they went down to the wood barn and looked under several piles of wood before finding what they were looking for. Tim picked out a heavy barrel precision rifle custom-made by George in 7mm Magnum caliber that already had a high quality scope mounted on top. He immediately liked the feel of the rifle but wanted to fire it for accuracy before deciding to trust his life with it. Thomas also pulled out a pistol caliber carbine for Tracy to have something to defend herself with. Walking back to the Trading Post, Thomas grabbed several boxes of ammunition and five magazines for the carbine.

They were soon joined by Stephen Garcia who helped out in gathering the supplies. Since the big vehicle was a gas hog, they first topped off the fuel tanks as far up as they would go and included fifteen extra diesel jerry cans in the back. The supplies were put into the back and covered as best as possible with regular waterproof tarps and tied down. Each person would add their personal bag later on before leaving. Tim moved the vehicle over by his cabin so they could leave out first thing in the morning. An additional bag containing frag grenades, smoke grenades and a couple of Claymore mines were placed in the back seat of the truck. He also handed over one of the military shotguns with a variety of ammunition.

Thomas had the chance to talk with Stephen about Mongo and the other dogs. "We haven't made a decision yet as to whether or not we want him. I 'm all for it since I do like Mongo, but I don't think Sharon is going for it."

“I understand, brother. A big dog is a big job. But lucky for us, I was able to bring out quite a bit of food. We had gotten a shipment in and had about twice what we normally do. Feeding them won’t be a problem for a while and even after that, I’m sure we have leftovers to give away,” he answered.

“So who took the other ones?” asked Thomas.

“We are going to keep Jade since she is the only female and we need to keep a close eye on her and in case we want to breed her with some of the others. Benny went to the Thompsons, Spike went to the Parsons and Nero is going to Frank. That just leaves Mongo. I understand if you don’t keep him, it’s not a big deal,” answered Stephen.

“Oh, I want to,” stated Thomas. “But it’s convincing Sharon. She is worried about Angel and having a big dog around. And there is the cat to worry about with an eighty pound dog.”

“Angel wouldn’t be a problem, Mongo loves kids. The cat on the other hand, I am not sure of,” stated Stephen.

Thomas was surprised at the cat so far. After the initial uneasiness of figuring out his new surroundings, he had just made himself at home. Sharon had left a window open for him to get in and out and had replaced the cat litter in his box with sand taken from a leftover construction pile. Thomas wondered if having the dog around the cat would present a problem and decided it probably would.

Ryan soon joined the group and handed over a ham radio along with a list of several frequencies they could contact the Ranch on and different times of the day they would be listening. He also gave over two of the smaller radios and several extra sets of batteries and one military radio tuned into the frequency they were using on the Ranch. All in all, nothing was left to chance for the two to travel out to Utah to pick up Tim’s wife.

Tim and Steve planned on leaving at six o’clock the next morning if all went according to plan. Tim requested to head up to the range to zero the rifle as well as making sure the carbine was in working order. Thomas agreed to take him up in about an hour or so to zero out the scope on the rifle. Tim agreed to meet him back at his house in an hour after he got finished packing out a clothing bag of his own.

Thomas returned to his house and asked if Sharon wanted to go back to the range and practice more on her shooting skills. She jumped at the chance and started calling around to find out who had the child care for the day. While she was busy finding that out, there was a knock at the door. Thomas answered it to find George standing in his doorway.

“In the morning, I want to take our visitors up to their retreat by truck,” proclaimed George.

Thomas pondered the thought for a moment before replying. “That’s a pretty good ways from here and we don’t really know those people all that much.”

George seemed offended at the remark and it showed in his reply. "Mike Dugger was on my ODA for two years and I guarantee he is a good guy. Cynthia and I can make the trip in the morning and all we are asking for is the use of one of the deuces."

Thomas noticed the defensive posture of George and knew this was a line not to be crossed. "I don't have a problem with that and I'm sure that nobody else will either. But we should let the group know the plans tonight at the meeting."

"Listen, this isn't a voting issue here. If Cynthia and I have to ferry them up one at a time using my gas and my vehicle, we will do that. I am just asking to take one of the big trucks to make it in one trip," stated a semi-irate George.

Thomas immediately tried to calm the man. "No problems there and I don't see a problem getting one of the big trucks, but with ten adults and nine children, that will be quite a load even for a deuce. Maybe two trucks or two trips would be better. Either way, with Tim and Steve leaving out tomorrow morning, we would be down by four if you all leave. I don't foresee a problem, but you should at least tell the group where you are heading. It's not a big deal and it's not like we are trying to force everyone to vote on everything. They are your friends and if you want to help them, we have no problems with you helping them out."

George seemed to calm a little at the situation and further stated. "I am going to take them some food from my personal stock. Mike is a friend and would do the same for me if the roles were reversed."

"You can take more out of the community stock if you like. We gave them some stuff already, but if it wasn't enough, we can afford to be a little magnanimous. Any friend of yours is a friend of ours. I'm just worried about the safety of the Ranch and the security in being somewhat unknown," said Thomas.

"I didn't realize we had provided them food already," said George apologetically. "I guess I jumped the gun a little and thought they were being held like detainees. I'm sorry if I came off rough. We can still keep them secluded while they are here and I think the two groups would be a good idea. Less vehicles on the road, less questions to answer if we get stopped. I can have everything ready to brief at the meeting tonight."

Sharon came back downstairs after Thomas and George were finished carrying two long guns, the Savage and the M-1 carbine. "It makes no sense to be carrying it around if I haven't fired it yet, or even zeroed it."

Thomas could not argue the point and went back to the basement to gather more ammo for the carbine. He also grabbed a spotting scope to help Tim get his zero fire at longer ranges. He briefly considered taking more ammo for his own rifle and grabbed a can of military surplus and several empty magazines to load in the vehicle as well.

Tim showed up shortly and they all piled into the Explorer for the short trip to the range. The Holmes had agreed to keep Angel for the time they would be gone up to the range. They went

over to the rifle range where several targets were set up for both Sharon and Tim to zero their weapons on. While Thomas was helping Tim get a rough zero on his rifle at twenty-five meters, Sharon was practicing on the Savage on random targets and continuing the lessons learned from her first visit. She was doing better, learning to make faster shots since she was getting more comfortable with shooting.

Tim quickly got a rough zero down and moved the rifle out to the two hundred meter mark to get a fine zero. By the time he was done, Sharon was about ready to start zeroing the M-1. A cease fire was called and while Tim went out to set up some distance targets, Thomas showed her the principles of using the peep sight on the carbine by drawing out the sight alignment on a piece of paper. She would remove the red dot sight on the front rail and rely solely on the iron sights for the time being since electronic sights could fail and she wanted to be able to use the iron sights effectively. Tim returned and she removed the red dot and fired the carbine at twenty-five meters, getting a zero on the iron sights. When she was done, she loaded up the available magazines with the ammo he brought with him and started engaging targets at the fifty, one hundred and hundred-fifty meter marks. After she was done, she reattached the reflex scope and zeroed it for firing as well. After completing the zero, she was happily plinking away at random targets around the range. Sharon also took a try at his rifle and promptly handed it back after one round stating she wasn't ready to move that far up yet.

Sharon was quickly becoming more proficient with the carbine, making first round hits on the targets out to one hundred-fifty meters with no problems. She even tried her hand at the two hundred meter targets Tim had been using. Although a potent round at close range, the .30 Carbine round starts losing effectiveness after one hundred meters and anything over one hundred and fifty is chancy at best for a one shot kill. Although the carbine was small and the round had limited effectiveness, it was ideal for beginner shooters to bridge the gap between small caliber rifles and larger caliber mil-spec rifles. Until she had the chance to get acquainted with an AR or AK type system, she would still have a means to protect herself further out of the normal pistol caliber range.

Tim had finished with his rifle shooting and was starting to practice on his pistol before they left. Thomas took the time to show Sharon the proper technique and fundamentals for shooting a pistol including two different stances, the Weaver and the Isosceles. She fired a few strings out of the pistol as he made corrections in her hand placement and her body positioning. She tried both stances and found she liked the Weaver the best. She went through five more magazines before they all decided to pack up and leave. As before, they policed up their brass and dumped it into one of the collection cans prior to leaving.

They returned to the Ranch where they dropped off Tim at his cabin and picked up Angel from Janie Holmes. As usual, Angel was her charming self and had the grownups singing her praises about what a good child she was. As they were getting ready to head back to the house, Stephen Garcia came by leading a large German Sheppard on a leash and spoke briefly with the two. While they were talking, the dog looked at Sharon and then at Angel and started wagging his tail. Angel saw this and started giggling at the dog which, in turn, caused the tail to go that much faster.

“Is it okay if she pets the dog?” asked Sharon.

“Absolutely” sated Stephen. “He loves kids.”

Sharon led Angel to the dog whose tail was still wagging. Angel giggled and petted the dog on the side of the head. The dog in turn licked her in the face and caused that much more laughter. After a moment, Stephen pulled the dog back.

“He really is good around children,” stated Sharon. “Is he the one you are keeping?”

“No,” answered Stephen sheepishly. “He’s actually the one I had picked out for you all. Honestly, I was just bringing him out for a bathroom break. Pure coincidence, I promise.”

Angel, not really understanding what the grownups were talking about turned to her Mother. “Mommy, can we get a dog?”

Thomas almost burst out in laughter, but managed to contain himself by coughing and smiling. Stephen looked away, a little embarrassed. Sharon shot Thomas a dirty look before answering. “Honey, I don’t know. That’s Mister Garcia’s dog and I don’t know if he would give him away.”

Stephen wisely did not reply with what was on his mind and Thomas chose to remain quiet as well. He knew he was already in a bit of trouble over the laughing spell and didn’t want to compound matters further.

“Thomas and I will talk about it tonight, Stephen. We will have an answer by tomorrow, I promise,” said Sharon.

“No rush,” said Stephen as he led the dog away to conduct business.

As they started getting into the vehicle, Sharon turned to Thomas. “If I know you like I think I know you, I would say you two had that planned.”

“Seriously, no, baby. I wouldn’t do such a foolish thing. I know it would just make you that much madder about it,” stated Thomas.

The rest of the walk was spent in silence except for Angel who talked about the “doggy” and how much she liked it. Thomas smiled inside to himself. He had worked with Mongo before and knew he was a well trained dog, but Thomas knew it would be hard to convince Sharon it was really a good idea.

The trio returned to the house where Sharon told Thomas she wanted to get a head start on her cleaning and asked if he could get something ready for dinner. Since it was late in the afternoon and the meeting was in a little less than two hours, they decided something simple would do for dinner. They agreed to a soup and sandwich for dinner and Thomas went off to the kitchen to get everything ready.

He grabbed a can of tuna she asked for and a can of corned beef for himself. Setting them off to the side, he grabbed two cans of soup, both chicken noodle and set them off as well. Finishing up in the pantry, he grabbed the loaf of bread out and started to grab a bread knife…*wait a minute? A loaf of bread? Where did this come from?* He took the loaf of bread towards the living room where she was cleaning on the .22 rifle. She saw him out of the corner of her eye and a sly grin appeared on her face as she continued to clean. Apparently someone had learned to bake bread recently. No matter how good or bad, he would have to compliment her on it.

He sliced off five pieces of bread and got everything else ready on the kitchen table before Sharon and Angel came in, washed up and sat down for the evening meal. Trying the bread he was pleasantly surprised. For her first time, she had gotten it right on the mark and he complimented her on it. They continued eating and she laid claim to washing up the dishes since he had prepared dinner. He told her about saving the water to run through the distiller for use in the toilet and the garden. She made it a point to remember the procedure and also asked a question. "Couldn't we use the rainwater from the gutter as well? Or is it too contaminated from the fallout?"

He thought about it for a moment before replying. "I don't think the fallout would be a big problem for the toilet and I'm not real sure about using it for the garden. After this year I wouldn't think we would need to worry about using it in the garden, but for now, it might not work. We will have to ask about that."

"Well, couldn't we just run it through the distiller? Wouldn't that take out the radioactivity?" she asked.

He again paused to contemplate what she proposed and thought the idea had merit, but was not qualified to answer. "I don't really know about that. Again, we will have to ask someone that is more of an expert than I am. I think it would work though." It was something to remember for sure. He had a large supply of plastic water barrels that could be used to catch the rainwater from the gutter during the evening rains and hooking up a collection system wouldn't take that much effort. Plus the barrels could be sealed and stored, if for nothing more than to use in the toilets.

After they finished washing off the dishes, they talked about Mongo and whether or not they could take him in. "Thomas, we already have a cat, I don't know how those two would cohabitate in this house. Plus having a big dog is a lot of work."

Thomas couldn't deny that logic, but stated his mind. "I like the dog and he is well trained. I have always wanted a German Sheppard, but never had the opportunity to actually care for one until now. I want the dog, but I don't want this to be a problem between you and me."

"I just don't know. I like him too since he immediately took to Angel, but again, it's a lot of work. I don't think we should take him," answered Sharon.

"Well, you wouldn't want to tell her she can't have him, do you?" asked Thomas as he nodded

towards Angel.

Sharon got silent after the comment and gave Thomas the "look." He knew he had crossed the line with the comment and probably needed to give it a rest for the moment. He hoped he hadn't completely shut her mind to the idea of getting the dog.

They got ready to go to the meeting scheduled for 7:30. Thomas grabbed a notepad to both take notes and to provide paper for drawing out the names for the leader of the group.

When they arrived, Thomas and Sharon found they were not the first ones to arrive and that Dave was already getting the fireplaces going. "It's a nice ambiance item and besides, we have some papers to burn," said Dave.

Within the next fifteen minutes, everyone arrived except for Cynthia and Misty, who were watching the visitors, and Renee, who was out on LP/OP duty. Thomas called the meeting to order, bringing up the unfinished business from the previous night. The leader of the group was the first order of business for the meeting. "Is there anyone not willing to serve?" Thomas asked the assembled group.

"What exactly would the leader be responsible for?" asked Darren.

"What does everyone think the leader of the group should be responsible for?" asked Thomas.

Ideas flowed in from the assembled group members around the ring of chairs. The leader would be responsible for preparing and holding meetings, assigning work details, negotiating for the group, preparing duty schedules and priorities of work, settling disputes among the group. More ideas flowed in, some dismissed, other adopted. By the time they were done, Thomas had copied almost a page of ideas down.

Sharon suggested the last item. "They should be responsible for keeping a journal, like a logbook of everything that happens here at the Ranch. I mean, nothing of a personal nature, but a diary of events affecting the group as a whole. Just some written account of what has happened here since we have all arrived."

Everyone agreed wholeheartedly this was a good idea and would be implemented immediately. It was also learned Shannon Parsons had already been keeping a journal of her time since arriving at the Ranch and would gladly take out her personal information and add the events affecting the group since their departure from Colorado Springs.

Thomas re-read the list to the group, called for a vote and after the majority vote, the group accepted the measures. He also re-asked the original question on whether or not anyone did not want to serve. Renee, Misty and Cynthia were all contacted about the position and none of them backed out based on the new duties. Thomas asked for a few minutes to get everyone's names written down and asked George to bring his proposal to the table.

After five minutes of explaining what he was going to do with the visitors, he asked for one of

the large trucks. Tim was the first to speak on his behalf. "Everyone knows Steven and I are heading out in the morning to get my wife and child from Utah and I am going to be using a community truck for that trip. I think I would be a hypocrite if I said we didn't allow him to use a truck to get there and besides, we all used those same vehicles to get up here. I say we use it and also, a little charity towards this group might go a long way in making some new friends around here."

A few more opinions were voiced, one of which was the concern for not really knowing the visitors. George quickly dismissed the idea and informed the group their leader was an old friend of his and could be trusted. The only conditions set on him taking the truck were not letting the group of visitors know the exact location of the Ranch and not discussing how well prepared they were with the outside group. George agreed to this proposal and the group unanimously agreed to lend him one of the acquired ex-government trucks.

It wasn't really a vote as Thomas had expected, but rather a mutual agreement of the group to let George use the truck for an unspecified period of time. George brought up the next point. "So exactly what are the grounds for using the vehicle fleet and who is going to control that?"

It sparked a small debate about fuel conservation and what exactly was to be done to use a vehicle. Some members thought the group should have free reign over the acquired vehicles and others thought for business only. After several minutes it was decided the leader of the community would have the final say so on who and why a vehicle could be used. The item was added to the list of duties for the leader of the community and the conversation moved on.

Kristy added the next point of business. "I really have to get started on the inventory tomorrow. Can we add some work parties to help out with the inventory? Also, I can use my laptop to inventory everything out and print spreadsheets so we have a paper copy of what is on hand."

Most of the members of the group volunteered to assist with the inventory, but Darren brought up the point that if everyone helped with the inventory, other areas would suffer. The general thought was to get the inventory completed as soon as possible, but not to let other areas suffer as a consequence. A work priority list of the inventory was brought up by the group, with food stores coming at the top of the list, followed closely by weapons and ammunition, hardware, vehicles, clothing and shoes, and food storage items.

A work priority listing was debated next with the food inventory and tending to the fields coming at the top. The next items on the list were security measures, training and ground maintenance. After a conversation, it was decided to put the security measures at the top of the listing as well. The soon to be determined leader would decide where the work parties would work day to day and who would be assigned. The group continued debating the listing and found more items to add to the listing. By the time they were finished, the listing of work priorities was almost a full page. It was decided that half the group would be assigned to tend to the gardens with the other half being split up between the inventory and security measures.

It was also decided the list would be reviewed weekly to determine whether an item could be taken off or more items added to it. Kristy also brought up the point of storage. "I can get the

inventory complete, but where are we going to store everything?"

"I know we have plenty of materials to build more sheds if needed, but building ones that will last? I figure we all can work on them and decide the best structure to build," said George.

"I can lay out a design for that. I took some college classes on architectural engineering and structures. I still have my old textbooks and can lay out a blueprint in a few days," said Sharon.

Thomas was surprised and proud at the same time. Most of the other group members didn't see it, but Sharon had found something she didn't need help with in the group. She was well on her way to fully integrating with the group and didn't need to rely on someone else to help her out. Sharon felt like she was taking a large step forward to help the group and made a mental note to make sure she accomplished the plans quickly.

As the group moved on, Thomas brought up the point about the radioactivity in the water and whether or not it posed a problem. Ryan answered the question after some thought. "I don't think it should be a problem if you say the fallout patterns were north of here. I was the NBC NCO for a while in my unit and I know for simple fallout, it just needs to be filtered, with more being better. Mainly fallout is Alpha particles and those can do harm if ingested. So, a good rule of thumb to filter…" he said while looking upwards to think about it. "I would say anywhere from two to three feet of sand would be good. Plus when we are done, we could run it through the distillers if we wanted to be absolutely positive. Now the question is, what kind of filtration system can we use without power?"

"We build one, just like we build everything else around here," stated Darren. "I can start thinking of a way to build one and find out whether or not we can collect the rainwater from the roofs. That is the easy part since I know for a fact we have a bunch of those water barrels and for this, we could even use garbage cans. Give me a while to think this one out."

"Is it really going to be that big a deal?" asked Heather Davis. "I mean, we aren't filtering the rain already falling into the fields watering the plants? Would it hurt any more to use that water to flush toilets? Would filtration be absolutely necessary for toilet water or using it to water plants?"

"I suppose you're right," answered Ryan. "For the toilet, it wouldn't be critical to filter it. Drinking is another matter, at least for a year or so. I think it's safe to say we could use the water for most things except drinking, bathing and cooking."

"Plus with reclaiming the shower and drain water, the solar distillers are going to be overused as it is," Stu said as he chimed in for the first time. "I've already got a way of modifying the drains for the showers and sinks to where the water can be collected for distillation. Plus, we do have those other distillers that fit on top of the stove. We can use a campfire or charcoal for them."

He went on for several minutes describing the system and asking if the materials were available or not. George answered "Yes, we have the PVC piping, the joints and everything. However, with the other priorities of work, that will have to wait for a while."

The group agreed to look at the modifications after some of the more critical work projects were completed, but agreed it would be closer to the top since nobody wanted a full septic tank.

Thomas asked if there was any further business to be discussed. Rick asked one final question. "I know most of us here are fairly familiar with the Ranch now, but can we get a map of all the buildings and who lives where just so we know?"

The group agreed it was a good idea and Thomas made plans to get that done as soon as the supply situation was finished. They moved on to the washer times. Thomas told the group how it would work. "I have times for everyone to be able to use the washer throughout the week. It should be available for eight hours at a time starting at 6 AM. The next shift runs from 2 PM to 10 PM. This gives us fourteen shifts to work with. With thirteen groups if you count Amber and Misty as their own group, we have enough to spare. I'm going to pass the can and have each family take one slip out. Each one has the day followed by a one or a two. The one or two means the first or second shift to use the washers."

The can was passed around the fire rings with every family getting a slip. Although Thomas and Sharon didn't really need a specific time since they owned one of the washers, they pulled anyway, getting Friday 1. When everyone was done, Thomas wrote down the times and told everyone he would post the schedule in the washroom of the Conference Center. "Either my machine and the machine in the Conference Center are available to use, your choice on either or you could use both. And in case anyone wants to do it the old fashioned way, we have plenty of washboards and tubs for you to use."

"And my washboard stomach can be rented out as well," added Michael Parsons with a grin.

Boos and groans came from the crowd as his wife gave him the "just wait until I get you home" look. Everyone knew he wasn't serious, but it was a good thing to see everyone starting to get their sense of humor back again.

Thomas brought up the final point of the evening, the leader ballots. He requested one of the younger members of the crowd pick the names out of the can to read off. Haley Holmes was picked and Brian went inside to fetch his daughter and grab a calendar. They both returned from inside and she didn't quite understand why she was pulling the slips out, but went along with it.

The first name that was pulled was Rick Jones. It was decided he would start immediately but his term wouldn't officially "start" until Sunday. Haley continued to pull names from the list with Thomas being somewhat down the list in November and Sharon in January.

The first official decision he made as the new leader was to have a meeting every Thursday followed by some group fellowship if the residents were so inclined. It sounded good to everyone and they all agreed to have a dinner the same night as well, with the cooking duties rotating throughout the community. He also promised to revise the guard schedule the next day to include all the newcomers.

The last task for the group was to unload the deuce George and Cynthia would be taking their friends home with. The group moved the gear into the Conference Center where it would be inventoried very soon by Kristy.

Afterwards the meeting broke up. Sharon grabbed Thomas by the hand and took him towards the Garcia's, who were about to leave as well. "I've given it some thought, and I think we can take Mongo for a probationary period to see how well he fits in. I'm not comfortable with him around the cat, but we will give it a try."

Stephen thanked the two while Kristy went to the house to collect the dog. They spoke for several minutes before Kristy got back leading the dog on a leash and carrying a bag with dog food in it. "He used the bathroom on the way over here, so he should be okay for the night. There should be enough food in here for three days and I figure that will be about the right amount of time to see whether or not you want to keep him. He gets two cups of food in the morning and again in the evening."

Thomas took the leash and the bag of food. Mongo saw Angel and started wagging his tail again. Angel giggled and walked towards the dog. "Are we going to keep him Mommy?"

"We'll see, sweetie. We need to see if he and Harley get along first," answered Sharon.

They said their goodbyes and left the Conference Center. Thomas turned to Sharon, "I would have never thought in the world you would have agreed to this."

"Sweetie, I know how much you wanted this dog. I thought about it and figured you would take care of him pretty well. It's something you want, and knowing this, I needed to be more open minded about it. If you want him, I can go along with that," she stated.

"I promise he won't be any trouble," he stated.

Sharon took his hand in hers and made an announcement. "You have a secret admirer."

"Oh? Who?" asked Thomas.

"Amber Villier. She couldn't take her eyes off you the whole meeting. Those cute puppy eyes a girl makes when she sees someone she likes," said Sharon, who sounded a bit jealous.

Thomas wanted to chuckle at the way she said it, but decided it wouldn't be that smart. "I didn't notice. Was it that obvious?"

"More than that. You are backwards when it comes to women, so I'm not surprised. I did the same thing the first time we went out and you didn't notice then. Of course, I knew to be more forceful with you the next time," she replied.

Thomas felt a little guilty about it since he had complimented her on the night the rest of the group had arrived. He didn't tell Sharon this, but knew he would have to be neutral when

dealing with Amber in the future.

They arrived at the house, and Thomas knew the next few minutes could make or break the decision to keep the dog. After going inside the house, the eighty-four pound dog immediately saw the fifteen pound cat laying on the couch in the living room. What happened was the same story that happened for several millennia. Harley stood up, looking over the dog intently while laying back his ears and swishing his tail. Mongo looked at the cat and cocked his head to the side. He got up slowly and walked towards the couch. Thomas made sure he had a good hold on the leash in case he had to pull him back.

As the dog approached the couch, Harley let out a low cry followed by a growl. Mongo still looked at the cat, a little puzzled, while wagging his tail slowly. When he was close enough to the couch, Harley let out a swipe of his front paw, catching the dog across the face. Mongo yelped and jumped upwards. He landed in the same spot and Harley decided to have a go again, swiping and again catching the dog in the face. Mongo again yelped and back away from the cat and looked up at Thomas. "What a fine guard dog you will make, you pansy."

Thomas tried to bring him closer to the couch again, but the dog would not budge, watching the cat intently. Harley watched the dog intently as well, letting out another low growl. In the first five minutes, it was painfully obvious who would be ruling the house. Sharon laughed at the "big mean attack dog" and lead Angel out of the room. Thomas led Mongo out of the room as well, who kept looking over his shoulder at the violent cat sitting on the couch, still staring him down.

Thomas and Sharon decided to call it an early night and put Angel to bed. They were getting ready to turn in themselves when they heard the report of a shot somewhere inside the Ranch. Thomas was up in a flash, getting a BDU jacket on and throwing on the gear for his PTR-91. He checked the rifle to make sure it was loaded and told Sharon to arm herself and watch Angel until he could find out what was going on.

Before he ran downstairs, he heard the clatter of the field phone so recently installed in his house and went back to the bedroom to answer it. Thomas picked up the receiver and heard others on the line already. He heard Ryan's voice above all answering the questions. "So Stephen shot himself in the leg?"

"Yes, but not in the artery, it's bleeding bad enough, but not spurting," said Kristy quickly.

"Was the bone hit?" asked Ryan.

"No, not that I could see," came the reply.

"Okay, keep direct pressure on it, elevation and hit the pressure points. We'll see about getting some help," said Ryan calmly.

Thomas could hear the receiver on Kristy's end be put back on the telephone unit. Janie Holmes announced she would be heading that way to help with treatment. Ryan stated some of the

visitors might be able to help out with the patching up that would be needed on Stephen. Thomas volunteered to go out to their camp and see.

Thomas ran back upstairs to tell Sharon everything was okay and he would be heading out to the visitor's campsite. By the time he made it back downstairs, he found Ryan already out on his porch waiting for him. They made a beeline directly to the camp and reached it in about ten minutes where they encountered Misty Taylor and Stu Donaldson watching the visitors.

Mike Dugger was woken up and informed of the situation and asked if there was anyone in the camp that could help with the wound. He immediately turned around and went to another tent and brought back another man. "This is Scott Carlson, medicine man extraordinaire and my best friend. He will be all the help you need."

Ryan and Thomas brought Scott up to speed and asked if he would be able to help out. He briefly asked questions. "No bone or the artery was hit?"

"No, we were told it's a straight through and through wound," answered Ryan.

Scott went back to his tent and brought a bag out which looked like a combat lifesaver bag, but a little larger. He made the proclamation. "No problem, it will take me about half an hour to fix."

Misty, who overheard the conversation, asked the trio if she could come along. They quickly briefed Scott she was one of the Ranch residents who was studying medicine and could use the experience, even watching it. He agreed and they went on their way, half jogging and halfway fast walking.

By the time they returned to the Ranch and Stephen's cabin, they found Janie already had dressed the wound, started an IV bag and was taking the rest of Stephen's vital signs. She saw the new man and said "I hope you are a doctor."

"Close enough, Special Forces medic with the 7th Group. I got my gunshot wound training in Miami at the hospital in the bad part of town and a more practical experience in some godforsaken places since then. I can sew with the best of them," stated Scott.

The two went to work immediately, rechecking the wound, cleaning it and prepping it for stitches. Carlson went into the bag he brought along getting the necessary items needed. After some painful poking and prodding, he made the announcement "Well, you are lucky and unlucky. Good news first, it didn't hit the bone or the artery, which would have caused a major problem. As long as I get some things done quickly, you will make a full recovery."

"Bad news, the bullet tore a .45 caliber hole in your leg. I'm going to have to do some delicate stitches or else you won't heal properly. You won't be dancing for a while, but I think you aren't in any danger," said Scott. "The only other thing to do is to get him to a hospital, but I figure that is a chancy proposition and I can do just about everything they can do here."

"Well, doc, we really don't want to be going near any civilized place for a while, if you know

what I mean," said Thomas.

"I understand," said Scott and turned to Stephen. "Do you want me to go ahead then?"

Both Stephen and Kristy nodded and Scott requested the room be cleared except for himself, Janie and Kristy. Misty asked if she could stay around and learn about the treatment. Scott agreed and the others left the cabin. Misty came running out a minute later and asked where the medical supplies were stored at. Thomas took her and went towards the Conference Center to gather more supplies to help out with the wound.

After returning, they noticed a group of people had gathered at the cabin to see how Stephen was doing. Thomas walked over to Tim and asked how this would affect his plans to leave.

"Well, I still want to go, but I don't have anyone to ride shotgun with me now. I will make the trip alone," answered Tim.

"You don't have to do that. I can have a bag packed tonight and be ready to head out with you in the morning," said Ryan.

Tim didn't really know Ryan but agreed to the request. "Can you bean ready to roll by 6:00 AM then?"

"No problem. Was Stephen taking anything special like a weapons system?" asked Ryan.

They informed him he was taking an M-203. "No problem, it will take less than five minutes to switch over. Let's go ahead and grab it before they get too involved in there," said Ryan.

The two went inside and found Scott and Janie hard at work fixing up Stephen. A worried looking Kristy showed the two where Stephen had left his weapons. Ryan quickly detached the launcher and the leaf sight from the M-4 while Thomas gathered the rounds up.

They were leaving the cabin when they were stopped by Scott. "I will have him done in the next half hour or less, but we need someone to give up a pint of blood for him. Plus, I was planning on leaving in the morning, but I'm going to stick around to keep an eye on him if that's okay. I will need unlimited access to the area here if that is the case."

They agreed he could come and go as he needed to check on Stephen. Thomas asked what blood type Stephen was.

"A Positive," answered Kristy.

"My blood type," answered Thomas. "I will oblige, but I don't particularly care for needles."

"Don't worry, Tom. I'll take it out of your neck where you can't see the needle," Janie answered with a smirk.

Thomas chuckled and went outside to hand off his rifle and asked someone to go tell Sharon he was giving up some blood. His rifle was taken by Darren who stated he would tell Sharon.

Thomas went back inside where Janie started an IV line to draw the blood out of his arm into an empty bag provided by Scott. About ten minutes after they started, Sharon knocked on the door, insisting she be with her husband after he finished giving up the blood.

Upon reaching a pint, Janie removed the catheter and taped a small square bandage over his arm and told him to rest easy for a little while. Janie returned to helping out Scott and now Misty finish up on Stephen. Scott was making a point to show Misty how to apply the stitches and was going to have her practice on the entry wound with close guidance.

By the time Misty had finished, Scott and Janie both remarked they had never seen such a good job by a rookie before. Misty beamed under the praise and thanked the two of them. Thomas had finished a quart of sports drink mixed for him by Kristy and felt well enough to go ahead and go home.

Sharon insisted on helping him out, over his protesting he was fine. Thomas only felt lightheaded once on the walk home and sat down with Sharon next to the pond where they watched the still waters in the moonlight. After getting home, they found Darren still there keeping an eye on Angel and thanked him for helping out. They turned in for the night and were asleep before they knew it.

CHAPTER 14 – NEW LIFE

Time since attacks: 97 days
Date/Time: 26 July/0722 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next day went well as there were no further interruptions that night and everyone was able to get a good night's rest. Scott Carlson had spent the night in the Garcia's cabin and pronounced Stephen was doing well to everyone's relief. Tim and Ryan left out early, as did George and Cynthia taking the first group to their retreat.

This morning, it was round two for the dog and cat deciding dominance over the house. Mongo was taken outside where he conducted business and watched a rabbit in the field between the house and the Trading Post. When Thomas came back inside, Mongo saw Harley sitting in the floor in the kitchen and walked cautiously towards him. Harley immediately went on the defensive and crouched down in pounce mode. When Mongo got close enough, Harley pounced onto his back and dug his claws in, biting and scratching with his back legs. Mongo let out a yelp and tried, unsuccessfully, to get the cat off his back. Thomas was able to grab Harley by the scruff of the neck and get him off. Mongo immediately moved away from the two with his tail between his legs, looking at the cat with fear on his face. It had been fully decided who was the main keeper of the house.

Stu gave Kristy the day off to watch Stephen but Jeff Holmes and Johnny Thompson stepped up and started gathering everything for the inventory that would start soon. Sharon went off to work in the fields and left Angel with Renee Lawson. Rick and Thomas started preparing the extra weapons for storage that had been brought out by the last group. They sat on the porch cleaning and oiling the weapons throughout the morning and had a brief lunch at the house.

Since Scott had helped the Ranch residents out the night before, the tensions between the Ranch and their visitors practically vanished and no guards were posted. The visitors agreed to keep to their area and not to wander towards the Ranch. It was early in the afternoon when Thomas and Rick received a visit from Scott Carlson.

"I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of having Misty show me your medical supplies. Not to put down what you folks have, but you are lacking in some areas," said Scott.

"Such as?" asked Rick.

"Antibiotics for one. You have some, but the problem is they disappear quicker than you think when you are using them. Empty IV bags are another thing you don't have. I didn't have the time to thoroughly check everything out, but I'm sure there are some areas you missed. It's not a bad thing, but you really don't have anyone except for Janie with medical experience around here to tell you what to get," said Scott.

Thomas pondered the thought for a moment and remembered Janie Holmes was not a part of the group when they were making their preps. A large oversight on the members of the Ranch. "So how do we fix that problem?"

Scott thought for a moment before answering. "I think we could work out some sort of trade. I can get you some of the medical supplies you need and I can also give Misty and Janie more training in wound treatment as well as some old books on diagnosing medical problems. I have to figure out exactly what areas you are lacking in and then look at the trade."

"What would you be looking to trade for?" asked Thomas.

Scott paused before continuing. "It's a pretty big trade, but we need some night vision equipment. That's the one thing our retreat was not able to get prior to the Fall and I'm pretty sure they haven't gotten any since. We have one Gen II scope, but that's about it. I don't know if you all have any to part with, but medical supplies are something you would regret not having more."

Rick and Thomas silently thought about what the man was saying and knew he was right. Rick, the new spokesman for the group, answered. "Okay, get with Misty to get you an exact inventory of what we have and you tell us what we need. We will go from there on the trade."

"Sounds good to me," answered Scott. "It might be a few weeks before we can get back down here, but we have a deal for the moment. Not to be nosey, but exactly how did you all get here anyway? I've heard of quite a few retreats, but nothing quite this advanced or set up this well. I mean, I know for a fact we aren't as set up as you all are here."

Thomas explained the origins of the Ranch for several minutes and how the group came to be here, skipping over the part about deserting from the Loyalist forces, but Carlson had figured that part out for himself. He put out his thoughts on the matter. "Escaped just in time for the government, or what's left of it, to finish destroying this country. Mike told me what you guys did before coming here. Don't worry, the secret is safe with me and I'm not holding judgment. In fact, I'm surprised you guys waited that long before coming here. I know I wouldn't have."

"Well, the last straw was the door to door searches. We all knew it was just a matter of time before someone got a round between the eyes and we all figured to be long gone and safe here before that happened. I, for one, don't think of myself as a deserter, but rather taking my talents to where they are appreciated and where I can make sure my family is safe. It is wrong what the government is doing and we won't stand for it," said Rick.

"Plus, right before we left, we heard a lot of the Army units were being moved up north towards Denver and eastward towards Kansas City and St Louis. Apparently, word leaked out that the searches had already begun in Colorado and the general population was taking matters into their own hands. There were supposedly areas which were already setting up defensive works to repel military units as well as the criminal element. A lot of people won't be willing to give up their supplies so easily and will make the government respond with force. I don't think it will come to

that in a lot of cases, but when it does, we will be in a civil war, more so than we already are. A lot of reserves and guardsmen are leaving the Loyalist forces since it's their own neighbors out there manning those positions. I figure the active duty forces won't be that far behind when they hear about their family's security being taken away," said Thomas.

They talked a few more minutes before Thomas gave Scott a tour of his house, showing him the off the grid engineering that had gone into the design. Scott remarked at how amazing it was and wished the two groups had met before the Fall so they could have gotten ideas from each other.

"Honestly, not too many groups could have pulled this off. I'm not bragging, but most groups didn't have the money to put into this like I did. I also never broadcast it out in the open either. Sure, I was a member of quite a few of those Internet boards, but I never told any of them just how well prepared I was. I didn't want this place to be well known as a survival retreat since there is some safety in being anonymous. Sure, we were open for business before the attacks, but all we can do is hope we are far enough away from most everything for people to leave us alone. All we can ask is that your group doesn't spread the word about our little campground here," said Thomas.

"You have my word," promised Scott. "But our groups might as well have some contact now. We will give you a frequency you can contact us on and we can set up a listening schedule."

"Sounds good. How is Steve going to make out?" asked Rick.

"He should be good as long as we keep the infections down. He won't be moving around very well for at least a month, but after that, he should make good progress," answered Scott.

The two talked for a few more minutes before Scott excused himself to go find Misty and fully check on the medical supplies. Thomas and Rick were going to bag some of the M-16s they had brought out, but decided to give them another cleaning before putting them in storage. The M-9 pistols were another story. They had been thoroughly cleaned and were ready to put into plastic bags. A generous amount of Cosmoline was added to every part they could and the weapons were ready for long term storage. Gallon Ziploc bags were used and a small packet of desiccant were dropped in for good measure.

By the time they were done, Rick and Thomas noticed people were starting to return from the fields. Rick excused himself and told Thomas he was going home to meet Michelle.

Thomas saw Sharon, looking very tired and dirty, meandering up the road towards the house with Angel in tow. She finally reached the house and plopped down into chair on the porch setting a bucket with fresh veggies in it beside her.

"Bad day at the office dear?" Thomas asked, teasingly.

Sharon groaned before answering. "I used to love to go out and play in my flower garden for a couple of hours at most. Now, if I see another weed today, I think I'm going to scream."

"Just think of what it's going to be like at harvest season," he said with a laugh.

"I'd rather not," she said with a tired laugh. They sat on the front porch for several more minutes watching Angel romp in the yard and be a kid. "I hate to ask, but do you think you could fix something up for dinner? I'm bushed."

"Why would you hate to ask? I've been sitting on my can all day while you've been out working in the sun. Anything in particular you want to eat?" asked Thomas.

"Food; that works the best right now. Can you feed it to me as well?" asked Sharon.

"You aren't that lucky. Why don't you go upstairs and get cleaned up while I get everything going?" suggested Thomas.

Dinner was chicken, rice, shells and cheese and a fresh salad made from some of the items she had brought back from the fields that day. After dinner they were paid a social call from the Janet and Darren Thompson and the two families went to the front porch to sit in the cooler evening and talk. Small talk passed for a few minutes before the talk turned to the Ranch and how things were going there. The entire Thompson family had gone out to the fields today to work and Janet brought up a good point. "With what we are getting out of the fields so far, we are going to need to look at preserving some stuff soon or it's going to go to waste."

"How much are we getting already?" asked Thomas.

"Enough that we would be seriously wasting a lot if we didn't. We won't be starving this winter at all if we got a jump start on it," said Darren.

"And those that don't know how to can will be able to learn right?" asked Sharon.

"Of course. I think Michelle, Cynthia and I have about the most experience in that area and we would be happy to teach everyone if they would like to," answered Janet.

"I think everyone should learn, even the children can learn how to do it," stated Thomas.

Everyone agreed this should be soon, lest the fresh foods go to waste. The issue of seed stock for the next year was also brought up. Thomas would have to check with Cynthia and George to find out just how many seeds were purchased this year and how many would be available for the next year.

Sharon also brought up another good point. "You know, working out there in the sun all day was hot and there was little shade. The closest area is about a quarter mile to the tree line for some shade. It would be easier if there was some sort of awning near the head of the gardens. Do we have a tent or something like that we could put up?"

Before Thomas could answer, they were joined by Michelle and Rick Jones, who were also out visiting that evening. They were brought up to speed on what had been discussed so far and

about the tent idea. Rick answered that question. "I think we brought out one of those Darnel tents with us and if we take the front and back off, it would be a good shelter."

"I also would like to have meetings every night until things turn somewhat 'normal' around here. I've already talked to the other families and they like the idea of having the meetings every night for the foreseeable future. So I'm calling for a meeting tomorrow where everyone can bring their ideas to the meeting for improvements around here."

"So spread the word, meetings every night until we get things settled around here. I would like to go out and get more firewood for the 'chats' we are having since I don't want to dip into the stash you have in the barn. I'm taking a truck out tomorrow to get that pile by the range that won't do us much good in the stoves, but might be nice in an open burning situation. Want to come along?" asked Rick.

Thomas said he was willing, but wanted to work for a while in the gardens in the morning. Darren made the same excuse, but both agreed to go after lunch.

Rick stated he was going to check on the rest of the firearms they had brought out as well as the ones from around the property in the morning and would let everyone know what was available at the meeting tomorrow night. Thomas also told him he would help, but wanted to wait until after the meeting so George and Cynthia could let them know where all the firearms were stashed on the property. "There is no telling where George put them all. I would rather wait for him to be around to tell us precisely where they are. Why don't you help out in the gardens in the morning instead?" suggested Thomas.

"I would, but I think finding out just how many firearms and ammo we have is more important. There are plenty of people to work in the gardens, but only you know precisely where most of the buildings are on your property and can find them," stated Rick.

There was general agreement from the people sitting on the porch so Thomas agreed to help out in the morning. The conversation moved on to the rifles sitting around and what might be issued to the families.

"I wouldn't mind getting a good hunting rifle for Johnny and Janet, possibly even Nicole. What do you think about letting us have the pick of the litter before putting them into storage?" asked Darren.

Rick thought about the idea before agreeing. "How about the full gambit of hunting rifles and shotguns for everyone? It would make the inventory easier."

"Just the ones we can reload for and not the ones we are limited on ammo," suggested Thomas.

"But that's why we got the Russian rifles for, for trading. That's what the chickens were traded for," said Janie.

"Not everyone is going to want a beat up sixty year old Russian bolt action. We will have to part

with a few of the good rifles at some point," stated Darren.

Thomas broke into the conversation. "How about we wait until the meeting tomorrow to discuss this? This is a decision for the entire group to make and not just us six."

The group agreed this was fair and moved on to other subjects. The conversation lasted for another hour before everyone went their ways. Thomas and Sharon made a quick walk to the Garcia's cabin to check on Steve before turning in for the night. It served a double purpose of giving Mongo a walk before bedtime. They found them doing well and got the full story from Stephen.

"I was cleaning my 1911; getting ready to leave in the morning," Stephen explained. "When I was lowering the hammer, I must have had some oil still on my hands and the hammer slipped. I know, I know, I should have had it pointed somewhere else besides my leg. I can't believe I shot myself making such a dumb rookie mistake. I figure you guys will stop bugging me about it in fifty years or so if I'm lucky."

"Only if you are lucky," said Thomas, laughing at the story. "But the important thing is, you are going to be okay.

"Did someone go with Tim?" asked Stephen.

"Ryan Meeks went up with him. Rest easy knowing he is in good hands," answered Thomas.

They continued talking for several more minutes before heading home. Sharon read her field manuals by oil lamp as he played with Angel on the floor. They played for a few minutes before she asked Thomas a tough question. "Daddy, when are the lights coming back on?"

Thomas took her and sat her down next to him and tried to explain. "Angel, the lights probably aren't coming back on for a while."

"But why Daddy?" asked Angel.

Thomas tried to think of a way to describe what had happened so far, the attacks, the retaliation, the embargo, society ripping itself apart. How to explain it to a three year old? "Sweetie, some bad people did some bad things which caused the lights to go off. Someday the bad people will be gone and the lights will come back on."

"Are the bad people coming here?" asked Angel wide eyed.

"No sweetie, they aren't coming here," answered Thomas with a smile.

"But what if they do, Daddy?" Angel insisted.

"I won't let them come here. You and Mommy are safe here with me," he said reassuringly.

Angel seemed to accept this answer and wanted to continue playing. Thomas obliged for a few more minutes before she started winding down. As with most children her age, she could go from hyper to sleepy in less than fifteen seconds. He and Sharon put her to bed before they started to turn in themselves. "Good job, Daddy, answering that question. I couldn't have done as good a job as you did."

"I wasn't sure what to say or how to put it into terms a three year old might understand," answered Thomas.

Sharon smiled at him. "Well, you did a pretty good job of it. Angel really loves you, you know. Ever since the first time you met her, she has latched on to you. I think that's part of the reason I love you as much as I do. Children are a good judge of character sometimes and I saw the way she took to you. I knew I couldn't go wrong then."

"Well, thank you. I kind of took to the two of you as well. It was a good deal for the both of us. And, by the way, I kind of love you as well," said Thomas.

"Kind of?" asked Sharon, with a tone in her voice.

"Maybe just a little, like maybe more than the world," answered Thomas.

"Like more than your guns?" she asked while trying to conceal a grin.

"Now, don't push it lady. A gun can be silenced and won't get jealous if you have more than one gun in bed with you at a time. Guns also don't mind when you lock them up in the closet or trade them in for a new gun," said Thomas.

"Oh, and what model might you trade me in for then?" she asked, playing along.

"I was thinking something Italian or maybe one from Brazil," answered Thomas with a grin.

Sharon made another face before continuing. "You know, I could trade you in as well. I would probably only get a derringer or a single shot though."

"Ouch, maybe I should keep the model I have for the moment. Seems to me I have a pretty good shooter and should keep it around to see just how valuable it gets," he said.

"Well, mister, why don't you come on over here and I can show you just how hot this gun can get," said Sharon with "that" look on her face as she patted the bed.

Thomas crossed the room and put out the lamp before getting into bed. An hour later when she was asleep he thought to himself. *Oh yeah, I've got a one of a kind custom order here. How did I ever get so lucky?*

CHAPTER 15 – LOOKING UP

Time since attacks: 98 days
Date/Time: 27 July/0643 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, Thomas learned Rick was manning the LP/OP and he also learned he had the duty the next day. It wasn't a big deal as he knew he had to enter the rotation anyway, but he knew Sharon needed to get spun up soon as well so she could work it. He would have her come down tomorrow so he could show her some of the duties associated with the observation post. This morning though, he would go through some items while out in the gardens. Since he was the first up, he fixed breakfast for the threesome and they armed up to work in the gardens.

They grabbed an MRE apiece, filled their canteens and Camelbaks and headed over to drop off Angel at the Conference Center with Amber, who was watching the children today. Again, Amber started flirting again, but this time in front of Sharon. Thomas was a little unnerved at the behavior, but didn't say anything this time. Amber did, however, get a dirty look from Sharon.

As they left, Sharon took his hand in hers and said "See what I mean now?"

"Yeah, I was being a blockhead before and didn't notice," replied Thomas.

Sharon chuckled at his backwards behavior. "No problem, baby. I think it's about time the two of us get acquainted though. I suppose I have to establish my territory."

"Do try and play nice with her. We have to live together here," said Thomas.

"Oh, I will be nice. I have tact," Sharon said seriously.

"Tact and your name have never collided in the same sentence," laughed Thomas.

"Seriously, she shouldn't be acting like that around someone's fiancé, who is almost my husband. She is young and pretty and probably thinks she can get away with it since we aren't married. But she is also still technically married and should act that way as well," said Sharon.

Thomas let the matter drop as there were matters better handled by women anyway. They made their way to the fields and found out where they should go to work today from Renee. They made their way to a shed which had the various hand tools needed to tend the gardens. They took several tools apiece as well as several buckets and baskets. They dropped their packs and rifles with Renee and went to the section that hadn't been tended to in some time.

It was hard work, but he was enjoying it and didn't even notice the time slipping away. He started thinking about the garden behind his house and the tending it would probably need here

soon. It was something he needed to do in the next few days if they got the chance. *So much to do over the next few weeks and we barely scratched the surface. Will we ever get ahead?* Thomas wondered to himself.

Before long he started to feel hungry and looked at his watch. It was close to noon and fairly hot outside. He collected Sharon and went to grab their bags to head to the trees nearby to eat lunch. He knew the tent would help out here and added that to his mental list to get done soon.

After reaching the shady area, they ate their MREs in silence and tried to replace some of the water they knew they had lost. Sharon was attempting to try all the varieties of MREs and had gotten the Country Captain Chicken. She wasn't that thrilled over her choice, but managed to choke it down.

After they were done, they refilled their Camelbaks and went back to the area they had been working in and continued to yank and dig up the persistent weeds. They also picked the area of the ripe vegetables and put them in baskets to take to the front when they were done.

Before long, they were joined by Rick, who had been relieved at the LP/OP. "George and Cynthia are back now and will be heading out in the morning with the other half of our visitors."

"How did everything go?" asked Thomas.

"George said they were horse's butts about the whole affair. Not the ones we gave a ride to, but the leader of the retreat they were going to. He wouldn't let them in closer than a quarter mile from his place so they spent the night on some logging road on the way back. George wasn't too thrilled about that. He said Dugger did apologize and promised to keep in touch, but George wasn't sure the retreat leader would go for it," said Rick.

"Well, we will have to see what happens in the future. Are you ready to do this?" asked Thomas.

Rick said he was ready and Thomas gave Sharon a quick goodbye kiss and collected Darren before heading back. They went the long way through the woods, looking for prospective wood piles before getting a truck. They found quite a few downed trees and limbs lying around so gathering up a good pile shouldn't be a problem.

Reaching the Ranch, they gathered the keys to the Dakota and took it to the woodshed. The three started filling the bed of the vehicle with the firearms stored there to move to Dayfield's house where they could be inventoried. Although the threat of the Loyalist forces doing an unannounced search still loomed over their heads, they knew the chance was remote since they were well off the beaten path and most military forces were being re-deployed to east of the Mississippi. When they made it back to the Trading Post and were unloading, they were met by Kristy to check on their progress.

They informed her they had just started and would not get done that day at all. "Why don't you just get started tomorrow then instead? That way you have a full day to get it going," she asked.

"Because tomorrow is going to be a family day, a do what you want to day." answered Rick. "It's Sunday and I think we should have a day off just to do nothing but be with our families."

"But there is so much to do," she protested.

"Some of us are still religious and think Sunday should be a non work day," Rick answered.

"So if I want to work, I can?" she asked.

"As long as you don't need help from anyone else, sure you can. But I'm asking for you to just take it easy tomorrow. Everyone needs a little rest now and then," answered Rick.

Kristy agreed to consider it before going off to do whatever she was doing before. The three finished unloading the truck and made plans to gather the firewood for tonight. They took the Dakota back to the small shed next to the wood barn and gathered axes, hatchets, bow saws and a small chainsaw just in case.

They drove into the woods they had been in before and started gathering a good pile of wood to break up. The three took turns sawing and chopping the fallen wood and didn't need to use the chainsaw at all. The filled the bed of the truck nearly all the way before calling it quits and grabbed a bunch of handfuls of the smaller branches to use as kindling.

As they were driving back to the Conference Center to unload it, Rick stated "You know, any time we do any work, we ought to be keeping every bit of wood we can so use it in the winter."

The three agreed this was a good idea and made plans for another shed where wood could be stored to season and dry prior to cutting. They returned to the Conference Center and unloaded the truck, putting the wood underneath the deck and the tools inside of the closet to be retrieved later. They left the truck there and went their separate ways.

Thomas knew Sharon would be returning soon from the fields and he wanted to have dinner ready by then. He went to the basement and looked through the freezer at the items they could make. He found a suitable sized ham and grabbed the cans he needed as well and took everything upstairs. Since everything was pre-cooked, it would take no time at all except for the ham. He loaded it into a pan and set it in the oven taking a peek at his watch when he did so.

Knowing he had some time to kill before she returned from the fields, he went back to the basement to look through the ammo he had for what he would be giving up to the community. Besides the unique calibers only he owned, he would be lumping most of everything into the stores, with one provision. The bulk surplus ammo or cheap reloads could be fired anytime, but the hollowpoints, hunting rounds and match ammo he wanted used sparingly. He knew nobody would have a problem with that and he also knew they have a good supply of reloading equipment to replace some of them. Either way, he wanted to save what they could and use the less effective ammo for training first.

He started taking up the cases of ammo and setting them out on the porch to be picked up the

next day. Checking his watch, he went inside to check on the ham. It was coming along nicely and he knew Sharon would be returning at any time from working the fields. He went upstairs and grabbed a quick shower and changed clothes. By the time he was done, he heard Sharon coming inside with Angel. He met them in the living room where Sharon looked tired, again.

"So what's cookin', good lookin?" asked Sharon.

"Ham, green beans, hominy, and some garlic rolls as soon as the ham is done. You have just enough time to grab a quick shower before dinner," answered Thomas.

"Okay, but tomorrow, I cook. I've been learning some new recipes from other people and I want the chance to try them out. You are my new guinea pig," she stated.

"A man never complains when a woman cooks for him. In about thirty minutes, everything will be on the table," he said.

Dinner went well and they both started getting ready for the meeting. Thomas grabbed his 1911 and put on the shoulder holster. Sharon had taken to calling the stainless pistol his "dress up" gun and told him he needed to find her one that matched. It was something he seriously needed to rectify in the coming days, like tomorrow. After his shift at the LP/OP, he would take her up the range and try her out on a few of his pistols, maybe even open the range for everyone.

As they arrived at the Conference Center, they found Rick and Michelle already there. Thomas helped Rick build one of the fires and was watched closely by Sharon. He didn't remember fire building on her list of things to learn so he took his time building up the tender, the kindling and the main firewood, hopefully letting her learn some things in the process.

Before long he got the fire going and everyone had showed up. The meeting was called to order by Rick who brought up the first point of business. "Tomorrow I would like for everyone to take the day off just to be with their families." The group thought that was an outstanding idea and amended it to make every Sunday a family day. Although some of the group wasn't that religious, they understood the principles of the Sabbath and would celebrate it in their own way. Perhaps it was time for them to rediscover their religion and start being more faithful.

Thomas brought up the idea of opening the range tomorrow afternoon and the invitation was open for everyone. Frank insisted it would be better to go in the morning before it got hot but Thomas informed him of his duty at the LP/OP in the morning. Johnny agreed to take his shift at the LP/OP if Thomas would take his on Monday afternoon. The sunshade idea at the gardens was met with overwhelming approval and would be implemented as soon as the tent could be located in the inventory. Shannon Parsons brought up the next good point. "We seriously need an outhouse at the fields. When the call of nature strikes, we don't always have the time to run all the way back to the Ranch. Can we get something built out there?"

"I'm sure we can come up with something in the next few days. That's a priority," said Rick.

Kristy brought up the supply situation. "If everyone chipped in for one day, we could probably

have the inventory done a week sooner than planned. Also, I need everyone to get all the community property out of their house and onto their porch so it can be picked up. And one more thing, storage space, where are we going to store the goods when we get them? I know we discussed storage sheds, but where do we stand on those and how long will it take to get them built?"

All eyes turned to Sharon. "I've got a rough draft right now, but how sophisticated do we want them? The more extravagant we want them, the longer it will take to build."

The group talked for a few moments and decided on four structures, uninsulated and on simple concrete or brick pads would suffice. Sharon told them she would purposely build them to where the group could make improvements if they wanted to at a later date. She promised to have floor plans and specifications in three days.

Thomas brought up the idea of giving out the unused shotguns, handguns and hunting rifles to the group for "safekeeping." Monday, Thomas promised he and Rick would have a rough estimate on what could be given away. He also promised to open the doors on the Trading Post tomorrow morning in case someone wanted to pick out something then, provided they let him know what they were taking.

So a schedule was made. In between the other work details, they would work the gardens and finish unpacking their gear the rest of the group had brought out with them.

Finally the idea of trading away firearms came up. As predicted, it was a hot topic. Janie Holmes led the first argument. "Why would we give away guns that could later be turned against us?"

Sharon made a surprising argument as well. "And besides, we don't know how long this thing will last. We might be up here for years and we will need all the weapons and ammo we can get."

"And if we can't get the items we need by bartering the other rifles or other goods, what good are they going to do us just sitting around?" asked Frank.

"And what good are they going to do when a bullet from one of them leaves one of us dead?" countered Janie.

Darren, a proponent of trading firearms for goods, tried to steer the conversation to another area. "Well, the question isn't about firearms, but about ammo and how much reloading supplies we have. What are we looking at in terms of reloading?"

Rick, seeing the argument from both sides, answered the question and didn't try and get into the debate. "I know for a fact we have the components for ten calibers including the five most important ones, 5.56, 7.62, .45 ACP, 9mm Luger and 12 gauge. Last fall, I left a list to be bought for about twenty-five more dies. I've added some others myself, so if the list was able to be gotten, we should be in good shape."

George jumped in the conversation. "From your list, I was able to get twenty-two along with a good supply of powder, primers and a variety of bullets. I also got quite a good supply of new brass as well. I need you to look over it and figure out if we are good to go or not."

"I can go look tomorrow or the next day, but we should be in good shape," answered Rick.

Since the next day would be a family day, Monday morning, everything would begin in earnest. Rick brought up the final point of the evening. "Since George, Cynthia, Ryan and Thomas know where everything is stored, hidden and buried out there; I want to pull them from the guard rotation for the time being. If we are going to get a good inventory, we need to make sure we have everything out and nothing is missed. Unless someone has a problem with that, I'm pulling them from the roster tonight."

Each person though it was a good idea and nobody objected. The four promised to make up the time missed after the inventory was complete and the meeting came to a close. After they were done, Thomas saw Scott Carlson walking towards the Conference Center. Turning to his fiancée, Thomas saw her making a beeline towards Amber. Figuring it was going to be a woman to woman talk, Thomas wisely went over to Scott. "Coming down to check up on Steve?"

Scott frowned as he talked. "Yeah, I headed to his cabin and then figured he was here. I told him not to be moving around for at least three days, but I see he didn't want to listen. My bedside manner might be a little rough tonight. Plus, I brought some stuff to leave for you guys. I'm going to work on the trade when I get up there, but it might be a few weeks before we get back down here."

"Is George planning on taking the rest of your group up tomorrow?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, and I figure the goods and services I provided here ought to be a little payoff for the gas he used to get us up there. We have some diesel up at the retreat we can help out with to top off the tank before they come back," said Scott.

Rick, who had silently joined the two, said "I doubt it" and went on to explain what happened the previous day with George and Cynthia.

"It probably won't happen again since Mike has had the chance to talk with them. It's no different than we were when we wandered onto your property, we were strangers then and trust was an issue. They were strangers up there, so it's natural for us not to trust you," said Scott.

Both Rick and Thomas thought about that for a moment before coming to the conclusion it wasn't really a good point since George and Cynthia had gone out of their way to take the group to their retreat. Neither said anything but Rick followed up "Trust or no trust, we still need to keep in touch. We have a radio frequency for you to be able to contact us on and you know how to get here now in case something goes wrong."

"Yes, I've got it written down and I'm leaving directions to our place just in case. If you do

come up for some reason, remember to stop down the road and walk up non-threatening. We are just about as nervous as you are," concluded Scott.

Thomas and Rick both agreed to the point. "There goes Steve and Kristy right now. Just make sure she isn't around when you start beating him for being out of bed" said Thomas.

"Her? Yeah right. She seems as harmless as a fly and it will be a cold day in hell before I let a little girl like that get the better of me," said Scott.

Rick laughed before answering. "I wouldn't underestimate her, buddy. Not only did she spend two hours in a gym every day, she's also a martial arts freak. Judo, aikido, tae-kwon-do and some kung fu stuff like you see in the movies. And she's just as good with edged weapons."

"Come on guys, you all talk about her like she was Superwoman or something. I've had the edged weapons training too and I know my way around hand to hand combat. I think I'm more than good to go against a little girl like that," said Scott.

"I know what you are saying, but you have to know her," answered Thomas as he told a story about how she disarmed a man and took his knife away on an ambush once. "By the time I reached her, she had done some sort of ninja move, took away the knife and stabbed him in both legs and one arm before we were able to stop her. She probably would have slit his throat had I not gotten there in time. She's not the kind of woman I'd pick a fight with in a kitchen."

Scott politely laughed at the story while thinking in his mind about his training. It was the little ones you had to watch out for and she was probably one of those. It was still his macho side that made the next comment. "I don't know guys, I'm a Quiet Professional remember? I figure I can hold my own."

"Brother, I've never seen anyone take away a full sized knife like that before. She still has it and carries it on duty as well. Remember, she slices and dices you with that ginsu and nobody here can patch you up," said Thomas.

"Okay fellas. I won't pick on her or beat Steve too badly. Hope to see you guys in a few weeks" said Scott as he walked towards the Garcia's cabin.

Thomas and Rick talked for a few more minutes before departing to look for their respective ladies and leave for the night. Thomas saw Sharon was still talking to Amber so he collected Angel and went back towards where he saw his fiancée. He met up with her about halfway across the deck and they turned for home. Sharon was unusually quiet as they walked around the pond towards the house.

Apparently, Sharon couldn't stand the silence any longer and asked "Well?"

"Well what?" asked Thomas, knowing full well she wanted to talk about her little chat.

"Well, don't you want to know what happened?" asked Sharon.

"I figured it was one of two things. One, it was a girl-girl chat and I didn't need to know about it. Or two, you were going to tell me when you were ready," said Thomas.

Without pause, Sharon let loose. "Grrrr, that girl! I know! And she knows I know! I didn't get mean, but I did lay the claim down on you. So, when are we going to get married anyway?"

Thomas knew with her temper, she could unleash again at any moment. "Well, Cynthia and George are heading out tomorrow with the next group of folks. So probably Tuesday or Wednesday we could go see the minister."

"The sooner the better," answered Sharon. "I don't like the fact we are living in sin like this."

Thomas almost laughed at the comments, but refrained from doing so. "You surprise me baby, getting this jealous over some other girl. You know I love you and won't leave you, so why worry about it."

Sharon sighed before continuing. "It's a long story."

"We have nothing but time, sweetie," countered Thomas.

"Well, back when I was with Cody, he used to tell me the same thing. I love you, I won't leave you, blah, blah, blah. So I gave him my heart entirely, like I have with you. It was only after we had Angel that I found out about his cheating. He denied it of course, but after I caught him red handed, I left him. I know you aren't anything like that and I'm not comparing the two of you at all."

"I suppose it's not jealously, but me being protective of what I have. I love you with all of my heart and don't want to give you up to anybody. That little girl got a glimpse of how mean I can be if she messes with my man. I'm just going to be protective of you and you have to get used to it," said Sharon.

Thomas was quiet for a moment before replying. "You think I would ever leave you?"

"No I don't," she answered. "I can see us growing old together, very happy with each other. It's still not going to stop me from feeling like I have to protect my man from some cute blond flirt that thinks it's right to mess with another woman's husband."

Thomas stopped and took Sharon by the shoulders. "Sharon Johnson, I think you are the most beautiful woman in the world and I love you with all of my heart. I won't ever leave you for anyone else, I can promise that. I have sworn to protect and love both you and Angel. You have my heart, my soul and my entire being at your beck and call."

With that, they shared a passionate embrace and continued on home. They readied Angel for bed then spent the longest time just talking. It was well after midnight when they finally fell asleep.

CHAPTER 16 – GIFTS

Time since attacks: 99 days
Date/Time: 28 July/0602 Local
Location: The Ranch

Thomas woke up early the next morning, not quite sure of why. He laid in the bed for several minutes trying to doze back off before finally giving up. He pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of athletic shorts and padded through the house. Stopping by Angel's bedroom, he found she was still in quiet slumber and decided not to wake her. He also saw Harley sleeping at the foot of her crib as Sharon said he always did. Mongo was lying on a rug at the side of her bed and thumped his tail on the floor when he saw Thomas. Thomas quietly left the room and was followed by Mongo who needed his morning bathroom break.

Stepping downstairs, he got a pot of coffee ready to make and lit the stove and let out Mongo into the fenced backyard where he hoped he wouldn't jump the fence chasing an animal. While he was waiting for the coffee to perk, he heard Angel from upstairs calling for her mother. He went back upstairs and found her wide awake and standing up in her crib. When she saw him, she smiled and raised her arms in a silent demand for an early morning hug.

He took her out of the crib and told her she needed to be quiet since Mommy was still sleeping. They went downstairs and found the coffee was going well, but still not ready. Angel complained she was hungry so Thomas found a can of mixed fruit and began feeding her an early morning breakfast. By the time they were done, the coffee was done, he poured a cup and let Mongo back inside. The three went to the front porch to welcome in the morning. Angel demanded to sit on his lap and surprisingly didn't fidget when she got up there. It was a peaceful morning and Thomas saw Darren and his daughter walking around the pond towards his house.

"Sorry to bother you, but do you think you could spare a cup of joe?" asked Darren as he arrived.

"Sure, help yourself, cups are in the cupboard," answered Thomas.

Nicole petted Mongo then plopped herself down in the chair next to Thomas. "So are we all heading up to the range today?"

"I suppose so, but I think you need to ask your father if he intends to take you or not," answered Thomas.

"No, I will probably get stuck watching the kids again. I always watch the kids because 'I'm too young to go.' How am I ever going to get better at shooting if I can't go practice?" Nicole whined.

Thomas knew this was a conversation she should have with her father and not him. "Nicole, you are young, but you have already helped out around here a lot. When it's time, you will be able to

go. Be happy in your youth right now."

"Being young sucks. I want to work the LP/OP, but I can't because 'I'm too young.' Like a hundred years ago, I would have been married and had eight kids by now! But nowadays, I'm too young to go," stated thirteen year old Nicole very dramatically.

Thomas laughed at her performance and tried to reason with her. "Nicole, someday you will be old enough to do the things you want to do right now. But for now, it's time to watch and learn. Someday you will get your chance."

"But I want it right now! I'm old enough to help and keep up. I just need to practice my shooting!" she answered.

Darren had returned to the porch with a cup of coffee and wasn't very happy his daughter was having this conversation…again…with someone else. "Nicole Ginger Thompson! It's me you need to be having this conversation with and we *will* be talking about this later. Now get home and get everyone else up for breakfast!"

Nicole began to argue. "But Dad-"

"Now, young lady!" said Darren who gave her his best "mad father" face and pointed towards his cabin to emphasize the point. A dejected Nicole walked slowly back home, probably feeling sorry for herself and knowing she would have to face her father when he returned home.

After she was out of earshot, Thomas remarked "Trying to grow up on you, Daddy."

"Yeah, and making Daddy get old in the process. I know she is growing up and all, but can't she just be that little girl who wanted a pony for Christmas for one more day?" Darren asked.

Thomas laughed at his friend. "Yeah, they all get older a lot quicker than we want. I suppose someday I will be looking at Angel the same way."

"Well, one thing I don't have to worry about is her being around unknown boys now," said Darren.

"You forgot about Jeff Holmes," laughed Thomas.

"No, I remember him, and I figure Brian and Janie wouldn't mind if I threaten him with a shotgun over my daughter," replied Darren.

Thomas laughed more before replying. "Well, you can't stop the course of true love, Daddy, even in the worst of times. Anyway, what time is everyone looking at going to the range today?"

"I don't know, but I think everyone is going to be meeting at the Trading Post around nine or so. I think they are taking up your offer of 'safeguarding' rifles, pistols and shotguns and gathering ammo to go to the range today," said Darren.

They continued to sit in silence and sip the coffee before finding the mugs empty. They wandered back into the house and refilled their mugs. Thomas could hear Sharon moving around upstairs and took Angel up to see her Mommy. He gave Sharon a quick good morning kiss and told her to make sure she was decent if she came downstairs since they had company.

When he came back downstairs, he saw Darren eyeballing the coffee grounds and asked if he was out. "Janet turned all of ours over for the inventory and didn't think to check the can that was already open. It was almost empty and we ran out yesterday."

Thomas dug around in the pantry and found an unopened can left there by Sharon. He handed it over to Darren, who took the can and looked at it like it was made of solid gold. Sharon came downstairs with Angel and Darren politely took his leave to get home for breakfast.

Sharon started making preparations for breakfast, digging through the pantry. "You know, I need to figure out what we have around here as well, like down in the freezer and all. I would love to have some bacon this morning. Do you have any in the freezer?"

"I think that could be arranged. Give me a sec," said Thomas.

He went to the basement and dug around in the freezer, finally finding a pack of bacon. When Thomas returned upstairs, he found Sharon mixing up some blueberry pancakes and getting the frying pan ready for the bacon. Thomas told her he was going for a quick shower before breakfast and ran upstairs to get ready.

Breakfast was fixed quickly and on the table before Thomas finished drying off. He came back downstairs and sat down to eat, but Sharon couldn't figure out why Angel wasn't hungry this morning. Thomas sheepishly looked at her and told her about feeding her the fruit that morning.

"Next time she can wait. I know you were just trying to help, but you have a lot to learn about children. I'm not mad, but before long, she will have you wrapped around her finger and will know it," stated Sharon.

"Okay, honey, you are right. But I think she already has me somewhat wrapped around her finger. I do have a lot to learn about children, though," he answered.

"Also, about Mongo," she continued. "I think we can keep him. I don't think he and Harley will be getting along very well, but I think they will be okay. You can have him."

"Thanks, baby!" he exclaimed as he hugged her. "And I don't see those two being a problem. Mongo has avoided Harley at all costs since the first two days."

It was true, every time the cat had come into the same room as the dog; Mongo had purposely gone out of his way to avoid Harley. It was comical to see a large dog cowed by a cat that weighed under a fifth of his weight.

They finished breakfast, with Sharon actually getting Angel to have a few bites of the breakfast before they were done. Right after, as they were cleaning up, Sharon said "You know, since we are going to the range today, it would be good if I got started on my own rifle today, like an AK or an AR. I just feel I would make a better contribution if I was better armed."

After cleaning up, Thomas and Sharon went to the vault and started looking around the various firearms on the racks. He took down five rifles in two calibers for her to try that morning. Before putting the rifles into bags, he let her pick up and handle each of them to see what she might like before they got there. After doing so, she placed them in the soft sided bags while he looked through the pistols. He pulled out three pistols in 9mm and let her handle each as well. She handled each before putting them into smaller soft sided cases. He gathered magazines for each and put them into another pocket on a backpack.

Sharon went upstairs and got in the shower as Thomas looked for clothing to wear to the range for the day for the both of them. By the time she was done and changed, he saw there were already people gathering up at the Trading Post in anticipation of the doors opening. Thomas started loading up the Explorer with the various weapons and ammunition to be taken up to the range today along with his own weapons. Sharon came out and stopped him and told him she would finish so he could open the Trading Post for the families to go in.

Thomas grabbed the keys and headed on over. While some families had gotten firearms, some had not and others still wanted to change over to something new. Opening the doors, everyone went in and started browsing the firearms counters looking at the various rifles, pistols and shotguns. Thomas, along with Rick and Dave, opened the racks and display cases so each person could handle whatever they wanted. Pretty soon, everyone was there with the exception of Johnny Thompson, who was on LP/OP duty and Shannon Parsons, who was manning the Control Center.

Soon everyone had gotten what they wanted along with the hunting rifles and shotguns and began to filter out. Ammo, weapons and everyone piled into vehicles and drove the short distance to the range. Rick gave a safety briefing and agreed to serve as range master for the day, although he asked of someone else could take over for a bit so he could get some range time himself. Magazines were loaded, earplugs were handed out and the targets were hung. Those with new weapons wanted the opportunity to zero in the new rifles and become more familiar with their operation.

Thomas sat down with Sharon and went over the system of operation for one of the rifles she was trying and how to load, unload and fire the rifle safely. Firing commenced and she fired several strings with both the carbine and full sized models. He also fired his own rifle and made sure the zero was correct before plinking away at targets all the way out to the three hundred meter line. Thomas took a break and showed Sharon the operations of the next weapon system. She quickly loaded some magazines and was prepared to fire. After several strings, she surprised Thomas by saying she liked the AK weapons better than the ARs. Thomas was surprised and figured that she would not like the sharper recoil of the larger rounds. Although the AR is probably the most user friendly weapon on the planet, the AK has it beat six ways to Sunday in reliability.

Sharon decided on a fixed stock version, another surprise for Thomas, and loaded several magazines. Thomas showed her how to work the sight adjustment tool and after several adjustments, she was happily plinking away at various targets on the range. Thomas made sure his PTR was still sighted in and engaged targets out to five hundred meters with it as well. The sure shot of the day was Frank with the Knights Armament SR-25 he had grabbed from the Trading Post. With that precision rifle, he hit every target the first time with all types of ammo used. He had mounted a top of the line scope on top and remarked that it was the best optic he had ever used.

After a couple of hours of shooting, everyone took a break for lunch. After eating, they policed their brass and dropped it into the small garbage bins located at the rear of the range. One strange thing today was no burst fire. Although several people had brought up their automatic M-4s, nobody seemed inclined to fire on burst. Instead, they focused on putting well aimed fire on point targets rather than "spray and pray."

After lunch, everyone moved over to the pistol range and practiced with their new firearms or fired proficiency with their tried and true sidearm. Sharon found she loved one particular model, but gave others a try as well. She was finally torn between two and fired them both several times to make sure she was comfortable with her choice. She finally chose the Browning Thomas had brought after firing several strings from both weapons. Others made their choice and Thomas agreed to reopen the Trading Post when they were done so the group members could get what they liked.

After another couple of hours, they again policed the brass and cleaned up the range. Several people wanted to try out the shotguns they had brought up, but most wanted to go back to the Ranch. The minority conceded their desire and went along with the rest of the group and prepared to go back to the Ranch. Brian and Janie agreed to take two of the garbage cans back down to sort through them for the brass, paper and other materials. Two of the heavy cans were loaded into Michael Parson's truck for transport back down. As promised, Thomas reopened the Trading Post and everyone went home happy with their firearm of choice. It took almost an hour for everyone to find what they wanted along with the holsters, magazines and pouches, but it was finally done.

Thomas returned to the house to find Sharon cooking up something smelling delicious in the kitchen. He unloaded the ammo cans and firearms into the basement and joined her in the kitchen. "So, what's cooking good lookin?"

"Uh, uh. Not going to tell you since it's a surprise. Don't worry; it should be done in about an hour and a half. Why don't you get the stuff put away and get cleaned up before dinner?" she stated.

Thomas did as instructed and also took the time to gather items for her to have a proper web gear set up. He found pouches specifically designed for the AK magazines and a vest to strap them on. He started setting up the pouches, but decided to have Sharon try it on first to see where they would be most comfortable for her. After trying it on, she made a request. "Can I have some of

the suspender type web gear instead?"

"Sure, but why not the vest? You know it can hold more pouches for stuff?" he asked.

"Yes, it sure can, however, there is a disadvantage to the vest you cannot see. The vest might be more useful, but they were not designed with a woman in mind. I have boobs and that vest would mash them up pretty good. The suspender style won't be as much of a problem," she said patiently.

Thomas hadn't thought about it from that standpoint and told her he would find what she needed with a laugh. He managed to outfit the LBE style rig for her with various items he had in storage and with a few minor changes, she liked the feel of it. After finishing up with the web gear, he finished moving up the various ammo crates onto the porch for pick up. He left enough for them to reload magazines and as "just in case" situations. By the time he was finished, dinner was almost ready. He quickly cleaned up and went downstairs to find delicious looking lasagna on the table ready to be served. They started eating and he found his expectations were too low. It was exceptional.

"I don't know why you say you can't cook. It seems to me you are truly gifted in the culinary arts," remarked Thomas.

"Thank you. I tend to screw up anything more complicated, but the simple stuff I can do," she said as she accepted his compliment.

"You could have fooled me. Lasagna isn't that simple to make," he remarked after another bite.

The conversation turned to her plans for the storage sheds. While he was moving items out of the basement, she had been coming up with blueprints and specifications for the sheds. Thomas asked if it would be possible to put in a basement as well, as to increase the amount of space without adding floor area.

"Not without major difficulties, plus you have the drainage factor. No, above ground is the way to go. Simple and effective. Now, the question is, did you think to get any roofing tin or shingles?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. We will have to check with George about that," he said.

During dinner she showed him the diagrams and list of materials needed to build the sheds. They seemed fairly simple and would probably go up pretty quick if they put some manpower into each of them. They decided the flooring would be concrete, something Thomas knew he had for sure. After dinner, they cleaned the dishes and got ready to go to the meeting. When they got there, everyone seemed to be in high spirits. Not only was shooting an enjoyable pastime, it was also a good stress reliever. It also had the unintended consequence of keeping everyone proficient in their firearm skills. Everyone thanked Thomas for his generosity in handing over the firearms from the Trading Post. "It's not like I was going to shoot all of them," he remarked when thanked.

Rick called the meeting to order and announced the duty rosters had been changed. Since he was mainly ineffective at the moment, Stephen Garcia volunteered to man the Control Center during the day and look after the children. Nicole Thompson, who probably had been talked to at length by her father, volunteered to help as well. Kristy Garcia presented her plan for the full inventory and had formed teams to gather and stock the items. Sharon was originally assigned to one of the teams, but requested to be removed so she could start work on the storage shelters immediately. Kristy looked over her list, made a few minor changes and added another person to help. Plans were made to go to each cabin the following day and collect each item and for the inventory of the food to start. Rick and Thomas were assigned to the weapons and ammo team as well as two others. Other teams were formed and the items they were to inventory were discussed, planned and agreed on.

Shannon Parsons brought up the next point. "It's all well and good we got to practice our shooting, but isn't it time we started working together on our defensive plans? Like individual, team and group tactics?"

Darren finished her point for her. "If we were to be attacked right now, it would be utter chaos. We got really lucky with the other group since they weren't hostile, but we can't always count on luck. As soon as we finish the inventory, we should spend a few hours a day at the least working on defensive tactics and coming up with plans to defend the Ranch."

It was decided by a group vote not to start this after the inventory, but during. Darren was appointed team leader for the training and promised to come up with a training schedule for the group members. Along the way, others would help with certain subjects for some of the fieldcraft items, but Darren would have the final say-so in the syllabus.

"It's not just attacks that we are facing, but what other disasters can we look forward to and plan for? Something like fires, floods, etcetera. What has been overlooked?" asked Janie, bringing up another good point.

It was a valid point and Rick told the group to start thinking about that and coming up with plans to deal with the other threats, or at least mitigate them. Other minor items were discussed as well as the question posed to how the group would have access to the washing machine. Thomas promised to keep the basement door unlocked on the side of the house so everyone could enter.

The meeting broke up and everyone went their separate ways home. When they arrived, Thomas and Sharon looked over her list and found she had learned a few items. She crossed them off but added a few more that she found she needed to learn that week. They both decided to check on her list every Sunday and find out how she was faring and take those items of she learned that week. With that, they turned in for the night and got an early night's sleep since tomorrow was going to be a big day for everyone.

CHAPTER 17 – SQUARE PEG, ROUND HOLE

Time since attacks: 115 days
Date/Time: 13 August/1356 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next few weeks were extremely busy for the group. The inventory was completed and the new storage buildings were worked on, running into several delays due to unexpected rains. They finally got completed and the next building to be built was the reloading shed, which would take a little longer due to the heavier construction and larger space needed for the table.

Even with the inventory going on, the group started their tactics training and found Darren to be a gifted instructor. During their training sessions, Darren thought to bring out a paintball gun to "shoot" at those not following the instruction after several briefings. Just to be fair, he took his turn going through the various courses and got shot at as well. By the end of the second week, most of the residents were starting to get really good at the tactics, as the welts were painful reminders of the lessons they had learned. They had plans to start pairing up for buddy tactics the next week and progressing to fire teams after that. Classes in other areas of fieldcraft would be added during the buddy and team tactics and volunteers offered to help in those areas.

Tim and Ryan had returned at nine days gone, rather than the six that had been planned. As the two had told their story, it was found they had encountered more trouble than had been anticipated. "We ran into some trouble as we weren't able to cross the state line where we planned on," Ryan said as he told the story. "Plus, there was a roadblock that had to be dealt with along the way and we almost ran out of gas, but we finally made it."

When they reached the border, they had to find another border crossing which wasn't manned by either Loyalist forces or the newly formed Utah State Militia. After finding an old dirt road which wasn't manned, they found Tim's wife Tracy in a refugee camp manned by Utah State workers. She had no way of crossing the border on her own and was staying at the camp in hopes of Tim reaching her. The drive back was uneventful, although cautious. Although they did not encounter any more roadblocks, there was evidence of plenty along the way. Each small town they passed through, they felt like a thousand eyes were watching them. Eventually, they reached the Ranch on nearly empty tanks and nearly empty bellies.

It seemed Tracy was having a little difficulty adjusting to life on the Ranch. Most of the residents took this as just a phase she was going through and would snap out of it soon, but others weren't sure. Only time would tell and the group would give her the benefit of the doubt for the moment. There was a noticeable increase in refugee traffic on the roads, as seen by the LP/OP and by Ryan and Tim on their trip. Only a few had stopped at the Taylor's house and most had just asked for food and water before continuing the trip. Each had been watched all the way past the residence as far as they could.

The LP/OP was improved, with better night vision, including a magnified night vision scope, a

thermal imager, a power spotting scope and better binoculars. Other LP/OPs and Defensive Fighting Positions were sighted in, dug out and camouflaged, but not used. Defensive plans were starting to be established, teams were starting to form and some early crops were harvested. The list of items they needed to accomplish was starting to dwindle down.

When it seemed like everything was starting to slow down, Cynthia and Thomas went to see the local minister. He lived well off the main road, content to live alone and tend his small garden. He had a small plot of land bordering the National Forrest, about an acre and a half where he also had chickens, a few goats and surprisingly enough, bee hives near the wood line. Cynthia introduced Thomas and the threesome sat on the porch drinking sun tea and making small talk until Thomas asked about the hives.

"Some years ago, I got cancer and my wife and I decided to retire from the ministry. I got bored out here with little to do and the doctors thought it would be good for me to have a hobby of some sort. Beekeeping was a relaxing hobby and I kept it up after the cancer went into remission. Before the attacks, I generally had enough honey to take to the farmers market to sell, which helped keep me busy. I also started making beeswax candles, but never sold them. It's a good thing I didn't since I have plenty of uses for them now! Speaking of which, I do have several jars of honey left over that you are more than welcome to take with you."

Thomas was not going to turn the man down, but added "I thank you kindly, but we are here on more than just a social call. I need another of your services instead." Thomas went on to explain about his and Sharon's proposed marriage and the lack of a preacher. "We aren't too worried about a license, but we want to make it right in God's eyes."

"Are you a Baptist?" asked the Minister.

"No sir, raised in the Church of Christ," answered Thomas.

"Well, I won't hold that against you," laughed the Minister. "It's been a while since I've done a wedding, but I think I can wing it. I did enough of them while I was still active, but be forewarned, I might be a bit rusty and forget the vows or something."

Thomas and Cynthia both laughed as Thomas replied. "Well, we won't hold that against you either. When would be a good time for you to come out?"

"It's kind of up to you and your wife to be. I'm pretty flexible with my schedule," answered the Minister.

"Okay, how about next Sunday? We can come pick you up," asked Thomas.

"Sunday shouldn't be a problem. Is this going to be a formal dressed up affair?" asked the Minister.

Thomas thought for a moment before Cynthia answered for him. "I don't think Tom has discussed that with the bride to be yet. So for now, go with formal unless we tell you otherwise."

Thomas was slightly annoyed that Cynthia had answered the question before he had the opportunity to. "It's not going to be that formal. I mean it won't be shorts and t-shirts, but I don't expect everyone to show up in three piece suits."

Cynthia knew Sharon well enough to know Thomas should discuss this with her first. "Tom, you should probably talk this over with Sharon before making the decision. Trust me on this."

"Okay, I will," answered Thomas before turning back to the Minister. "Is there anything we can do for you for services rendered? Anything you need that you don't have?"

"Come to think of it, there is something you could do," answered the Minister. "If I recall correctly, you owned that sporting goods store down the road did you not?"

Thomas nodded before the Minister continued. "Some coyotes and other such critters have been snooping around here, especially around the chicken coops. I used to have several rifles and shotguns that might have been of use getting rid of the problems, but I gave them to my relatives after I got cancer and thought my hunting days were over."

"I've never known a Minister to hunt," said Thomas with some surprise.

"Well, son, it's impossible for me to shoot someone, but nothing in the Bible says preachers can't hunt. Some of the Apostles were fishermen, so what's the difference? We have to eat somehow," answered the Minister.

"Okay, you got me there. Do you need some of us to come out and get rid of your varmint problems?" asked Thomas.

"Laws no," answered the Minister with a laugh. "Coyotes tend not to stick to a set schedule when looking over my henhouse, so I wouldn't want to bother you all with sticking around for that long. Plus, generally speaking, where there is one, there tend to be more. No, I was wondering if you had a rifle you could be willing to part with to deal with my problem. Plus, something that would come in handy with the deer and elk I see out this way sometimes. You weren't hit during the firearm confiscations were you?"

Thomas thought briefly about it being Rick's job for coordinating the trade of firearms, but realized it was not Rick who was getting married. "No, we were lucky enough to be far outside of the towns and not get hit like a lot of gun stores so we still have most of our original stock in hand. I'm sure we can find something that would suit your needs. You need something for both hunting and for varmint? Maybe one for both?"

"No, I don't think two rifles would be needed, just one in .308 or maybe .30-06 will do for both. I'm not planning on shooting a trophy elk out here, just something large enough to keep me in meat for a while," answered the Minister.

"Do you think you could come out today and look through what we have?" asked Thomas. "I've

got a few to spare and if you are going to do the marrying of my fiancé and me, I can get you something."

"I don't have anything in particular planned on my calendar today, but that's like most days. I can follow you out to your ranch if you prefer," stated the Minister.

"I wouldn't dream of making you waste your own gas," replied Thomas. "You are more than welcome to hop a ride with us and of course it's a round trip."

"Since you insist, I suppose I have to," he answered as he gathered up an old brown cowboy hat and the four jars of honey. The three left the small house as the Minister locked the door out of habit and got into the back seat of Thomas's Explorer for the ride out to the Ranch. The trio made more small talk during the drive and dropped Cynthia off at her house before continuing down the gravel road to the Trading Post.

When they arrived, Thomas started looking through the old Mosin-Nagant rifles for the Minister, trying to find one of the best one. While he was looking, the Minister was browsing and said quietly to himself "Hello, old friend."

Thomas turned to look and saw the man looking at one of the M14 rifles, one of the Honor Guard rifles brought out by Rick when they escaped. "Bring back some memories?" asked Thomas.

"As a matter of fact, it does. Quite a few memories, actually. You see, before I found my calling with the Lord, I was an Army sniper. This was during the Vietnam War and after the Army had the Rock Island Arsenal recondition the old M14 rifles to XM21 standard. I happened to be issued an XM-21 and carried it during my time in Vietnam," answered the Minister.

"These are old Honor Guard rifles and I don't know how accurate they are," explained Thomas, showing the Minister the rifle. The Minister took it and opened the bolt, cleared it and checked the safety as training in weapons handling since the 1960s was enforced. He raised it to his cheek several times and a large smile grew across his face.

"It hadn't changed over the years and I've always been partial to a nice wood stock although they weren't the best for accuracy," stated the Minister looking over the walnut stock.

Thomas thought for a split second before deciding this was the type of rifle the Minister would take home with him. If there was anyone in the area they could probably trust, it was this man. Plus, Thomas wouldn't feel right giving the Minister an eighty dollar rifle for doing his wedding. He immediately turned his back on the Mosin-Nagants and went to look for a good commercial Springfield for the Minister. He looked through the racks until finding a high M1A National Match model. The rifle already had a 3x9 scope attached, but Thomas took it off and wanted something better. He got it off the rack and proceeded to look for different scope rings for a larger scope.

He found a set which would fit along with a high end Leopold scope. He quickly mounted the

scope and grabbed a bore sight laser system for when they would zero the rifle. He handed the rifle back to the Minister who looked over the new scope.

Thomas went to look for a pistol as well for hunting while the Minister continued to look over the new rifle. Thomas knew the Minister probably wouldn't take it, so he decided to hide it in a bag he was putting the ammo for the rifle into. He found a small daypack in a hunting pattern and dropped several boxes of .308 ammunition with varying weights of ammo including some lightweight varmint rounds, several magazines of varying size and a sling all into the main compartment. He found a Smith & Wesson Model 27 Classic pistol in .357 Magnum and dropped in two boxes of .38 Special ammo and a box of .357 Magnum ammo. Finishing off everything, he put a military style cleaning kit in the bag along with a separate bag of cleaning patches and a bottle of CLP.

The two got back into the Explorer and drove the short distance to the rifle range where the Minister could zero the scope and back up iron sights. The Minister loaded six of the match rounds before getting into a comfortable firing stance. It was apparent he was well trained a long time ago since it took only the six shots to completely verify the zero of the scope at two hundred meters and another six to verify the iron sights. He completed firing the box of shells at the random targets all the way out to five hundred meters, hitting everything he aimed at. A large smile grew across his face as he tried to hand the rifle back. "I can't take this, it's too much and it's a brand new rifle."

"It's not doing me any good sitting on a shelf gathering dust. And besides, you fired it, you have to clean it. Now, that's a minimum of three cleanings and if you take it with you, you will probably end up using it on your varmint problems again, so that's another three cleanings, so on and so forth. You might as well just take it and say thank you," said Thomas with a smile.

"I guess I can't say no then," said the Minister with a laugh. "Now for the rifle and ammo, I will do the wedding as well as giving you another dozen jars of honey."

"Okay, that sounds fair," said Thomas.

The Minister went to put away the magazines in the backpack when he discovered the hidden pistol. "What is this? I don't need a pistol."

"You just might, sir. What happens if you are hunting and are attacked by a bear? Or if you shoot one of your coyotes and only wound it? It's not worth another rifle shot to finish it off. This pistol will come in more handy than you realize," said Thomas.

"Good point and I didn't think about it that way. Now, for the pistol you tried to hide I will provide either another forty jars of honey and candles or a beekeeping suit and two spare hives and teach some of your folks how to be proper beekeepers," said the Minister.

"That's too much for a simple pistol and three boxes of ammo," exclaimed Thomas.

"The rifle alone is worth more than that and I would feel really bad if I didn't do at least that

much. You wouldn't want to make an old man feel bad now would you?" asked the Minister with a smile.

"No, sir," said Thomas with a laugh.

"So what will it be? The jars of honey or the hives and suits?" asked the Minister.

"I think the latter would do us better," Thomas replied after a moment to think about it. "I will have to check with our community leader though."

"And since you insisted in giving me a pistol, can I at least have some say so in the matter as to model or caliber?" asked the Minister.

"Do you want something larger?" asked Thomas.

"Laws no," laughed the Minister. "Just something I'm more comfortable with. I used to carry an old Colt Single Action Army in .38-40 when I was hunting, for bears and follow up shots if needed. It was my Granddaddy's pistol and is probably worth a fortune now. Do you have something comparable?"

Thomas thought for a moment about the different kinds of firearms they had cleaned and stored. He remembered having some Single Action Army pistols in storage, but couldn't remember for sure if they were in .38-40 caliber. "We have some things comparable, but I'm not sure about that particular caliber. Isn't that kind of small for bear protection?"

"As my Granddaddy used to say, it's not the size of the bullet that's important, but rather where you put it. .38-40 is good for shoulder wounds and keeps a bear occupied long enough for you to bring your rifle on target you should have been using to begin with," explained the Minister.

"Okay, you got me there," said Thomas. "Let's go see what we might have available."

The two got back into the Explorer and went back to the Trading Post. Thomas never seriously kept many of the single action cowboy guns in stock like some stores, but he had a few. Most of the SAA models were in .45 Long Colt caliber, but he had a couple in .32-20 caliber as well. Thomas finally did fine one in the .38-40 caliber and looked around in the basement. However, he couldn't find any of the unique ammunition for the pistol.

"I can't find any of the ammo for it," said Thomas after returning up from the basement.

"Well, what about another one?" asked the Minster.

"Well, we have a few in .32-20, but that is nothing when it comes to power and larger ones in .44-40 and .45 Colt. Care to take one of the larger ones?" asked Thomas.

"No, I think my old hands wouldn't take too kindly to a full sized cartridge like that. How about the .32-20?" asked the Minister.

"If you insist, but taking on an angry bear with anything less than a magnum shell might tend to get him a little upset at you. Are you sure?" asked Thomas. The Minister replied he would be comfortable with the smaller shell and "it's where you put the shot that matters the most." Thomas grabbed two boxes of the ammunition for the pistol and dropped them into the bag. He also found a nice leather holster and a belt for the pistol and put them in the bag as well.

They drove the short distance back to the range where the Minister proceeded to put six shots into an inch and a half circle in the right "shoulder" of the target at twenty-five yards. He reloaded and repeated the performance in the left shoulder of the target.

"Nice shooting pistol. But I could probably do better with a .38-40," stated the Minister as Thomas looked on with his mouth hanging open. He placed the pistol back into the backpack and the two made the short drive over to grab Rick and let him know about the negotiating that had gone on. They swung by the Jones's cabin and found Rick was out helping build one of the new storage sheds.

After arriving at the area where the new sheds were being built, Thomas introduced the Minister to Rick and asked him to come along for the trip back to the Minister's house. Rick agreed to come along and grabbed his rifle, web gear and asked if they could swing by his house to grab his bug out bag. Thomas saw Sharon helping out and decided to introduce the Minister to her. He tossed the keys to Rick and asked if he could swing back by and pick them up.

Rick returned in short order and the Minister said his goodbyes to the people he had met. While they were leaving, Thomas told Rick about the trade for the rifle and pistol and the agreement that was contingent on his approval for the beehives and the suits. Rick agreed to the deal for the suits, but remained silent about the trades. Thomas felt he might have been a bit angry about the deal, but again, remembered it wasn't Rick getting married.

After dropping off the Minister and saying goodbye, Rick finally commented. "I thought we were going to use the Mosin-Nagants for trading purposes."

"Well, we are, but there is a story behind it," replied Thomas who went on to explain the story behind the Minister and the M1A. "And it's not like we have to worry about a preacher coming around to take pot shots at us. It's my wedding, man, and if losing one of the Springfields out of the stash means I can have a good wedding, then I will replace it with one of my own."

"Yeah, you're right and I apologize for being a bit gruff. It is your wedding and no, he really isn't a threat. I probably would have made the same deal if I was there. Don't worry about replacing it; it would have just gathering dust anyway," said Rick.

"Do we have any .38-40 ammunition?" asked Thomas.

"I think we do, but not that much. Why?" he replied after thinking about the question. Thomas went on to explain the pistol situation and how he could not find the ammunition. He also explained the Minister had taken the less powerful .32-20 handgun

“Taking on a bear with an old .32 caliber single action handgun? That man is brave,” answered Rick. “I think I put it in with the other ammo we only had less than a ten boxes for. It should be in the basement of the Trading Post somewhere,” answered Rick.

“It’s not that big a deal right now. He has a sidearm in case he needs it. But, since we are out here, what do you say we make a short trip into Cañon City?” asked Thomas.

“Looking for what exactly?” asked Rick.

“Open stores, clothing stores, things of that nature. It still is bugging me about the children’s clothing thing. Let’s just see if Cañon City is still somewhat normal,” answered Thomas.

For the most part, the small city had escaped the riots, looting and destruction prior to the group’s arrival. However, the closer they got to the city; it seemed less likely at this point. From two miles out, light smoke columns could be seen from near the city center and even the outskirts seemed deserted. Houses sat silent, but the two got the eerie feeling they were being watched. Both ignored the feeling and pressed further into the city, driving slowly keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

Suddenly, a metallic ping of a gunshot was heard hitting the car next to them they were passing. The report of the shot followed and Thomas immediately hit the gas and swung the vehicle around in the wide four lane street. He manipulated the vehicle’s steering wheel and gear shift in an attempt to both change directions and speed at the same time.

More gunfire was heard and Thomas downshifted the vehicle into second gear and pressed the accelerator to the floor. The V-8 engine of the Explorer responded and shot the vehicle forward out of the city. Although the vehicle wasn’t designed for speed, Thomas had the engine up to 90 MPH by the time they made their way out of the city. When the passed the last houses, he let off the gas and returned the vehicle to a more safe speed heading towards the Ranch.

“One thing is for certain, we need better intel about what is going on out there. This could get downright nasty real fast” stated Rick after they cleared the city and were relatively safe.

“We are only fifteen miles from Cañon City and less than a hundred from Pueblo and the Springs. We need some kind of warning system,” agreed Thomas.

“I’ve been thinking, we need some kind of reaction force and more security out there,” stated Rick.

“You mean more security over what we have already at the Ranch?” asked Thomas.

“Well, not more static posts, but a reaction force for sure,” explained Rick. “A dedicated eight man team that is either on stand-by or actively training, not working details. If the violence is getting this far outside the major cities, we need a team in place to keep an attacker engaged long enough for the main body of residents to get there. Well, maybe eight is too many, but we need

some sort of team. What do you think?"

"Rotating basis, semi-permanent teams, maybe some short range patrolling," said Thomas thinking out loud. "Doesn't sound like a bad plan."

"Plus, we need to get those fall back positions done. And we need to try some sort of ex-fil plan on everyone, just in case. A lot of things have been put off that we need to get started on. I believe we all thought we had more time, but that probably isn't the case," said Rick.

Thomas thought about what he said and remembered he had planned on getting his own BOB back in order, but had put it off in order to concentrate on other areas. Rick was right though, now was the time not only to prepare better defenses, but to make emergency plans to leave the Ranch if that became an issue. Thomas didn't think it would come to that, but he had gotten this far by planning on the worst case scenario.

They arrived back at the Ranch and found everyone coming in from their work details. Thomas dropped off Rick at his cabin and went to the Conference Center to collect Angel. He took her home and found that Sharon had stopped by while he was gone and was cooking up something in the oven, elk by the smell of it. He and Angel cleaned up before dinner and Sharon got home. She returned with semi-concern after having gone to the Conference Center to look for Angel and not finding her. Thomas greeted her with a kiss on her way to check on the roast in the oven.

"So how is it going to feel being Mrs. Dayfield instead of Miss Johnson after Sunday?" he asked.

"Well, it won't really change the way we are doing things right now, just makes us officially married," she said with a grin.

"True, but it keeps us from living in sin and makes me officially Angel's Papa," he replied.

"Baby, you have already been more of a father to her than her biological father ever will be. And as for us living in sin, nobody around here has said a word. But either way, I'm going to be completely happy to be Mrs. Dayfield," she concluded.

During dinner, she talked over the progress on the new storage sheds and how they were almost done. Thomas told her about the little trip he and Rick had made into the town and the trouble they had encountered.

"You mean there are looters that close?" asked Sharon.

"Yes, but we are off the main path here and fairly secluded. I know the Ranch was fairly well known before the attacks, but we can only hope people don't get the idea to make their way up here and stake a claim. Even if they do, we can chase most of them off," he stated.

Sharon got silent for a moment thinking about what he said. "For the first time since we have been here, I'm a little scared. It just gives me the willies thinking about looters being that close."

"Like I said, I doubt they will come this way. After all, we were just a hunting camp to most people. Besides, Rick is coming up with some plans to secure this place up really good. We will be okay, I promise" said Thomas.

The rest of the dinner was spent mainly in silence. Sharon had slightly overcooked the elk, but this wasn't the time to tell her so. They got ready to go to the nightly meeting with Thomas putting on his shoulder holster and 1911 and Sharon her Browning.

"You know, I'm going to have to find you a stainless pistol to match mine, especially before the wedding" he said, teasing her a little.

"Just make sure it has pearl handles so it matches my earrings," she said, teasing back.

They gathered Angel and walked the short distance to the Conference Center where they found they were the first ones there. Thomas had shown Sharon a few days before how to build fires and this was a good opportunity to put her training into practice. Thomas watched her while he built one of his own in the other fireplace. She did not do well as the kindling she was using was too large to start with and the fire burned itself out before catching the larger wood. He showed her the mistake and in no time, she rebuilt it and had a good blaze going. Others showed up and before long, everyone was gathered. Rick called the meeting to order and gave the floor to Kristy. She stood up and gathered several pieces of paper before addressing the group.

"The inventory is almost complete, just a few minor unimportant things to go. Since he had been on the sick-lame-lazy list, Stephen has been putting it all into the computer and printing out the spreadsheets. Here is what we know for certain right now:"

"We have enough food stored, at current consumption, for twenty two months. This is not taking into account what we will get from the harvest or what game we will take this fall. With rationing, we could go out to twenty-eight months, but I don't think we will need to do that. Again, this is just the dried goods, canned goods, MREs and whatnot. So we are more than good to go since we are growing our own."

"As for ammunition, we have enough on hand to destroy South America, even if we do some proficiency firing every month. We also have plenty of reloading supplies to keep us going and Rick has agreed to show us how to operate the reloader. As we agreed before, those weapons we don't have a lot of ammo for will be used up first, cleaned and placed into storage. Thomas has a plan on how to get those weapons out to everyone before we start hunting."

"We have enough lumber and building materials to construct pretty much anything we desire. I lost count on the amount of nails, screws and other such items, but we have plenty. As for tools, everyone should have their own household set, but we have spares and duplicates of practically everything. With the extra generators brought out, we can provide power to the workshop full time if we need to. Renee has offered to rewire part of the system there to provide two hookups for the different electrical parts of the building. She can tell you more about it later."

Kristy continued for several minutes describing the other supplies the group had and how long

she thought they might last. She finished her presentation with supplies they didn't have. "We are still waiting on Mike Dugger or Scott Carlson to come back with the medical supplies for trade. I think we can part with three sets of the old PVS-7Bs or 7Ds which would leave us with enough for security around here and a couple of spare sets in case of breakage. Either way, George says they owe us some supplies for the cost of the gas we used to get them to their retreat. I also have detailed files on all the supplies I didn't mention if anyone so desires to look them over."

Rick took back the floor, thanked Kristy and asked if there were any questions about the inventory. Sharon asked about the tent that had been promised for the gardens. Kristy told the group she had left it easily accessible and it was in good shape. Rick agreed it would be put up the next day and assigned four people to complete the task. No further questions were asked about the inventory and Rick briefed over the quick trip he and Thomas made into Cañon City and the possible trouble heading their way. He proposed the plan for the reaction force and asked for the group's inputs.

"We have been doing well on the tactics training and I think forming permanent teams would be a good idea. Rick is right; we do need a reaction force to delay attackers, probably vehicle mounted. The question is, how many and what kinds of shifts do they work?" asked Darren.

Before the group was able to discuss the plans, Tracy Daniels jumped in. "Wait a minute! What if we don't want to work it? What if we feel we could make a contribution in other areas?"

"We all have chipped in for the defense of the Ranch. It's our home and since we really don't have anywhere else to go, we have to defend it. We may not like it, but we all have to do our part. I don't understand why you wouldn't want to defend your home," said Rick.

Tracy fell silent after the comments were directed at her. She had been reluctant to help out in any way. Most chalked this up to the normal period of discomfort they all had experienced, but some thought it was deeper than that. Her quiet resentment of the Ranch and the residents had many boggled since they had accepted her with open arms and tried to help in her transition.

Rick seemed to ignore the questions and continued with the discussion. "If we agree to start this, we should be paired off, military and non-military. Spouses will not be paired off with each other since this could start some child care issues. As with everything, we will put it to a vote and will work out the details if we agree on it."

The vote was almost unanimous with the exception of Tracy voting against it and Tim Daniels abstaining. "So since I voted against it, do I still have to do it?" she asked.

Rick's patience was starting to wear thin, but decided to avoid a confrontation in front of the group. "We can talk about it later, after the meeting if you don't mind."

Tracy nodded her head, but had an angry look on her face. The group couldn't understand why she was acting like she was, but it would be up to Rick to find out. The group discussed the teams and agreed to six person teams including Johnny Thompson and Jeff Holmes. Rick

promised he would work on the team alignment after the meeting and be able to give them a rough pairing before the next meeting. Rick also informed the group since everything was getting done, they would go to three meetings a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, starting after tomorrow. Thomas and Sharon brought up their wedding plans for Sunday and made sure the invitation went out for everyone. Frank asked if it was going to be formal.

Thomas decided to avoid the answer since he hadn't discussed it with Sharon yet. "We haven't decided for sure yet, but we can let you know tomorrow."

Rick asked if there was any more business to be discussed and brought the meeting to a close. Thomas went inside to get Angel while Sharon was being congratulated by some of the wives. When he walked out of the Conference Center, he saw Rick talking to Tracy with her shaking her head side to side. She abruptly pointed her finger in his face, talked for about twenty seconds and turned and walked away. Thomas saw the anger on Rick's face, but didn't go and talk to him about it. In due time, Rick would let everyone know what the problem was.

Thomas walked over to Sharon who was discussing the wedding reception with Michelle, Shannon and Cynthia. She volunteered to help out but was denied by Shannon. "It's your own wedding, sweetheart, why would you want to bake your own cake?"

Sharon thanked the ladies and turned to Thomas for the walk home. They discussed the attitude of Tracy while walking home and if something should be done about it. When they arrived, they got Angel ready for bed and the conversation Thomas had been dreading came up.

"So, just how formal are we going to be?" asked Sharon.

"Well, honestly, I don't want this to be a suit and tie sort of thing. I mean formal, but informal. Besides, most of the folks here don't have that kind of clothing," he said.

Sharon was already a little upset and it showed in her voice. "I'm not worried about them, but about us! I never had a formal wedding, just a Justice of the Peace thing. This time it's going to be proper and I want it to be special."

Thomas knew this conversation could get out of hand really quickly and tried to steer it in the direction he wanted to avoid sleeping on the couch tonight. He knew the tone of voice she was using was her borderline anger tone so he kept his voice calm as he replied. "But it will be special; you and I will be there and that's all that is needed to be special. How much more special will it need to be?"

By the look on her face, it was the wrong choice of words. "I want it to be more special! I want us to be dressed up for this! Someday when I look back, I don't want to remember my husband was wearing blue jeans on our wedding day!" she stated forcefully.

Thomas couldn't understand where that came from. "I wasn't going to wear blue jeans! Whatever gave you the idea I would do that?"

"Oh, I know you Thomas Brent Dayfield! You would do just that!" she stated, almost yelling.

"You are seriously getting silly about this! I would never do anything like that!" he returned.

"Oh really? Remember our first date when you showed up in jeans and a polo shirt? You were supposed to impress me! Fat chance of that since you showed up looking like a bum. And that was just the start of your bad taste," she said, almost yelling again, but refraining from doing so since it would wake Angel up.

He wanted to end this quick since they were both getting angrier about the subject. Plus, when a woman starts bringing up history, it can turn really ugly, really quickly. "Listen, this is our wedding. I wasn't planning on wearing shorts and a t-shirt, but I will at least wear pants and a button up shirt."

As soon as the words came out, he knew he had made a mistake and given her an opening. "You sure will be wearing pants and a button up shirt…and a jacket and a tie!" They continued arguing the point for several minutes before Sharon brought the discussion to a close with two simple sentences.

"You know this isn't an argument you are going to win. Why are you even fighting about it?" she asked in a calmer voice which Thomas recognized as her extremely upset voice.

Thomas sighed before answering with a question. "I guess I don't have any choice in my apparel for this?"

Sharon shook her head slowly side to side with her nose pointed upwards and lips puckered. Thomas sighed and thought *welcome to married life; I get to wear the pants, just as soon as she picks them out.*

He put her hand in his before continuing. "Sharon, if you want it to be special by dressing up, then we will have it special."

"But you aren't going to like it," she stated, matter of factly in the same tone.

"I never said that, but I want you to be happy and I don't want to start our marriage by fighting over something so trivial. I will wear my nice gray suit, but everyone else is free to wear what they want. Deal?" he asked as a compromise.

She softened somewhat. "No other buts?"

"No, and I won't be mad about it either," he said with a smile, trying to defuse the situation.

"Yes, you will with that bad Irish temper of yours," she said, smiling back.

"That's like the pot calling the kettle black, my little tempest. You would have been equally mad if I had continued fighting," he said with a laugh.

“I don’t have a temper. I’m just misunderstood!” she smiled and put on her best ‘innocent’ face.

“Misunderstood like calling the sky red. But I love you anyway,” he said with a laugh.

“You better, Mister,” she said while grabbing him around the neck in a hug, happy it had turned out the way it did. She was also surprised at getting over the little spat as quickly as she did. They were getting ready to turn in for the evening when a knock was heard at the door. Thomas went down to answer it finding Dave, Rick and Darren at his door.

“We need to talk,” said Dave.

Thomas guided the men over to the chairs on the porch and everyone had a seat. If this is about my bachelor party boys, I think the bars are all closed.”

Nobody laughed at the comment and Rick spoke. “No, it’s about Tracy Daniels. After the meeting I attempted to talk to her about the guard thing. I wasn’t trying to force her to do it, just get an explanation of why she didn’t want to do it. I mean, there might have been a good reason why, but I never got it. Before I even got the chance to talk to her about it, she jumped down my throat, claiming I was trying to force her to do something she didn’t want to do. I never really got another word in edgewise before she walked off.”

“So after the meeting, Michelle went over to ask her if she would like to help with the wedding reception. Before Michelle even got the chance to ask, Tracy jumped down her throat claiming I put her up to changing her mind. Since she has arrived, she has not done a thing around here except avoid work and complain. Shannon tried to help her out in the garden behind her house, which she had kept up since before she got here. She got the cold shoulder and Shannon’s words fell on deaf ears. Tracy doesn’t want to help out, but eats the food we all paid for and worked to get, sleeps under the roof you paid for and lives under the protection we all provide. I’m sorry, Tom, but that is unacceptable. Everyone around here has had to give up something to protect our family’s future. Quite frankly, she hasn’t given up anything yet, and doesn’t seem like she plans on it anytime soon. So far, Tim has been pulling his fair share of work, but I’m not sure how long that will last. Again, the situation is unacceptable,” concluded Rick.

“You guys came to me, what should be done about it?” asked Thomas after thinking it over.

“Either she pulls her weight around here or gets out. I like Tim and all, but we are all in this together and everyone needs to help out, including her,” said Dave.

“Rick, you are the community leader right now, why come to me about this?” asked Thomas.

“I may be the leader, but you still own this property and helped form the group. If we ask her to leave, you would have a major say in that,” he answered.

“True, but asking her to leave will be a group vote issue. Plus, we never really thought about making someone leave,” said Thomas.

"Well, there is a first for everything," said Darren. "We are just getting a feel for the mood about her right now, nothing more. We thought about having Brian talk to Tim about it."

"Okay, how about this, in the morning, Brian, Tim, Rick and I will go on an ATV patrol away from the Ranch proper. We can get out to where there is little distraction and he wouldn't be pressured by her presence. We can let him know how we feel and let him know the possible alternatives if she still doesn't want to help out," offered Thomas.

"That's a step in the right direction, but I figure even with Tim talking to her she will go off on another tirade about being here. I know it's not an easy place to get used to, but it sure beats the alternative," said Dave.

"What kind of alternatives are we looking at?" asked Darren.

"Easy, she pitches in and works, or gets out. If she refuses, no more food rations for her. It's not very nice to think of cutting off someone's food to get what we want, but if she isn't willing to help us out, we aren't willing to help her out," stated Rick.

"Tim will probably go with her," said Darren.

"I hate to say it, but I really don't care. Again, I like Tim and all, but we are in this together and we need one hundred percent from everyone to get by," said Dave.

"Do you think it's going to be that easy to cut off their food?" asked Darren.

"Probably not, but what other choice would we have?" answered Thomas.

The question went unanswered and the group got silent. Since they had pretty much decided on a course of action, Thomas moved the conversation away from the dark thoughts. "Sharon and I came to an agreement. We are going formal, but everyone else can come as is to the wedding."

"Cool. I hoped it would be something like that. I'm not going to be totally formal, but I will at least have clothes on," said Darren, laughing. The other two agreed and stated they would show up in less than formal clothing and the men prepared to leave. Thomas went back upstairs and got ready for bed.

"So what was so important that it couldn't wait until tomorrow?" asked Sharon.

"Oh, the boys were trying to get me to go to the strip club for my bachelor party," he answered with a grin on his face.

She gave him the "look" and stated "Seriously, wise guy."

Thomas briefly explained the problems with Tracy and how the consensus was to take some sort of action. He further explained they were going to talk to Tim in the morning.

“It probably won’t do any good, she won’t care. I’ve tried to be nice to her, but she acts like I’ve got three heads. She seems to treat everyone that way. It’s not fair she lives here and does nothing. If it’s a matter of not knowing how to do something, she can learn like I am doing,” said Sharon.

“I know baby, but it might not be easy to make her leave,” he said.

“What’s so hard about it?” she asked. “No work, no food. Simple solution.”

“Simple to say, hard to do,” he returned. “I don’t like the idea of using starvation as a tool to get what we want.”

She looked at him and offered another perspective. “You do realize we all would starve if we didn’t work?”

“That’s why I’m marrying you, you’re so smart and all,” said Thomas as he snuggled up to her.

CHAPTER 18 – HONORABLE EXIT

Time since attacks: 116 days
Date/Time: 14 August/0812 Local
Location: The Ranch

As planned the next morning, Thomas grabbed his rifle, web gear and pack and went to collect the others. He found them already gathered at the Conference Center, preparing to go on their patrol. "I talked to Brian last night and he is on board with us," said Rick.

The foursome went to the barn and got the ATVs ready to go out on patrol. Thomas would lead off towards the orchards and stop with the intent of gathering some of the early fruit. They would make a full loop around the edge of the property before getting there though. After an hour and a half of riding, they arrived at the orchard and parked the ATVs under one of the larger trees. It wasn't particularly hot that day, but the heat of the engines made everything warmer and the group decided to take a break before gathering the fruit. After a few minutes of relaxing, Thomas brought up the subject. "Tim, we've got a problem and we need your help with it."

"It's about Tracy isn't it?" asked Tim.

Thomas paused before going on. "Yes, how did you know?"

"Well, what else could it be? She isn't exactly popular around here and everyone is giving her the cold shoulder. As a matter of fact, we're thinking of leaving," Tim stated.

"Tim, nobody has been giving her the cold shoulder. Michelle has been more than nice to her trying to help her along, but she treats her pretty bad. In fact, everyone here has tried to help her out, but she has shunned us all," said Rick before the others could answer.

"She feels like an outcast here," said Tim, setting the mood of the discussion.

Brian figured this would be a good time to jump in. "Tim, we have been friends a long time and you know I'm not going to lie to you. You and I both know Tracy hasn't really done anything since you brought her here. Janie has also tried to help her and they were good friends back when you were married. Again, she got shunned and downright treated like dirt. Yes, it's hard on all of us here and we all have had to learn new things, but she hasn't even made the attempt."

"We don't want to see you all leave, but we need everyone to chip in to get us through this. You knew this when we were first invited by Tom to move here. I hoped you explained this to her when you got here. We have tried to accept her with open arms into the community and only asked she do her fair share of work in return. She outcast herself more than being outcast by us," he concluded.

"So what you are saying is, unless she works, she has to leave?" asked Tim.

"Honestly, Tim…yes. I hate to say that, but there it is. Again, we don't want you to leave, but we can't have someone here who is not willing to help out," said Thomas.

Tim thought about that for a moment before answering. "It's decided then, we will leave."

"Where will you go?" asked Brian.

"I don't know, we'll find someplace, I'm sure. All I ask is that it's after Sunday. You are my friend, Tom and I want to be there for your wedding," answered Tim.

"We can agree to that and to keep this quiet," said Rick. "We can set you all up with a week of supplies when you leave. That's the least we can do."

"No conditions on that?" asked Tim, surprised the group had readily accepted his decision.

"None," answered Rick. "Like I said, we will keep it quiet until you leave and if the question comes up, we'll just tell the group we had a difference of opinions and you chose to leave. One thing to think about; even if you wanted to return, there is a chance we won't let you back in."

"What makes you think we would come back?" asked Tim.

"Where else will you go?" answered Brian. "You can't check into a FEMA camp since we deserted from the Loyalist forces. You would be arrested and thrown into one of those 'special' camps. Also, it will be hard to find another place as set up as this one and getting the residents to agree to take you in will be another problem. Some things to think about before you leave."

Tim thought about what his best friend was saying before answering. "I suppose we will look for somewhere we can be alone. That will work the best for us I think."

The group was silent as the decision soaked in to all of them. For several moments an uncomfortable silence fell on the group before Brian changed the subject. "Tom, we aren't on your property are we?"

"No, well off of it. Why?" asked Thomas.

"Just wondering. If we did get some squatters out here, just how close can they be? I know on your property would be off limits, but how close would we feel comfortable with?" asked Brian.

"A good question. I suppose it would be the kind of people that moved in. I wouldn't be comfortable with someone causing problems," said Thomas.

"This is something we need to think about as a group," said Rick. "Plus, we need to make contact with our neighbors. I know there are some, but I don't really know them. Do you?"

"No, but George probably does," answered Thomas.

"What you could do is locate likely spots where people might try and move in, both off and on your property. Then patrol them frequently for signs of unwanted inhabitants," offered Tim.

"That sounds good, possibly do some long range foot patrols to save on gas, two or three day excursions," stated Rick.

"You are making these teams with six people; why not go with four instead?" asked Tim.

"Why four instead of six?" asked Rick.

"Well, with four you aren't committing off a quarter of the residents here. Plus, the military folks are used to working in groups of four. You know, fire team formation and all," said Tim.

Rick pondered the idea for a moment. "Good point, why didn't you bring it up last night?"

Tim didn't answer and everyone knew why. It would have angered his wife. They let the matter drop and went on improving the idea.

"So, okay, four person fire teams, figure doing five to eight miles a day for two to three days. How long would it take to cover your property?" asked Brian.

"With the prime camping spots, maybe four or five days? I'm not even sure of all the good areas out there, so each patrol would be more like a recon. We could plug in the good spots into the GPS so each patrol knows where to look," said Thomas.

"And get the neighbors involved. We can ask George tonight about making contact with them and asking them to keep an eye out for visitors or even determining if they pose a threat to us," said Rick.

The four broke up the impromptu meeting and gathered some of the fruits into bags for transport back to the Ranch. Frank had transplanted some of the younger trees to the new orchard near the creek, but they weren't as developed as the orchard here and wouldn't produce a lot of fruit for another year or two. After gathering everything up and stowing it in the cargo boxes of the bikes, the four remounted and continued the patrol around the property perimeter. They finished and arrived back at the Ranch in time for lunch.

Thomas found Sharon in the kitchen preparing leftovers from the night before. He asked about the construction for the buildings and how it was progressing. "Pretty well and we are going to be able to have everything done without running short on anything."

"Sounds good. I haven't seen anyone else around really, where did they all go?" asked Thomas.

"I think some of them are out finishing the last shed and others are sorting through the brass," stated Sharon.

"Where are they working at?" he asked.

"The Conference Center I think. They are just sorting it out and they were hoping Rick might come by and show them how to prepare the stuff for reloading. If you want to help, it will cut down the time. Anyway, how did your meeting with Tim go?" asked Sharon.

"I'm not supposed to say, but they are leaving on Monday morning," he answered.

Sharon almost said "good" but kept the comment to herself since Tim was a friend of Thomas. She told him she would be going back out to help finish the last shed.

The sheds were twelve foot by twelve foot by eight feet tall with concrete floors. Plexiglas windows were on three of the four sides and a simple wooden door with a hasp and lock was located on the fourth side. They were currently uninsulated, but the inner walls were left open in case the residents wanted to put insulation in at some point in the future. The last shed to be done would be the reloading shed. This one would need to be a little sturdier and for the moment, the reloading equipment was in the Conference Center. Rick had suggested making it out of seasoned logs and Sharon had promised to see what kind of designs she could come up with. He wanted it to be a bit more durable since the majority of the gunpowder would be kept there and just in case there was an explosion, a sturdier building might contain the blast better.

Before heading to the Conference Center, Thomas went out back to check on the solar distiller. He found the five gallon jug was almost full and changed it with an empty. He poured the water into a fifty-five gallon barrel and found it was almost a third full already. The garden behind his house needed a good watering tonight and he added it to the list of things to do that day. He returned to the house and went to the basement to gather two items he would need very soon. He found what he was looking for in a box of items he brought from Tennessee and sat them in a hard to find place in the basement. A container of various rounds that he had fired before the Fall was sitting next to the safe in the basement. He grabbed it and walked to the Center, finding Michael Parsons, Ryan Meeks, Johnny Thompson and the entire Holmes family already at work. Michael showed him the different cans for the "saved" and "unsalvageable" rounds and put him to work. Thomas jumped right in and started sorting by pistol and rifle category.

Michael was a different sort of person for the group, but an outstanding addition. Being a black male from the bad part of Montgomery, Alabama had made his upbringing a hard one. However, a good mother and father had raised him right teaching him good morals and never to depend on anyone else to support him in the world, especially the government. He was highly conservative, bordering on extreme when it came to liberal politicians like Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. A curious member of the group asked him why.

"Those people! Oh yeah, they speak of equal rights and togetherness and all that jazz, but they've done more to keep the black man separate than bring us together. Jackson doesn't give a hooptie-hoo when it comes to my race unless it gets his face in front of a camera. He is all about stopping violence in the world, but doesn't ever try to stop the violence in our own cities."

"Look, I'm proud of my race and heritage, but I'm not looking to blame the white man for

slavery and I'm not going to blame the white man for 'keeping me down.' Any man, including a black man, can succeed in life as long as they put in the effort to succeed. Those people that say we are being repressed are full of it. They just want someone to blame for their own failures," he concluded.

Not everyone agreed with this line of thinking, but knew that Michael had been successful. Part of his family in Mississippi had been victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and had been forced to depend on government aid in the aftermath. Michael swore it would never happen to him or his family and started taking preparedness seriously, no matter where he was stationed. And after the offer, he and his wife had jumped in headfirst to making the community work.

His wife, Shannon, had been high school sweethearts but had broken up when they went to separate colleges. After Michael joined the Air Force, they got back together and had been happily married ever since. She had a good job as an insurance agent and was rapidly moving up the ladder when the attacks happened. However, the group learned one of her unknown talents right after her arrival at the Ranch. "Sew? Are you kidding? My Mother was a professional seamstress and that's all I ever did growing up. My fingers are tough as steel from all the pinpricks in them over the years. Of course I know how to sew!"

Shannon had become the group's resident expert on matters of sewing. She had brought up a dozen bolts of cloth when she arrived and the group had added more immediately after the attacks. As fate would have it, Ryan was able to locate an old foot operated sewing machine in an antiques store before going in to town became dangerous. Even if they could not locate new clothing, she could teach the residents to sew their own. Both the Parsons had made countless contributions to the Ranch already and worked with tireless devotion to bringing it online. Theirs was just one of the many stories of the group that helped meld them together.

After two hours of work, the group finished sorting through the various rounds and wanted to see how the progress on the sheds was coming along. The work was going well and the group found the roof was being put on as the last part of everything. It took less than an hour to finish up and dark clouds were rolling in from the west. As fate would have it, the last shingle was being nailed down just it started to rain. They would find out in the next few hours if the sheds would be watertight or not. Everyone gathered the tools and started heading back to the main Ranch. They were halfway there when the rain came down hard in a torrential downpour. The group ran hard for their cabins, arriving home soaking wet.

Sharon grabbed an umbrella and went to the Conference Center to pick up Angel while Thomas changed clothes and got dinner ready. Sharon arrived home and was chilled to the bone since she had been wearing the wet clothing and the temperature was dropping. Thomas took Angel and changed her wet clothing first and had Sharon do the same. Even after changing clothes, Sharon was still chilled so Thomas made her a cup of hot chocolate to help warm her up. After mixing up the cup, he got the rest of dinner ready. It was a simple affair and they ate in silence while the rain continued to pour down outside.

Soon it was time for the meeting and they grabbed waterproof jackets to wear and took the umbrella to keep Angel dry for the walk over. They found about half the families there in the

dining room area and found seating at one of the tables. Eventually everyone arrived and Rick brought the meeting to order, discussing old business and then moving on to new business. He gave out the fire team assignments and told the group they were going with four person teams instead of six. Thomas found himself paired with Kristy Garcia and also having Brian Holmes and Amber Villier on Team 5. As soon as her name was called, Thomas felt a little uneasy, but didn't say anything. He didn't want any trouble on his team, but would let the matter rest until there was trouble. Sharon was paired off with Michael Parsons and had Ryan Meeks and Johnny Thompson on Team 1. No one seemed to notice Tim and Tracy Daniels names were not called or they did and kept it to themselves. Thomas didn't expect Tim to mention they were leaving, but figured they might anyway.

Sharon brought the group up to speed on how the final two sheds had gotten finished and how they saved roofing shingles for repairs on the cabins. George asked about the fallback points and when the group would get started on them. Since it seemed there were other projects to be done, a new work priority listing was created and agreed on by the group. It was decided two of the fire teams not on alert would work on the fall back points. The next priority was the coming harvest. If there was too much work to be done in the gardens, one fire team would be moved back from the fallback points to help with gathering the crops. Rick also dedicated one day a week to maintaining the individual gardens at the cabins as well as general home maintenance and clean up at their residences. The group came to a decision Thursday would work best.

Rick announced the duty rotation for the on call reaction teams, which would start with Team 2. When asked about why they were starting on 2 instead of 1, Rick replied since Sharon was on Team 1, it would give the newlyweds a few days to themselves. Since there wasn't really any place to honeymoon, the least the group could do was give them a few days to enjoy each other's company. The Taylors, the Parsons and the Lawsons all volunteered to watch Angel for the couple so they wouldn't be distracted during their time.

Thomas and Sharon thanked the families and accepted the Parson's offer. Although not having a family of their own, they were both very good with children. Shannon Parsons could not have children due to a childhood illness, but both she and Michael made every attempt to help those that did. They would have made dynamite parents and the children often looked forward to the times either of the two was on the child care duties.

Thomas also announced he and Sharon would be going formal to the wedding, but everyone else could come as they were. Rick gave out the work assignments for the next few days and Thomas found his team would be working on the first fallback point and Sharon's team would be working in the gardens. Cynthia, Michelle and Janet announced they would be showing people how to can and would start the classes at 3:00 at the cannery shed. It would only take about two hours to show everyone the ins and outs and have everybody give it a try. The next meeting was scheduled for Monday night and Renee Lawson would be taking over the leadership duties on Sunday. No other business was brought up and Rick brought the meeting to a close.

After Sharon and Thomas returned home, they talked about the work duties and how Thomas would have to find another place to stay on Saturday night. "Why is that?"

“Well, I’m a slightly old fashioned and know we can’t be together on the night before our wedding and you can’t see me that morning prior to the wedding,” she stated.

“Okay, I’ll camp out in the Conference Center for the night. Can I at least have the house for an hour to get ready?” he asked.

“Of course, from 11:00 to 12:00 if that will be okay,” she answered.

“That should be more than enough. Are you going to pick out my shirt and tie?” he asked.

“Do you want me to?” she asked.

“Yes, sweetie, you know I’m not that good at matching my colors to your colors and I’m not sure what you will be wearing,” said Thomas.

She laughed and agreed to pick him something out. They finished talking and put Angel to bed before turning in themselves.

CHAPTER 19 – THE DAY

Time since attacks: 117 days
Date/Time: 15 August/1356 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, Thomas met his team by the tool shed near the fields where they grabbed shovels, picks, axes, machetes, bow saws and hatchets. They loaded the tools up into the Dakota and went to the barn where they located sandbags and grabbed a few hundred to start on the fall back positions. The drove the old logging road to the first fall back point identified by George and began work. They sighted in defensive positions and began to clear the underbrush and the scrub oak bushes so prevalent in Colorado from the area where the families would gather first. They saved any wood over an inch in diameter and put it in the back of the truck so it could be seasoned for later use as firewood. After they finished an area large enough for the families to gather, they moved on to working on the defensive positions. They would return when they were done with those to complete some battlements at the gathering area, but wanted to work from the outside perimeter to the inside. During this time, Brian brought up the idea of creating overhead cover for the area where the families would gather.

"I don't think we have enough lumber for that, but we could do something natural like lashings," answered Thomas. The fire team thought it was a good idea, though, but wanted to get the basic fall back positions done before improving them further.

While Kristy and Thomas were digging the first DFP, Amber and Brian were clearing the fields of fire for the positions. The work was going slow and little progress was made by lunchtime. A new strategy was discussed and the group would make hasty fighting positions first, then bring the Bobcat or backhoe up to entrench them further. Immediately after lunch, they started digging the rest of the hasty fighting positions and the work progressed faster. Thomas and Kristy had switched places with Amber and Brian throughout the afternoon, so a work-rest cycle was established since the cutting of the underbrush was not as physically intensive as digging was.

By 2:30, they started gathering the tools and made their way to the cannery near the Trading Post. Cynthia, Janet and Michelle were already busy inside canning various items and were ready to put on their demonstration. Thomas had learned from Cynthia a couple of years before, but figured this would be a good refresher. Sharon had wisely brought a notepad and was busy writing down the procedures for canning the various vegetables. Each person got a turn at trying it out and even though there were some problems, everyone seemed to grasp the concept.

They were complete by 5:30 and the three teachers agreed to overwatch the canning until everyone was more comfortable with it. Renee, the oncoming community leader, and Rick agreed to this and kept two of the three on that duty until they felt everyone was proficient enough to do it on their own. Tomorrow would be a repeat of today, with the same groups going to the same work locations. Thomas collected Sharon, who was busy asking Michelle some questions and headed home, stopping by the Conference Center to pick up Angel.

“This is one benefit of being here I never imagined,” said Sharon.

“What is that sweetie?” asked Thomas.

“Free child care. You don’t know how much money I threw out paying for a babysitter for Angel. Not that money counts for a whole lot right now anyway,” she said with a smile.

The three returned home where Thomas got a shower first since he had been digging that day and Sharon fixed a simple dinner. Over supper, Sharon brought up an interesting point. “We were weeding and collecting like crazy today and filling up the trash cans with the yanked weeds. Instead of running them through the mulcher, could they be burned instead and use the ashes to mix in with the dirt?”

“Also, I remember reading about something called ‘mulch tea’ on a gardening website a few years ago. Something about running water over old dead plants and then filtering it for the larger stuff. Supposedly the nutrients from the old plants are absorbed in the water and it makes kind of a Miracle-Gro,” she said.

“Did you ever try that?” asked Thomas.

“No,” she answered. “I always cheated and bought the stuff from the store.”

“I think the burning would be possible for sure, as for the mulch tea thing, we can check with Michelle, she has the most experience in gardening,” said Thomas.

“If you want, I think I remember how some people built their own mulch filters and I think I could reverse engineer them, or at least try,” offered Sharon.

“Honey, we aren’t going to stop you from being over eager up here. Trust me,” said Thomas.

“Okay, after the wedding and after our ‘honeymoon’ I will look at it,” she said.

The two finished eating and cleaned the dishes before calling it a night. Thomas read a book to Angel, who was asleep by the fourth page. He turned in himself not long after and fell asleep almost immediately.

The next day was a repeat except for having the Bobcat to dig out the positions. Thomas was the operator of the Bobcat since the rest of his team did not know how to operate it and saved the dirt from the holes for use in the sandbags. Filling the sandbags was hard work, but they managed to get all the positions except for three complete. They started adding natural camouflage to the positions, some of which was the underbrush they had so recently cut. They also transplanted some younger brush and plants and added them into loose dirt piled on top of the sandbags. When they were complete, the positions were not easy to detect from more than seventy-five meters away. They knew the Army manual called for thirty-five meters, but as with all fighting positions, they would continue to improve them.

By the end of the day, Thomas showed his entire team how to operate the Bobcat and had them take turns digging out a parapet which was going in the center of the fallback position for the families to have some cover. As time went on, they would become more proficient at driving the small earthmover and Thomas made a mental note to have everyone capable of driving the equipment become trained in its use. Thomas drove the slow machine back to the barn where it was stored and walked back home as the rest of his team had finished putting away all the tools.

At the end of the day, Thomas went home and packed an overnight bag for his trip to the Conference Center. Sharon wasn't around so Thomas left her a note telling her he loved her and reminding her to be out of the house by 11:00 the next day. He walked into the Conference Center and found Stu and Heather making some dinner for themselves. Thomas reached into his bag and pulled out a can of soup and some bread and heated it as well.

"Ummm, did you and Sharon have a fight?" asked Stu.

"No, she is old fashioned and wanted to be alone on the wedding eve. I promise I'm not in any trouble," answered Thomas with a laugh.

"No problem. It's actually none of my business anyway," offered Stu as an apology.

"It's no big deal," said Thomas.

"But there is something I've been meaning to ask you. Why did you all ask me to join the group?" asked Stu.

"Besides the fact we were just being nice?" said Thomas with a smile.

"Yeah, besides that. I'm a lot younger than most everyone here, except those family members who are children. I mean, why me?" he asked.

"Well, first off, your name came under consideration at the same time we invited the Parsons, the Holmes, Frank and the Daniels. You have good morals and are a decent person. Second, you have mad skills in how to build and fix things and we figured you would come in handy in case we need maintenance or construction around here. Overall, you are a good person with good skills to help make this work around here," stated Thomas.

Stuart Donaldson was a regular whiz when it came to fixing things and coming up with ingenious designs to make things easier. He had grown up working in his father's contracting business which specialized in construction and maintenance and probably had enough knowledge stored away to earn at least two dozen special certifications. He was currently reading a book about solar power and solar power applications, trying to expand his knowledge of items around the Ranch.

"Well, Stu here is a regular whiz, but I have no idea why you invited me to join," stated Heather, more of a question, rather than a fact.

"Heather, as I've told you for a long time, you aren't a bad kid. Yes, you got in a little trouble here and there, but you always did what you were told and did it very well. You always showed me you could follow orders and aside from a little attitude problem, normally followed them very well. I typically wanted to drown you when you copped an attitude, but restrained myself from doing so. I knew you had it in you to make it up here and it took a lot of begging to allow you to stay. I even had to give up the Swedish bikini team for you, so don't screw it up," said Thomas with a smile.

Heather laughed at the joke and stated "I will" to the man who had become a sort of surrogate father to her. She looked up to him and was happy at least one person in the military had looked past her problems and seen her potential. She was also glad it was him since he had saved her life by bringing her here. She wanted to make sure she adapted as much as possible to the lifestyle here without any problems and would continue striving to earn the respect of everyone. The three talked for a while longer before they headed to bed. He was nervous about tomorrow and had trouble falling asleep, but finally dozed off around midnight.

The next morning, Thomas woke up and found Heather was preparing enough breakfast for all of them. They ate in silence and Thomas cleaned the dishes and cookware for them. At around 9:00, people started showing up to prepare the Conference Center for the reception following the wedding. Thomas helped until Janie Holmes chased him off stating with a wink "Tom, this is your wedding, let us do the work since you will have your hands full tonight and need not wear yourself out."

The clock seemed to stand still, but it was finally 10:45. *Close enough*, he thought and went home to shower, shave and change. He found Sharon had laid out everything for him, even matching his tie. After his shower, he set out his shaving items and proceeded to cut away the four day growth on his face. Since arriving at the Ranch, most of the men had chosen to shave sporadically or not at all. Thomas chose a middle road, shaving out a goatee since Sharon liked it when he did that. After finishing up, he got dressed in his gray suit. It wasn't extremely warm today, so the suit would not be stifling in the outdoor wedding.

After dressing, he walked back to the Conference Center and brought Mongo with him for Stu to watch during the "honeymoon." He found everyone still busy preparing for the reception and the wedding. A lot of work in a short time frame was going into this wedding. Rick approached Thomas and asked a question that had been on everyone's mind. "Hey, dude. Who is going to be your best man?"

Thomas thought about it for a minute before answering. "Honestly, everyone here is a good friend and deserves to be my best man. I think I can go without one."

"No can do buddy, Sharon said 'pick a best man or else.' Michelle and Shannon are going to be her bridesmaids and she insisted you have at least one best man," stated Rick, wearing a suit.

"Well, I guess you need to gather Dave, Darren and yourself and decide which two will have the honors. You three are my best friends and two of you get the duty," said Thomas.

While Rick went over and gathered the other two to explain the situation, the Minister approached Thomas. "I never realized your friends were so persuasive."

"I'm sorry?" said Thomas.

"Well, instead of a shotgun wedding we have an assault rifle wedding. Apparently you made some daddy really mad somewhere or your friends are going to force you down the aisle. Your friend Rick says it's about time you got married and I suppose he is going to make sure you end up at the altar, one way or another," said the Minister with a laugh.

"Good thing for me most of them can't shoot straight," laughed Thomas.

Besides Team 2 dressed out in their tactical gear and having their rifles ready, everyone else was armed to some degree. Thomas could see everyone had their pistol on their side and had their rifles sitting nearby. It was comical to see people in suits, ties and dresses wearing a pistol or carrying a rifle. *The world changed so much we have to carry firearms to a wedding, even though the bride to be isn't in any of THAT kind of trouble, at least that we know of,* thought Thomas with a smile. *Just one more thing in the world that shouldn't be "normal."*

Thomas also noticed the men dressed up formally. Apparently, the ladies of the Ranch had enforced the formal dress code and the men had little say so in their apparel for the wedding. It had apparently gone out through the unofficial channels that Sharon wanted a formal wedding and she and Thomas were going to be dressed nice. The ladies of the Ranch had gone to the trouble of making sure everyone was dressed presentably, all except the reaction team. Even they were wearing their nicest sets of fatigues and had pressed them before coming. *We wear the pants, but they pick them out.* He chuckled and the Minister asked what was so funny.

"Well, the other day, the guys were pretty happy about this being a less than formal affair without the dress up. Apparently their wives had other plans," said Thomas.

"Not unlike my wife when she was alive. I never got the option of picking out my own clothes. A Sunday never went by that I wasn't in the pulpit wearing something she had picked out. Once I said to myself 'I'll show her and pick my own clothing' and ignored what she had left out for me. Only halfway through my sermon I discovered my socks didn't match the suit and neither did my tie. I wondered why she had sat in the pews with that smirk on her face the whole time. Since that day, I stopped arguing and let her pick out my clothes," the Minister chuckled.

Thomas looked over and saw Darren, Dave and Rick deciding who would be the best man in a rather unorthodox manner. They were playing rock, paper, and scissors to determine who would have the honors. Apparently, Darren and Rick came off the winners and Darren asked Dave to take his place on the reaction force so he could go home and change. Both men left the Conference Center and Thomas told everyone the wedding would be delayed for a few minutes while they sorted out the best man situation.

After fifteen minutes, Dave reappeared, having changed into ABUs, wearing his tactical gear and

carrying his M1A rifle. He was followed by Darren less than five minutes later who had changed into a suit very similar to what Thomas was wearing. Everyone took their place and the wedding got underway.

Someone had thoughtfully started the generator and wedding music was playing over the outdoor speaker system. Darren, Rick, Michelle and Shannon came walking down the makeshift isle followed by Angel who was throwing flower petals like crazy. The wedding march started and Sharon was escorted in by George, the oldest member of the community, who would be giving her away. She was wearing a beautiful old wedding dress Thomas didn't know she had. Sharon had brought out the family heirloom on the night of their escape and she and Shannon had spent some time getting the dress altered for the wedding. Shannon had also made simple bridesmaid dresses for herself and Michelle.

The Minister got the wedding underway and, as predicted, was a little rusty. However, after a few minutes, he got back into the groove and had things rolling along. He quoted several passages of the Bible and got to the objections part. Of course, nobody objected and the wedding proceeded without incident. The wedding got to the vows, something Thomas had not planned for. After Sharon went was finished, Thomas quickly made up vows on the spot and all were touched by his words.

"I vow to make your life more important than my own. To love, honor and cherish you from now to eternity. To love the million little things about you equally. I vow to keep you safe and protected, loving you every second of the way. I vow, for the rest of my life, to make you the only love I will ever share with anyone. And when I die someday, I vow the last thought in my mind will be of you and the love I have for you."

Sharon was moved by his words and tears formed down her face. The Minister moved on with the wedding and got to the ring exchange. George pulled the rings out of his pocket and handed them to each person. This was a surprise to Sharon since she didn't know he had the rings. In his Mother's will, she had left the rings for Thomas and whomever he had married. The Minister commented "Well, you are a little old to be a traditional ring bearer, but I suppose you will do."

The group laughed and the wedding continued. Ring exchanges were completed and the Minister pronounced them man and wife. As Thomas and Sharon gave the ceremonial kiss, Brian shouted from the group "It's about time, Tom!"

The group laughed and whistled at the newlyweds. Thomas felt a little overwhelmed at that moment since he had never been married before, but was now responsible for his new family. But it was a feeling he liked and knew it would never go away. Rice, from the long term food storage, was thrown at the two as they marched the short distance to the reception hall. The group had gone all out preparing a feast for the couple. Dinner was served and during the reception afterwards, the champagne Thomas had in storage for the corporate retreats was passed out for toasts. Rick had the last toast for the dinner and was the best.

"Well, we've been after Tom for years to get married and it finally happened. Most of us know him, some better than others, and wondered if he would ever take the plunge. He finally found

someone with a worse temper than his who will actually keep him in line. We all have gotten to know Sharon since we got here and we all kind of figure she will call the whole thing off when she sobers up." Laughter followed the last comment and Rick continued. "I have no doubt these two will be happy for all times. Thomas is a grumpy old man who is actually happy when she is around, so that's a marked improvement over what he normally is. Sharon is happy with him as well since she gets all moody and sour when he is off 'playing hero' as she is fond of telling it. But when they are together, they are happy and in love."

"So, I toast to you. For eternal love for you two, for eternal happiness for the two of you, to everlasting devotion to the happiness and love you will share. From all of us, we wish you long life, health and prosperity from now to eternity."

Everyone was moved by the toast and Thomas and Rick shared a handshake and a hug. He also received a kiss from Sharon. After the toast, Thomas and Sharon shared the traditional first dance and were joined by the rest of the group on the next song. The cake was brought out not long afterwards. It was a simple affair, baked in the larger oven of the Conference Center. Janie and Michelle had done the baking and Shannon had done the decorating. The group had gone all out for the wedding on such short notice and felt they owed it to Thomas and Sharon for giving them a new life at the Ranch.

The reception lasted far longer than planned and started breaking up around 5:00. Sharon tossed her bouquet of wild flowers to the ladies on the Ranch and was caught by Nicole Thompson, much to the dismay of her father. Thomas tossed the garter and it was caught by Frank. Darren made the group crack up when he yelled "You stay away from my daughter, Frank!" Frank made them roll on the floor when he went over and received a kiss on the cheek from Nicole, again to the dismay of her father who laughed along with everyone else.

Sharon and Thomas said goodbye to Angel before getting ready to leave. She would be staying with the Parsons for the next three nights to give the newlyweds a little time to themselves. A "limo" was provided by George in his full sized Chevy Suburban and drove the two the short distance to their home. Thomas carried her into the house and over the threshold and once inside, they got down to the business of married people alone in their house for the first time…

CHAPTER 20 – NEW DISCOVERIES

Time since attacks: 120 days
Date/Time: 18 August/0803 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, Sharon and Thomas woke up far later than usual, around 8:00. Thomas reached up and pulled her hair away from his face and was rewarded with a smile and a "Good morning, love." They stayed in bed talking for a few minutes before Sharon asked "So, how does it feel to have a Mrs. Dayfield in your life?"

"You mean we got married yesterday? I thought it was all a bad dream," he teased.

Sharon smiled and ran her hand across his chest. "Oh no buddy, we are in it for the long haul. You aren't getting rid of me anytime soon."

"Well, I guess I can get used to having a Mrs. Dayfield around," he replied with a smile.

"You better get used to it mister, else I'm going to find me another ranch owner who has enough supplies to last through the millennium," she teased back.

"Yeah, I hear they have their own website. Ranch owners looking to be a sugar daddy," he said with a laugh. "Anything in particular you want for breakfast?"

"You mean we can't order room service and have it in the buff? What kind of place did you bring me to on our honeymoon?" she asked.

"I brought you to the kind of place that charges you extra for room service," he replied with a mischievous grin.

"And how much is this room service going to cost me?" she asked, playing along.

"Why don't you come back over here and I'll show you exactly what it's going to cost."

Forty-five minutes later, the two were in bathrobes having breakfast in the kitchen when she asked "Was there anything special you had planned for today?"

"Not anything planned. I just kind of figured we might lounge around here today, enjoy the peace of just you and me," he answered.

"Uh-huh. And by lounging around, you mean spend a lot of time a lot closer than normal?" she asked.

"Well, maybe that could be arranged. I mean, Angel isn't around so we have free reign of the

house for a change. There are plenty of rooms to be explored more fully," he said with a grin.

"You are so bad! While the thought that sounds really nice, I kind of want to get out of the house for a bit. There is plenty of time for that later," she answered with a grin of her own.

"Anything special you wanted to do?" he asked.

"Well, I was hoping you might show me the rest of the property. I mean, just a nice long walk through the woods would be nice," she answered.

Thomas thought about it for a moment before deciding it would be a good time to see the marsh Frank had told him about. "Okay, sweetie, let's get cleaned up and go on out. We can follow the stream down a ways before coming back."

They finished breakfast and got their packs ready. Sharon, with the help of Thomas, had put together a small Bug Out Bag along with a basic survival kit a few days prior. Since they were going to be traveling light and through somewhat secure areas, he went to the basement and grabbed a small carbine and seven magazines. He didn't expect there to be trouble and they would head back to the Ranch in case they ran into anything. He felt the pistol caliber carbine would be enough of a long gun in case of trouble. He also grabbed a box of shot shells for his 1911. Although they didn't cycle the action reliably, they were handy to have in case of snakes. He loaded a magazine with the shells and put it in a spare magazine holder by itself. He also changed out the shoulder holster for a leather belt holster.

When he returned upstairs he found Sharon strapping the M1 Carbine to her pack like the Feather carbine was on his. Although though she carried the AK during LP/OP duties or on patrol duties, she liked the little carbine for its compact size and light weight. *How strange,* he thought. *We are taking a simple hike and not four months ago I would have grabbed my hiking pack, a revolver and wilderness survival kit and nothing more. Now we take long guns, automatics and enough supplies for three days. Not very normal, but what is these days?*

They set out, checking out through the comm center and checked out a radio. They let Stephen know in what general direction they would be heading and when they would be coming back. They followed the stream down towards the gardens where they found Dave staring intently at the tree line two hundred yards away.

"See something?" asked Thomas.

"Yeah, Team 2 is doing some camouflage and concealment training and I'm picking them out. Care to take a look?" he answered.

Both Thomas and Sharon peered off in the distance finding two of the four members of the team. They pointed them out to Dave, who relayed the information to Darren over a radio. He sounded a bit disappointed over the radio that two had been spotted. "Yes, but we knew where to look and that you were there. A little more practice would be good, but it is enough to fool someone not particularly looking for you," replied Thomas.

They continued past the gardens where everyone seemed a bit busy. They felt a little guilty knowing others were working while they were taking it easy but decided to double their efforts when they returned. They continued following the stream past the fields where Thomas had not really been before. About three quarters of a mile beyond the gardens, they found the marsh Frank had told them about. They snuck up on it finding a dozen ducks and half a dozen geese. There were also game trails evident where the local wildlife came to water before going back into the mountains. Thomas decided this would be a good starting point for the fall hunts and track the game back into the mountains.

After observing the marsh for five minutes, Sharon and Thomas stood up and startled the fowl who immediately took flight away from the intruding humans. They moved around the marsh and continued following the stream which had come back to one focal point. They moved in and out of groves of trees and followed a slightly worn game trail that paralleled the stream. Another mile downstream they encountered a densely wooded area and moved ahead slower than normal. When they had gone about a third of a mile, Thomas saw a cabin in the woods ahead. He immediately stopped and had Sharon get down behind some scrub oak. Thomas suggested they observe the cabin, about one hundred fifty yards away to check for signs of inhabitants.

For the first time since they left, Thomas was upset at himself for not having brought the larger caliber rifle. Not that he needed it for the longer range, but the scope on top would have been ideal for checking the cabin out from a distance. He left Sharon in place and checked the view from several different angles. For the most part, it seemed the cabin was uninhabited and there appeared to be a lock on the front door. From the side, it also appeared dark inside and there were no pathways in the long grass in front of the cabin. It looked like someone's hunting cabin or weekend retreat.

Thomas returned to Sharon and unstrapped the carbine from his pack. Sharon did the same and the two approached the cabin non-threatening holding the carbines by the grips at their sides with one hand. As they closed the distance, Thomas saw the padlock on the front door and rust starting to appear on the sides. They walked around the rear of the cabin and peeked in the windows. It appeared there had not been anyone there in a long time since the furniture was covered in sheets and there were cobwebs in the windowsills.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Sharon.

"Probably someone's hunting cabin or weekend getaway spot. Looks to be a three room design from appearances," he answered.

The cabins were one story structures and appeared to be well designed except for the lack of upkeep. There were wood stoves in each of the bedrooms and the living room area as well as a wood fired kitchen stove and a fireplace near the dining table. The furniture inside was simple, but looked to be in decent shape. A woodpile was to the rear of the cabins covered in a fading blue tarp that had several holes in it. There were also several blue water barrels, two of which still had water in them, and a small hand operated pump. One more sat on a metal stand and had a semi-rotted wooden base and walls and was plumbed for a shower head. They were close

enough to the stream to run a water hose and pump the water in manually. They saw PVC pipes running from the barrels into the kitchen and another hand pump in the sink. A small building with another padlock sat about ten yards from the house, which they figured was probably a storage shed of some sort. An outhouse stood back almost fifty yards from the cabin and almost seventy five yards from the stream.

"Well, here is the honeymoon retreat. How do you like it?" he asked.

"Ugh, it would take at least a day to clean the place to a nasty standard, much less anything else," she replied.

"So you'll take the current location without room service?" he asked with a laugh.

"Yeah, I bet the room service here is brought to you by the rats. No thanks, I am happy at the current lodging," she replied with a grin.

Going behind the cabin, they found an old pathway which looked almost like it was used by vehicles, but not recently. They followed it around and found three more cabins along the stream, almost identical to the first. Looking across the stream, it appeared there were another two along with a place to ford the water. Thomas did not remember there being another hunting lodge or campground near his, but could not discount the possibility of it. They checked the other three cabins on this side of the creek finding similar arrangements inside like the first. From the looks of it, the cabins had stood abandoned for some time, possibly even years. They returned to the first cabin and marked the spot on the GPS so the others could come back at a later time and see the cabins. Thomas wanted to come back with more people and with better weapons and do a thorough recon of the area to determine if the area was inhabited at all. One thing was certain, they cabins would have to be watched closely in the future.

Between the second and third cabins, there was a roadway leading back into the forest and Thomas marked that spot as well on the GPS. They could either return on foot or on the ATVs to effectively scout the area. He looked on the military map of the area and didn't find the roadway marked on it. He would have to check the Colorado jeep trail map he had at the house to make sure, but from the direction, this dirt road led out to the main hardball, although he wasn't sure where. The cabins also weren't marked on the map.

It was close to noon and the two sat down near the road junction and ate their lunch, albeit out of sight of the roadway just in case. After policing up their garbage, Sharon suggested they follow the road for a little to see where it went. Thomas wouldn't have thought twice about it had it been someone else, but suddenly was protective of his new wife.

"Baby, it's not really a good idea since we don't know for sure what's down that road. With only two of us, there could be trouble," he told her.

"Thomas Dayfield! When we got married I did not suddenly turn into a china doll that you have to protect all the time! I know you are trying to protect me, but I want to see what's down the road," she said, obviously seeing through his façade. "So if you want to protect me, you will just

have to follow along."

Thomas sighed before continuing. He knew he didn't marry a china doll, but still wanted to be protective of his wife. "No chance of talking you out of this?"

She shook her head to the side and gave him a slight smile as he continued. "Okay, you win. But I lead, you follow. We will parallel the road and go slow. Got it?"

She agreed and they set off. The road had been well traveled at one point, indicated by the deep ruts where light vegetation was growing. However, it had not seen traffic in recent times since the grass in the middle of the road was high and had not been disturbed. There were also no tire tracks visible and several trees were downed across the road.

Thomas set a slow pace and tried to make as little noise as possible. Sharon attempted to emulate what he was doing and had a degree of success, but still was making a little more noise than he was used to. They reached a clearing a third of a mile down the road and he came to a stop, close enough to observe the clearing, but far enough away to still be fairly well concealed.

"Isn't this what they call a danger area?" she whispered when she got along side of him.

"Yes it is," he said, impressed with her remembering the field manuals she had read. "What does the book say about crossing them?"

"If I remember correctly, you would either cross quickly, like a roadway, or box it, like in this situation. Am I right?" she asked.

"Yes, we box this one, but what about a larger one?" he asked, impressed by her answers so far.

She closed her eyes and thought about it for a moment before replying. "You go straight through if you can't go around. But you spread out far enough that two people can't be engaged by the same burst of fire."

Thomas was proud of his wife for remembering what she had from the Field Manuals she had been reading. It actually gave her a head start, in theory at least, for the tactics she would continue to learn with the group. Although he figured it was fairly safe to cross this one, he decided to show her the proper technique for a boxing a danger area. He turned ninety degrees from the area and walked forward, counting his paces until the danger area was past. He then turned back ninety degrees on the original heading and proceeded past the danger area to his right. When they were past, he turned right, walked back the appropriate amount of steps to their original course. Turning left one last time, they would be right back on the same heading they had been on before had they been following a magnetic azimuth.

They continued down the road, finding another small area which she boxed. He prompted her steps once, but otherwise, she didn't need his assistance. After almost a mile, they came upon a large open area and Thomas figured it would be enough for the day. He plugged the spot into the GPS and looked at the map as to where they were. According to the military map, they were

within a mile and a half of the main hardball road. It concerned Thomas since the map showed neither the jeep trail or the structures. There could be more ahead and they could be inhabited.

He informed Sharon they had gone as far as they needed to go for the day and probably needed to head back. Sharon was actually enjoying prowling around in the woods like this, but knew the further out they were, the more time it would take to get home. Thomas looked at the coordinates displayed on the GPS and consulted his map again. He decided to make a two leg course back to the Ranch, but nothing fancy. He looked at the map and entered the correct waypoints into the GPS to his home. With the revised plotting, the distance read 3.28 miles distance. Normally about an hour and a half, maybe two tops in peaceful times, but going tactically and slowly, more like three to four.

He showed her how to work the magnetic compass and how to determine directions the old fashioned way before heading off. Their blazed trail back took them through both woods and clearings. As they entered a cleared area, she would drop back to his left and further out, but would close back when they entered into a wooded area. Since they started that morning, she had gotten quieter since she was making a concerted effort to be stealthy. Thomas could barely hear her footsteps behind him in the wooded areas, typically the noisiest areas one would travel.

He would check the compass and the GPS every ten minutes or so. He found his land navigational skills had not perished since he past used them since the magnetic heading they were on exactly matched the GPS route. Almost two hours later, they were within a half mile of the Ranch and he called the Control Center on the radio and informed them of his direction of travel anticipated arrival point and security status. Darren came over the earpiece of the radio and relayed back the information and told them to proceed.

Since they were so close to home and in the relative safety of the group, they stopped being tactical and Sharon moved alongside of Thomas. They slung their carbines and he took her hand in his and walked a little faster towards the hill behind his house. By going over the top, they would be coming down into the backyard and check on the garden before going inside.

As they walked along, Sharon saw a figure move behind a tree at the base of the hill and informed Thomas. They were in an open clearing, but there was a small scrub bush to their front. They both immediately grabbed their carbines and ran the short distance and plopped down behind the bush. Thomas was about to call in the contact report when he heard Darren's voice over the radio again. "Don't be alarmed, that's us at the base of the hill."

"That's fine, stand up and let me recognize you if it is," replied Thomas.

The fire team at the base of the hill stood up from behind their cover and grouped on Darren. Thomas and Sharon walked the two hundred yards to them and joined the discussion.

"Sorry we didn't tell you in advance, but we were using you as a live target to practice setting up an ambush," stated Darren.

"I understand completely, but a little advance notice would have been nice," replied Thomas. "It

wasn't too bad though. We did see one person moving behind cover, but not the rest of you. Are you teaching them to engage at as long a range as possible?"

"We hadn't really emphasized that point. We were training to wait until the group was closer into the kill zone before attacking," he said after thinking about the question.

"We should be taking advantage of range when we can, at least to cut down the numbers of a larger group. Frank and his razzle-dazzle rifle should be able to consistently hit targets out to eight hundred meters or further. The other 7.62 NATO rifles should open fire at five hundred and the AK and 5.56 weapons at three hundred," stated Thomas.

"This is true on a known hostile adversary, but most of the people we will be encountering will be unknowns. It wouldn't be polite to shoot at someone until they prove themselves to have hostile intent," said Darren.

Thomas thought about the comment for a moment before agreeing with him. "This is true, but it's something we need to address again, the long range marksmanship. Maybe something to set up every month or so?"

"I can bring that up at the meeting tonight. Are you all going to be there?" asked Darren.

Thomas looked at Sharon and didn't get an answer. "We don't know yet, maybe."

"Well, if not, we understand. Talk to you later then," said Darren.

The fire team walked the long way around the hill as Sharon and Thomas cut across the top. They grabbed a basket and took some of the ripe vegetables off the plants and into the house. Sharon suggested they get a quick shower before dinner and stated they should go to the meeting that night.

Time Since Attacks: 120 days
Date/Time: 18 August/1900 Local
Location: The Ranch

Thomas and Sharon joined the meeting and were almost shooed away, but they were allowed to stay after they protested and said they needed to know what was going on. Renee Lawson was hosting the meetings now that she had taken over for the group leader position and started off the meeting. The big question on everyone's mind was where are the Daniels? Even Renee had not known since Rick had kept it a secret until that night. He explained the difference of opinion with Tim and Tracy and how they voluntarily left the Ranch. He emphasized the point they were not forced to leave and had decided this was what was best for them.

Some saw the departure as a good thing since Tracy had abused the hospitality of the group before leaving. Others were sad because Tim was a friend of many on the Ranch. Everyone

silently wondered where they might go and if their location might be compromised at a later date. Tim knew the defenses of the Ranch and even friends can turn on each other when starvation is at hand.

Their cabin was offered to Stu who declined. It would remain empty for the time being until either another family moved in or a determination could be made. Renee moved the business on to the harvest and to food preservation. Ryan also brought up the point that the meat in the freezers would eventually run out and it was probably time to start thinking about some hunting parties. "It wouldn't hurt to take a fire team out to start taking some game as well. I mean a good sized elk or deer would keep us fed for a while, but we need to get the getting before the game move far into the mountains away from the refugees coming out of the cities."

"Plus, with the violence coming out of the cities as it has, we need some scouting parties out, like a recon patrol," added Frank.

"Yes, but if the violence is this far outside of the big cities and bandits might be close, is it smart to be sending our people that far away?" asked Brian.

"Maybe not that far out, but with advance warning, the group would have that much more time to prepare for an attack. Plus, the recon team could begin attrition on a larger group, sniping at them before they even reach the Ranch," countered George.

"But you run into the same problem Thomas and I talked about earlier. How do we tell if they are friendly or not? We don't have property demarcation lines out there, not even a fence, so no warning of no trespassing. Trying to sort the good guys from the bad guys is going to be hard," stated Darren.

The group argued the point for a couple of more minutes before Renee took charge again. "Maybe it is something we need. How many sightings has the LP/OP seen in the past week on the roadway?"

"We have gotten more in the past three days than in the past three weeks. Mainly foot traffic, but some vehicles as well. Most have not taken an interest in the Taylor's house, but those that have were peaceful. Most asked for water and food and were given what we could and sent on their way. So sixteen sightings over the past three days, eleven were not armed or we couldn't see the weapons. Five, however, had firearms evident and displayed them openly," said Stephen.

"Which means some of the other eleven probably had them hidden," stated Shannon.

"How large have the groups been?" Renee inquired.

Stephen consulted the logbook before answering. "Most groups have been four to eight people, but we saw two groups of over ten and two of over twenty."

"We have no way of knowing where these groups are coming from or where they are going. We might think about making contact with some of them and getting some information," suggested

Amber.

“But not by the Taylor’s residence. Either further down the road, say a half a mile or more or down by the end where the group stopped before they got here,” said Thomas.

“Also, since we are getting increased traffic on the roads are we to assume there are possibly more groups not using the roadways, like Mike Dugger’s group? I mean, not everyone is going to be dumb enough to go meandering down the road waiting to be picked up by bandits or Loyalist forces. I’m sure some of the groups have some form of military training. We might even think about setting up some additional LP/OPs on the eastern side of the property. I agree with George, increased warning gives us increased time to cut these people off before they wander onto the Ranch,” said Dave.

“And I also agree it would be good to start cutting down the numbers at long range for the larger groups,” stated Sharon.

“And we come back to the same problem as before. How do we tell? I mean, Mike Dugger and his group had the looks of being hostile until we saw the children and they turned out to be all right,” objected Darren.

George summed up the arguments. “Both sides of this debate are correct. We need to both determine if groups are hostile and keep those that are at long range. But the question still stands, how do we determine if they are hostile or not?”

This question bugged each member of the group. Even armed parties could have peaceful intentions and those parties that seemed non-hostile could use it as a ruse to get close then attack. Renee wanted to move the meeting on to other subjects but promised to re-engage the debate before the meeting came to a close.

Thomas briefed the group about the cabins to the north-east of the Ranch and wanted to return with a recon team when he came off the “honeymoon.” This sparked another debate.

“We should look at breaking the locks off, taking whatever we need then either tearing them down or burning them. Don’t even leave the temptation of someone moving in there,” stated Frank.

Cynthia led the argument from the other side. “Let’s not be too hasty in that decision. What happens if we got some nice neighbors in up there, or perhaps even a doctor? We don’t know who owns them anyway and that would be destroying other people’s property. Even if the owners don’t move in, we could invite others to go there, those that we trust.”

“So the question is, who would we invite to live there?” asked Michael.

“Well a doctor of course, as long as he would fit in here. But who else? I mean, we don’t have any use for lawyers up here or a nuclear scientist. Who would fit the bill on getting invited?” asked Misty, joining the discussion.

"A doctor for sure," answered Rick. "Even a plastic surgeon would have the basic surgical skills we could use here."

"A good question, but not only that, how would we invite them in?" asked Renee.

A small debate was had before deciding on a two-thirds majority vote for someone to get in to the Ranch. Then the discussion was had on whom else to invite. Renee asked the group to think about it and bring their ideas to the next meeting on Wednesday.

Misty brought up the point that the LP/OP needed some work done, especially clearing out the observations fields. Renee appointed Team 5 to do that when Thomas returned to duty on Wednesday. The work on the fallback points was going well and almost the entire group had learned to operate the Bobcats and the backhoe. Brian brought up his idea of having a shelter at each and it was decided when the defensive works at all of them were done, they would work on that as well.

Bug Out Bags were brought up again and each family was asked to prepare a bag for each family member in case the group needed to leave the Ranch for any reason. Some of the families asked what should go in the bags so George volunteered to make a recommended items list and would be ready by the next meeting on Wednesday. The subject of applicable backpacks came up and the group decided to pass out the military issue bags for everyone to use. If they ran short, commercial backpacks could be used and Shannon agreed to sew camouflage covers for them. Thomas offered to open the Trading Post to gather out the backpacks for the group. He was turned down by Rick.

"You are on vacation right now and I know precisely where you put them. You just continue your honeymoon and make a godson you can name after me," said Rick as he turned to Sharon. "Isn't there any way you can keep him at home."

"Oh, I can think of some ways," she replied with a naughty look on her face.

The harvest was again brought up and how the work was almost too much and in the next few weeks, the entire group should be working in the gardens. It was decided after putting in the final hasty fighting positions in fallback point four, that team would return to the gardens to help with the harvest. As planned, the group returned to the debate of hostile versus non-hostile groups. One key point in deciding whether or not to stop a group for information was agreed on. They would stop smaller groups of no more than six people and offer food and water in return for information. Two separate points were determined where a fire team would wait for travelers to pass.

Recon patrols were agreed on, even with the coming harvest. The group understood it would do no good spending a lot of time harvesting crops if the Ranch was to fall. A team not on alert would recon the eastern parts of the Ranch looking for both signs of intruders and groups passing through. Smaller groups located would be redirected and sent another way. Larger and armed groups would have to be determined to be threatening and then dealt with. Other reaction plans

were discussed and were agreed to be discussed further on Wednesday giving everyone time to think about the plans. Dave and Renee also informed the group they planned to cook dinner for the entire Ranch on Wednesday if everyone would come a little earlier than planned. No further business was brought up and the meeting broke up.

Thomas and Sharon took the time to see Angel before leaving. She was thrilled to see her Mommy and Daddy and started crying when they were about to leave. Sharon and Thomas decided to take her back the next night instead of waiting until Wednesday morning. The newlyweds would have one more night to themselves before starting to become a full fledged family. The two said their goodnight to Angel and made her promise to behave for the Parsons before leaving. They returned home and turned in for the evening.

Time Since Attacks: 122 days
Date/Time: 20 August/0841 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning it was overcast with a light drizzle coming down. The two decided to spend the morning just enjoying each other's company. By lunch it had started to clear off a little and they decided to make a walk on the eastern part of the Ranch today. They moved towards the orchard and made it there in under an hour. They weren't walking tactically, but neither was acting like they were just walking out on the street. They stopped for a few minutes and grabbed a large apple apiece off one of the trees. They were bearing good fruit and the group would need to return to gather more up before the winter.

The orchard was almost a mile off the paved road so the chance of someone stumbling around out here wasn't that good, but Thomas and Sharon kept an eye out anyway. Checking the map, he had Sharon shoot a magnetic azimuth towards the stream. They walked in a northern direction for an hour before picking up the stream. It gave Sharon a chance to not only practice her navigation skills, but to ensure her pace count was correct. They followed the stream towards the Ranch and found a few game trails along the way, other spots to start hunting very soon. They arrived at the Ranch just as it was starting to rain again and headed for home. Before it started to come down heavy, Thomas checked the rainwater barrel under the gutter and found it halfway filled. He attempted to remove and replace the barrel but found he couldn't make it budge. He left the barrel in place and moved an empty next to it and scooped it out using the pitcher they had been using to fill the distiller. He managed to get a good portion out before the rain started coming down harder and he returned into the house.

He found Sharon in the kitchen preparing another elk roast for the night. She planned on cooking it a little less than last time to try and get it right. He went upstairs to change out of the wet clothes and was joined by Sharon. Another forty-five minutes of passion later, they were lying on the bed talking.

"So…on the matter of hunting. I'm pretty sure I can hit what I am aiming at, but I'm not sure about skinning the game or keeping the furs. We are planning on keeping the furs of the animals

we shoot right?" asked Sharon.

"Of course. I have more books about skinning and preserving furs as well as how to properly dress out a variety of animals. Some of the furs will make good blankets in the winter or even clothing, although that might not be a good idea. Animal fur tends to attract gunfire and that's seriously not what you want," said Thomas.

Sharon was silent for a moment. "You know, there was a time when I might have objected to shooting Bambi, but now I don't figure this will be a problem since we will starve otherwise."

"True, but you will never know if you can pull the trigger until you have it in your sights with the safety off. And other than that, you need a proper hunting rifle anyway," he replied.

"You think you might be able to spare one out of your meager collection?" she asked with a grin.

"Maybe one, but other than that, you are on your own," he replied with the same grin.

He wanted to get her a rifle capable of taking small game, a medium caliber game rifle and a shotgun. He also thought to get her a varmint caliber rifle to deal with coyotes and wild dogs, but wanted to get the first three before moving up. Since they had some extra time before dinner, they redressed and went to the vault where they looked through the various hunting rifles inside. Thomas also had two gun safes immediately outside the vault which he cleaned out, one for him and one for her. She took her Savage .22, M1 Carbine and the Feather RAV given to her by Rick and put them inside while Thomas finished cleaning out the other. Her AK was already out, being stored upstairs in their closet in the bedroom.

Since she had a smaller stature and might have a problem with the larger magnum calibers so effective in Colorado hunting, he decided to go with a .308 rifle. It would be capable of taking most of the game they would be hunting this year, except maybe the larger elk. He found a rifle in that caliber and had her try it out. She cleared the rifle before throwing it up to her shoulder several times and lining up where the scope would be. She commented she liked the feel of the rifle and would be willing to try it out the next time they were at the range. She placed the rifle in the safe she now called "hers" and returned.

He had found a smaller bore shotgun in 20 gauge. She commented she didn't care for the long barrel, but after handling several more shotguns, found it was normal. Again, she stated she would give it a try the next time they were at the range. The 20 gauge was perfect for her since it lowered recoil substantially over the normal 12 gauge rounds with only a slight degradation in performance. He found her a small game rifle, a Marlin in .17 HMR. A hot, fast round, it would be very effective on rabbits and squirrels. Although a shotgun was better suited to take small game, the rifle had a far greater range then the shotgun and an extremely flat trajectory. Again, she commented she liked the feel of the rifle and put it away in her safe.

Since he was here, he decided to get her a varmint rig while he was messing around. Looking through several set-ups, he found a varmint type rifle in .22-250 with a heavy barrel. It was an extremely accurate rifle, making a five shot pattern at one hundred yards that could be covered

with a dime with some handloads Rick had come up with. She didn't care for the heavy weight of the rifle, but when he explained it was a bench rest shooting rifle and wasn't necessarily meant to be carried around, she changed her mind. She would change her mind even more after putting rounds downrange with it. He checked the high end scope to make sure it was mounted properly before placing it in her safe. The last item he pulled for her was a magnum caliber handgun. He knew she would need a pistol while hunting in case of bear or wild animal attacks. The 9mm, while potent on humans, would do little more than annoy a bear unless it was placed in just the right spot. Looking through his various pistols, he found a Ruger in .357 Magnum with a Hogue aftermarket grip which fit her smaller hands perfectly. It also went into the safe along with the other rifles.

While he was in here, he decided to get his own hunting rifles in order. It would be much easier than her since he knew what he liked, knew what was accurate and furthermore, what he was comfortable with. His first stop was back at the varmint rifles where he got his custom built AR-15 style precision rifle. The rifle had been built as a precision rifle by both George and Ryan over several months and the two had gone all out making a top of the line precision marksman rifle from the ground up. While Thomas had supplied the parts specified by the two, it was they who had worked their magic on the rifle and come up with a winner. The rifle when first tested had shot 0.35 MOA out to one hundred yards and even held the MOA mark when military surplus ammunition was used. He placed this rifle in "his" gun safe and went back for the rest of his items.

His next weapons were the small game rifles and his shotgun. While Sharon would be using the 20 gauge predominately until she felt more comfortable with a larger caliber, he went straight for the 12 gauge as he was already proficient with it. He pulled his regular game rifle out next, a Savage hunting rifle in .30-06. Although Savage seemed to suffer from a bad name, Thomas found their rifles to be of high quality and have better than average accuracy. He had no problems with the rifles on the various hunts he took and the .30-06 was also probably the most versatile caliber for taking Colorado game since the rounds could go from lightweight varmint rounds to heavyweight hitters that could take even the largest game with one well placed shot.

The final rifle he pulled was an old Model 1891 Argentine Mauser Carbine in 7.65x53mm Argentine caliber. The rifle was a family heirloom which came from his Grandfather and Thomas had found the short rifle to be especially handy and light enough to carry long distances on mountain treks when serving as a hunting guide. Although it kicked like a mule, had poor sights and didn't have a scope, it was more accurate than your typical military surplus firearm. Apparently, someone at the factory had taken the extra time to make sure this rifle was put together properly and the accuracy was better than average for the ranges he shot at. Being a carbine model, Thomas never expected to make full use of the extended ranges the iron sights offered, but he had once made a four hundred yard shot on a wounded deer while on a hunting trip and another hunter's rifle jammed up. He made a one shot stop on the wounded animal keeping it from running off and them from having to track it through the rough underbrush where they were hunting. It was a favorite story of George who never thought neither Thomas nor the little carbine could make that sort of shot. It was also a favorite story of Thomas since it was George's rifle that jammed up. Although Thomas knew he got lucky, he never passed the opportunity to remind George of the once in a lifetime shot.

He also gathered the various rounds they would both need for the weapons for the hunting season and placed them into the tops of the safes. Thomas knew another trip to the range would be needed in short order for Sharon to zero the rifles as well as others in the Ranch doing the same. They would need to start taking game earlier than planned since the frozen meat wasn't lasting as long as expected. After completing everything, he headed back upstairs and found dinner was almost ready.

The meeting that night focused on the completion of the inventory and taking the harvest out of the fields. They planned to run the cannery from dawn to dusk to preserve as much as they could and Cynthia and Michelle were put in charge of supervising the operations there. More items were discussed, agreed on or were put off until the next meeting to give the residents a chance to think about the problems they faced. Thomas and Sharon collected Angel after the meeting and she was overjoyed to be going back home after the short stint away. While she enjoyed her time at the Parson's house, she was happy knowing she was going back home with her mother and new father. They checked the duty roster before going home and found Sharon had canning duties and Thomas and his team were going to do some work by the LP/OP to clear the observation fields and fields of fire. When they got home, Thomas got Angel ready for bed and read her a story. She was asleep by page three and Thomas had a newfound peace in his life since they were now a full-fledged family. And, of course, new worries came into his head since he was now doubly responsible for the safety and security of his new family. He went to sleep that night thinking of better security arrangements for the Ranch.

The next day, Thomas and Sharon set off and to get back into a working cycle and dropped off Angel at the Conference Center. It had become the primary building for whoever was on duty that day to watch the children since the large rooms were better for the amount of children as well as easier to clean from the mess children can inevitably make. The newlywed couple shared a kiss and went their respective ways, Sharon to the cannery and Thomas grabbing his team and heading for the LP/OP area. When they arrived, they found the entire field should be cleared with the brush hog and agreed to bring it up to the group. They had briefly discussed it before only to be turned down by George, who stated the fields shouldn't be touched since it would indicate the area was being occupied. However, the tall grass was now limiting observation of the avenues of approach from the roadway and the forest and would have to be dealt with soon. For the moment they began to clear the different areas from the LP/OP with hand tools, working steadily throughout the morning.

At around 11:00, they heard gunfire in the distance. It was automatic gunfire and it was getting closer to the Ranch. They immediately dropped their tools in place and ran back towards the LP/OP where their rifles and gear were stashed. Frank was working the LP/OP and was already calling in the report over the radio to the Control Center. Thomas and his team were pulling on their web gear, BDU tops and grabbing weapons when a Toyota 4-Runner appeared at the bend in the road. Thomas put his rifle to his shoulder and increased the magnification on the scope. It was hard to make out details at almost a mile, but the vehicle was moving far slower than it should have been. Thomas could see the rear two tires were flat, reducing speed. A one figure was hanging out the passenger side window, reloading a rifle and peering back at some unknown target.

Suddenly, two other trucks were seen coming around the bend and the gunfire started again. The figure in the front vehicle started firing at the rear and several others in the pursuing trucks fired back. Thomas was almost positive it was Tim Daniel's vehicle and was rewarded with confirmation when Tim's voice came over the earpiece of the radio.

"Ranch, this is Tim…sorry to do this, but we are in serious trouble…found a few visitors that want to crash dinner uninvited…two trucks unarmored…four occupants in the rear, now two in the lead vehicle…it would be nice to have some friends around…can you help us?"

During the pauses, Thomas could hear Tim firing at the vehicles both over the earpiece and the reports traveling over the field. Even though Tim and Tracy had left under less than ideal circumstances, Tim was still his friend and they needed help. "Here is what you need to do," ordered Thomas over the radio, not using call signs. "In another four hundred yards, you will stop and haul butt out of the vehicles towards us. There are some trees about fifty yards off the road that can provide you cover. Get there and we will engage. Stop firing when you get there and we will get rid of the visitors. How copy?"

Tim acknowledged over the radio and continued firing. Thomas placed his team by twos in an area a little over three hundred meters from the expected ambush zone. He silently hoped the pursuing vehicles had not been paying attention to their surroundings and had not seen him or his team getting into position. Thomas knew the stretch from the roadway to his current position would be a good distance for the M-4s and AKs to engage at, but would be well within reach of his PTR and Frank in the LP/OP.

Tim and Tracy reached the spot designated by Thomas and stopped the vehicle. Tim provided cover to Tracy from the vehicle, sending several bursts down the road towards the other vehicles and then displaced himself. Tracy attempted to cover him with the pistol she was firing, but the distance between her and the aggressors was too great and the shots fell short.

The pursuing vehicles did exactly as Thomas had planned and driven off the roadway to chase down the individuals they had been chasing. When the first vehicle came off the roadway, it fell right into the steep drainage ditch which had been overgrown with vegetation and had blended in nicely with the rest of the field. As soon as the front right wheel of the truck sank into the ditch, the driver attempted to correct, but momentum carried it into the ditch and the vehicle rolled onto its side, completed one full roll and came to rest on the roof.

The second driver saw the mistake and pulled away just in time to avoid the ditch. Their vehicle came to a rest about twenty-five meters away from the Daniel's Toyota and continued to fire at the family now hiding behind as much cover as the small group of trees provided. Thomas sighted in his rifle and ordered "FIRE" to his team as he engaged.

Observing the small attacking group, he found the most immediate threat to be a man firing an M-16A2 on burst. He silently tracked in on the man and pulled the trigger rearward, sending the round downrange to the intended target. He watched as the round hit and the man fell onto the ground, not moving. The rest of his team fired at the aggressors; however, their shots were not

as effective as his first shot had been since there was a good distance between them and the 5.56mm and 7.62x39mm rounds weren't as effective at that range. Thomas immediately found another target in his scope and engaged this one as well, the round finding the head of the man and he disappeared from view behind the vehicle. When he shifted focus onto the other two individuals, he found the rest of his team had connected with their rounds and the individuals were lying on the ground.

Thomas turned his attention to the other vehicle and the two remaining members who were getting out of the overturned truck. Just as he was about to engage, he heard a shot from behind him and saw the man go down from the impact. The other unknown was attempting to aim his rifle at the group of ambushers when two more rounds fired found their mark and the man went down. Thomas heard Dave's voice over the radio "We are to your rear and right side about one hundred and fifty meters back. Go and check the vehicles and we will cover you. Break, Tim, you and your family stay put until we check everything out."

Thomas informed his team of the plan and acknowledged the transmission. They moved in bounds towards the first vehicle, weapons held in tight against their shoulders as they slowly ate up the distance. When they arrived, two members covered them and two more checked on the individuals. Thomas and Kristy didn't find any of them alive and the team prepared to move to the next vehicle. Suddenly another single shot was heard from the overwatch team and Dave's voice was heard again. "One of them started to get up and grab a weapon. Michelle got him, but be careful."

They moved again to the second vehicle, the one overturned onto its roof. They found the final two members had died as well as two more that had been in the truck, but were dead from either Tim's gunfire earlier or from the vehicle rolling over on top of them. The announced the scene was secure and moved back towards Tim, Tracy and their son, slinging their rifles as they went. Thomas saw Dave's team rise up out of the grass behind where they had been sitting and walk towards the roadway. Tim and his family emerged from the trees and started heading towards the fire team at the roadway.

"Anyone hurt?" asked Thomas.

"Just a scratch," answered Tim as he motioned with his head towards his left side. "And I've got to change my shorts. Other than that, we are fine thanks to you."

Thomas was going over to check on Tim's wound but was intercepted by Tracy. She was crying and kept repeating "thank you!" while she grabbed him in a bear hug. She repeated the same performance to the other members of his team while Thomas went to Tim. As he stated, the bullet had only nicked the side of his arm, but caused a pretty good gash. He probably wouldn't need stitches, but that would be for Janie to determine. Thomas placed a compression bandage on the wound and tied it off. By the time he finished, Dave and his team had arrived and were getting the same treatment from Tracy. George asked her why she was apologizing.

"I was such a pain before and I have to apologize! You saved our lives and I'm asking you to forgive me for being the way I was!" she exclaimed through tears.

Tim took her into his arms and let her cry for a few minutes as the stress of the combat had worn off. The rest of the teams started looking over the vehicles to determine if they could be moved. Tim approached Thomas and drew him off to the side. "Is there any way we could stay for the night, repair my vehicle and get some water?"

"We will have to run it by Renee, but I think we can accommodate you. Your cabin is still empty and you can at least stay there until we can talk to Renee," he answered.

"You don't know how much I thank you, we thank you, for helping us out and giving us a place to stay until we can repair the vehicle," said Tim shaking Thomas' hand.

"It's nothing, old friend. Let's take a look at your vehicle," said Thomas, shaking the offered hand.

The two were joined by Kristy and Dave in looking over the Toyota. Both back tires were completely flat and the rear hatch was shredded. Most of the contents had holes in them from the gunfire and they family was lucky they only emerged with a scratch. The foursome smelled gasoline and looked over the tank. About halfway up, they found a hole and gas was steadily leaking out onto the highway. Contrary to Hollywood, gas tanks aren't easy to detonate and rarely erupt in the massive explosion seen in films. However, the gasoline leaking out did present a vapor hazard and could ignite if given a spark.

George made a call to the Ranch and had two large trucks brought up along with two tow straps. They would attempt to salvage the two trucks on the roadway and try and figure out how to get the overturned vehicle back on its wheels and into the Ranch. Dave asked about the dead bodies.

"We take everything we can off them useful except their clothing and bury them. We are going to take the trucks back to the Ranch and try and salvage them or at least use them for parts. From the looks of things, we aren't going to be able to salvage any of them without massive repairs. Either way, we should move fast in order to get clear of the scene," said George.

He made another call for the backhoe to be brought up to assist in digging the graves for the dead men. He picked out a point near the tree line where they would bury the individuals into a mass grave. The big Ford truck arrived and the group immediately went to work on hooking up the tow straps to the two dead vehicles, Tim's Toyota and a Dodge Ram. Gas cans were also brought along and the remaining gasoline in Tim's vehicle was siphoned into the available cans. The process would be repeated on the two additional trucks when they got them into the parking areas. As the trucks were getting ready to head off, the small group checked the third vehicle overturned into the ditch. Two additional bodies were found underneath, both dead and probably from Tim's gunfire. The other truck was in no better shape than the previous two, with the windshield, radiator and front grill being shot out. They weren't able to look at the engine compartment, but from the exterior, the frame was bent and the right front wheel tie rod was broken and the entire axel bent. But again, the truck might prove useful for parts.

The Bobcat appeared, not the backhoe as specified, but the group went to work on the graves

anyway. George pointed out the area for the digging and the small tractor went to work immediately breaking up the hard ground. The cargo HMMWV appeared and took the bodies up to the grave site. They went through the pockets of each of the men and gathered the items. After loading the eight bodies into the HMMWV, they were again checked for signs of life before transporting. George and Michelle would stay behind to supervise the removal of the third truck while Thomas and his team would help prepare the graves.

The Bobcat was making good progress into the ground, but with the small bucket, it was taking far more time than they wanted to be out in the open. The fire team grabbed shovels and continued digging on the hole while the Bobcat moved to a different spot and started making the hole larger. Tracy Daniels appeared and asked if she could help. This was an unusual request since she had avoided all forms of work prior to their departure. Kristy offered her the pair of gloves she was wearing and the shovel and took a break in the nearby shade.

The final truck was finally turned back on its wheels and was being towed slowly towards the Ranch. The digging continued into the afternoon with everyone except Tracy taking a break to eat and drink some water. She only took the occasional drink from an offered canteen and continued working silently.

At 4:00, the holes were finally finished and the bodies placed inside. Thomas made a mental note to have the Minister come by and say a prayer for the departed and ask God to forgive them of their sins. The group started putting the dirt back into the holes on top of the bodies and finished forty-five minutes later. Since it was getting late, they went back to the field and collected their tools and called it a day. Thomas arrived at home to find Sharon already preparing dinner and expected her to blast him for his role in the small battle that day. She said nothing and was entirely pleasant during dinner, much to his surprise. He casually mentioned it while they were cleaning up and was rewarded with an answer.

"Baby, you had no choice today since they came to the Ranch, it's when you go chasing trouble that I have a problem with. It's not your fault the Daniels came back," she replied.

He filled her in on the details of the story and how the Daniels might be staying a while longer since their vehicle was almost beyond repair. Either they would have to be readmitted to the group, or another of the group vehicles would have to be given up. After cleaning up, he refilled the distiller in the backyard and watered the garden. They also gave Mongo a long break in the fenced in backyard to run around and be a dog for a moment. He was quickly becoming a good dog to have around with his keen sense of smell alerting the residents to nearby deer and elk.

The garden was doing very well with all the rain and sunshine they had been having recently and several early crops were ready to be picked. The family also took the time to move some of the rainwater into the barrels for later use. Thomas decided it would be nice to have a way of getting the water into the houses easier than having to haul it upstairs for the toilets. He would put some thought into the idea and enlist Stu's help. After they finished, they went to the front porch to enjoy the cooler evening air coming down out of the Rocky Mountains. They were joined that evening by the Taylors who had come by for a social call. George immediately went to Angel, who was already getting "Uncle George" wrapped around her finger. The two families sat on the

porch passing the time with small talk and drinking a glass of sun tea. George brought up an interesting point.

"Do you know Frank is growing coffee beans? He had me buy the seeds for the plants right after you all invited him to join and they seem to be doing well," he said.

"That's kind of strange. I figured they wouldn't do very well up here with the altitude and all. Well, Columbia is pretty high where they grow coffee beans. Does he know how to roast them?" asked Thomas.

"I suppose so. He said his family used to do it on their ranch when he was growing up. I mean, we have a similar climate here, so I don't know why they wouldn't be okay as long as they have plenty of water," answered George.

Thomas smiled at the thought of never running out of coffee. "It's going to be nice when our supply runs out to have another source for my morning caffeine fit. What about a grinder?"

"He has one" answered George. "He brought it with him and has all the spare parts needed for it."

They continued the small talk when they noticed Tracy coming around the compound towards the Dayfield house. She was invited to join the group and didn't seem very comfortable with them at the start. Sharon prompted her to talk.

"I'm not really good at coming to folks with my hat in my hand, but I'll give it a shot. I came to apologize for what I did before and to ask the group to consider a request for us to rejoin. I know we left under bad circumstances, but we don't really have anywhere else to go," she stated.

Before she continued, Thomas told her to wait for Renee to join them since she was the leader of the community. He went inside to place the call and was followed by Sharon. "You aren't seriously thinking of this are you?"

"We need to at least hear her out before passing judgment. A near death experience can change just about anyone's perspective," said Thomas.

"I'm telling you, it's going to take a lot to convince the group to let her back in," said Sharon with a frown.

"I know, but it's up to Renee to bring up the idea to the group, which is why I am calling her," said Thomas, effectively ending the discussion without getting into a spat with his new wife.

Renee answered after being patched through by Stuart and Thomas briefly explained the situation and requested her presence. He and Sharon rejoined the group on the porch and continued the conversation they had been having before Tracy's arrival. After fifteen minutes, Renee arrived and Tracy brought her up to speed on the request.

"I didn't realize just how good we had it here before we left and I wished I'd been more receptive to the group before. But I made the mistake of thinking we could just pack up and leave with no troubles. I didn't realize the world had changed so much and thought the old rules still applied. It's not me I'm worried about, but Tim and my little boy. If I have to go and they stay, then that's the way it will be," said Tracy.

Renee thought about the request for an uncomfortable moment before answering. "It will take the group to vote you back in and you are in luck as we have a group meeting planned for tomorrow night. I will bring it up then and have the group discuss it. You will be given the chance to speak before the whole group and present your case. You and the rest of your family can stay until then but if the group decided that you cannot stay, you have to leave at the earliest time you possibly can. I understand your vehicle needs major repairs so if you can't stay, we can work something out. Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes, and one other thing…Tim doesn't know I'm here. Please don't let him know I talked to you all before I get the chance to talk this over with him," she said as an immediate answer.

The group agreed to keep silent until she had a chance to discuss the matter with her family. After she left, Renee voiced the same concerns Sharon had. Thomas stated the same thing as before.

"We need to wait and see what happens. I've known her for a long time and it's taking a lot for her to come up and apologize to us. She isn't the type to admit she is wrong so easily, so this is a pretty big deal for her. I wouldn't mind Tim coming back and Tracy as well as long as she pulls her fair share. But let's wait until tomorrow night before making our minds up."

Neither Renee nor Sharon was convinced she would easily change her ways, but would keep an open mind towards it. George and Cynthia both were on the fence about it since they were probably the fairest people in the Ranch when it came to dealing with people. Renee politely excused herself and headed back home for the night and probably to discuss the issue with Dave. When it was starting to get dark, the Taylors said their good nights and left for their house as well. Thomas and Sharon put Angel to bed and turned in themselves after the long day.

CHAPTER 21 – RETURN FROM EXILE

Time since attacks: 123 days
Date/Time: 21 August/1831 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next day, almost the entire group worked in the fields gathering the ripe vegetables from the various plants. Tracy came out to lend a hand and was given long looks by several of the group members. They quietly approached Renee and asked what the deal was. Renee told them the Daniels were staying until their vehicle could be repaired and during that time if Tracy wanted to help, she was more than welcome to. They would continue to be hospitable to the Daniels family until such time as the group could discuss the matter fully and because they left the group and had not been voted out. It was a pretty flimsy reason, but the group went along with it, figuring Renee had some other reason for it.

That evening, the Lawsons cooked up dinner for everyone at the Ranch prior to the meeting. Everyone showed for the dinner and a spirited explanation about the battle the day before was given by Tim.

"We were heading west when we left and didn't find much of anything there. Small towns were pretty much made into fortresses and there were plenty of roadblocks up along the route. Cañon City is still looking pretty rough, by the way. We stayed on the outskirts of town for the most part, but there was still evidence of burning homes or businesses and we heard gunfire several times. After the first night, we decided to go east through Colorado Springs or Pueblo and try to make the trip as early in the morning as possible. We camped out off of Highway 50 past Cañon City the night before we made it back, well off the roadway. There was little traffic on the roadway and we found out why the next day."

"We got up early and headed out east on 50 towards Pueblo. While we were going down the road, we saw a roadblock in the distance, but stopped well short of it. That didn't matter as there were enough of the men there awake to warn the others and give chase. Tracy was driving and we turned around and tried to get away. They sent three vehicles after us, the two trucks and one car. The car was pretty fast and caught up to us in no time at all and started firing at us. I grabbed my M-4 and started firing back and hit both the gunner in the sunroof and the driver. The car spun out of control and wrecked on the side of the road. But, by this time, the trucks were starting to catch up to us. We were loaded down pretty well so we weren't able to go as fast as we could have, but we still kept the speed pretty respectable. Anyway, I managed to hit one of the guys in the lead truck and it seemed to just make them madder. They came after us even more when we made it through Cañon City. Just as we made it on the outside of town, they hit one of the rear tires, slowing us down even further. I told Tracy to head back this way, hoping you all may have been able to help us out. As we were coming here, I got another one in the front truck and they got me in the arm and took out the other rear tire."

"When we were close enough, that's when I radioed you all. If you hadn't been here, I doubt we would have made it much further. I don't know why they were chasing us so hard. It was weird. But I am eternally grateful you all were here to help us out," said Tim, finishing the story.

"Who were they anyway?" asked Darren.

"We pulled identification from most of them, normal driver's licenses and whatnot. None seemed to be hard core criminal types, at least as far as we could tell. The weapons were non-military issue except the one M-16. Probably just a gang of people extorting refugees coming through the roads," answered Dave.

"Any signs of Loyalist forces?" asked Michael.

"No," answered Tim. "Strangely enough there were several abandoned checkpoints we encountered. It was like they had been there recently and just upped and left."

"So the question is; who were those guys and can we expect more of them?" asked Renee.

The group was quiet for a moment before George answered the question. "I think we probably can expect more of them. I mean, with us being off the main highways a good distance, we won't be a huge target. But we will be a target, you can guarantee that."

"And another question," said Janie. "What happens if we take survivors? It's not like we have a sheriff to call to haul them away."

The group pondered that thought for a moment and decided to discuss it in depth later during the meeting. The conversation moved on to other subjects and the dinner came to a close. The entire group assisted in cleanup and the fires were lit on the deck. The group gathered on the deck as the children were ushered inside to play games with Nicole.

Renee brought the meeting to order and brought up the request made of Tracy as the first item of business. She gave the floor to Tracy and sat down, giving her the opportunity to speak her case. "I'm here tonight to ask the group to consider our request to rejoin. I know I left under bad circumstances, but I-"

She was immediately cut off by Stephen before she could continue the explanation. "Why would we reconsider that kind of request? How do we know you won't act like you did before?"

Tracy was too shocked at the question to immediately respond. While she didn't expect a warm welcome back, she certainly didn't expect such hostility. But she had an unknown ally as George came to her rescue.

"She was granted permission to speak in front of the group here. Why don't you let her finish before interrupting and being so rude?" asked George, an order in the form of a question. He turned to Tracy "Go ahead and continue, please."

Tracy let the minor interruption slide and did not react as she normally would have. She would have to be very diplomatic tonight if she was to get the group to agree to let her back in. "I know I was a major pain in the butt before I left. I didn't realize just how good we had it here and convinced Tim to leave without thinking everything through. I realize that was a huge mistake and I'm asking the group to consider at least letting him and my son stay. If I have to go to make sure they have a future, than that's what I will do."

Tim attempted to interrupt her, but she cut him short with a raised hand. "Tim, let me finish, please," she said, grateful she could still be curt with her ex-husband. "I am making the request on their behalf, but I am making a request for myself as well. I apologize for my behavior and I know I should have known better. I was a guest here and I shouldn't have acted the way I did since I was a guest. I also know there isn't anywhere for us to go besides here and I was mistaken in thinking there might have been."

"I'm begging the group to consider the request. I will do any job, any duty you ask without problems. I will learn whatever I have to learn in order to blend with the group. I know trust will be an issue since my attitude was poor the first time, but I've changed. Give me a chance to prove it. But, if the group feels like I should leave, consider the request for Tim and my son. As long as they are safe, I don't care about rejoining. I can find someplace to go, but I will always know they are safe and not have to worry about where their next meal comes from," she concluded and her voice was wavering.

The entire group fell silent as they took in what she had said. Some thought it was just a way of her trying to take advantage again and would resort to her old ways after she joined. They thought she was just saying what they wanted to hear and would base he decision on pity. Others thought she was telling the truth and wanted to give her a chance. Stephen was the first to ask questions. "Okay, same question as before. How do we know you won't pull the same stunts as before?"

"Honestly, Stephen, I can't give you a good answer to that. At least, I have no credibility here and my word probably doesn't mean much. But those that know me, know when I say something, I will do it, or die trying. I promise the group here I have seen the error of my ways and I'm willing to change in order to stay," she answered.

Several members of the group knew Tracy for a long time and knew when she put her mind to something, she wouldn't stop. Janet asked the next question. "What kind of skills can you bring to the group?"

"Unfortunately, I can't think of much anything that will help the group out here. I was an administrator of personnel for a computer company before the Fall. I can cook, sure, but I guess I have to learn everything from the ground up before I can make a contribution. But I am willing to learn," she answered.

Sharon thought back to the things she had to learn when she first got here and found she was in the same position as this woman in front of the group. The major difference was Sharon had readily accepted the group's hospitality, while Tracy had not. There were no further questions

and Tracy and Tim were asked to leave so the group could discuss the matter in private. Tracy looked like she was about to object, but took Tim's hand and walked inside.

The debate that began once they left was lively with two distinct camps forming on the different ends. One group, the larger, wanted to help fix their vehicle and send them on their way. The other group, slightly smaller, was willing to give them a second chance at a new life on the Ranch. It continued for almost fifteen minutes before Tracy found an unusual ally.

"I kind of know how she feels," said Heather, starting her small speech. "I know a lot of you didn't like the fact I was being invited into the group since I had a history of having a bad attitude. I know I had to grow up and change with the world and I've done everything I can to blend in with the group up here. Sure, I still have my problems, but who doesn't? I think she has realized the world changed and the old rules no longer apply. I would say we allow them back in, but for a probationary period. Kind of like the same thing you all did with me. I know I was on probation before we got here and it made me perform even harder to fit in. Give it a month or so probationary period and see how she fits in. After a month, we readdress the situation and find out exactly where she stands. Until that point, she joins up, helps out with whatever duties she is asked and neither of them have a vote in group matters until they are voted in as full members. It's kind of a compromise to see just how good her word is and gives her a little more time to adjust. I'm willing to give her a chance."

The reasoning given by Heather swayed a few members. The debate, not as spirited as before, went on for a few minutes but the members were fairly well set in their minds by now. Renee called for a vote, a secret ballot since it was such a controversial topic. She took out a small note pad and tore off enough pieces of paper for the voting age members and handed them over, explaining a yes vote meant they could rejoin and a no vote meant they needed to leave. She also explained a two-thirds majority was required for them to come back.

Everyone wrote down their vote and put it in the empty can Renee took around the circle. As she counted the votes, she could see there was a possibility they could not be allowed back in. She came up one vote shy of a two thirds majority but remembered she had not voted. She cast the final "Yes" ballot in favor of letting them stay, partially swayed by both Tracy and Heather's speeches. Nicole was called in to recount the votes, just in the spirit of fairness and so no one could claim the vote was rigged. The casting came out exactly the same and the Daniels were invited back onto the deck and given the news. The ballots, since they were controversial, were placed in the fire to burn so it was kept a secret as to who voted for what.

When the Daniels returned, they were given the decision and the conditions of their probation. Both Tracy and Tim thanked the group and promised to make every effort to become full-fledged members of the group. The meeting moved on to other subjects including a recap of the events of the day and what to do with survivors. The solution ran from building a holding cell and forcing the people to work the farm to banishment. A few even thought that a firing squad might be a good idea, but never voiced their suggestion. As they were people, if they were wounded, they would receive medical attention. If they were alive and surrendered, the group decided to take them at least fifty miles away from the Ranch and set them off minus any weapons they could use to harm others. No food or water would be given and they would be

blindfolded the entire way. It seemed like a waste of gas to some members, but they could not come up with any better alternatives to sending them away. Another vote was held and the majority agreed this was the wisest course of action when dealing with bandits. Thomas also stated he would set aside a plot of land for graves in case they didn't survive. Simple tombstone markers made out of wood would mark the site with the date of their demise and the names if they knew them. The group also thought this was a good idea and Ryan agreed to put up the first sign for the nine that had died the previous day.

The next point of business was about what people the group might invite to become members. A doctor was at the top of the list and several more occupations were discussed. In the end, the list included farmers, doctors, ranchers, metal workers, mechanics; both auto and general engine, and even included some highly advanced skills like solar power engineers and pharmacists. In the end, the listing was not extensive, but had a broad base of knowledge for additional members to be invited to join.

The issue of living space came up and those families that had more room than others agreed to house the individuals until new accommodations could be built. Sharon briefed the group the shelters had taken some of their wood supplies, but not much as they still had plenty left over to build small cabins or houses. However, the more residents they chose, the more supplies they would need, plus the factors of water, sewage and power would be a problem. Stu agreed to think about the time his family had been working new housing tracts and would remember all the little details of building new homes. Thomas also informed the group he had a small portable sawmill and planer in the barn that had been his father's, so making new lumber might not be as hard as they thought as long as the wood had been properly seasoned. He had not used the device in a few years, but it worked well the times he had used it or had seen his father using it. The group agreed to move it to the workshop and give it a try in the coming days with some of the seasoned deadfall from around the Ranch. An overhang for the woodshop was planned for the rear where the group could work in the rain or snow making new materials.

The meeting moved on to the work assignments the next day and Tim asked what duties he and Tracy would be involved in. Renee assigned them to a work detail, but kept them out of the guard force rotation for the time being. She explained that during the probationary period, they would be responsible for the defense of the families and not with the main defensive forces. Tim wasn't that happy with the decision, but Tracy felt it was a great honor for them to place enough faith in her to defend their families in case of attack. The work listing was given the once over by the group before they broke for the night. A few items were crossed off the list and a few new ones put on. With the harvest rapidly approaching, the group's main efforts would be the gathering and preserving of the crops they had raised.

CHAPTER 22 – LONG JOURNEYS

Time Since Attacks: 4 Months, 24 days
Date/Time: 13 September/0808 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next few weeks were busy for the group with the gathering of the crops and getting them ready for long term storage. The group was paid a visit by Scott Carlson and Morgan Gable, the leader of the other known large retreat in Colorado. Ryan wheeled and dealed for the medical supplies, giving up two sets of PVS-7B NODs in trade. Gable wasn't completely thrilled with the trade, but reluctantly agreed to it. He also requested to be taken on a tour of the Ranch, but was denied since he had not shown the same courtesy to George and Cynthia when they had returned the other members of his group. Again, he wasn't completely happy with that answer, but agreed to continued contacts between his group and the Ranch.

As planned, they stopped several bands of refugees coming down the roadway well away from George's house. They gathered more information about the local area and the state in general. The group learned the riots and looting had enveloped Colorado Springs and Pueblo fully and that the remaining Loyalist forces had moved away from the Colorado region. They also learned the Peterson AFB had been overrun during a protest that had turned ugly at the FEMA camp near the base. Everyone silently thought about friends they had left behind and how they were making out. Thousands of refugees had taken flight out of the cities in all directions searching for food, water and shelter. Lawlessness abounded and gangs and criminals took advantage of the situation by extorting refugees for food and material items and killing those that resisted. There were still rumors of an Islamic gang or a Lion Claw team working in Colorado, but the groups didn't have any more information besides "We heard it from a friend who heard it from a friend." The Ranch decided to keep a wary eye out for them just in case, but they knew the operations methods the teams used was to attack lightly defended targets. Hopefully, the Ranch was secluded enough and presented a strong enough defense that they wouldn't become a target.

Some of the smaller groups were given food and water for the information and sent on their way since none possessed the skills the group was looking for. Those groups that demanded to be let in were sent on their way empty handed. The few groups that attempted to muscle their way in got a big surprise in the form of the reaction team popping up on a flank after moving in undetected. In two cases, it ended in armed confrontations with the attackers on the losing side. And for the most part, the security systems and training were working as they had taken no casualties so far. One night, a group of twenty individuals that had passed by the day prior staged a raid. They were defeated easily by the combined defenses of the Ranch and by the recon patrol that had stalked them off the property. After this, the group decided to start shadowing groups off the property, much like Frank had done, but only for two miles instead of the five that he had done. It took a little more manpower than they liked, but it gave everyone a more secure feeling about the living areas not being attacked.

Since the refugee traffic was becoming more and more frequent, additional recon patrols were

sent off onto the east and south sides of the Ranch. Only a few groups of people were found in this area and redirected to other parts not on the Ranch property. Some groups stopped near the Taylor's house and one group even camped out in the field across the road from his place. They never seemed to know the house was there or didn't pay it any mind. They were shadowed as per standard procedure, but didn't have to be "talked" out of coming back. However, one group in particular gave the Ranch members pause for thought. Rick's team stopped them as they came around the bend dragging two wagons filled with goods. They were surprised by the Rick and Cynthia coming out of the woods to meet them and threw up their hands in surrender.

"We give up! We give up! Take what you want!" screamed the man.

"Settle down, mister, we don't want to take anything of yours," said Rick.

"That's what all of you say! Just take some of our food and leave us alone!" said the man.

"Mister, we don't want anything you have. We just want to ask some questions," said Cynthia.

"You don't want our food?" asked the woman.

"No, can't say we do. We have plenty ourselves and we are willing to trade some of it off for information," said Rick.

"What kind of information?" asked the man, staring at the M1A Rick had before switching his glance to the AK Cynthia was carrying.

"First off, my name is Rick and this is Cynthia," said Rick.

"My name is Ron and this is my wife Cheryl. These are my children, Susan and Ron Junior," said the man.

"What did you do before the Fall?" asked Cynthia.

"I was a Professor of History at Colorado College and my wife worked there as well in the library. My children are seventeen and fifteen and in high school," said Ron.

"Where are you coming from, where are you going and conditions outside of here," answered Cynthia, wondering why the man was volunteering all the extra information.

"We are coming from Pueblo and heading to a refugee camp near Buena Vista," answered Ron.

"And the conditions in the Pueblo area?" asked Rick.

"Lousy and getting worse. Gangs, terrorists and criminals rule down there," said Ron.

"How many gangs and criminals are we talking about?" asked Rick.

"I don't know, thousands maybe? We saw a few before we escaped. Everyone with a gun is in a gang there," said Cheryl.

"Were they fighting each other or had they joined forces looting the local area?" asked Cynthia.

"I think they were fighting each other for the most part. I just know I saw a lot of people with guns. Did you say you had food for us?" asked Ron.

"Yes, we did, we can give you a four day supply when you leave along with fresh water," said Cynthia.

"How much food do you actually have? I mean, for you to just give four days worth like it is nothing, you have to be well off," asked Ron.

"Don't worry about how much food we have," said Cynthia.

"You do know FEMA says you can't have over a seven day supply of food and have to give any excess to them," said Ron.

"No, I didn't know that. What concern is it of theirs?" asked Rick.

"They are distributing it for the common good. They are giving it to those less fortunate that don't have any," said Ron.

"So, I paid for my food and had the mind to prepare for emergencies and now I have to give it up to those that didn't prepare or pay?" asked Rick.

"Yes, of course. The President says it's in the best interest of the nation. Food, gasoline, fresh water, building materials, whatever FEMA needs to get the job done," said Ron.

"Are there still FEMA camps in Pueblo or Colorado Springs?" asked Cynthia.

"Sort of. I think there were riots at two of them, but I'm not sure," said Ron. "Your stockpile of food, does FEMA know about it?"

"Don't worry about that," said Rick.

"And your guns are illegal as well. The President ordered it so. Only criminals have guns these days," said Ron.

"Yeah, we heard" said Cynthia, getting tired of the family already since they didn't offer any new information they hadn't gotten from other groups.

"Are you going to turn them in as well?" asked Cheryl.

"Hadn't planned on it," said Rick.

"But they are illegal!" said Ron.

"We use these weapons to defend our families and our property. The Second Amendment allows us to have them," said Rick.

"The Second Amendment is being debated right now and the President has made an Executive Order stating it does not apply in times of crisis. Your assault weapons are illegal and you should turn them in. Especially those terrorist weapons," said Ron, looking at the magazine fed rifles Rick and Cynthia had.

"Mister, I don't care what the President says, the Constitution say I have every right to have them and unless the President has burned the Constitution, I'm keeping my 'evil assault weapons' until someone takes them from my cold dead fingers," said Rick.

"But that's a terrorist weapon! Only terrorists use that sort of gun!" exclaimed Ron.

"It's a magazine fed, auto loading rifle, not a terrorist gun. Where do you get your information from?" asked Rick.

"From the FEMA pamphlets. They have a listing of all terrorist guns and pictures of what they look like. They give those out to help identify terrorists and their stashes of weapons," said Cheryl.

"They aren't terrorist guns any more than the knife I carry is a terrorist knife because it had a blade of more than four inches," said Rick.

"Okay, if that's the way you want to be, then fine! I'm reporting you to FEMA!" said Ron.

"Mister, you can report me all day long, but you would be an idiot these days not to arm yourself and protect your family," said Cynthia.

"Guns are evil! The government will protect us! A criminal can take your guns away from you and use them against you, that's why we don't believe in them," said Cheryl.

"They can't take them away if you shoot them in the head before they get to you," answered Rick with an even tone.

"No! Violence doesn't solve anything! You aren't…aren't right carrying around those evil terrorist guns!" said Ron forcefully.

"Guns aren't evil, you moron. Do you blame the sword for the hand that wields it? And has the government protected you so far? Is that why you are leaving your home?" asked Cynthia.

"They had to withdraw to reorganize because of the deserters. They will be coming back, I promise you that," said Ron. "They will deal with your kind when they return."

“My kind?” asked Rick.

“The ones who flagrantly violate the laws ordered by our President. You know you aren’t supposed to have guns yet you do. You are terrorists yourself!” said Ron.

“So, answer me this. If a man was killing your wife or children and you had the means to stop it with a firearm, why wouldn’t you?” asked Cynthia.

“Because they are evil and by shooting someone, I only compound the problem with gun violence in this country. That’s why,” said Ron.

“You are an idiot and I pray for your safety,” said Rick as the discussion was over.

“Now listen here, I don’t like being insulted! I have an I.Q. of over one hundred and fifty and a Doctorate in Economics! I’m not an idiot!” said Ron.

“That high of an I.Q. and absolutely zero common sense to go with it. If you are looking for the refugee camp, you might not want to go, they have plenty of weapons there to defend themselves,” said Rick, making the last part up.

“Then we will find a place where they don’t allow guns and stop there. I’m still reporting you to the police or FEMA when I get the chance. They will come for you! You will see!” said Ron.

“You are still an idiot. And if you are looking for that camp, you are on the wrong road. You need to go back to Cañon City and go west on 50 until you reach Texas Creek then go south. Now leave,” said Cynthia.

“Wait! You said you would give us food!” said Cheryl.

“That was before you insulted us and called us terrorists, now go,” said Rick.

“FEMA says you have to give us food! I demand it!” said Ron.

“Not a chance. I don’t care what FEMA says, especially since they aren’t anywhere out here,” said Cynthia.

“We are not leaving until we get some food and if you don’t give it to us, we will just take it. The law says I can take it if I want!” said Ron.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you. I think the same law says something about looters and thieves. Justice is swift these days,” warned Cynthia.

“I don’t care, FEMA says you have to give me food and I’m going to take it,” said Ron as he picked up the handle to the wagon and got ready to move.

Rick had about enough of the man and his family and pointed his M1A at the man's feet. "You even take one step onto my property and I will invoke the Castle Laws. You are educated and can figure that one out. Don't think I won't."

"You wouldn't shoot me! Not in cold blood! I'm taking what I want!" screamed Ron.

Rick placed a shot onto the roadway in front of Ron, the round ricocheting off into the nearby woods. "I do not think so" said Rick very slowly, accenting every word.

By this time, the other two members of the fire team had stood up and flanked the family. Ron looked at them and the grim determination on their face along with the "evil assault rifles" they carried. Apparently, he had more common sense than he led on and turned away in the road, followed by his family. Before leaving, he gave a final warning. "I promise you I'm going to contact FEMA when I find them and tell them about your little army up here. hey will come take everything you have and throw you into jail, you'll see!"

They walked back on the same path they came on and disappeared out of sight around the bend. "We are going to follow them a ways to make sure they don't double back," said Cynthia.

"Of course. You realize you sent them in completely the wrong direction, don't you?" asked Rick as he relayed the situation to the Control Center and was given the go ahead.

"Whoops," said Cynthia with a wry smile as she prepared to lead off following the family.

They followed the family for two miles along the roadway, keeping out of sight by walking parallel with the road. After they stopped, they waited another hour to see if the family would come back. They never returned and the fire team moved back to the safety of the Ranch, "evil assault rifles" in hand protecting them along the way.

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Four days later, Ron watched in horror as his wife and son were killed before his eyes. He was powerless to do anything since the man that held him hostage was holding a knife to his throat.

"Man, you ain't got no guns?" asked one of the brigands as he looked through the wagons.

Ron didn't answer and felt a lump in his throat. Now, far too late, he realized he was powerless to do anything and the government he had such faith in was not in a position to help him.

The man holding the knife to his throat answered. "Don't worry about that, dude. We at least get some entertainment value out of this," he said while eyeballing Ron's daughter, whose hands were bound by duct tape and her mouth covered with the same. She was crying and looking at her father to help her, but he could not.

"Wait! I know where you can get guns and food! Just let my daughter and I go!" said Ron.

"Oh? Where is that?" asked the man with the knife to his throat.

"A place near Cañon City! I swear it!" said Ron, begging.

"They got guns there?" asked the leader of the brigands.

"Yes, they do! There for the taking!" said Ron.

"Why would we go after a place that has guns when we can go after people like you that are unarmed?" asked the leader.

"Please! We won't tell on you! Just let us go! Please!" Ron pleaded.

"You made the choice to come into the jungle unarmed," said the leader as they finished going through the items and finding nothing of serious value.

"Please, I'm begging you! We don't have guns because criminals have guns and we obeyed the law! Just let me go!" said Ron, starting to cry.

"And you think we are obeying the laws because…?" asked the leader.

"Just do him and let's get out of here. They only have enough food for a couple of days and hopefully we get more coming through that ain't armed," said another man as he grabbed the girl by her arm and yanked her off the ground.

"Sorry, man, but this is just how it is," said the man holding the knife as he pulled back and yanked the somewhat dull knife across the throat.

Ron fell to the ground and tried to free his hands to clutch his throat. Precious life was spilling out onto the ground as he watched the two leave with his daughter into the woods. He slipped off into darkness, with his last thought of *what a fool I was*.

Two weeks later, the three brigands were killed by an armed refugee party when they tried to attack. They rescued the traumatized daughter who was completely catatonic from the mental anguish she had suffered from watching her family killed before her eyes and the repeated "entertainment" she had provided for the men against her will. Starving and dehydrated, they gently nursed her back to health and offered her the chance to go with them. She agreed and they took her with them to the refugee camp that had sprung up near Westcliffe where she eventually learned to lead a "normal" life…and carried a firearm until the day she died. But before departing, the refugee party looked over the brigands. They found the men only had fixed blade knives as their weapons.

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Thomas and his team were on recon patrol on the eastern edge of the property. Actually, they were off the property since they decided to go a little further and try and intercept groups as far out as possible. They were near the orchard when Amber called in a contact report. "One tent in the trees, maybe not a tent, like a poncho or something. One individual, web gear, but I can't see a rifle. No wait, I can see a pistol. Wearing camouflage and appears to be cleaning up."

Although Amber knew the SALUTE method of passing information, she often jumbled the information in the excitement of the moment. She was getting better and was quickly learning to be more informative in her descriptions. Brian was the designated patrol leader this time out and called everyone in together to discuss the matter. "Well, what do you all think?"

"Is he headed this way, I mean like breaking camp or settling in?" asked Kristy.

"It looks like he is getting ready for bed more than striking camp," answered Amber.

Brian told Thomas to go forward and have a peek and see what he thought. He made his way to the edge of the clearing where Amber had called in the contact report and increased the magnification on his rifle scope. Thomas saw a figure washing his face with a well worn washcloth, but his back was turned towards the group. He was wearing ABU pants and had on a black t-shirt. His BDU camouflage coat hung on a broken branch on a nearby pine tree. A tactical vest hung loosely on his shoulders, not fastened in the front. He completed cleaning and turned partially to the group, grabbing an M-4 carbine leaned on the log beside him. Thomas got a really good look at the profile and even at four hundred and fifty meters; he could positively identify the man. "It's Greg Henry! I swear it!"

Thomas had Brian reconfirm the identification. Brian increased the magnification on his own scope on top of his Armalite AR-10 Carbine. Brian had replaced his M-4 with the larger caliber rifle just after the incident with the Daniels and their pursuers. He peered through and exclaimed "You're right! I'm as sure that is Greg as I am that the sky is blue! Nobody else in the world looks like him!"

The almost certainly identified man disappeared under the camouflage poncho strung up between the two trees. Brian made the decision to go ahead and make contact with him, but only after they had observed for several more minutes to make sure he was alone and didn't have a partner out hiding and observing. Either way, it would help to positively identify the man and where he was headed. Brian designated Kristy and Thomas to go forward and make contact.

After thirty minutes of planning and continued observation, they determined he was probably alone or his buddy was well hidden. They planned to use all the cover they had available and to use the blind spot created by the makeshift shelter to mask their approach. They were both in stealth mode and moved very quietly towards the area he was in. They didn't know the best way of greeting him, so they decided to challenge him out of the shelter and make a positive ID. They reached a point about a hundred feet away from the improvised tent and separated by about thirty feet themselves in case they were fired on. Thomas had a direct line looking into the

shelter and could hear the man snoring, deep in sleep.

Thomas silently laughed to himself and figured that was why they were able to make their approach so effectively. He also knew Greg had a bad habit of loud snoring and this additional factor helped make almost positive identification of the man. Thomas looked out slightly from behind the tree that was covering him and shouted "Hey!" in the most authoritative voice he could muster. The yell echoed through the small woods and the man stopped snoring and stirred slightly in his sleep. What Thomas didn't know was he was actually awake and was wondering if he had dreamed of someone yelling at him.

Thomas followed up his initial call with somewhat of a challenge. "Greg? It's Tom Dayfield! If that's you, come on out and show yourself. It's safe."

He gave the man a moment to compose himself after being woken up, but saw his arm creeping towards the M-4 at his side. "Not smart my friend. We have you covered from three different points so don't go doing anything stupid like grabbing that rifle. We don't want to hurt you," Thomas continued.

The man stopped moving his hand and answered "Tom? Is that really you?"

"Yes, now come on out and show yourself so we can make sure it's you," answered Thomas.

"If it's you, where were you on Christmas in 2007?" asked the man.

Thomas knew Greg was asking questions to fully verify he was who he claimed to be. " Camp Bucca in Iraq, doing detainee operations. I sent you a Merry Christmas e-mail that year from my AOL account. Where were you at on Memorial Day of 2005?"

"Camping with you and it snowed that weekend. We didn't have a chainsaw and had to cut wood by hand the entire weekend to stay warm. You asked me to help fix your vehicle once, what part did I help you replace?" asked the man.

"The thermostat and it took us nearly four hours since we didn't have the first clue on how to get to it without taking the engine apart. We both skinned our fingers trying to get at the bolts. When you moved away, you took something of mine with you. What was it?" asked Thomas.

"Three things actually, your blue cooler, a holster for my pistol and a tie that I had borrowed for Rick's wedding. It is really you!" the man exclaimed as he got out of the shelter. He fully faced the general direction of where Kristy and Thomas were covered. Thomas fully identified the man as Greg Henry and came out of hiding to greet the long lost friend. As he walked over, he called in over the radio to Brian about the positive identification and told them to gather up with them at the campsite.

The two men shook hands and hugged as Thomas asked "Dude! What are you doing here? Last thing I knew you were in New Jersey!"

"Well, I was," answered Greg. "Long story short, I was making my way here to you. I remember you telling me last year when I visited I had a place to stay if everything went to crap. Well, it did and I hope that invitation is still on."

Thomas didn't want to bore him with the details of having to be voted in and besides, he had already been invited and was friends with most of the members of the Ranch. "Of course it is. Do you think you could walk a few more miles to there?"

"Was I that close?" asked Greg as he greeted Kristy. "Yeah, I may be a little tired, but if I have a warm bed just a short walk from here, I can make it that far. I didn't realize I was that close. Let me get my stuff repacked."

With that, he started repacking the items into a commercial black backpack. Thomas noticed there was a shotgun attached muzzle down to the outside with a pistol grip in place of the stock. It looked remarkably similar to the type used for tactical entry that the military used. They were shortly joined by Amber and Brian. Greg paused to greet another long time friend and was introduced to Amber. Thomas helped by loading some of the light gear into the backpack and started taking down the poncho. Kristy kidded him about his snoring and how it gave his position away.

"I wasn't that loud, come on!" said Greg.

"No kidding! I thought you were sleeping with a bear with the racket you were making," said Kristy with a smile. "Be glad it was only us that found you. Otherwise, someone might have shot at you thinking you were some wild animal!"

They got everything together and radioed the Ranch that they would be terminating their patrol six hours early and had found a potential new member. Stephen, still not fully recovered from his gunshot wound enough to go on patrols, radioed the other recon team on the perimeter that Thomas and his team were inbound with another person and were all secure. The patrol walked a straight line distance to the Ranch, but still went tactical along the way. Since Greg was unfamiliar with the team tactics, he stayed slightly behind and to the left of the fire team. Along the way, they still checked the additional sites that had been identified as prime places for someone to set up camp on the property, even though they were not on their patrol route.

As they were walking along, they came across another campsite that was occupied. It was inside of a fairly dense area with scrub oak and concealed from the casual observation. Inside the area was a small clearing that had been identified on a routine patrol and marked a few weeks earlier. As they approached, the smell of a wood fire caught in their noses and the patrol went on alert. The sight was one of those areas that if someone knew to hide in, they knew their business. Luckily enough for the patrol, there was a small incline near the area which could see down into the area somewhat. They hiked the small hill cautiously since it also would provide a good overwatch for the encampment.

When they reached the top of the hill, Thomas and Brian peered into the small clearing. They saw a raised and partially covered MARPAT camouflage poncho which was surrounded by tree

branches that had been cut for camouflage. They couldn't see inside of the makeshift shelter due to the angle. A small fire was still smoldering slightly in a small fire pit and a large coyote brown backpack with several more pouches added sat near the front of the shelter. There were no visible occupants and the group made their way carefully towards the area, moving as quietly as they could. "You happen to be following someone?" asked Brian.

"No, not that I know of. I don't have any travel companions and haven't seen anyone else along my path," answered Greg.

Thomas and Kristy were picked to move around the small encampment to see if anyone else was on alert. They left Brian and Amber in a position to their right of the camp while the other two made their way around. The one way in had been slightly covered by more cut branches and didn't offer a direct view inside. Greg was stashed away in an area to overwatch the two pairs since he wasn't a member and didn't need to make contact.

After twenty minutes of skirting the edges of the camp, they decided nobody else was around or they were well hidden and well disciplined even after Thomas and Kristy made several feints towards the camp. Thomas gave a hand and arm signal to move inside and Kristy took the lead. As they moved into the opening and started silently pulling away the cut branches, Kristy's hand suddenly came up in a fist meaning "STOP NOW!" She peered closer to the ground and found a length of 550 cord running across the trail, one end ties to the bottom of a branch and the other end tied to a group of titanium pots hanging inside one of the scrub oaks. No matter which way you moved the branch, it would clang the pots together in a homemade alarm. Before she moved the branch, she traced the line back to the pots and tied the string off around another bush. After she finished typing the simple knot, she moved the branch with the other end near the pots, ensuring there was enough slack to where the branch, if moved, wouldn't trigger the trap. Kristy was more alert now, checking each individual branch for a sign of a bobby trap. Another cord was found near the end, this one tied to the front pole of the shelter which could give the occupant warning. They stepped over this one and inside the clearing. Thomas tried to peek inside the shelter, but again, the angle was not with him and could only see a pair of well worn boots sticking out.

They finished their way silently inside the brushy area and took up a position beside a large tree where they could view the shelter. As before, they decided to challenge the occupant out of the shelter. This time, Kristy handled the challenge. "You in the shelter! We are the owners of the property you are on! We are friendly and would like to meet you!"

It seemed like an unusual way to challenge, but considering a normal challenge might seem like an escalation of force, the friendlier way of greeting and given by a female might lower the guard of whomever was in the shelter. They could hear movement inside the shelter and suddenly, the poncho flew back and a flash appeared with a bolt action rifle, moving for cover. The movement was so quick the fire team didn't get a good look at the occupant with the exception of seeing the person was wearing Multicam pattern camouflage, had a smaller stature and moved like greased lightning. They disappeared behind a large Aspen tree and didn't move. Neither of the two teams had a direct line of view on the individual but Greg did. The problem was he didn't have a radio to communicate with the other team.

Kristy continued trying to communicate with the individual. "We are friends! We mean you no harm and only want to meet!"

A female voice was heard from behind the tree. "I'm only looking to pass through, lady! I didn't mean to be on your property!"

"That's fine, come on out and we will talk!" answered Kristy.

"Uh-uh lady! I know that drill. I come out and you shoot on sight!" answered the unknown female.

"Look, we can talk or we can sit here all day! We could have shot you in the shelter but we didn't!" answered Kristy reasonably.

"Okay, sure, but i don't feel comfortable coming out. Show yourself first," said the unknown female.

"How do we know you won't shoot us first?" asked Kristy.

"Because I already have a shot at one of your people and I haven't pulled the trigger! We can sit here all day for all I care," said the female.

"Listen, sweetheart, you are trespassing on private lands and we have no interest in killing you. We just want to meet and ask you to detour around our property!" said Kristy, becoming slightly irritated at the conversation.

"No way! I know that trick. Hope you have fun sitting there for a while," said the female in return.

Greg's voice was heard from his overwatch position. "I've got a clear shot! She may be hidden from you all, but not from me!"

"You hear that? We have you covered and we don't want any trouble! Please come out now!" said Kristy, trying a nice tactic at the female.

"I don't believe you!" came the reply.

Brian's voice was heard next. "Okay then. Greg, one shot to convince her!"

Greg sighted in with his M-4 and let a round fly, aimed right above the female on the tree trunk. The round skipped against edge of the tree and several small pieces or bark rained down on her. "We mean business lady!"

"OKAY, OKAY! I SURRENDER!" said the girl, laying down the rifle next to the tree and moving her hands away.

“Come on out with your hands on top of your head!” ordered Kristy.

A red headed female figure appeared, looking very scared at the turn of events. She looked dirty and hadn’t been clean in some time. Her hands were on top of her head as ordered. Kristy moved from behind her cover to meet the woman, keeping her M-4 at the ready in case of trouble. She ordered the woman forward away from the rifle lying on the ground and away from her campsite. After she reached a point where she could no longer access the weapon, Kristy and Thomas moved forward to her. Thomas moved into an overwatch position to the right of the woman and Kristy moved behind her to search for additional weapons.

Just as Kristy started to hand off the carbine to Thomas, the woman turned and let a roundhouse kick fly at Kristy. Kristy resorted to her martial arts training and parried the kick, assuming a defensive stance of her own. The woman followed immediately with a kick at the M-4 Kristy was carrying and knocked it out of her hands. With her primary weapon gone and no time to grab for her pistol, Kristy immediately went into combat mode and prepared for the assault the woman was unleashing.

Like something out of a movie, the woman moved in to strike, throwing punch after punch which were blocked by Kristy. Her fists were flashes and Thomas was amazed that Kristy could block the punches as fast as they were being thrown. Kristy went on the counter offensive at the woman who blocked the return blows with ease. The woman attempted to leg sweep Kristy but found her sweep went through thin air as Kristy shifted her weight and moved her front leg out of the arc of the swinging leg. Kristy kicked back with the raised leg, but found the woman had slid backwards and blocked the leg with her forearm. Thomas rushed in to help, but the woman skillfully kept Kristy between her and him. Several more kicks and punches were thrown by both women, one of which landed on Kristy’s face. She seemed startled for a split second but immediately went back onto the offensive and landed her own kick into the side of the woman. Both backed away a step and looked for an opportunity to strike again.

Suddenly, a flash came out of the side and Amber tackled the woman onto the ground. Kristy immediately moved in, but the woman had thrown Amber off her and landed a chop at her midsection, effectively emptying her lungs of air. The woman rolled backwards and got back onto her feet and was reaching towards the small of her back for something. Kristy moved in again to strike and the woman moved her hand towards her front pocket instead while side stepping away from Kristy. She came out with a knife from her front pocket. The woman got it out and Thomas yelled for Amber to clear the scene. The auto-opening Benchmade knife flashed in the light and Thomas could see the large blade was fully opened and locked . The woman looked at the rolling Amber and turned her attention back to Kristy. Amber managed to roll away while Kristy got ready to finish the fight and went to grab her pistol, but the woman lunged at her. As she reeled away, Kristy managed to grab her knife from the sheath at her belt. The two women circled at each other, just waiting for an opening to strike.

Suddenly, a shot was heard and the ground at the woman’s feet exploded as a .45 caliber shell dug out a hole in the ground. The woman looked to her right as Thomas now had a pistol trained on her center mass. “Enough of this woman! We don’t want to hurt you! We could have done

that already! Now face down on the ground right now!" The woman looked at the pistol and the expression on Thomas' face. She knew from the sound of his voice he meant business and it finally hit her that these people probably wouldn't hurt her as they could have shot her already.

She complied and got down on the ground while Thomas continued. "Put your hands behind your back, now! Palms out, thumbs up! Spread your feet! Wider! Look away from the sound of my voice!"

She again complied and Kristy pulled a flexi-cuff from her web gear and bound the hands of the woman quickly. She placed an additional cuff on the woman's feet and cinched it down tightly. It might hamper the search, but with what the woman was capable of, they wanted to make sure she had no effective means of attacking them further.

Kristy skillfully searched the woman, finding a small .32 ACP pistol concealed at the small of her back and a dagger between her shoulder blades, right where she could get at it if her hands were on her head. Another small knife was found concealed in her bra line, between her breasts. Kristy emptied the woman's pockets onto the ground next to her and put the small pistol in her cargo pocket of her fatigues. When she was completed, Kristy and Thomas picked her up and moved her away from the area to a fallen tree where they could talk further. The woman had to hop since her legs were bound and Thomas and Kristy supported her on both sides. They sat her down and Brian took the time to check Kristy's face where she had been struck. It had hit right in the eye and Brian knew by tomorrow a nice black eye would appear.

Brian then moved to grab the rifle, a custom made precision rig which looked like a varmint rifle in .243 Winchester caliber. He looked a bit closer at the rifle and noticed it had a high quality stock and a high end scope. The whole rifle had been painted in the various earth tones of a modern sniper rifle and blended in nicely with the surrounding environment. He saw the markings "Sniper Central Rifleworks SER .243 Winchester" on the receiver. Brian wasn't familiar with that brand and figured he would ask Thomas or Rick later what it was. He checked on Amber and found she was just now getting her breathing back to normal after being hit in the stomach. They swept the shelter finding a set of web gear containing a Glock pistol in .40 S&W caliber along with various magazines, a Columbia River fixed blade knife and other implements. A single shot shotgun in ,410 gauge sat next to her sleeping bag, still loaded and ready for action.

"Lady, you have a lot of firepower. Who are you and where are you going?" asked Thomas.

"My name is Amy and I'm heading west of here. Who are you and what do you want with me?" asked Amy, now a little fearful since she had been disarmed and couldn't protect herself.

"My name is Tom and I own the land you are sitting on. We don't want anything from you actually, we just want to steer you clear of my property. It makes us a little uneasy to have someone armed traipsing across my property. You never had to fight us to get away; we will let you go when we are done here. Anywhere in particular you are heading?" asked Thomas.

"A hunting cabin west of here my family owns. I'm heading that way to hopefully wait everything out," she answered, still fairly cryptic in her responses.

“Listen, we don’t want to harm you or do anything else. We will let you go as soon as we are done talking. Just a few more questions and we will have you on your way,” said Thomas.

“What kind of questions?” asked Amy, a little leery.

“Nothing personal, but first off, are you alone here?” asked Kristy.

“Yes, I am. I’m traveling by myself,” she said with a hint of sadness in her voice.

Thomas knew from his time as a cop sometimes it was better for a female to ask questions to another female. He took his leave of Kristy, who immediately understood the apprehensiveness of the woman and why Thomas was leaving. Greg joined the group after completing a small circle around the area to ensure nobody else was around who might have heard the shot. Thomas, Brian and Amber checked the contents of the Amy’s bag. After opening it up, they found a pistol on top, a modified Ruger Mark II. The pistol had been reworked by the Advanced Armament Corporation to the Phoenix standard and had an integral silencer built into the slide. More questions were raised as Thomas held up the pistol for Kristy to see. Another pistol, a Ruger Redhawk in .44 Magnum was found underneath a Gore-Tex jacket. Additional ammunition, camouflage clothing and food were found in the pack along with some high quality, lightweight gear made for long treks. Not a cubic inch of space was wasted in the pack as they emptied the contents into the shelter.

After ten minutes, they had completely inventoried the pack and removed the dangerous items and placed them with the other weapons. The group noticed Kristy had taken out her Leatherman and cut the bind at the woman’s feet and continued talking. Amber moved closer to the woman to provide overwatch as she knew how dangerous she could be. She overheard the conversation between the women.

“So no hard feelings right?” asked Amy.

“No, you did what I would do in this situation. Water under the bridge” said Kristy with a smile.

“Who are you people exactly?” asked Amy.

“A group of friends just trying to get by in the world. Don’t worry, we don’t go looking for trouble. You are safe with us,” said Kristy with a smile.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that one before,” said Amy, not really believing what she heard.

“No, we could have killed you already. Would most gangs keep you alive this long after you attacked their members?” asked Kristy.

“Probably not,” admitted Amy. “But you never know who are friends or who are enemies this day in age. I won’t know for sure until you let me go.”

"Honey, we aren't going to hurt you at all. Come on now, you see we have two women in our group here. Do the gangs let women go out like that?" asked Kristy.

"Sometimes. The women are sometimes more ruthless than the men. I mean, not just attacking, but using for pleasure as well," said Amy.

"Amy, you don't have anything to worry about. I stick to the right side of the fence as do all the ladies at the Ranch. Trust me sweetheart, you're cute, but not *that* cute and besides, you really need a bath," said Kristy laughing.

Amy laughed along with her, her tensions easing somewhat as they two women continued to talk. Eventually, Kristy got what information she needed and rejoined Thomas, Brian and Greg.

"Who is she and what was her problem?" asked Thomas.

Before Kristy could answer, Greg jumped in. "I don't know, but with the way she handles herself and her choice in weapons, I'm in love!"

The group let out slight laughter as Kristy explained. "She was in Colorado Springs and was heading up to her family's hunting cabin west of here. I never did get a location on it and I doubt she will tell us. She didn't know if we were friendly or not so she immediately assumed we were not. She didn't attack us as much as she felt she was defending herself in order to get away."

"She's had a run-in with one of the bad groups out there and saw how they treat the solo traveling women. She wasn't caught, but she saw someone who was. She didn't know what would happen to her when we found her so she went into fight and flight mode with us trying to escape. She won't let herself be raped and I told her we didn't want to do that. We even have women in our group and she told me other gangs do to. Anyway, she seems calmed down now and just wants to get to her retreat in the mountains," concluded Kristy.

"Is she a threat?" asked Brian.

"No, I don't think so. She was scared and wanted to get away. She stuck to the woods instead of the roads since there is more protection out here. She wasn't expecting us to sneak up on her like that," answered Kristy.

"Does she have family waiting for her at the cabin?" asked Thomas.

"I don't know, but I don't think so. She completely avoided the subject about who she is going to meet and I think she is totally alone," said Kristy.

"Well, we can have a vehicle meet us near the next checkpoint and have them take her weapons away from here. We can drive her up the road a ways and drop her off," said Thomas.

"Tom, there's more to this story; I can tell. She had been through something traumatic recently and there is something deep down that bugs her. The least we can do is to offer her a place to

stay tonight and send her on her way the next morning," said Kristy.

"Kristy, everyone has been through something traumatic in the past six months. Everyone has a sad story these days," said Brian.

"No, there is more there. I get the feeling she wasn't trying to hurt us, just trying to get away since we were kind of a threat. How about we run it by Heather and get her opinion on it. She is the leader and can make the final yes or no decision," said Kristy.

"Let's get her on the radio then," offered Thomas as a compromise.

It took several minutes to get Heather back to the base station radio and return the call. After several minutes of explaining the situation, Heather agreed with Kristy and told the group to bring the woman back to the Ranch in order to question her further. She told the group an ATV would meet them along the way at the final checkpoint and gather the weapons to take back to the Ranch. Brian and Amber would stay behind to repack her things and collect everything to be transported in the trailer for the ATV.

"Amy, we have a proposition for you," said Thomas.

"And that is?" she asked.

"We give you a hot meal and a warm bed for the night. A chance to get yourself cleaned up and restock your provisions. All in exchange for a little information," said Thomas.

"And if I don't agree?" asked Amy.

"We take you to the other side of our property and let you go. We put your weapons a couple of miles away so you can't use them on us when we drop you off and send you on your way," said Thomas. "Your choice."

She seemed hesitant to agree to the terms but the offer of a good meal and a place to sleep that night seemed to win over her mind. Somehow, she knew she would be safe with these people. It was a feeling she got from the start when she defended herself. She didn't know why, but these people were different somehow than others she had run into. Kristy, who already had a good rapport going with her, offered to have her spend the time at her cabin until tomorrow. She agreed under the conditions she be allowed to leave at any time if she chose to. The Ranch members agreed to these terms and told her the weapons she brought along would be kept by them until such time as she left. They also wanted more information on the current status of Colorado Springs and Colorado in general. Such information could be bought with food and water from the solo traveler.

"Can I have a self defense weapon for the walk back?" she asked.

"No," answered Brian. "Thomas, Greg and Kristy will protect you. Okay, I will make a deal. Thomas will carry your sidearm and if you get attacked, he'll give it to you for defense. Deal?"

"That's about the best deal I can get," said Amy, nodding.

Brian and Amber went ahead with the various weapons and met the ATV at the Checkpoint and lead it back to the camp. Brian handed over the Taurus in its holster before leaving with three of the spare magazines. Thomas hooked it onto his belt and handed over the spare magazines to Amy. She grabbed her Camelbak, three energy bars and water filter before moving since she had no idea how long they would be moving for. They finally set out, moving tactical again. Amy was more or less guarded, but in an informal fashion as they walked and met up with Brian and Amber. It surprised Thomas to see Amy moving silently through the woods, almost as quiet as the fire team as they moved.

All in all, it took another two hours to get back to the Ranch. Amy was amazed at the set up and felt a little stronger about her decision to stay with them. Most of the survival communities she had encountered were not set up like this. The yards of the cabins were mowed and the weeds were cut back. She saw a couple of members moving around, doing various things and saw how well kept up the area was. Her fears she would be imprisoned, raped and killed started to drift away even further. These seemed like good people who were a lot like her family, before they were killed.

Greg was shown the Conference Center and set up in one of the remaining spare bedrooms upstairs. He was given a towel, toiletries some spare clothing gathered from the stocks to make it through the day. Since they were back in camp early, each of the patrol members went to their homes for lunch. Amy was invited by Kristy to spend the night in the spare bedroom in their cabin. She accepted and left with Kristy, the bond now a little stronger between the two women. Before everyone left, Thomas invited Greg and Amy to dinner that night after they had the chance to catch up on some sleep. Another team had gone out a little early to make up for Thomas' team on the perimeter. He took the time to finish gathering some firewood and placing it in the basement and clearing the rest of the dying plants from the garden.

In the afternoon, Sharon had come back from helping prepare one of the fallback points and greeted Thomas as she came in the door. "Hey sexy man. We have company coming over for dinner. Can you be ready in about an hour?"

Thomas wondered how she already knew Greg and Amy were coming over to visit him and asked. Sharon looked a little puzzled at his question and replied. "No sweetie; the Jones are coming, not Greg and Amy…speaking of which, who are Greg and Amy?"

"Greg is an old friend of mine who happened to show up out here. I invited him to come here a long time ago and he's staying for the moment until the group can vote on him. Amy is just passing through and we are offering some hospitality until she moves on," he answered.

"Okay, I think we have enough for two more place settings. I'm curious that you never mentioned Greg before," she inquired.

"Well, honestly, he was out on the east coast and I never thought he would make it this far. But

he did and I am going to honor the invitation for him to stay," answered Thomas. After a long shower, he went back downstairs and finished placing the table so Sharon and Angel could go bathe. He checked the chicken stew that had been on the stove the better part of the day and found it was almost done. Sharon had been rapidly becoming a better cook since they arrived and Thomas had to work doubly hard on his exercise to keep from gaining weight. He had actually lost some weight since they moved to the Ranch, but more from exercise and working than from the portions of food. A knock on the door was heard and they were joined by Michelle and Rick and their two children. Thomas socialized for a few minutes before Sharon joined them in the living room. Another soft knock was heard on the door and Greg was standing there, looking world's better since he was able to shower and shave. He was introduced to Sharon and made himself at home in the living room with the Jones and Thomas.

Another knock on the door and Thomas found the final dinner patron had arrived. Amy looked like another person entirely, having showered for the first time in ages. She had borrowed some regular clothing from Kristy and Misty Taylor, who were close to her sizes. Rick and Michelle greeted her warmly and introduced themselves. They continued to talk until Sharon announced dinner was ready. Amy had sat back, a little uneasy at the surroundings and not spoken unless asked a question. She was tired from not sleeping that day at all since she was still a little uncomfortable in the surroundings and kept one eye open for the threat that could appear. Throughout the social call, she took in everything she could about the people and found them to be entirely normal in their outward demeanor.

The dinner consisted of the stew served over rice and some fresh wheat rolls from the grain taken from the long term food storage. Although the group was eager to hear about how Greg had come to the Ranch, they waited until he finished his second helping before asking any questions. He also had several questions he wanted to ask them, but was happy to have his first hot meal that didn't come from a bag in several weeks. Amy also devoured her portions of food, also the first decent meal she had in some time.

As Greg finished up, he began to tell them the tale of his journey. "First off, you all know I was out in New Jersey at the school at Fort Dix when all the sh-stuff," he said in deference to the children in the room "hit the fan. We stopped having classes not long after and were tasked with providing additional base security immediately after. With all the radioactivity from Philadelphia and New York nearby, the base was soon evacuated. Not to worry though, we never got enough of the radiation to make a dent since we were evacuated so quickly. Most of the troops from there were sent to other bases in the US to help with security, but lucked out when I was sent with a detachment to Kansas City to help with a FEMA camp there. I wasn't happy there since we ended up taking on the missions of firearms confiscations and started looking for a place to bug out to. A little over a month ago, I decided this place was about my best bet and headed this way. I packed everything I could into a Tahoe including extra gas and headed west with a set of fake MCOs assigning me to Phoenix. I wanted that extra distance since I was traveling past the Springs, Denver and Pueblo and would need the state routes to get here."

"The problem I ran into was the lack of fuel, or rather the bad fuel I got. I made it all the way across the state line with Kansas before the engine completely quit because of the rotten fuel I

had in the gas cans. Apparently, the stockpiles we had were some pretty bad quality and I got a can of stuff that stopped the engine. I tried locating extra gas, but I was in the middle of nowhere. I stayed a couple of days at the vehicle before deciding it would be better to get here on foot. I don't know whether the vehicle can be repaired or not, since I'm not mechanically inclined enough to know. It might be simple, it might not. Anyway, I took my weapons, ammo, some clothes and as much food as I could stuff into my pack and left the rest. I tried to hide the vehicle near the road, but I figure by now someone found it and went crazy with what I left inside. I wouldn't mind getting back there and checking, but I know it's a long shot. Anyway, I walked by night and slept by day, hiding as best as I could in the eastern plains. I did manage to find food and water along the way and shot many a rabbit and squirrel with my shotgun. In case nobody ever told you, hunting small game with a riot barreled and stockless shotgun is hard! I did manage to get enough to keep me going and not have to dive into my MREs too much. I also ate what I had to when I couldn't find a convenient rabbit, so prairie dogs were on my list of edible items. They suck, let me tell you. Anyways, sometimes I would get shot at by farmers along the way, and that's why I stuck to hiding during the day and traveling by night."

"Along the way, my useless ruck sack broke. I've been saying for years the CFP-90 was useless and I finally have proof, or had proof. So somewhat near Colorado Springs, I found a Wal-Mart central distribution center and was able to get a new pack and some real food for a change. It cost me my M-9 pistol, but I still had my Para-Ordnance so I was still good to go. The guy I traded with had been living there since the Springs went up and was a pretty decent guy."

Rick interrupted him at this point. "Did you say there is a warehouse complex out there for Wal-Mart that hasn't been looted?"

"Yeah, near Fountain. The guy was a little odd, but pretty nice and I figure he could hole up there for a while without being detected since the warehouse isn't marked all that well. Anyway, I stayed there for a few days and he found me a new pack and some food before moving on. I heard about Peterson being overrun and I figured you all headed this way. Colorado Springs is trashed along with Pueblo and most of Cañon City. I never ran into Loyalist forces west of Topeka and even those were going to be moved soon. I did run across some pretty rough looking groups and avoided them as best as I could. So, this morning, I camped out at the place you all found me and figured I would travel along the stream until I ran across the Ranch this afternoon and evening. But you all found me first. Good thing you all found me since I might have walked another five miles or so looking for the stream. So, here I am and thanks for taking me in," concluded Greg.

The entire group was excited, not because their friend was alive and well nor due to his incredible story, but about the distribution center. "So, back to the warehouse, what all did it have in it?" asked Michelle.

"It's a huge complex, at least ten huge warehouses, but from the outside, you could never tell. It's not marked at all. They have pretty much everything that the store carries and a lot of it," answered Greg, a little puzzled at the question.

"And the guy is willing to barter?" asked Thomas.

"He seemed to be. He was really interested in my M-4, but took the M-9 when offered. What's the big deal? You guys look like I just told you I discovered a gold mine or something," asked Greg.

"Are there clothes and shoes, children's sizes specifically?" asked Sharon.

Greg looked oddly at them. "I guess so, but I never looked. What is going on?"

Thomas briefly explained that while the Ranch was fairly well set up, they did not have a supply of children's sized clothing and shoes. "So we have been looking for a place to get them. Is this guy easy to deal with?"

"Smoke? I guess so. Kind of an odd guy, knows a lot of things. He is pretty interested in firearms, but not to go out looting, only for protection. I figure if you all have something he needs, he will be willing to deal. He traded me the new pack and as much food as I could carry for my M-9. If you have a decent rifle to part with, I think he will be receptive," answered Greg, now understanding what the excitement was about.

The four adults started discussing the matter between themselves, but not completely ignoring Greg in the process. They would inform Heather, the current community leader, at the meeting tomorrow and request to make a trip to the complex to barter. Kristy would also be brought on board since she was most familiar with the supply situation and knew what everyone needed.

Since Amy had been quiet, Thomas decided to be sociable to her and ask her what story she had to tell. "I know we got off on the wrong foot out there, but it's already in the past. No hard feelings about giving Kristy a black eye or fighting us. Any one of us would have done the same. So anyway, what's your story?"

"I'm not really comfortable yet discussing everything about me, but, my name is Amy Kerns and I'm twenty-three. I was a student before the Fall and was set to graduate soon. My parents lived in Colorado Springs and I was heading for our cabin to wait everything out. I was traveling alone and hoped to make it before bad weather in the winter set in. I've been traveling by night and sleeping during the day, much like Greg. I decided to get off the roads and the trails since the gangs are now starting to look at those as well. I was traveling cross country and my course would have taken me through the middle of your ranch if you hadn't stopped me first," she said.

"Okay, I understand you don't feel comfortable talking about what brought you here. Tomorrow we will give you a ride to your cabin. Will that help?" asked Rick.

"Uh, sure. But what do you want in return?" asked Amy.

"Just information mainly. What are the conditions in Colorado Springs, how far out are the gangs now and what other groups have you seen along the way?" asked Thomas.

Amy spent the next five minutes describing the situation in Colorado Springs and what the gang

warfare was like. She told the group the gangs pretty much ruled Colorado Springs, but for the most part, the fighting was confined to the city itself. She had run across several other groups heading for the mountains, but had never made contact with them. "Actually, until today, you people are the first I've talked to in three weeks."

"What's the deal with the hush puppy in your bag?" asked Greg.

"The silenced pistol? It was my father's and I use it now to hunt small game," she replied.

"And the magnum revolver?" he asked.

"For large game. Yes, it gives away my position, but at the same time the .44 Magnum up close will take a deer or elk. I believe in one shot stops and humane treatment on game," she said.

They continued talking for several more minutes not extracting any further information from Amy. The conversation moved on to the Ranch and they answered the questions Greg asked about the place and how everyone came there. Some of the answers were guarded since Amy wasn't a member and wouldn't be invited to the Ranch to live. The remaining beers in the house were brought out and Greg had his first alcoholic beverage in several months. Amy declined the offer and excused herself to go back and get a good night's sleep.

Michelle headed for home to tuck the children in for the night. Sharon did the same for Angel. Rick, Thomas and Greg stayed behind talking about the escape and why Greg didn't go home.

"My direct family and most of my kin are dead. Do you remember that small town in Indiana that was wiped out before the Marines could respond? That was my home town," he said sadly.

"Greg, I'm sorry for your loss," said Thomas with Rick agreeing.

"It's in the past and I've finished my mourning. I originally wanted to go there if I had to bug out, but since that isn't a possibility, your place was next on my list," said Greg.

The three sat in silence for several moments before Sharon rejoined the group. Not understanding why, she sat silently before Greg spoke again. "I don't have a problem telling people this so they have a better understanding of why I am here. Most of you were like family when I was stationed out here, so I came back to my other family."

"We are your family now, just like I think of everyone around here as family since I don't really have any either," said Thomas.

Another brief moment of silence and the conversation moved on. Sharon and Thomas told Greg about their wedding and how Greg could be admitted to the group on a probationary period at the next meeting. They assured him it was a formality since he was well known to a lot of the members of the group already. The families moved to the living room and caught up until close to 10:00 PM. When they were leaving, Greg asked if there was anything he could do to help the next day. They told him to take the day to relax and rest up after his long journey.

The next morning, Kristy paid an early visit to Thomas and brought Heather along with her. "Tom, we need to talk about Amy."

"Well, two of you coming to my doorstep had to be something serious. What's the problem?" asked Thomas, inviting the two in for a cup of coffee.

They sat down at the kitchen table and were joined by Sharon, who hadn't left yet for the morning details. "Well, she opened up a lot more to us last night. Heather came by to introduce herself and we spent the better part of three hours talking. We came to the conclusion we should offer her a place to live here."

"Okay, why ask me about it? And why the sudden change?" asked Thomas.

"Well, the sudden change is because we think she is alone and her family was killed. She is heading up to the mountains to live by herself and you know what easy pickings she will be by herself. She has a lot going on in her mind and she needs us. If a gang was to find her all alone in her cabin in the mountains, you know what will happen," answered Heather.

"Okay, what skills can she bring to the group?" asked Sharon.

"Honestly, we never asked. She seems like a woman in need and we didn't press the issue. However, she can help with the self defense classes I've wanted to teach for one. If you didn't notice, she is pretty handy when it comes to unarmed defense. Other than that, I don't know," answered Kristy.

"Have you asked her yet?" asked Thomas.

"No, we were just kind of getting a feel for the mood around here and you are one of the best to bounce off ideas with," answered Heather.

"Where will she stay?" asked Thomas.

"In the Conference Center in the spare bedroom. If not there, she can move into my spare bedroom," answered Kristy.

"You know we will have to bring it up to the group," said Thomas.

"We can tonight," answered Heather.

"Now on the flip side, what if she doesn't want to stay?" asked Sharon.

"We can ask, but I guarantee she will stay if we ask," said Kristy.

"There are a lot of unknowns with her. I don't know," said Thomas.

"Well, we will offer to take her to her cabin and extend the offer to come back here if things don't work out. Is that fair?" asked Heather.

"I guess so. You're the community leader, you make the call," said Thomas.

"I may be the community leader, but I don't think I'm ready to do the job. I'm just not old enough or wise enough yet," said Heather.

"You are fine now; you have what it takes to do it. Make a decision and stick to it," said Thomas, teaching a small lesson that morning.

"Okay, then. She gets the offer, but would you mind being along when we ask her?" asked Heather.

"No, I don't mind. Who is taking her up to her cabin anyway?" asked Thomas.

"I hoped you would do it along with Kristy. Is that okay?" asked Heather looking at Sharon.

"You know me well enough to know what my answer will be. But I think a short trip off the Ranch would be okay this morning," said Sharon.

"Okay then. Thomas and Kristy go and take Amy to her cabin and ask her along the way," said Heather, coming to the decision. "If she decided a yes to move here, they turn around. If no, they drop her off with a week supply of food."

Thomas brought out his atlas and book of Colorado roads and jeep trails and found out where her cabin was generally located. According to Kristy, it was north east of Salida off a jeep trail. He consulted the map and found they could use the dirt back roads and jeep trails to get there instead of going out on the potentially dangerous highways. He ran the route over the map again and fired up his laptop computer and brought up the software for the mountain trails for Colorado. Not wanting to put his own vehicle at risk, he decided they would use the police Explorer for the trip since it offered both four wheel drive and a good speed in case of emergency.

Kristy and Heather bounded out of the house to the parking area to grab the vehicle and Amy before returning. "Honey, do you really want me to go?" asked Thomas of Sharon.

"Baby, I worry anytime you set foot out of that door and out of my sight. It shouldn't be a problem since you are on the back roads rather than on the highways. Just be careful as always," said Sharon, not really giving him an answer.

"And the other thing? Her moving here?" he asked.

"That I'm not sure of. One part of me thinks they are being overly dramatic about the whole thing, but another part of me thinks she might be in serious need. You know us women stick together during times of crisis and tend to help one another out," she said with a smile.

He went upstairs and changed into a set of fatigues and grabbed his Bug Out Bag along with his web gear. By the time he was finished, Kristy was back with the vehicle and had picked Amy up as well. They stopped by the food storage and packed up enough food for a week in the back of the Explorer along with her pack and weapons. Thomas also picked up a small chainsaw in case of downed trees along the few jeep trails they might need to use. Amy seemed happy about being able to be driven to her cabin and sat in the front seat next to Thomas. After they set off, he reset the GPS to the waypoints they needed to turn at. After leaving the Ranch, they turned onto the state highway for a ways until driving onto a dirt road that was kept up in normal times by the state. Kristy started talking to Amy along the way. It seemed the two had bonded over the previous twelve hours and were fast becoming sisters. Finally, the question was asked. "Amy, what would you think of moving to the Ranch?" asked Thomas.

"I don't know. You all are pretty set up for holding out for a long time, but I wouldn't want to be a burden. I know my cabin has some long term food storage up there, so I should be okay. I have to kindly decline. But I would like to keep my options open for the future just in case it doesn't work out up there," she added, not totally dismissing the idea of moving to the Ranch.

They continued the drive to the cabin, making good time even though progress was slow in light of potential ambush sites along the way. Finally, Amy's GPS dinged at her and she told them to take the next right up a jeep path to her cabin. She was fairly excited at this point since they were nearing the area. The cabin seemed to be in an ideal location, in a lightly wooded area in the middle of the dense forest and nearby a snowcap fed spring traveled down the mountain. A small mountain lake was on their left as they continued up the uneven dirt path to the cabin. Her mood suddenly took a turn for the worse as the cabin came into view.

Sometime in the recent past, the cabin had burned to the ground. The rock chimney still stood at the end, and some of the burned timbers of the cabin were still in place, but the entire area was destroyed. Thomas approached carefully since it might have happened recently, but knew in his heart it hadn't. A small garden was overrun by weeds next to the cabin in a clearing. They stopped well short of the cabin and got out, grabbing their long guns in case of a problem. The three moved around the area finding small piles of spent brass here and there, evidence of an attack against the cabin sometime in the recent past. The brass had started to tarnish fairly well, indicating it had been there for a little while. On the north side of the property in the tree line, Thomas found seven bodies, in an advanced state of decomposition. The horrid smell was being blown away from the cabin by the easterly winds whipping through the mountain hideaway. He couldn't tell exactly how long they had been here, but from the destroyed flesh, it had been at least a month. Several large anthills were found around the bodies and the armies of ants continued to attack at the flesh remaining on the bodies. Other areas of the bodies showed signs of where crows and other carrion eating birds and animals had feasted. It appeared the bodies had been left there to rot after the attack on the cabin and completely forgotten about.

They continued searching around the area, not finding any traces of anyone living there since the fire. When they got back, they looked through the ruins of the old cabin and found three bodies, one of which was a child. The bones were pretty much all that was left of the bodies, between the fire and natural scavengers the victims had been picked clean. Thomas looked around and found what appeared to be the remains of two AK style systems with the wood stock and hand

guards burned away. Small piles of 7.62mm steel casings were evident in the charred remains on the ground. The distinctive metal profile of the receivers and gas system of Kalashnikov's masterpiece system were beginning to rust over but still distinguishable. Amy looked over the two adults and found a set of dog tags on one. She wiped away the blackened tarnish from the fire and looked at the name on top. After studying it for a moment, Amy screamed and broke down in tears. Kristy immediately rushed to her side and pulled her away from the area, taking her back to the vehicle.

Thomas tagged along behind the two, but kept quiet. He could hear Amy telling her story through a wavering voice, cries and sobs. "I've got nobody now. My parents were killed in Colorado Springs and my brother and his wife were all that were left for me to go to in this world. And someone killed them here! I don't have anyone!"

Kristy took her in and hugged her in close and Amy cried on her shoulder for a long time. Thomas didn't interfere and kept a close eye out on the area. When Amy was done, she and Kristy sat down and the full story was finally let out.

"My parents were fairly well stocked for emergencies in Colorado Springs and I was living there with them after moving back from college. My brother had moved back as well. Daddy was into preparedness from a long time ago and my family continued the practice after we went out on our own. We were getting along okay until the neighbors started demanding food and water. We gave them some to make them go away and Daddy sent my brother and his family up here to get the cabin ready for the rest of us to follow."

"One evening, he sent me away to go and trade for some things we might have needed up here. I was only gone for about three hours and was on my way back when I saw the neighbors shooting at our house. I was pretty scared but wanted to help them. I only had a pistol on me and planned on sneaking up on a few to take them out. But before I was able, someone threw a firebomb at the house and it caught on fire. My little sister came running out and was taken away by the mob outside my house. My parents tried to run out of the house, but were gunned down as they made their way out the back door. People ran into the house and started grabbing everything they could before the flames beat them back. I had so many targets I could shoot at, but never found myself able to do so. Daddy always told me not to shoot unless it was absolutely positive I could get away."

"I waited and waited until the flames died down and came back to the house. Daddy and Momma were dead, but Mom hadn't died right away. She had tried to crawl away but hadn't made it very far. I knew what happened to my little sister and I never thought I would see her again. Daddy had made me hide my backpack outside the house in a place where it couldn't be found by anyone but me. He also had buried some food, weapons and ammunition outside the house in case we were hit by the military in the firearms confiscations. That night, I dug everything up and buried my parents in the backyard."

"I managed to find my sister in one of the nearby houses and waited until the morning time to get her. The residents were up all night drinking and abusing her. That morning, I went in with the Ruger and killed every one of them, but I was too late. By the time I made my way inside, she

had been raped repeatedly and finally been killed by one of them. She was only sixteen and didn't deserve that kind of death." Amy began crying again. "She had her whole life ahead of her and was so innocent. She was a kind and gentle soul who never hurt anyone in their lives. I was enraged that she would be killed just because my family chose to prepare for emergencies and they wanted what we had. They killed my family because we thought ahead to prepare and they didn't! I took her body out and buried it along with my parents and took off for the cabin on foot the next night. Before leaving, I took some gasoline and alcohol and set fire to the house where it happened and two other homes along the way, homes which held people who took part in the attack on my house."

"I was on my way up here, knowing some of my family was still alive at this little spot of safety. Now, I'm the only one left," she said as she began crying uncontrollably again. This time, Thomas pulled her into his shoulder and let her cry again. He let her cry as long as she wanted to and saw the look on Kristy's face.

When she finally stopped crying, Thomas talked in a kind voice to her. "Amy, we are willing to take you in at the Ranch. It's your choice and the offer is open indefinitely. If you want, we can take you back and protect you. I know we can't ever replace what family you have lost so far, but we want to take care of you. Take some time to think about it if you would like. We can wait as long as you want to."

She wiped a tear away from her face and looked into his eyes. "Please, I just want to be alone for a few minutes if that's okay."

"Take as long as you want. We will be here for you," said Thomas.

She stood up and walked over to the burned out cabin, staring at the bodies for a long time. After nearly a half an hour, she came back and made a request. "Can we bury them here before we leave?"

"Are you willing to come with us?" asked Kristy.

"I don't have any other place to go. Your offer is about the best I'm going to get and you all seem like kind people. Can I try it for a month or so to begin with?" asked Amy.

"Absolutely," said Thomas.

They moved to a small shed in the woods near the cabin. It couldn't be seen from the cabin unless someone knew where it was. It was still locked and appeared to be undisturbed by whatever gang had looted the cabin. Amy dialed the combination lock and opened the shed, showing the two the tools inside. Thomas found a pick and two shovels and grabbed them before going back to the cabin. Amy stuck around to see what else was in the cabin before moving back to the area where Thomas was digging. Kristy and Amy moved the Explorer back to the woods near the shed and started loading some items from inside. Not everything would fit, but some of the items were unnecessary to take since they had it at the Ranch already.

Amy grabbed another shovel and walked twenty paces away from the shed into the woods. When she stopped, she found a rock sticking up out of the ground and pulled it out of the way. She started digging into the ground and hit a metal object after a foot of digging. Kristy had joined her with a small entrenching tool from the Explorer and began to search out the sides of a fifty-five gallon drum. The two got the top uncovered and about four inches down the sides. They moved slightly to the left and started uncovering another barrel just like the first one.

After removing the cover, Kristy looked inside at the diverse collection of weapons, ammunition and magazines. "My father buried them up here a long time ago in case we ever had to bug out up here. Just in case one of us lost something." Inside were six hunting rifles, three shotguns and three .22 LR rifles. Amy opened the second can and continued retrieving firearms. She handed over two rifles to Kristy and went back for more. Amy kept grabbing firearms from the barrels, including several magazine fed rifles. The last long gun to be brought out was a precision type rifle topped off with a high power scope. Five handguns as well as two pistols in .22 were handed over. Finally, several bags were at the bottom containing the magazines for the firearms, clearly marked for which firearm on the bags they were in. All the weapons were stored in clear plastic bags and had a generous amount of Cosmoline on all the metal surfaces.

Amy further explained the weapons. "My father thought for years we might have to bug out up here and stashed several different kinds of weapons here in case we ever had to leave one of them behind or trade one off. Pretty much everything in here is a standard caliber he could find and buy." She smiled slightly when she remembered her father explaining why he spent the money she at the time considered wasteful. Her smile left immediately upon remembering what had happened to her home and her family and how necessary the weapons were now.

With the barrel now empty, Amy turned left and walked another twenty paces to another rock. She and Kristy began digging again and hit a plastic container. They were fairly heavy when the two tried to lift them out since they were filled with the various rounds of ammunition for the firearms. All in all, ten buckets were removed from the hole and the two had a problem packing it all away in the back of the vehicle. Several boxes of items were removed and Kristy promised to make a return trip at another time to gather the rest of the items.

Thomas was still digging out a large hole for the family and was joined in short order by Amy and Kristy. They didn't dig out to the six feet as usual, but deep enough for the bodies. They eventually got down deep enough and the three bodies were carefully wrapped in sheets found in the shed and placed in one common grave. Thomas erected a small cross marker using wooden planks from the shed and Amy wrote the names of her family members on the wood in permanent marker. It would not stay forever and Thomas promised her they would construct a more permanent tombstone at the Ranch and bring it back at a later date.

The drive back was fairly quiet, with both Kristy and Amy sitting in the backseat. Amy would have fits of crying and Kristy would attempt to console her as best as she could. Thomas decided to stop by the Minister's house on the way back and see if he could help her before she got to the Ranch. He mentioned it to Kristy and Amy, who silently nodded her agreement.

The drive eventually took them past the turn off to the Minister's house. Thomas turned in to the

driveway and went down the long pathway to the house. When they arrived, they found the Minister under the hood of his car messing with something in the engine. "Howdy, been a little while since we talked," said the Minister with a smile.

"That is has. How have you been?" asked Thomas.

"Well, the cold nights have been a little hard on my arthritis, but otherwise, I'm fine," he replied. "What brings you out my way?"

"We have something I think you are more qualified to deal with than we are. We have a friend in need and it's something right up your alley. I hate to bring you work, but I'm afraid we really aren't qualified to help her," said Thomas.

The Minister went over to the Explorer and opened the back door for the ladies. Amy got out along with Kristy and shook hands with the Minister. "Hello, young lady. Would you like to come inside for a glass of tea and talk for a little while?"

Amy nodded her head again through tears and the Minister took her by the arm and led her inside the small house. Thomas and Kristy were at a loss of what to do, so they went to the engine to look at what the Minster was attempting to fix when they drove up. Peering into the engine block, Kristy poked and prodded around until she saw what the problem was. "Looks like the engine threw a piston. He might have gotten a hold of some bad gas or something."

After nearly a half an hour, the Minister exited the house and sat down on the front porch with the two. He offered them a glass of tea and started speaking. "That young lady has a lot of problems right now. Some I'm qualified to help with, well, most I can help with. Are you planning on taking her in?"

"I think so. We have to talk to the group about it, but I think a request for her to move in would be found favorable in light of recent events," said Thomas.

"If it's okay with you all, I'd like her to stay for a few days so we can talk some more. She has a lot of problems that run deep and I'm not going to be able to help her over a glass of afternoon tea. She has already agreed to stay, but she wanted to know if the invitation was still on to live at the Ranch," requested the Minister with raised eyes.

"Yes, for certain. That's the least we can do, although we have yet to discuss it with the group. Even so, I think they will find the request reasonable and offer her the one month trial period," said Kristy.

"It's settled then. Also, I know she was borrowing some clothing from a few of your members. Do you think they could spare a bit more to tide her over for a few days?" asked the Minister.

"Certainly! I will talk to them as soon as we get back. Do you know when we can come back to pick her up?" asked Kristy.

"I think you should be able to check in three days. Maybe a while longer, but at that time, I can give you a really good estimate when I can release her to you all," said the Minister.

"I noticed your car is dead. You seem to have thrown a piston. If you need transportation, we can arrange to have a radio out here for you," said Thomas.

"Yeah, I got a hold of some bad gas. More like bathtub gin and it blew the motor. And I thank you for the radio, although I don't get out too much these days. Speaking of which, I'm down ten rounds for the rifle. When you come back, do you think you could bring some replacements for a jar of honey?" asked the Minister.

"Absolutely not. I won't accept your payment for something like that. Do you have the empty shells?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, I sure do. One thing the Army taught me was to police my brass," said the Minister as he disappeared into the house. He returned a minute later with the ten empty casings for the .308. Thomas grabbed a magazine of his own ammo and stripped them from the magazine and handed them over to the Minister. He thanked them and assisted Kristy in unloading the gear from the Explorer for Amy. When it came to her individual firearms, the Minister almost stopped them. "That might not be such a good idea in her current state. However, I think I can properly secure them for the time being and return them if she needs them. Just leave the rifle, pistol and shotgun, the rest need to go with you."

They said their goodbyes and drove the short distance back home. When they arrived, Kristy agreed to speak on her behalf at the meeting that evening. She began making rounds of the various houses with Heather in tow to draw support prior to the meeting. Thomas started unloading the various firearms and ammunition from the old police vehicle and Stu and Michael showed up to help out. Thomas briefly explained the situation about the firearms and the situation with Amy. He also explained that Kristy would be asking on her behalf at the meeting for her to become a member of the community here.

"Yeah, she caught Shannon and explained the situation. I'm not totally against the invitation, but I think we need to know a little more about her before we just let her in," said Michael.

"Well, she doesn't seem like a bad person, just been through a lot. I think Brian will be opposed to the idea and I'm not really sure why. He does have a good point though, we can't let everyone in who has a sad story to tell," said Thomas.

"We've heard enough of them in the past few months and I agree with him. I'm not sure why she is different but I suppose Kristy has a good reasoning. She is a pretty good judge of character," said Stu.

"We will see soon enough at the meeting tonight if she drops a bombshell on us," said Thomas. The three spent the better part of an hour sorting through the various firearms and ammunition, sorting it out before storage. It was decided to keep them all separate in case Amy didn't stay at the Ranch and wanted to take the various arms with her. It was getting close to dinner time and

the three left to wash up prior to supper at the Conference Center. Prior to the meeting during dinner, Greg was introduced to those members he didn't know and was immediately befriended by all. It was evident he would be given the probationary period without any problems. Greg was a very likeable person who was a jack of all trades much like Stuart. However, Stuart was his superior in most areas by Greg's own admittance. He was also a practical jokester whose constant jokes and sense of humor kept everyone in high spirits.

After dinner, the meeting was brought to order and Greg spoke before them with the request he be allowed to join. He was asked several questions about what he could contribute and was voted in with no trouble at all. He was immediately assigned to a work detail since he volunteered to do anything. He thanked the group for their generosity and promised to make a full contribution to the continued survival of the Ranch.

Kristy stood up next and made the request for Amy. "Most of you know we have another person who wants to join the group here. I'm going to make the request on her behalf since she is currently with the Minister dealing with some personal problems. For those that don't know, her name is Amy Kerns and she is twenty-three years old. She was a student at Arizona State studying engineering before the Fall. Her family was originally from Colorado Springs and was into preparedness big time. They were deciding to tough it out in Colorado Springs until the violence got really bad and then had a cabin in the mountains they were going to hole up at. Unfortunately, they waited too long and got trapped by the gangs who demanded their supply of food and water. She escaped because she happened to be out of the house and watched as her family was killed before her eyes."

"She was going on foot to her family's cabin west of here where her brother and his family were already at. Sometime in the past few months, they were killed at the cabin and it burned to the ground. She doesn't have anyone left in the world family wise and I think we can offer her a home here so she doesn't become a victim of the gangs and looters still out there," concluded Kristy.

"Do we really know enough about her to just let her in?" asked Stephen.

"No, I don't think we do. But Kristy and I spent quite a bit of time talking to her last night and she seemed like she needs our help. She is probably too proud to ask for it, but I think we should make the offer," said Heather.

"Where is she right now?" asked George.

"At the Minister's house getting some help to get over the loss of her family. He asked us to check in after a few days to see how she is doing," answered Thomas.

"Well, I for one think we should extend the offer, at least for the trial period. She needs help," said Shannon.

"If we let everyone in with a sob story, where will it end? I thought we made a list of people we are going to invite," said Dave.

"She doesn't really fit the criteria we established for the membership, except she was heavy into the alternate energy applications, including solar power. We could use that sort of talent around here especially since we rely on solar for a lot of our power. Besides that, her family was into preparedness big time and she probably has a wealth of knowledge on survival and related subjects. She is into martial arts as much or more than I am, so someone with a different background can help in our self defense classes. I think she honestly can help out around here and be a valuable member of the group," said Kristy.

"I didn't know you two talked that much," said Thomas.

"We did and this morning wasn't the best time to talk about it until she saw she didn't have another option. With the rest of her family gone, she has no place to go except here. I'm sure she has other talents she could help out with around here," said Heather.

"Why wouldn't you all tell us this to begin with?" asked Stephen, wondering why his wife would withhold information from the group.

"Because of the same reasons we are having this debate right now. I knew a lot of you wouldn't take the idea of her moving here seriously. She has had a hard time and needs to be shown a little kindness since it's in really short supply these days, even around here," said Kristy angrily.

"And furthermore, why would we just throw out someone basically crying for help. She might be too proud to do so, but she needs our help, at least from what you have told us. Wouldn't you agree?" asked Renee looking at Thomas.

"I don't know her well enough to answer that question. Kristy and Heather have spent the most time with her," said Thomas, avoiding the answer.

"Well, I for one think she needs a place to go. I think we should offer her membership in the group when she gets done at the Minister's house," said Sharon.

"How do we know she isn't some gang member sent in with a sad story to lure us into getting inside the camp and later providing intel on where best to attack? How do we know she won't slit our throats at the first chance and get away to tell her gang buddies how thinly spread we are here," asked Darren.

"Oh, for crying out loud, do you actually think she is a member in a gang? Does she fit the profile? Why must we think of the worst things in a person when we first meet them? Why can't we just accept her story at face value and she needs someone like us to help her out in this world. Are we that jaded that we have forgotten not everyone is a bad person?" asked Janie.

"These days it's hard to figure out anyone, especially since most people don't have the supplies we have up here. Think of it this way, she could be a good person or she might have hidden intentions. They put on a happy face, but would just as soon kill you and live off your supplies. Does she fit the profile of a gang member? Probably not, but most of the people that have

attacked us these days don't fit the profile either," said Tim.

"Most of them haven't been solo women heading for a mountain retreat either. Most of the women in the groups we have encountered haven't been going anywhere in particular and have been looking for a place to stay. She had a place to stay already and was heading there when we found her. She never asked to be here and we are extending the invitation instead. She already turned down the invitation until she realized this was the only place for her to go. That alone should be sufficient enough to convince a lot of you," said Amber.

"It still could be a ruse! Playing on our emotions to make us want to invite her in," said Darren.

It was clear the two sides in the debate had formed along gender lines and needed to be brought to a halt quickly. The ladies in the Ranch wanted to invite her to stay while the men were more careful about it. George noticed this as well and whispered to Ryan, who nodded his head in agreement. After whispering back and forth, Ryan stood and spoke.

"I think what we have here is a failure to communicate," he started off with a smile. Nobody laughed at the poor attempt at a joke, so he continued. "Honestly, and no gender bias intended here, we are tearing right up the middle based on two different camps. One, the ladies, who are pretty much all in agreement on helping out a sister in need. And two, the men, who are naturally suspicious of anyone else coming into the camp who cannot be vetted by another group member. Greg is a different situation since a lot of you all knew him before he came here, so trusting him is not a big deal. However, he has a similar sad story that she has with losing his family, which happened in Indiana. I'm sorry for bringing that up Greg, but it is relevant." Greg nodded his head at the apology and Ryan continued.

"There is nothing wrong with either side's opinions, but this kind of thing will tear us apart if we let it. Even households are split down the middle on whether or not we should let her in. I'm about as suspicious as they come and haven't met her yet, but I see merit in both sides of the story. One, she might be in need and it's hard to fake the scene at the cabin from what I understand. Now, she might have been a part of the group who attacked the cabin in the first place, who knows? But on the other hand, it's pretty hard to fool the Minister, who is currently evaluating her right now. If she was a gang member, how would she have known about the buried weapons up there? Would a gang go to that great of an extent to lure us into confidence or just attack us outright?"

"I'm all about listening to what she says as opposed to debating it in her absence. How about we wait until she gets done up there and wait for the next weekly meeting before we take a side. We can work it out with him and ask if she can stay the week at his place before we invite her back. Is that acceptable?" asked Ryan in conclusion.

The group muttered amongst each other before coming to the agreement this was the best course of action. George, Heather and Ryan would make the trip in three days to confer with the Minister about the plan and offer to supply the two for the week it would take out of his time and supplies. The next big item was the one they had all been waiting for. Greg briefly explained the warehouse and the occupant and the unheard of stores it had waiting for them. He briefly

discussed the best way to approach the individual and offered to mediate until he became more comfortable with the Ranch residents. Heather immediately appointed Thomas and his team to do the bartering with the "owner" of the warehouse. She also appointed Rick to come up with a plan to get the items from the warehouse to the Ranch in a small convoy. Kristy informed the families she needed exact sizes for the children's clothing and shoes by the next day so she could start formulating a list of what to get as some were already growing out of what was brought.

The rest of the meeting went smoothly and Rick asked Thomas if he would mind helping with the convoy order. Thomas told him he would sit down after the meeting and come up with a quick plan so they could think about it overnight and improve it. Heather asked if there was any other business to be discussed and finding none, adjourned the meeting. Sharon gave Thomas a kiss and told him not to stay out too late. Rick and Thomas, joined by Stu and Greg, sat down at the large table and started coming up with the plan to get to the warehouse, looking over maps and what vehicles were available. They decided to make a two day trip out of it if they could, however, Heather would have to make that decision for the community. With a two day trip, they wouldn't be as rushed and could gather everything they needed in the afternoon and in the next morning if they needed to.

Greg inquired as to whether they might make a quick side trip out to eastern Colorado to repair his vehicle or to gather his remaining items. He stated the vehicle was near a small town named Bethune and well off the highway under cover. If someone hadn't discovered it already, he had things he wanted to retrieve. He also stated he had buried some items near the vehicle and wanted to retrieve them as well. After looking at the map, they saw the round trip distance would be close to three hundred miles. They told him not this trip, but promised him in the near future they would get out there.

They chose four vehicles for the two teams to go. The armored HMMWV would be in the lead, followed by a deuce, the small flatbed and followed by the F-350. Since it was their first trip, they didn't want to wear out their welcome with a potential trading partner and didn't want to overload the vehicles either. For the trading material, it was decided to take a variety of firearms to be traded. They would offer the least valuable first and then get progressively better and better. The groups decided they had done enough for the night and planned to discuss it more the next day during their detail. Heather had taken an interest in fire control around the Ranch and decided one of the work priorities would be to ensure they had adequate fire breaks and the ground cover was not conducive to spreading fire rapidly. Although the above average rains that year had decreased the fire danger, they still didn't think it would be a bad idea to prepare for the worst. Greg immediately volunteered when he learned about this detail since forestry was a hobby of his and he planned to pursue a degree in it when he got out of the service. He was immediately included in the work party Thomas was involved in and told the time to show.

The impromptu meeting broke apart and the individuals went home. Thomas arrived home and checked on Angel, sleeping snugly in her bed with her guardians, Mongo and Harley, sleeping at the foot of her bed and on the rug respectively. Thomas smiled at the serene child before going on to his bedroom, finding Sharon reading by a lamp. He closed the door and went to bed himself, falling asleep with a book in his hands.

CHAPTER 23 – STRANGE DEALINGS

Time since attacks: 4 Months, 26 days
Date/Time: 15 September/0811 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next day, Rick, Thomas and their respective teams along with Greg went to the location to begin the work on clearing the underbrush and to select trees to be cut. They stopped by the barn and grabbed the various tools and implements they would need for that day as well as gathering Rick's personal F150 and the wire sided trailer to haul the claimed wood in. They decided to begin by clearing a box pattern fifty yards by fifty yards and then moving to the interior. They mainly used the hand tools instead of the chainsaws just yet. It was hard work, but they were making progress. While working, they were discussing what else the Ranch needed and adding items to their list to be bartered for. Kristy brought up several good points.

"First off, our soap, shampoo and generic toiletries are not going to last forever. I think we should put them as a second priority after the clothing items. We should also be looking at extra linens, towels, washcloths, shower curtains, shower mats, clippers for hair, grooming kits for the dogs, a ton of stuff keeps flashing into my head about things I know we don't have," said Kristy, attacking a scrub oak with a short axe.

"I hope you are keeping a list," said Rick with a smile. "You know I'm going to forget it as soon as we walk away."

"Of course I'm not keeping a list. I thought it was your day to keep up with the writing," said Kristy, sarcastically. "I've written a bunch of stuff down as being needed but also things we are short on. Like hair clippers and scissors. We have one set and thank God Heather thought to bring them. What else am I missing here?"

The group went through several items which Kristy either confirmed or added to her mental list. She already had a listing of everything she had noticed that they didn't have, but wasn't sure what the other families had come up with. She took a break and took out a pad of paper and a pen and started writing the items down they had discussed, gathering new ideas from the work party. "Do you think we are going to get everything we want for a rifle?"

"No, probably not," answered Rick after a moment's reflection. "We might want to throw in a hunting rifle and a shotgun for good measure."

"Maybe some magazines for the pistol too," added Greg. "I only left him with three."

Rick and Thomas briefly discussed what they might be able to trade in the firearms department before continuing on. Everyone decided another meeting would be in order for the group to put on a listing of what they wanted. They would spread the word and inform Heather about the impromptu meeting that night. They continued working and filled both the truck and the trailer

with the seasoned wood. They put the green wood that could be carried near the pathway to be seasoned or to be used in the smokehouse for the meat they were taking. The final job was to identify trees that could be cut to allow for additional growth in the wooded patch. Fifteen trees were identified by Greg as being ready for harvest and they marked them with a can of spray paint to be cut the next day.

They returned to the Conference Center and replaced the wood that had been burned off during the meetings as well as leaving an additional supply for the wood stoves. They portioned out the remainder of the wood at the various cabins and houses for use since it was starting to get a little colder at night. Each returned home and washed up and prepared dinner for their families. Sharon came home, completely exhausted from her work at the fallback positions. Over dinner, Thomas asked what she might need from the warehouse to add to the list for that night. They discussed the matter for several minutes writing down several ideas to get from the warehouse if they were available.

"Do you think since we are down that way that I could go along and we could stop at my house and pick up some stuff?" she asked.

"I don't think the two of us going out is a great idea, but if you want, I can stop by and check on our way," replied Thomas.

"Well, there are things that only I know where they are at. Plus, I wanted to see if the house had been ransacked or not," she offered.

"Honey, I understand, but it might still be dangerous out there. I tell you what, I will go by and check, especially since everyone else got to make two or three trips to move their stuff. It's only fair that you get the same opportunity to gather all your personal belongings. Once we declare it safe, you can make another trip if you want and I can watch Angel," he replied.

This seemed to be agreeable to her and they spent the rest of dinner and cleaning up coming up with additional items needed for the Ranch and their family. Eventually, time for the meeting came and they walked the distance to the Conference Center where some of the families had already gathered and were comparing "shopping" lists. The entire group eventually assembled and the meeting was called to order. Kristy took notes through the meeting and made one master list for everyone, while annotating the names of which family needed what. Specific sizes for the clothing were added to the list and it was finally read back. It took an hour to get everything finalized and the departure time was planned for the day after next starting at 0600 in the morning. Thomas' and Rick's teams were heading back to the same area they were in before and planned to gather everything for the planned trip in the afternoon after felling some of the trees and pruning them. The meeting broke up and Sharon went immediately to bed at the request of Thomas, who got Angel ready for bed. She was deep in sleep when he turned in himself, worried about the upcoming trip outside the safety of the Ranch.

The next morning, the eight gathered again to continue clearing the patch of woods they had been working in the day prior. The trees that had been identified were felled prior to lunch and four others continued to remove the underbrush and deadfall. Of the fallen trees, Amber stated

they needed to come up with a way to move them into one of the barns where they could season properly without being out in the elements. For now, the trees would remain in the woods to season, but everyone agreed a plan needed to be devised of getting them out. Again, they loaded the truck and made rounds to the various houses, dropping off the seasoned wood which would be later cut into fireplace or stove sizes by the individual residents.

They broke for lunch and gathered again after lunch to prepare for the next day. Four returned to the work site to continue clearing while the other five broke off in teams, each given a different assignment. Thomas and Rick would retrieve the firearms and ammo and some camping supplies while Kristy and Greg would get the vehicle ready. Amber would be gathering enough food for three nights, tents and sleeping bags. Although they only planned an overnight trip, it never hurt to be prepared to stay longer just in case. That evening, the entire group would prepare a BoB for the trip, packing away enough supplies for five days apiece.

After gathering the weapons and ammo, Rick and Thomas also grabbed several shotguns for barter as well. They didn't want to give away any of their really good military style shotguns, so they chose three types of hunting shotguns along with five boxes of game loads. They also located two hunting rifles they didn't have much ammo for to begin with. A rifle scope was thrown in as an afterthought and would be mounted on one of the hunting rifles if the need arose. Amber met up with them at the Trading Post and asked if there were any tents available. She had gathered most of the rest of the items already but could not find any tents. Three four-man tents were found in the camping supplies and added to the items to be picked up that evening. Kristy came over with the Ford and helped load up everything into the back, to be subdivided later that evening after dinner. It didn't feel right leaving the weapons just lying outside, so they were transferred into the Conference Center for the night. It was getting late in the afternoon, so everyone agreed to meet at 7:30 after they had all had supper.

After dinner, everyone came back with their bags and whatever else they planned to bring along with them. Vehicle assignments were given with Greg being the odd man out. Vehicles were rechecked and loaded with the supplies and items for each. Rick brought up the point they might need some additional firepower so an M-240B was brought out to be mounted in the HMMWV along with Kristy and Stu mounting M-203s on their M-4s. It took an hour to locate the vehicle pintle for the machine gun, but it was finally installed and ready to accept the support weapon. Since they had an additional person, Greg agreed to be the turret man on the M-240B for the point vehicle. Rick brought along his Remington PSS, the same rifle Thomas had used on the night of their escape. Thomas briefly toyed with the idea of bringing the monster Barrett with him, but decided it would be overkill. The group thought it might be a good idea to bring along some serious firepower and a large caliber as an anti-vehicle weapon and Thomas eventually consented. Stuart suggested some close in firepower might come in handy and a pump shotgun was added to each vehicle as well. Being the quintessential military cops, the group figured the more firepower the better.

After everything was loaded, the group agreed to meet at 0545 in the morning to roll out by 0630. Standard Operating Procedures were handed out by Brian who had thought to print the actions on contact for the group to review that evening. Since they planned to leave so early, they decided it would be best to have a good night's rest and said their goodbyes. Thomas

returned home just as Sharon was putting Angel to bed. They stayed up a while talking about the mission and how she would worry while he was gone. Thomas reminded her nothing would stop him from returning to her and reiterated his promise to go by her house to see what condition it was in. He held her in tight and promised to be careful as always as they fell asleep.

The convoy left a little later than planned, at 0645 in the morning and had just about everyone watching them as they left. They planned to drive slower since they were worried about more roadblocks like the one encountered by the Daniels not long ago. However, the roadblock they had encountered was not to be seen except for a burned out area which might have been a tent or shelter of some type. The cars had been moved well off the road and the convoy sped up slightly. In a vehicle, speed often means life. However, speed also means not having as much reaction time for an ambush. The group attempted to have a good balance of speed and reaction time. In the towns and built up areas, they averaged twenty miles an hour and on the open roads, close to forty. They attempted to avoid the built up areas as much as possible and when it couldn't be avoided, stuck to the outskirts of the towns. After nearly four hours on the road, they were finally within sight of the warehouse complex. The vehicle stopped at the main gate which was locked and waited for a few minutes.

"We might have spooked him since he wasn't really expecting us," said Greg.

"How did you get in there to begin with?" asked Kristy.

"There's a hole in the fence between the first and second warehouse. I have to show you on foot, the vehicle won't fit," said Greg.

Thomas agreed to join him, but left Kristy at the vehicle to watch over them. Thomas informed her if they didn't return or make contact in fifteen minutes, the rest of the group was to leave and not return. Kristy frowned at the comments and decided in her mind to get the group to attempt a rescue of some kind in case the two men ran into trouble.

Thomas and Greg headed out on foot down the fence line and found the opening he had used before. Thomas now figured why the warehouse complex had not been raided yet. From the exterior, the warehouses were rusty and no signs announced what company owned them. They looked entirely normal, not unlike thousands of warehouses across the continent which housed less than valuable goods inside. The found the opening had been somewhat covered by some old pallets from the outside, hiding it from direct view, but the two of them rapidly cleared the obstacle. This worried Thomas somewhat since it showed the area was still inhabited. After entering, they decided to be more discrete in going around and moved in a form of bounding overwatch. They finally reached the second warehouse there the caretaker for the most part lived. They opened the door and moved inside, covering each other as they did so. When they were inside, Greg announced his presence to the warehouse, his voice echoing off the metal walls and tall ceiling.

It seemed like an eternity passed before the caretaker appeared from the middle of the building. It was obvious the man had neither bathed or shaved for quite some time since his was fairly scraggly looking. He greeted Greg like a long lost brother before being introduced to Thomas.

He introduced himself as "Smoke" a name given to him in one of the local bars in town before the Fall. Greg informed him of the vehicles waiting at the gate and requested permission for them to enter. Smoke happily agreed and left with the two in tow to open the gates. Thomas called over his radio informing the other personnel he would be exiting and they were all secure.

They reached the gate and Smoke pulled a huge key ring out of a pocket and found the appropriate key to open the padlock on the gate. The vehicles rolled in and parked between the first and second warehouses. Greg, Thomas and Smoke were joined by Rick as they walked the distance back to the second warehouse. As they were walking, Smoke engaged in small talk to the group.

"So, I see you found your friends you were looking for. I never thought you would make it back this way," said Smoke.

"Well, friend, they wanted to meet you and I never got the chance to properly thank you for your hospitality before. I figured it would be a good time to come and thank you," said Greg.

"Want to meet me? Whatever for?" asked Smoke.

"Well, sir. My name is Tom Dayfield and we were hoping to bargain with you for some goods you have here or you could put us in touch with whoever owns this place," said Thomas.

"Mister Thomas, I own this place and everything in here. I'm the guy you need to deal with," said Smoke with a smile.

"Well, that's good because I wouldn't want to drive any more today," said Thomas with a smile right back.

"So, here to do a bit of tradin huh? All righty then, whatcha have in mind?" asked Smoke.

"We have a list," answered Thomas, handing him over the folded sheets of paper.

Smoke took out a pair of reading glasses and glanced over the list, giving several "Hmms" as he did so. "Well, I have most of the stuff you are looking for. What are you looking to trade?"

"A rifle for starters. What will that get us?" asked Rick.

"What kind?" asked Smoke pointedly.

"Mosin-Nagant 1891 or 1944 with a spam can of ammo," said Thomas.

Smoke laughed out loud as if he had just been told the funniest joke in the world. "Mister, that old beat up import would only get you three items on this list. You have to do better than that."

"Okay, how about an SKS with five hundred rounds and the stripper clips?" asked Thomas.

“That ain’t too bad, but I was thinking maybe an AR like my friend Greg has,” said Smoke.

“M-16A2 with ten mags and a can of eight hundred-forty rounds. Still has the Burst on it as well,” said Rick.

“Hmm, that will get you about half this list. Anything else to trade?” asked Smoke.

“A shotgun maybe. What will that get us?” said Thomas.

Smoke paused and ran his hand through his rough beard. “Mister Thomas, if you have a decent enough shotgun and a hunting caliber rifle, I will get you everything on this list, no problems.”

“Okay, a Ruger Model 77 in .280 Remington and a Browning Citori over-under in 12 gauge. Is that enough?” asked Thomas.

“Mister, ya’ll just make yourself at home. Smoke is now open for business and I will show you folks where everything you want is. Shoot, for that, I’ll even help you load it,” he laughed.

The three shook hands and walked into the nearest warehouse. This one apparently was the home of Smoke since the dust on the floors had a pathway up the middle. The rest of the group followed them inside and Smoke’s demeanor changed immediately upon seeing the ladies that came in. He changed from hard bargainer to gracious host in a split second.

“Good morning ladies! Might I interest you in our selection of cosmetic items or some of the fine jewelry we have in stock here? Possibly some of the nice clothing we have in storage as well?” He looked at Amber. “You my dear, would look drop dead in a nice black outfit with pearls.” He turned to Janet. “And you, pretty lady, would be quite elegant in something in green along with diamonds. And all of you please feel free to browse our perfumes. If there is anything I can get for you beautiful women, please say the word and Smoke will get it for you.”

The ladies that had come with the party were a little taken back with Smoke’s behavior. They were unaccustomed lately to being treated so…nice by a stranger and didn’t know how to react. He wasn’t being pushy, just overly gentlemanly. Maybe it was because he had been here so long without companionship and was lonely or maybe this was the way he always was. They thanked him for his generous offer, but turned it down until they had gotten the rest of the items the group had come for. Smoke wasn’t upset at the polite rebuke and started showing the group where the items were to start gathering them up.

They were about halfway down the list and had filled the Deuce and partially filled the flatbed and the Ford when it started getting dark. Since there wasn’t any power, they decided not to continue looking for the items by flashlight and rest for the remainder of the evening. It was also fairly obvious they wouldn’t be able to retrieve everything this trip and made plans to come back for the rest of the items at a later time. But they covered the essentials on the list and were down to the “nice to have” items now.

They all sat down for a dinner and heated the various MREs and freeze dried foods over the

camp stove they had brought along. Smoke broke out some of his own foodstuffs from another warehouse and ate along with them, getting to know the group better. The Ranch residents were offered a place to sleep inside and Smoke provided air mattresses for everyone in the group. Even if he was friendly, they still decided to keep a fire watch that night, just in case. The firewatch times were taken by the various members and the group settled in for the night. Thomas was woken at 0100 for his shift by Brian and he took his place watching the door and the long warehouse. He looked around for Smoke but couldn't find him. Thomas wandered over to the doorway on the warehouse and peered at the one across the roadway. He saw Smoke gathering boxes by lantern and stacking them next to the door. It appeared he was gathering the rest of the listing so the group wouldn't have to the next morning. Smoke continued to work until Thomas woke Janet for her shift and went back to sleep himself.

The next morning, Stu woke everyone at 0600 to finish up. Everyone had a light breakfast and got ready to finish picking up the goods. Smoke, as they had guessed, had finished gathering the goods and stacking them near the doors in the warehouses. It took the group a little over an hour to finish loading the trucks before they didn't have any more room. Smoke agreed to let them come back later and get the rest of the items with no conditions and promised everything would be in one location when they came back so they could load it easier. After they finished, Thomas informed the group he wanted to make a side trip into Pueblo to Sharon's former house to see if it had been looted. They agreed to the minor side trip, but the trucks full of goods would remain behind outside the city at a secluded spot. Thomas, Kristy and Greg would make the trip in the armored vehicle into the city to see if anything could be salvaged. They thanked Smoke for his generosity and departed the complex with waves.

About ten minutes after they had set out, Greg exclaimed from the back seat of the HMMWV. "What's this? Did anyone stash any goods back here?"

"No, what is it?" asked Kristy.

"There's a note, hang on," said Greg, unfolding the piece of paper. "Dear friends, here is a little something extra for the lovely ladies that came to visit me and the others at your retreat. Don't bother bringing it back since I can't use it anyway. Thanks for keeping me company for a little while and don't hesitate to come back at anytime. Your friend, Smoke."

In the box were twenty-five bottles of perfume and other small boxes contained earrings and necklaces. Kristy looked through the box after shifting to the back seat and exclaimed "There must be at least ten thousand dollars worth of stuff in here! We have to take it back!"

"Do you think he is going to take it back? Better to just say thank you the next time we see him," said Greg.

"Well, I don't want to wear out our welcome there, plus, if we vote Amy in, she will need to get some new clothes and supplies herself. And as pretty as she is, I'm sure Smoke will trip all over himself to help her out," said Kristy with a laugh.

They agreed it would be a nice gift for the ladies of the Ranch and would have to take Smoke

something back the next time they went to the complex. "You know, it was strange. He never asked who we were or where we came from. Most people might have been curious, but it seemed like he didn't care," said Kristy.

"Yeah, that is odd," said Thomas. "It's not like we look like your typical refugee party."

"He is a little strange like that," said Greg. "When I stayed with him, he didn't seem to care who I was or where I came from, just enjoyed my company. Nice enough guy, but seems a little spacey. He appears to be fairly well educated and has a mind like a steel trap, but he never spoke of college or anything like that."

They continued talking until they reached a point outside Pueblo where the trucks could wait under cover and somewhat protected from observation. The trucks pulled off the road and the HMMWV continued down the road alone until they reached the outskirts of the city and the exit for Sharon's house. Thomas felt a chill run down his spine since the last time he was here he had been pursued and had to kill several people. Apparently the other two felt a little uneasy as well as Kristy chambered a round in her M-203 and Greg loaded the M-240 and unlocked the turret.

It was an uneventful trip however and they reached the alleyway behind Sharon's house. Her house was easy to find from behind since the fence they had smashed had not been repaired. It was an eerie feeling as they passed by the other houses and each felt like a thousand sets of eyes were watching their every movement. They reached her backyard and pulled the HMMWV into the backyard and positioned it to where they could escape in a moment's notice. Greg was tasked to stay with the vehicle while Kristy and Thomas would clear the house to see if anyone had taken up residence during their time away. Sharon had given him the keys to the house and he unlocked the back door leading into the kitchen. He and Kristy cleared the bottom floor tactically and moved to the upstairs. After completely clearing everything, the house seemed to be in the same condition they had left it in July.

They peeked out the windows at the neighborhood, but couldn't see anyone. However, there were signs of recent activity since the grass in front of several homes had been trampled down. He called Greg to find out if he had seen any activity and he replied he had not seen anyone, but felt like they were being watched. Thomas grabbed the bottom sheet off the bed and took several of Angel's toys and some of Sharon's clothes out of her dresser to take back when they departed.

While he was tying up the sides of the sheet, Kristy took the time to look through the half empty closet. "Sharon has some good taste in clothes! Maybe she and I should do some shopping and spend some of your money. You know; a daylong shopping trip, facials, pedicures, fifteen different bags from different stores. We could do that."

"Yeah, fifteen seconds of looking through her closet and you already have about a thousand dollars spent. I'm not sure Steve would understand," said Thomas with a laugh.

"No, not Steve's money, your money, Daddy Warbucks," said Kristy with a laugh.

"I suppose I don't have a say in this do I?" said Thomas with a laugh.

"Oh, you do, just tell me she isn't worth it," said Kristy with a grin.

"Trick question, I say yes and my credit cards scream. I say no and I'm a butthead," laughed Thomas. "Either way, I think it's going to be a long time before the mall opens back up."

He finished tying off the sheet and they were heading downstairs when the report of a shot was heard. They ran to the back of the house and Thomas contacted Greg on the radio. "It didn't hit me, only the vehicle. Either they are a poor shot or they are trying to scare us off. I've got a general location on the shot, but nothing specific."

As soon as Greg finished the radio call, another shot was heard and a bullet ricocheted off the vehicle's side. A voice followed it up.

"You looters better get away from here before I kill every last one of you!"

Obviously the man thought they were there to loot the house. "We aren't looters! This is my wife's house! We are only here to collect some things of hers!" Thomas yelled back.

"Nice try! But the woman that lived here is divorced! Now get out of here!" the voice replied.

"No kidding!" replied Thomas. "She and I were married last month."

"That little tart you brought along with you is not her!" the voice replied.

"Little tart?" asked Kristy, a little displeased.

The earpiece of the radio came alive with Greg's voice. "I have his location. I can spray the area if it comes to it."

"We can deal with the name calling later," said Thomas. "No, don't shoot yet, just a concerned neighborhood watch program, stand by."

Thomas called out of the house again. "No kidding you didn't recognize her! This is a good friend of hers. The woman who used to live here was Sharon Johnson and she has a daughter Angel. She and I were dating before the attacks. My name is Thomas Dayfield and she moved in with me two months ago and we got married."

"If you are who you say you are, what kind of car did you drive?" asked the voice.

"Black ford explorer, two door," answered Thomas.

"And what color eyes does her daughter have? Green right?" asked the voice.

"No, blue, like the early morning sky," answered Thomas.

"How do I know you are who you say you are?" asked the voice again.

"You only have my word! You and I can go back and forth like this for hours or you can accept the fact my wife used to live here and we came by to check on the house and her belongings. Your choice pal!" answered Thomas, a little upset.

There was a moment of silence before the man answered. "Okay, you get the chance to prove it. Step on out so I can get a look at you. I won't shoot unless you aren't who you say you are!"

"Do I at least get a warning first before you shoot?" asked Thomas.

"Sure, five seconds before I open fire," answered the voice. "No funny business either, I've killed before and I probably will again."

"Right mister, I'm coming out now!" announced Thomas. He stepped out of the house and well into the backyard in full view of whoever wanted to see him. After five seconds Thomas asked "Well am I who I say I am?"

"Yes I think you are! I'm not going to shoot now!" the voice answered.

Kristy darted out of the house and took up a position behind the HMMWV just in case. Thomas casually went back to the house to retrieve the sheet with the items inside. When he moved back outside the house, a man appeared at the fence, holding a lever action rifle aimed at Thomas.

Greg swung the turret over to cover the man and Kristy aimed her rifle at the man as well. He shifted his focus to the turret, giving Thomas the chance to bring a firearm into play. He dropped the sheet on the ground and pulled his pistol from the holster. The sudden movement made the man shift his attention back to Thomas.

"Bad move my friend. You may get me first, but not before my friends fill you full of some hot stuff. Why don't you go ahead and sling that rifle and we all relax a bit," said Thomas.

"How do you know I don't have you covered by other people?" asked the man.

"You don't or they might have fired already. You might get me and my friend in the turret, but not before the little tart gives you a third eye for your troubles," said Thomas calmly. "I tell you what, I'm going to holster my pistol and you sling your rifle. My buddy on the machine gun will point it in the air and we all take a deep breath."

Thomas lowered his pistol and put it in the holster, but kept his hand at his side in case in case he had to draw it quickly again. The man seemed to relax a bit and pointed the rifle in the air before slinging it over his right shoulder. Greg relaxed a bit and pointed the gun in the air.

The man walked across the yard looking Thomas over before deciding in his mind he was telling the truth about who he was. He stuck his hand out and said "Dan, Dan Morgan."

Thomas shook the offered hand and replied. "Tom Dayfield. Is that the same kind of Dan Morgan like the Revolutionary War hero?"

"The very same and supposedly we are related somehow, like cousins or something. Anyway, why are you back here? That night you left, I never thought I would see you again," replied Dan.

"I took Sharon to a safe place away from here and she and Angel are fine. We will be coming back to collect her things we left behind," said Thomas.

"It's good to hear she is okay. I recognize you as the fella who used to spend the night at her place all the time. About time you two got married and stopped living in sin," said Dan in an admonishing tone.

From behind the HMMWV he heard Kristy make her comments through snickers. "Oooooh, Tom, you animal!"

"Please ignore the little tart behind the HMMWV. Her name is Kristy by the way and that's Greg behind the gun," said Thomas.

"Sorry for the name calling Miss, please accept my apologies," said Dan with a smile.

"No offense taken. Has there been a problem with looters around here?" asked Kristy.

"A few. The word got out that the Loyalist forces had done the firearms confiscations around here and they figured it was open season on the residents. When they came to my house, I gave the Loyalists a few of my old guns and hid the rest. The Loyalists seemed content with what I gave them and left me alone, unlike Gabe next door. So the gangs came back a little afterwards and we talked them out of it," said Dan with a smile.

"Well, you don't seem to be a very good shot with that, if you don't mind me saying so" said Greg from behind the machine gun and pointing at the scar on the turret.

"This? No, friend, I wasn't shooting at you with this. I took some shots at you with my Sharps .45-120. I wasn't trying to hit you, just scare you off," said Dan.

"Kind of odd firearms to be having in this day in age. A little old, don't you think?" said Thomas, looking over the .44-40 lever action rifle on his shoulder.

"Actually, most are new built. I got into Black Powder Cartridge Rifle and Cowboy Action shooting a long time ago. I don't even own a firearm designed prior to the 20th century. Only high wall, rolling block or lever actions, real men's guns! Trust me, if I wanted to hit you all I would have and you would have had to pick up the pieces afterwards," said Dan with a grin.

Thomas looked over the spots where the two rounds had hit the armor of the HMMWV. It had left a pretty good ding, despite the thick armor of the vehicle. "Well, Dan. Nice to meet you, but we need to get going. We have some people waiting on us, but we will be back eventually."

"No problem. Just knock on my door and let me know you all will be around. It tends to make me and the neighbors a little nervous when someone shows up we don't know. Tell Sharon I said hello," said Dan as he stuck out his hand again.

"Which house do we go to first?" asked Thomas.

"The only one with a direct view of her backyard," said Dan as he pointed with his thumb.

True enough, there was only one house with a decent view into her backyard. Thomas shook the offered hand and they mounted the vehicle, ready to move again. They made the drive out and picked up the other vehicles before continuing the trip back to the Ranch.

During the drive, Kristy spoke the thoughts on everyone's mind. "Is it just me or have we run across some really weird people in the past few days?"

"It's not you. First we meet Smoke, which we all agree is a little off. Then we meet a guy named for a Revolutionary War hero who won't use a gun designed after the 20th century and takes pot shots at us to scare us off then becomes our best buddy after we play twenty questions. Yes, there are some odd people out here surviving," answered Greg.

"True, but Smoke didn't have to help us and Dan Morgan could have just shot us without warning. A little strange, yes, but they seem like good people," said Thomas.

The trio thought about what was said and the conversation shifted to other subjects until they reached the Ranch. As they pulled up the driveway, they saw George and Michael outside the house replacing a pane of glass and Jeff repairing bullet holes in the walls. Amber jumped out of the vehicle almost before it came to a stop and ran to her father to make sure he was okay. Cynthia followed from the rear vehicle at a more sedate pace since she knew her husband could handle himself in a shooting situation, but still worried just the same. George assured his daughter he was okay and took her back to the vehicles to look at the bounty they had gotten from the warehouse. The four found seating in the vehicles for the short drive down to the Conference Center where the goods would be given out. A radio call went out for everyone to come help unload and within twenty minutes everyone, minus the LP/OP, came to the Center.

The trucks were rapidly unloaded into the Conference Center and the families immediately started claiming items they had requested. Thomas presented Sharon with the items he had grabbed from her house and told her about the run in with the neighbor.

"Who? Dan? Oh, he's harmless, although a bit nosey. It doesn't surprise me in the least he knew exactly who you were. I'm a little surprised he shot at you, much less being alive after he did so. But I am glad you didn't kill the old coot since he's been watching over the house. So, when can we go back?" asked Sharon anxiously.

"We have some other stuff from the warehouse we couldn't fit in the trucks, so next week probably. Oh yeah, Kristy was a little taken aback by your wardrobe and you two are somewhat

close in size. Maybe you ought to offer her an outfit if she needs it sometime," said Thomas.

"I think that can be arranged. Now let's go inside and see what bounty my pirate brought back from the warehouse," said Sharon.

The items were being claimed immediately by the families, much to the dismay of Kristy, who wanted to inventory everything first. Heather stepped in and offered a compromise. Families could take what the needed to get by for the next three days in order to give Kristy time to inventory and store it all. This seemed agreeable to everyone and they only took those items they felt would be totally essential for the next three days.

Kristy brought in the other box given to them by Smoke and explained it was for the ladies of the Ranch. Some of the people were worried that the man knew a little too much about the Ranch and the residents, but remembered that four of the ladies had gone down with them to the warehouse. Where there were four, there were bound to be more. Each woman found something they liked from the different perfumes and jewelry and claimed some of each. Several bottles were left over and put into the supply bin for later use. When everyone was done grabbing what they needed, Kristy grabbed a notepad and started taking account of what was left. Thomas was about to leave with Sharon when he was stopped by Tracy Daniels. She had Rick in tow and her son in her arms. "Tom, you got a minute to talk?"

"Sure, what's on your mind?" asked Thomas.

"I don't figure you have heard what happened here last night, but you soon will. Anyway, I'm honored you all have given me the children to watch during emergencies, but all I have is Tim's pistol to do it with. I would feel a lot more comfortable with a long gun of some type. Heather gave it the go ahead, but told me I needed to get with you and Rick to get one," said Tracy.

"Our pro-fire is on Sunday, want to wait until then or something now?" asked Thomas.

"Something now. Well, something simple until Sunday and after that, maybe an AK or an AR. Just something I can use to reach out and touch someone if I have to," she said.

"Okay, let us get settled in and we can meet at the Trading Post in about two hours. Will that be okay?" asked Rick.

"Yes, of course. That gives us enough time for Tim to get home to help watch the kids. I'm on child care duties today," she said. "See you in a bit."

After she had walked away, Rick turned to Thomas. "Well, that's a surprise."

"Yeah, I never thought in the world she would come begging for a long gun. Well, hey, it's at least a start. What are you thinking? Bolt action or autoloader?" asked Thomas.

"That's a good question. Is there an uncomplicated autoloader we still have? What about your M-1 Carbines?" asked Rick.

"All of them are spoken for I think, except the pre World War Two Winchester that belonged to my Grandfather. Not a chance she is taking that one out," said Thomas.

"Wait a second; I thought we have three of them in stock," said Rick.

"We did, however, all are spoken for now. Sharon got the new build, Nicole Thompson has another and the third is spoken for by Shannon. Maybe we can get her to give it up, but even the M-1 isn't without fault. Let's say we meet in the Trading Post in an hour and see what we can come up with," said Thomas.

"Okay, that sounds like a plan. See you in an hour," said Rick.

Thomas went home and showered up, taking a little extra time in the shower. Sharon had headed out to the fields to gather the remainder of the crops and start cutting the old plants down. The mulcher was working full time and the compost would be going back into the soil for the next year. After showering, Thomas put on some clean clothes and cleaned his 1911 quickly. It wasn't dirty, but it was that time of the month to clean and oil it. By the time he was finished, an hour had past and he saw Rick making his way to the Trading Post.

When they entered, they started looking through the remaining autoloading rifles and carbine they had in stock. "What about an MP5 or the USC you have?" asked Rick.

"I thought of those, but they are kind of complex for a beginner with minimal training. I'm leaning more towards a bolt action myself, maybe even a lever action," said Thomas.

"You might be right, but let's assume she actually has some weapons training. What are our options without making it too complicated?" asked Rick.

"I was thinking something in a pistol caliber myself. A carbine maybe. Well, let's see…we have a Beretta C4X in 9mm and .40 S&W…a Feather RAV in 9mm that you loaned me and Sharon has in her safe…a Kel-Tec in 9mm…the MP5…an Olympic Arms in .45 ACP…the M-1 carbine Shannon has…a Ruger PC9 carbine, which was the same she had before when Tim went to get her…a Hi-Point in 9mm…that about does it," said Thomas. "None of these are seriously complicated, but still, it's hard to beat a bolt action with a beginner."

"You might be right and the more I think about it, the more I think she needs something uncomplicated and can be used with minimal training. Yeah, a bolt is the way to go. What do we have available? Something with a detachable magazine so we wouldn't have to worry about reloading from a charger or one at a time?" asked Rick.

"Yeah, something along those lines, and light enough recoil where it won't knock her silly. Let's see here…between .223 and .30 caliber, light enough and handy enough for work in the field. Not a magnum, not a full sized…not a varmint caliber, although that might work…I was thinking maybe a .308, but that does tend to kick a little for a beginner," said Thomas.

“Maybe a .243? I think you have a few of those left,” said Rick.

“Yeah, I think that might work…wait a second, what’s this? Oh, man, I forgot all about that! This is perfect!” exclaimed Thomas as he pulled a rifle off the shelf. He handed it over to Rick.

“Oh yeah, this will do great, but what about magazines? Do you have enough?” asked Rick.

“Enough and more! Computer request glitch at the distributer. George ordered five of them and got shipped fifty by mistake. Right before the Fall too so he never sent them back,” said Thomas, looking at the CZ 527 Carbine in 7.62x39mm caliber. A near ideal rifle for a beginner since the rounds wouldn’t kick as hard as a larger round might, but still potent.

“Too bad you didn’t order five Barretts with fifty cases of ammunition from the same distributor,” said Rick, laughing.

Thomas looked around in the bins containing the magazines for the rifles and was rewarded by finding the large box of the detachable magazines for the CZ rifle. A beloved, but relatively hard to get model in the CZ line, it worked well for game under two hundred yards and would be a good rifle since the targets she might be shooting at should be at that range or less. And they had plenty of the rounds on hand for the rifle. For personal protection and protection of their families, it would work until she could get spun up on one of the battle rifle systems.

“What’s this and why did someone leave an AK and an M-16 lying out?” asked Rick.

“Yeah, I saw that too. I thought we had all of the M-16s put up in storage. Did someone pull one out while we were away?” asked Thomas.

“I don’t know. And there are five pistols and a shotgun I don’t recognize as well. Maybe is has something to do with last night?” asked Rick.

“Who knows?” answered Thomas. Their quest complete for a long gun, they decided to find her a pistol as well. Looking through what was left, they decided a double action revolver would suit her needs the best. As handguns go, the double action revolver is about the most foolproof design there is, for the most part a “point and click interface” for lack of a better term. Revolvers don’t suffer from jammed ejections or failure to feed due to improper grip or failing to engage the magazine like automatics. If it fails to fire, it’s typically one of two things, bad ammunition or an empty chamber. Corrective actions? Pull trigger again or reload. They would give her a brand new revolver, so they wouldn’t be too worried about the parts breaking.

They decided to go with a Ruger in .32 H&R Magnum. While never an extremely popular round, the little .32 approached .38 Special +P ballistics and normally had six rounds as compared to five in snub gun revolvers. It was gentle enough for a beginner shooter, but powerful enough to be taken seriously. Lucky enough for Tracy, Thomas had a fairly decent supply of the rounds and the .32 Smith and Wesson Long that the pistol could shoot since a couple of his customers were into Cowboy Action Shooting and requested the ammo.

Tracy showed up a little early and was showed what the two had picked out for her. Rick was busy setting a scope on the rifle and bore sighting it, so Thomas showed her the pistol first. "It's a Ruger, a very sturdy handgun and packs a respectable punch. I don't have any speed loaders for the rounds, so if you reload, it will have to be one at a time."

"I don't really need a pistol do I? I mean, I have Tim's pistol for now," she said.

"Tim needs his own pistol just like you do, unless he has one already," said Rick.

"No, I think he only has the Beretta. Okay, how does it work?" she asked.

Thomas explained the pistol and the operations behind a double action model for several minutes. He showed her how to load, unload and fire the pistol in both double and single actions modes. He showed her how to align the sights and pick a point of aim, focusing on the front sight as opposed to the target. She wouldn't go to the range just yet, but he wanted her to be familiar with the concept of operations. She dry fired the pistol repeatedly aiming at various targets around the room. Thomas showed her the proper stance and grip for the revolver. By the time he was finished, Rick had mounted the scope and boresighted it against the wall as best as he could. It was not a precise zero, but it would be better than nothing until they could get some range time later. He showed her the rifle, the safety and how to properly load, unload and clear it out. She took the rifle and showed some experience with it after taking it in her hands.

"I thought you never had firearms training before," said Rick.

"No, I never said that. My father taught me when I was young, but it was only a .22. It's something that was ingrained into my head from an early age, firearms safety. How does this compare to the rifle Tim has?" asked Tracy.

"Apples and oranges. He has an automatic and this is a bolt action. This round is better up close as compared to the M-4 since it had a larger bullet, but not nearly as accurate at long ranges. Heavier bullet means more knockdown power except after three hundred meters or so. After that point, it goes downhill since the accuracy on the 5.56 is better. It's perfect for the job you want it for which is personal protection. A bolt action is about as simple as it gets and since you have to be more precise, people tend to be better shots with one. Autoloaders tend to make people put more lead downrange than they should. This will work well for your beginner rifle," said Rick.

"Can we go to the range today and fire it?" asked Tracy.

"No, it's getting late and I want you to do something first. This is the owner's manual. Take it home, read it, disassemble the rifle, clean it thoroughly and oil it. Do the same for the revolver. Bring them to either Tom or me tomorrow and let us see it. Tomorrow we can get you to the range and have you put some lead downrange with it," said Rick.

"Okay, I understand. What about the scope, how powerful is it?" asked Tracy.

"It's a mid power scope, two to eight power. It's just as good as most scopes on the market for

the intended job, which is hunting. As for power, it adjusts from two power, which means the object you are looking at is seen two times closer than it really is up to eight times closer. Plenty enough for the ranges you would be working at," said Rick.

"So I should keep it on eight power all the time?" asked Tracy.

"No, at closer ranges you need less power. More power at closer ranges tends to make you focus more on a specific point on the target instead of center mass. You also lose sight of other potential threats at close ranges and increased power. Less power at close ranges, like the two power should be used at one hundred yards or less and go up progressively from there," said Thomas.

"Only five rounds in the magazine? Is that enough?" asked Tracy.

"Five rounds will be sufficient for what you need it for, which is precise aimed shots at the target. Yes, you will have to reload more, but at the same time, five aimed shots center mass are better than thirty shots downrange near a target in spray and pray," said Rick.

"I understand, so tomorrow, I can find one of you two and go to the range provided I clean and oil my weapons tonight?" asked Tracy.

"Sure, and we also need to get you some ammo for both of them, a holster and some web gear," said Thomas. Rick and Thomas went through the Trading Post and found the items: a holster, ammunition, pouches for the magazines and a cover for the scope. They put everything into a bag and handed it over to Tracy.

"Okay, this will do for now. Can I ask a favor? Sharon told me she got to try out a few different pistols and rifles and found one she liked the most. Do you think I could do the same thing? You know, try out a bunch of different ones and pick the one I like the best?" asked Tracy.

Both Rick and Thomas were a bit surprised at the request, again since Tracy hadn't volunteered for guard duty before or voluntarily asked for a firearm. Rick finally asked the question. "Tracy, can I ask you a question?" She nodded and he continued. "Before it seemed like you didn't want to have anything to do with firearms or guard duty. Now it seems like you are over eager."

He never really asked a question, although she knew what was on his mind. "Honestly? When we came back here that day on the road I felt so helpless and last night I felt the same thing. Yeah, I had a pistol, but big deal. I couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with the thing and I knew if push came to shove and I came across an armed adversary, I'd be up the creek. If you are going to give me the opportunity to live here again, I have to make a contribution. Watching your children during emergencies means you trust me and I have to do my best to keep them safe. I need to be properly armed for that to happen. I wanted to ask before now, but since I was a probationary person, I didn't know if you all would go along with it."

"Had you asked from the first night, it would have helped your case along a lot more," said Thomas.

"I just got reaccepted into the community here, I didn't want to push my luck by holding out my hand saying 'give me' immediately after getting voted back in. I think everyone has gotten over the anger towards me now and I need to continue to incorporate myself into the community fully," said Tracy.

"Hey, nothing wrong with that. Anything else we can help you with?" asked Rick.

Tracy paused before continuing. "Actually, I was going to wait, but since you asked; I was thinking I, well Tim and I both would need several different firearms. I know we both need hunting rifles and shotguns. My own automatic pistol eventually and maybe a rifle for little Tim, but I'm not sure about that. An air gun perhaps?"

"That's a pretty tall order for the both of you, but I think we can accommodate you on pretty much everything. Anything else?" asked Thomas.

"Maybe a riot gun?" asked Tracy.

"A what?" asked Rick.

"I've been reading the gun books and I've heard the three best things for home defense are a dog, an alarm and a shotgun. We don't have a dog or an alarm, so a shotgun fits the bill. If someone breaks into the house, I don't want to go after them with an assault rifle. If I did, I might miss and the round would go through the walls and hit the neighbor's house. A shotgun is more effective in dealing with someone up close," said Tracy.

"Tim knows how to operate one already, I fired him on the range last year. We can get you checked out tomorrow or on Sunday if you like. Hang on," said Rick as he turned towards the racks. He located one of the military models and handed it over along with several boxes of OO buck and slug shells. "This should do fine. And to answer your original question, certainly you can try out different weapons systems. If you see one you like, let me know and I will get it."

"You have an operators manual for the shotgun too?" asked Tracy.

Thomas looked through the various manuals he had kept over the years before finding one for the Mossberg system. He placed it in the bag with everything else and asked Tracy if she needed anything else.

"No, I really can't say how much I appreciate this though. I'm sorry for being a pain in the butt about it before, and it took a lot to open my eyes," said Tracy.

"No problem, anytime you need some weapons help, just let us know," said Rick.

Tracy told them she would see one of them first thing in the morning and bring along Tim to select their hunting firearms, providing nothing happened that night. She went away happy with the new items and Rick turned to Thomas and asked the question on both their minds. "Can you

believe it?"

"It's good to see her taking security seriously. Actually, she has a good point about the shotgun, I think I need to pull one of mine out as well," said Thomas.

"I was thinking the same thing. What exactly happened while we were gone?" asked Rick.

"I don't know. Sharon was working and I never got the chance to ask anyone," said Thomas.

"Let's pay a social call to Darren and find out. If anyone knows, it's probably him," said Rick.

"Okay, I'm heading back home to fix dinner. See you around eight or so?" asked Thomas.

"Eight will be good," said Rick and they locked the door and departed.

Before dinner, Thomas went to the basement and pulled a 20 gauge Winchester Defender shotgun out of the vault. Tracy had brought up a good point about having a shotgun available for home defense. If someone was able to slip into the Ranch and get into the houses, a shotgun would be the preferred weapon. He located the ammunition and loaded seven of the buckshot in the tube. He had a side saddle which he loaded the five slug loads. The recoil might be a little rough, but it was well within Sharon's capabilities to fire and reengage targets. He put the shotgun on the top shelf in the closet and reminded himself to tell Sharon where it was located.

During dinner, Thomas both informed her of the additional weapon in the closet and asked her what happened the previous night. "Baby, I'm not entirely sure of all the details. All I know is someone was shooting up the Taylor's house and Darren's team took them out. I don't really know the details," she replied.

After dinner, they met the Jones' at the Thompson's cabin and paid a social call. After catching up for several minutes, Thomas asked what happened the previous night.

"Some old friends of yours, if I understood George correctly," said Darren. "As George and Frank explained it, these were the same two you chased off when you first got up here. They came back and were trying to steal out of the Taylor's garden. Lucky for us, the LP/OP was watching in every direction and caught them in the act. By the time we got to the Taylor's house, George had already challenged them and they had opened fire on his house. Good thing for him the walls are fairly thick in his place and those idiots weren't using high powered shells. They had some new weapons, but more of that later. We were able to flank them and I attempted to challenge them. One swung his weapon towards us and presented a threat. Frank took him out one before he was able to get a shot off."

"The other surrendered immediately, begging for his life. We had no intentions of shooting him or even the other one but they forced us to do so. We didn't know what to do with him for the moment and decided that taking him fifty miles away as we had talked about was the best course of action. We made him bury his buddy before taking all his weapons away and driving him out to Westcliffe and dropping him off. We had him bound and eventually gagged in the back of the

car before dropping him off. We had to gag him since he screamed the whole way. It was either that of shoot him outright. Anyway, we left him with what he came with, which wasn't much. We told him if we ever saw him out this way again, we would shoot on sight and not ask questions. He seemed fairly scared about the whole affair and maybe that set him straight."

"Speaking of the drive, since it was dark out when we took him, we spotted about a dozen camps along the way, at least that's as many fires as we could see. It appears the refugees are starting to take to the mountains and coming out of the cities. There were probably more, since we could only count that many in the dark. I figure hunting in a few weeks is going to be a little entertaining since every idiot in the state with a gun is going to be out plugging off rounds at anything that moves. So anyway, that's the story," concluded Darren.

"And the weapons?" asked Rick.

"According to Frank they were better armed than the last time you had your encounter with them. According to our friend, they found a truck being guarded by a Loyalist up in the mountains. It had weapons that had been confiscated by Loyalists, or so he claimed. Supposedly, they were fired on first and had to defend themselves. We didn't believe him for a moment and told him so. He clammed up after that and didn't discuss the matter further. One was armed with an AK and the other an M-16A2, a full scale military M-16A2. Something strange though, remember in the armory we used to have the old M-16 lower receivers that were stamped over with 'Burst?' This was one of those. I'm fairly positive it came from one of the bases in Colorado Springs. Anyway, plenty of ammo for each of them and five pistols and a shotgun between the two. Not a lot of food, so that's why they were stealing I guess."

"We have plans to go out looking for this truck tomorrow, if the location he gave us was correct. It's better we get our hands on it than some other idiots like them, if it's even still out there. George, Heather and I were going to go, but were waiting on the armored HMMWV to come back before going out. Heather wants to go by the Minister's house to check up on Amy as well, so we figured we would kill two birds with one stone," said Darren.

"You think he told you the truth?" asked Thomas.

"Not positive, but he was scared and probably didn't think to lie," answered Darren.

"Sounds good. Also, we have to go back next week to the warehouse and get the rest of the stuff we traded for. Sharon also wants to make a run to her house and gather up some stuff she didn't get to bring the first time," said Thomas.

"Plus, I'm sure everyone will have more to add to the list since we know what he has now. I'm sure by the next meeting everyone will have more items to add. Janet already told me about the strange dude you all met. He sounds interesting," said Darren with a laugh.

The three families sat a while longer, talking about different things. Since tomorrow was a workday, they didn't spend too much time talking and left for home after another hour of talking.

CHAPTER 24 – KINDRED SPIRIT

Time since attacks: 4 Months, 30 days
Date/Time: 19 September/0933 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning as promised, Tracy came to see Rick and was taken to the range to zero her new rifle. She also brought along Tim to select some hunting equipment. Tim reclaimed the 7mm Magnum rifle he had taken with him on his trip to get Tracy along with several rifles and shotguns between them. Both admitted they knew nothing of hunting and needed lessons before going out. Rick told them to talk to Stephen, who was probably the best hunter in the group. The zero firing took a little longer than planned, but by the end she had zeroed the rifle and was consistently hitting targets out to two hundred yards. Her longer range shooting beyond that point wasn't as good, but it wasn't too bad. Tim took a little more time to complete the zeros on his new rifles and to add some proficiency fire with his M-4. The pistol she seemed to grasp immediately and was hitting the target center mass almost immediately in both single and double actions. Rick promised her the opportunity to shoot again and told her the rifle and pistol was hers to keep.

George, Heather and Darren left the Ranch and first stopped by the Minister's house to talk about Amy and to check up on her. When they arrived, they found the two sitting on the front porch, talking in the unseasonably warm morning. Unlike before, Amy had a smile on her face and seemed in better spirits than before.

"Good morning, friends. Care to have a cup of tea? I've run out of coffee so it's the best I can do in the morning," said the Minister as they departed the vehicle.

"We have some coffee out at our place I'm sure we can part with if you need some," said Darren.

"I wouldn't want to be a burden, but if you can part with it without any trouble, then I wouldn't complain," said the Minister. "My dear, do you think you might rustle up some tea while I talk to George for a few minutes."

"Of course, come on in," said Amy with a smile as she led Darren and Heather into the house.

The Minister disappeared briefly inside and returned, strapping on the pistol belt with his Colt. "In case of bears and such, I know it's not the time of year for them, but it never hurts to be prepared." George agreed and grabbed his Springfield out of the vehicle and slung it over his shoulder. He still had on his web gear and Glock pistol.

George and the Minister walked away from the house towards the rear where the chicken coops were located and the well which had a solar pump installed. "I always wondered about your water, now I know," said George.

"Something the wife had me buy before she moved on, God rest her soul. She always worried about the power going out up here and us being without water, so I ordered it a few years ago and had it installed. It's worked more or less ever since and kept us in water. It also powers the pressure tank, so I'm not without plumbing either. I take it you are here about Amy," said the Minister, getting down to business right away.

"Yes and we are heading out to look for a potential problem as well," said George as he explained the two midnight visitors they had received.

"It seems to be a lot of that going around, but that's not why you are here. Amy is doing well and I think she is ready to move back with you all if you agree to it. She has had a rough time of everything and seems eager to move on. Giving her the opportunity to move to your ranch has given her something to strive for and I would hope your people would take this into consideration before voting her in," said the Minister.

"She will be voted on, but getting her in might be a problem. We seem to be split down the middle along gender lines about her getting in. However, if you think she is a good person and can fit in where we are at, I think that would help her case," said George.

"I think she can help you more than you know. Besides being a good person inside, she has a wealth of knowledge about electrical engineering. Did you know she fixed my solar pump? It was installed wrong from the start. Darn thing was supposed to be pointed south and the hired help I had put it in never faced it the right way. Plus, there was something with one of the electrical lines not being installed properly and didn't provide the power it should have. I've always wondered about it since it never put out the water like it was supposed to, but always put out enough to keep the tank filled. Anyway, she fixed it for me. That alone might help your folks out a bit since you rely on solar power there for quite a bit if I recall correctly. I can come down and make a personal case for her if you like," said the Minister.

"No, I don't think that will be necessary. The wives and other single ladies at the Ranch are the ones pushing to get her in. I think their husbands will see things their way when it comes down to it," said George with a small laugh.

"Yes, out here, we can be men and rule the world, but after we step one foot inside the house, we know who runs things," laughed the Minister. "So you don't think there will be a problem?"

"No, I doubt it after they get talked to privately by their off duty supervisors. I was never opposed to her joining, but I wanted an outside opinion. You have provided us that and are a better judge of character than all of us put together. I know you look for the best in everyone, but you can also see the worst as well," said George.

"That I can. So if you are asking whether or not I see anything bad in this young lady, no I do not. She has done some bad things, but only under rage and vengeance. Her soul carried those burdens and she hated herself for what she did. I won't go any further on the matter, but she has found her peace with God. I think she could be a good addition to your small community," said the Minister with a smile.

"I can pass that along to our group. Otherwise, how are things going up here?" asked George as they entered the sparse trees at the edge of the property.

"As good as can be expected, besides being out of coffee," said the Minister with a jovial laugh. "Other folks besides you look in on me from time to time so there isn't anything major I can use right now."

"Are you sure? We are more than willing to help," said George.

"Nah, I can't think of a thing, except maybe a new car," he replied with a laugh. "Actually, Thomas said you all have a radio to spare so I can call you when I need to. Is that a possibility?"

"I think so, but we will have to check on the distance between here and there as the crow flies. It might be just out of range for our small sets, but we will check," said George. "I left my portable set in the car and will check it before I go. If it works, we will leave it with you when we come back to pick up Amy."

"Sounds good my friend. Otherwise, Thomas already gave me more ammo since I nearly ran through a box already. The South African surplus isn't really as good as the Lake City surplus or the match rounds, but for coyotes, it works just fine," said the Minister.

"We really just need to get you a regular varmint rifle and be done with it. The Springfield isn't really meant for that sort of application," said George.

"It does well enough for my needs, so I thank you kindly, but no. Thomas already tried that one with me and I turned him down. The rifle I have is more than adequate for my uses and I don't think having more than one rifle would be necessary. Trust me; I can hit what I'm aiming at with that one. Longest shot so far was just at five hundred fifty yards on a coyote in the daytime and one at two hundred and fifty at night. He made the mistake of trying to get into the coops and ran away after I got one of his buddies," said the Minister.

"You made a two hundred yard shot on a dog sized animal after dark?" said George, not believing the story.

"It was a full moon and the Army didn't teach me just to shoot in the daytime. The scope on the rifle is exceptional and I almost wish I had something similar during Vietnam. Of course, now I look back and the thought of taking someone's life is appalling. But that's in the past and the Lord forgave me," said the Minister. "Coyotes are a different matter entirely and I don't think God worries that much about me shooting them, especially if one of his children would go hungry otherwise."

"I might have to come out here and camp out one night just to see you do that," said George, still a little distrustful of the story much like a "I caught a fish this big" type of story. They made their way back to the small house and found Amy happily chatting away with Heather and Darren. She looked better and had a shine on her face they hadn't seen before. She asked if she

would be able to move to the Ranch.

“Well, next Thursday, we are going to have a meeting and you get voted in for a probationary period. After thirty days, you get voted in as a full time member,” said George.

“I didn’t know how it worked. I’m staying with the Minister until next Thursday?” she asked.

“If he doesn’t mind,” said George.

“Of course not, she is excellent company and a good cook as well. Sorry to say, but I’m a pretty lousy cook and she wasn’t too happy with the first few meals I served up here. She threw me out of the kitchen and took on the cooking duties herself,” said the Minister.

“It’s not that bad, sir. I just felt if I was staying here I needed to make my own contribution,” said Amy with a smile.

“No, young lady, you don’t need to lie to cover up for my lack of cooking skills. You won’t hurt my feelings,” said the Minister, laughing at himself.

“Well, a little spice here and there wouldn’t hurt,” she said with a laugh of her own.

“Amy, let’s take a walk and talk privately for a few minutes,” said George.

“Yes, Mister Taylor,” she said as she picked up the holster with her pistol and slid it into the belt at her waist. She also clipped on a two magazine pouch onto the opposite side before joining George on the porch. Before they left, George asked Heather and Darren to bring in the additional food they had brought to “pay” for the continued lodging of Amy.

They took relatively the same path towards the woods George had taken before and once they were out of earshot of the house, George started talking. “Amy, I wanted to talk to you privately about the situation at the Ranch and ask you a few questions. Are you up for it?”

“Sure, what kind of questions though?” she asked.

“Nothing too personal, I promise. Just some questions I’m sure will be asked when you come up for the meeting next week. I mean, we know the basics about who you are and where you came from, but nothing except that. First question, provided we accept you in, what can you contribute to our community?” asked George.

“Well, I was one semester from finishing my Master’s Degree in Technology, focusing on alternative powers, including solar, wind and hydroelectric. I already had job offers from several locations in research and development including Arizona State working on the teaching staff there as soon as I finished my Master’s. So, I have a wealth of knowledge in the application of solar power, which I saw you all rely heavily on. Other than that, my father and mother were preppers from way back to the time I was a child so I learned about preparations a long time ago and had it beaten into my head from an early age.”

"I was a tomboy growing up, so I learned to hunt, shoot and survive almost before I learned how to ride a bike. Dad and Mom taught me most of everything I needed to know to survive from an early age. I have good fieldcraft and shooting skills and a lot of the typical things those in preparedness seem to seek. Basic knowledge of building, carpentry, leatherworking, preserving animal hides, hunting, fishing, trapping, living off the land, farming, working repairs on engines, welding, metalworking, electronics and electrical repair, preserving foods, you name it, I've either done it or studied it. For my sixteenth birthday, my present was a two week excursion into the wilderness in Alaska where Dad and I had to live off the land. Just me and him for two weeks, hunting, fishing and trapping, basically we had to survive with what we had on our backs practically. I learned a lot from that trip and have continued preparedness ever since."

"Since then, I've done several survival courses, Caribbean, mountain, woodland, urban and desert as well as plenty of shooting type courses. Tactical rifle, pistol and shotgun as well as some IDPA, IPSC and some three gun matches. I was scheduled for a jungle survival course in Thailand next summer, but I guess it might take a while to fulfill that trip. My boyfriends used to think I was a complete nut job when I told them my idea of a relaxing weekend was to go out in the woods with a daypack and not the usual assortment of comfortable camping gear. I think I was the only person on the campus of Arizona State University that had a month's supply of canned and long storage food in her dorm room and a Bug Out Bag with enough supplies to get to Colorado Springs on my own," she said with a laugh.

"I honestly don't know what your group needs or wants for help, but I can say I wouldn't be a bad addition if I can toot my own horn. I can teach martial arts, which I took from the time I was six until the Fall. I have a mix of quite a few self defense styles and could teach your folks on the Ranch along with Kristy. I can help maintain and repair the electrical systems there and possibly improve them if they needed to be. I'm kind of a general handywoman and have a way of figuring out how to fix things when they are broken. From looking at your pond and dam, I even think I could come up with a hydroelectric generator given the proper materials."

"I can also help teach shooting. I figure your group already had that skill down, but another perspective can't hurt. Plus, if you get new members, I can help teach them shooting and hunting. I'm fairly intelligent if may I say so and can readily adapt to pretty much anything. I'm a quick learner and like learning new things. What else do you want to know?" she asked.

"Tell me more about your survival training. When we found you, you seemed to have a pretty decent pack put together. Was that something you learned from your parents?" asked George.

"More or less. Like I said, from the time I knew what was going on in the world, my father taught me about survival. I always thought it was the way people were until I got older. Lucky enough for me, the school I went to it was pretty conservative so a lot of the other kid's parents hunted and owned weapons. By the time I got into high school, it pretty much took with me. My brother was four years older and the three of us used to camp and live off the land. Sometimes it was a game with us. Dad would have a friend take us out on a Friday with just our BOBs and drop us off in a location we didn't know. We would have the weekend to find our way back home living out of what we had in our packs. Sometimes we could use a GPS, sometimes we

had to use a map and compass. Once we could only navigate using the stars and reference points during the daytime, no maps, no GPS, just dead reckoning."

"Dad was always crazy about us having an area to get to in case of an emergency. From when I can remember, I always had a BOB packed. Of course, at that young of an age, I never knew it was a BOB, but I always had a pack I needed to be able to grab within two minutes. Since we planned on leaving after the Fall, Mom had all of our packs stashed nearby off the property. We all had weapons buried since right after the firearms confiscations. They searched our house and went away without finding anything since Dad had some pretty nifty spots he hid our weapons in. Anyway, to answer your question, yes, I learned survival from them along with several of Dad's friends. I learned what was useful in the pack and what could be left at home over time. I learned tricks in the field and learned how to live off what I had and not rely on anyone else to help. Mom went along with the preparedness idea too since she saw what happened during natural disasters and the like. The whole family was involved, even my brother. My little sister was just getting into it when the Fall happened," she answered.

"Your parents, do you mind telling me about them?" asked George.

"They were good parents, enforcing discipline from an early age. I mean, not in a bad way, but made sure I was raised right and had good morals. I got my behind spanked when I did something wrong and learned right from wrong at an early age. My father worked for Lockheed Martin and was one of the directors there, working with Space Command on a lot on satellite stuff. Mom worked as the Assistant Director of Personnel for the Broadmoor Hotel for a couple of years before the Fall but had worked there since the time I was a little girl," answered Amy.

"Okay, what do you expect if you join the Ranch and our group?" asked George.

Amy was confused at the question. "I don't understand, what do you mean what do I expect?"

"I mean, what do you expect to do when you move there?" asked George.

"I don't know, work in the areas I'm told to and incorporate myself into the community? I'm not sure what answer you are looking for or even asking. I guess I make myself at home and help out where help is needed, make improvements and survive along with everyone else," she said.

"Is there anything you couldn't perform? Either mentally or physically?" asked George.

"None that I can think of off the top of my head. I love a good challenge and would probably kill myself trying before admitting I couldn't do something," she answered.

"Is there any other place we could take you in case it doesn't work out for you?" asked George.

"No place I know of since my immediate family is gone. My grandparents are in Seattle, or were the last time we heard from them. Other than that, most of my family was in Seattle or Tacoma, so I don't really expect to ever hear from them again. If it doesn't work out at your ranch, I guess you can take me back to where my family's cabin was and I can live there," she answered.

“Anything else to add?” asked George.

“No, but I do have some questions for you” she answered.

“Go for it,” he said.

“Tell me about the Ranch, your community, the security and the life there. What can I expect? How are decisions made? How secure are you? What can I expect if I move there?” she asked.

“I can tell you we are very secure. Everyone knows about security and how to properly defend themselves. Everyone learns from the same playbook in tactics and we are open to new ideas. We have good defensive arrangements, which I won’t really go into and you won’t really learn about until you become a full member. No offense, but we don’t know you well enough to fully discuss our security arrangements.”

“Big decisions are made by group vote in most cases with the majority ruling. Smaller decisions are made by the community leader which is rotated every two weeks with everyone over the age of eighteen getting their turn. Not everyone likes the decisions that are made, but everyone seems to accept the arrangement. We have weekly meetings where issues are discussed except for emergencies where the community leader calls for them.”

“Everyone pitches in and helps out where needed in all areas, security, farming, manual labor, and construction; whatever task is assigned by the community leader. Personal property is your own property until you decide to give it to the community. The only community items are those which the community either gathered as a whole or those designated by the community leader. Personal property cannot be designated as community property under any circumstances without the approval of the owner. Likewise, community property cannot be claimed as personal without the consent of either the group or the community leader. Take the government vehicles for one, those are community property. Our personal vehicles are still owned by us and cannot be used for community purposes except when volunteered. Food raised by the individual families is kept by them, but the larger farm is community property. Personal firearms are your own unless you designate them to the community. Former military firearms are community property until an individual needs them, except for the machine guns and the grenade launchers.”

“A typical day up there is spent doing whatever details are needed doing. Like right now, several members are clearing out some of the undergrowth in the woods near the Ranch in order to keep the fire danger down. Others are helping out with supply and others are getting the Ranch ready for winter. What details we perform just depends on the day,” concluded George.

“Are you the leader now or who is the official head of the community?” asked Amy.

“Like I said, we rotate the business. I’m the oldest member of the Ranch so I get the pleasure of interviewing some of the potential members before the group passes final judgment. I guess they see me as old and wise and can figure out the prospective members. Our current leader is Heather and will be replaced next Sunday,” he answered.

"What about the Dayfield guy? Thomas? Where does he fit into this?" asked Amy, wondering since the first night they had met.

"If we were to ever have a permanent leader, Thomas Dayfield would be it. However, he shuns the responsibility and goes with the rotating leader idea. And to answer how he fits into everything, Tom Dayfield spent quite a bit of money getting everything going up there along with myself and several other families helping out along the way. He donated quite a bit of his personal property including the land, cabins and firearms to the community and has not asked for anything in return. It was him that had the idea for a retreat in the first place, but he has never gone out of his way to be the overall leader. He is a good man and we all are grateful he was there for us in time of need," answered George.

"Where would I live?" asked Amy.

"Well, we have that final room at the Conference Center unless someone agrees to take you in. I mean, you will be sharing a bathroom, kitchen and a shower with three other people, plus we use it for the weekly meetings and as a classroom. It's not very private, but it's a roof over your head," answered George.

"Anything else I should know about the place?" asked Amy.

"Nothing I can think of off the top of my head. I suppose we will assign you a sponsor to help out with your transition, probably Kristy unless you prefer someone else," answered George.

"I would like that just in case I end up having questions about what is going on. Now with this whole voting thing. How does that work?" she asked.

George went through the process of how one was voted in and accepted into the community and about how she would be given the chance to talk to the group as a whole prior to the vote. They would be back on Wednesday to pick her up so it would give her a couple of days to see what all went on at the Ranch. She agreed to all the terms and the two went back to the Minister's house. Everyone said their goodbyes and George, Heather and Darren left to find the truck west of the Ranch the attacker stated had been there. After several hours of searching, they didn't find any vehicle matching the description and went on their way back home, arriving at the Ranch well into the afternoon.

The next week, Amy came back to the Ranch and saw what all went on. She was put on one of the work details and immediately set to work helping saw and split the hard wood Cynthia had ordered after the attacks. They had received four truckloads of the wood and it was taking a while to get everything sawed and split. Four members were working with chainsaws getting the logs cut while another six were swinging away with axes and splitters cutting it to length. Another truck was making runs to the barn to take some of the older wood to the various homes and cabins to store for the coming winter, some outside and some in the basement. Another party was out gathering some of the less efficient soft woods from the surrounding property to be used in the daytime as well as marking trees to be cut that were dead or dying.

By the end of the day, Amy was totally exhausted and worked to the bone. She was invited to dinner by the Lawsons, who had yet to meet her for any length of time. She attempted to be as pleasant as she could be, but excused herself early and went to the Conference Center to the room they had prepared for her. The Lawsons understood why she was so tired since she had outworked almost everyone that day during the detail. Her head hit the pillow and she was asleep within seconds.

The next morning, Amy was woken up by Heather pulling down the blanket. "Hey girl, you going to join the land of the living anytime today?"

Amy groaned under the covers and pulled them over her head. "I hurt from the hair down."

"Come on, get that blood pumping. You get an easy detail today and breakfast is almost done," said Heather.

"What am I doing today?" asked Amy with another groan as she pulled the covers back.

"Nothing major, weapons firing with Thomas, Rick and Darren this morning and making plans to return to your cabin to get the rest of your stuff. We also need your sizes for more clothing and shoes since we are making a return trip to the warehouse. This afternoon your tactical skills get evaluated. Come on, let's go," said Heather as she pulled the blankets off the bed.

Amy let out a low groan and swung out of the bed. She glared at the happy face of Heather and looked around for some sweatpants she had been loaned to put on. "You know, the nice thing about being on my own was that I was able to sleep in whenever I wanted. Plus, I'm still not totally into a day-night schedule. This getting up at the crack of dawn thing sucks."

"Well, we all took some time to get used to it. But the earlier you get up today, the easier it will be tomorrow. It sucks, I know it, but it's just the way it is. Be glad it's not summertime, else we would be getting up prior to dawn," said Heather as she put a cup of coffee on the nightstand.

She took a sip of the strong brew and made a face. "That's one way to get me started in the morning. What is this motor oil?"

"We accidentally let Stu make the coffee this morning. He isn't happy unless you can stand a spoon up in it. We've got some cream and sugar downstairs," said Heather.

Amy continued to move slowly, groaning at the soreness in her joints. "And I thought I was in shape. So I finally get to meet the elusive Thomas Dayfield for a longer time than the time we did dinner. What can I expect?"

"He's a really great guy and pretty smart. He kind of adopted me, well, I should say I adopted him when I came in the Air Force and made him my mentor. He kept me out of trouble for the most part except by my own mistakes. If I had listened to him more, I might have stayed out of more trouble. But anyway, I thought you met him when you got here?" asked Heather.

"I did, more or less, but he was catching up with Greg. I don't blame him for being impolite; I wasn't planning to stay then. Anything else I should know?" asked Amy.

"Nothing I can think of; just be honest. He has an uncanny ability to tell when someone is lying. Speaking of which, what are you planning to be armed with? I know your firearms are being stored at the Trading Post and have been inspected by Rick and Thomas," asked Heather.

"I don't know yet. I've fired the majority of them since Daddy wanted to make sure I could fire anything I picked up. Personal preference then?" asked Amy.

"Yes, for the most part. I mean, we have enough ammo here for anyone to carry what they want within reason. Just whatever you are comfortable with," said Heather.

The two went downstairs and found Greg and Stu putting the finishing touches on breakfast. Amy thanked them for the cup of coffee before adding some hot water to dilute the strong brew. "Do you know how long it's been since I had a cup of coffee?"

"We have quite a bit in storage and Frank also grows his own beans. We have a never ending supply of coffee around here," said Stu.

"You folks seriously are set up for everything around here. I wish my parents could have met you all before the Fall," said Amy, her voice trailing off thinking of her dead family.

The foursome was silent at the comments and thought it best not to say anything at the moment. Eventually the talk turned back to the Ranch and the members, with Amy trying to get to know everyone a little better. She was surprised that she would be accepted into their arms as easy as she had been. The talk continued until an issue came up from Stu. "Okay, since we not have four people in the house, we seriously have to talk about shower use and time. Who goes when and for how long we get it for. I was thinking a half an hour in the morning or the evening."

"Come on Stu, you know we get it for at least six hours, three hours apiece. We're girls and have to take our time," said Heather with a smile.

"Okay, that's a bit of a stretch. How about thirty-five minutes?" said Greg with a laugh.

The foursome continued their discussion until they were done with breakfast and Rick, Thomas and Darren showed up. Amy excused herself to go and take a quick shower and put on some clothes loaned to her by the Ranch residents. She was done in a little over twenty minutes and came back to find the three men talking with the other residents. They walked the short distance over to the Trading Post where her weapons had been stored off to the side so they wouldn't be claimed by the other residents. Amy started looking through the neatly stored weapons and pulled the original rifle, the Sniper Central Rifleworks SER, from the blanket that had been put down to protect both the weapons and the wood floor. She put it off to the side and Rick asked to look at it. She consented and went back to perusing the various other weapons on the floor.

“That’s a pretty nice rifle, where did you get it?” asked Rick, examining the rifle.

“It was a gift from my father when I turned eighteen. I had been after him for a while to get me a nice marksman rifle that could double as a hunting rifle. We made a trip up to Montana to see Mel, the owner of the shop, and see what he could do for me. He sized me up for the stock and everything and built what we asked for,” she replied, grabbing AR carbine and an AK-74.

“Your Dad had this custom built for you?” asked Rick, throwing the rifle up to his shoulder. Even though it was sized for her smaller frame, it still fit fairly well in his shoulder and naturally pointed when he opened his eyes.

“Yeah, Dad checked around at several places, but this guy was the best of the lot. This guy Mel runs a smaller outfit that doesn’t do a whole lot of custom builds, but Daddy convinced him to do a special one for his little girl. Their rifles aren’t well known, but he enjoys building them and keeps the cost well below what most would charge for something as accurate,” she said while gathering some magazines.

“Pretty accurate?” asked Rick.

“I can take game out to five hundred yards with it easy, varmint as well. With a slick moly round, it’s sub-MOA out to five hundred. Three years ago I took a whitetail at four hundred sixty yards in North Carolina, verified one round stop. It’ll take your head off at three hundred, probably out to five hundred no problem,” she said, while continuing to look at the other rifles on the floor.

“Isn’t it kind of heavy to be lugging around in the woods hunting?” asked Darren.

“Only for the first fifteen miles, then you get used to the weight. When it comes down to it, I wanted something I could shoot accurately out to five hundred yards that would hit the target every time. This rifle can do that. If it is heavy, so what? That just means I spent another twenty minutes in the gym everyday working my upper body,” she said. “I’m not your typical girly-girl worrying about her nails. I did hump a full pack and that rifle all the way in from Colorado Springs, you know.”

Darren, Rick and Thomas all shared a look about the woman leaned over gathering her firearms. She had finally picked out the weapons she wanted to use, the AK, AR and her SER. She also grabbed her Glock and Seecamp pistols. Ammunition and spare magazines were placed into the vehicle for her and the other three decided to get a little pro fire as well. Tracy had heard the three were going to the range and asked if she could come along as well. She had picked a rifle and an automatic pistol and had fired them initially on the group’s Sunday firing. However, she stated she still wasn’t entirely comfortable with the rifle and asked to come along to get more range time in. She also offered to return the other rifle and pistol to the group, but was told to keep them “just in case.” They told her to gather her things and meet them by the front door of her cabin when they drove by. Tracy ran off excited and gathered her various firearms, reminding the group what calibers she needed before leaving.

Before leaving, Darren took a last look at the various firearms lying on the floor of the Trading Post and asked Amy "This is a kind of eclectic collection of firearms don't you think?"

"Sort of, Dad used to buy firearms when they were on sale. Even though we were fairly well off money wise, he was still frugal with his money. He eventually did buy standard rifles in all the major calibers, you know, Rock Rivers for the ARs, Kimber rifles in the short action hunting rifles, Glocks for the pistols, so on and so forth, but the extras he sent up there to be buried. He would sell the old ones to help pay for the new ones. Eventually, he wanted to replace everything and sell off all the old ones, but it just never happened," she said.

The three understood and helped load up the various rounds they were planning to use that morning. When they finished, everyone loaded up into the truck and left out, picking up Tracy along the way. When they arrived at the range, they divided up the tasks. Rick would concentrate on rifle shooting while Thomas would work on pistol shooting. Darren would follow them up with a quick course on tactics and to determine Amy's level of proficiency. He would also work with Tracy, but independently.

Amy started out with the firearm most familiar to her, the SER. She checked the zero against a two hundred yard known distance and then gradually worked her way out to the five hundred yard point. She wasn't telling tall tales as she consistently hit targets out to that point, scoring first round hits with every round. Rick was sufficiently impressed that he didn't need to offer any advice to the Amy. He continued to observe and only made slight corrections to her shooting by calling out windage. Eventually, she had put out forty rounds and took a break to load up the magazines for her other two rifles. Rick, being the eternal gun nut, requested and was given permission to fire five rounds through the precision rig. He came back with the same silly grin he always did after firing a new weapon, even though the stock was a tad too small for him. He also made five hits on five targets, but only out to the three hundred yard point since he was unsure of the ballistics of the rifle past that point. However, Amy did, and took full advantage of that knowledge to consistently hit targets.

Amy found that Thomas and Darren had already taken the liberty of loading the magazines for her other two rifles and were busy advising Tracy on her shooting style. Amy took down the AR carbine and fired several magazines before moving on to the AK-74. After firing several more magazines, she decided she liked the AK better and would choose that as her primary carry weapon. They moved on to the pistol range where Thomas found Tracy was a pretty good shot with her 1911 model. She was starting to get into double taps and her accuracy was improving. Her first rounds almost always hit in the center of the rings on the targets and if she could hit a vital area with one shot of .45 ACP ammo, the second shot wouldn't be as critical. However, the entire group trained for the double and triple taps since ammo was cheap and life was not. Either way, Tracy was quickly learning on the large caliber pistol despite her small stature.

Amy, on the other hand, wasn't as good with the large Glock. She had problems bringing the pistol out of recoil for a second shot and found she was anticipating the sharp recoil too much and was starting to "nose dive" the muzzle towards the ground. Thomas worked with her to place single shots on target and to slow her rate of fire. She listened carefully and slowed her rate of fire to a level where her second round would impact near the first. It took sometimes up

to two seconds for her to fire the second shot, but her accuracy was improving. Even thought she had been through several pistol type classes, she still was out of practice and the Glock was a new system for her. While she fired, Rick and Darren continued to load magazines for her until she was completely satisfied at the targets. The Seecamp pistol was another story entirely. She loaded and fired at targets ranging from the three meter line out to the ten meter line, making first round hits in the head. She told them group her father had taught her to always place the smaller rounds in the head if possible since the .32 ACP wasn't as good at penetrating as the larger rounds would be. With the smaller rounds, even if they didn't penetrate, they would still knock someone silly and put them out of the fight momentarily. Her precise aimed single shots went into the head area every time.

Tracy had also brought along the Ruger revolver and had fired several cylinders into the targets. She found the revolver with the three inch barrel was a convenient piece to hide on her smaller frame, especially in an inside the waistband holster. Most of the Ranch residents had taken to carrying a secondary concealed handgun when out and about instead of their typical main sidearms. While they still carried a rifle, it was far easier to carry the lighter pistols while working than a full sized model. The stock of the smaller handguns in the Trading post was all but diminished now, but several smaller revolvers still remained.

The other three took some time to send some lead downrange from the various firearms they had brought along. Rick, Darren and Thomas practiced a little with both their concealed pieces as well as their full sized sidearms. When they were finished, they policed up the brass on the line and put it in a five gallon bucket to take back for sorting and later reloading.

Darren worked with both Amy and Tracy on their individual tactics. A small course had been set up for individual tactics and he had Thomas and Rick demonstrate the various tactics each needed to perform. It was slow at first, as Darren used a crawl-walk-run approach to the training. By the time they reached the walking phase, they broke for lunch and ate the sandwiches provided by Rick. During lunch the three trainers discussed the various other tactics the two would need to learn before moving on to an actual fire team. They also discussed the roles and responsibilities of the two in providing protection for their families.

After lunch, Amy and Tracy again worked the course. Amy found her soreness was entirely justified and was beginning to come back full force. Tracy kept at it, gaining speed and proficiency after each run through of the course. When it came time for the run stage, Amy found she couldn't keep up with Tracy and it showed in her performance. However, she didn't say anything since she was determined to complete whatever training they had in store for her. But Darren noticed the diminished performance and called it a day. Tracy wanted to continue, but also noticed Amy was falling behind when she shouldn't have been. She was starting to get pretty tired as well and figured it was best to quit while she was ahead.

CHAPTER 25 – NEW THREATS

Time since attacks: 5 Months
Date/Time: 20 September/1048 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, the LP/OP called in a sighting. "One vehicle, looks to be four occupants, red Subaru type wagon, sitting at the end of the driveway…standby…all four getting out, all armed, I say again, all armed but no hostile intent at this time, all four have rifles," said Janie, excitedly.

The response team was sent on the way up along with a second team for support. One team had been training and the other on standby. Thomas and his team had been training on patrol tactics against the one call response team of Michael. Both ran the short distance to the Taylor's house and set up in the tree line overlooking the unexpected visitors. They had passed Cynthia and Misty carrying their BOBs and rifles heading towards the Conference Center to meet with the rest of the group.

George came out of his house carrying his M1A at the low ready. He shouted at the visitors. "Drop your rifles on the ground!"

The visitor yelled back as they were walking slowly up the driveway. "We come in peace."

"Drop your rifles on the ground!" George repeated.

"My friend, we come in peace; we have no intention of harming you," said the man.

"You are on my property where I don't allow strangers to carry guns. Drop them now!" replied George, moving the rifle up to his shoulder and aiming over the scope. The reaction team pulled their rifles and single light machine gun into their shoulders tighter since the group was not adhering to the instructions.

The leader of the group stopped as he saw the threat from George. He laid his rifle on the ground and told the other three to comply. "My friend, we come in peace with a message. We will comply with your demands."

The other three set their weapons down on the roadway, approximately one hundred yards away from the house. Janie had now shifted her focus back to the horizon since this could be a ruse to get the residents attention away from a main attack. When the visitors had dropped their rifles and web gear, the spokesman came forward with his palms out. "We have no intentions of hurting anyone, brother. We come with a glorious message for you and your family."

"You are safe here without your weapons, we are peaceful also," said George.

"We have your word, swearing it upon God?" asked the man.

"You have my word. Let's go near the house in the shade," he said to the group of four. In bringing them closer to the house, he brought them further away from their weapons and closer to the two teams that were silently overwatching the visitors. With eight watching the four, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel if it came to that. When George finally sat down, they were within seventy-five meters of the two teams. With the wind in their face, they could hear the conversation clearly. They were talking about the weather and idle chitchat that normally preceded business. When the conversation finally moved on to business, it sent a cold chill down everyone's spines.

"My friend, we have come on a great journey to spread the word of Allah and Mohammed his prophet. We bring his word to you in great hopes that you will heed them and join the great crusade against the unbeliever," the leader said. He was cut short by George.

"If you don't mind, I would like to have my friends join us. Is that okay?" asked George.

"By all means, the words of Allah are for everyone and not just the select few," said the man.

George pulled out his radio and called for Thomas and Michael to join him. They were puzzled by his request, but figured George had a good reason for it. Instead of giving away their teams positions, they silently crept back and exited the woods down the road, but still in sight of the visitors. They were genuinely surprised since they had not detected the men in the trees nor had heard them moving around when they exited. Thomas and Michael joined the small group on the ground, ensuring they were out of the line of fire of the other six waiting in the woods.

"My friends, I have come to spread the words of Islam as it is time for it to flourish in America. Our religion had been persecuted for far too long in this country and it is time for the faithful to rise. America had hated the words of Allah and Mohammed his prophet for a long time and oppressed the faithful almost since their beginning. They have even murdered the faithful in the with nuclear fires of hatred."

Michael was about to interrupt, but was stopped by George holding up his hand. He motioned for the visitor to continue. The visitor nodded his head and continued to talk.

"As I was saying, it is time for Americans to embrace Islam as the one true religion of the world. The faithful around the world are awakening and beginning to realize the petty differences of the past no longer apply. They have set aside their differences and joined in union, creating a new Islamic Nation that will spread the word of Allah and Mohammed his prophet. We will no longer be persecuted by the unbelievers and will keep our religion safe from all unbelievers. We are on the path to help Americans realize the benefits of Islam and join our union. I only ask you listen to what I have to say friends, as I will show you the true pathway to paradise." He continued for several minutes speaking of the attributes of Islam, condemning unbelievers and warning that the faithful were prepared to rise up against those that persecuted them.

Michael had finally had enough and interrupted. "So if I am a Christian and believe Jesus to be the Son of God, I'm an unbeliever and I'm going to hell?"

"We also believe in Jesus as he was a prophet for Allah, but not his son. He was a messenger, much like Mohammed, spreading the words of God to be heard by all," said the man.

"But you didn't answer my question, if I choose to continue to believe Christ was the Son of God, I cannot follow true Islam?" asked Michael.

"Anyone who denies the words of the Prophet are non-believers and will be burned in the eternal fires of hell," said the man, evasively.

"So, if I choose that path, I'm an unbeliever?" asked Michael.

The man dodged the answer again. "Will you choose to accept the words of Allah and Mohammed his prophet as the one true word of God?"

"Answer my question first. If I am a Christian, you think I am an unbeliever, an infidel, correct?" asked Michael.

"If you are an unbeliever, you are an enemy of the faith and the faithful," said the man.

"So, right now, we, being Christians, are enemies of the faith?" asked Michael.

"If you continue to ignore the words of Allah and Mohammed his prophet, you are an unbeliever," said the man, still dodging the question.

"And unbelievers are enemies of the faith?" asked Michael.

"My brother, you are trying to bait me. I do not like that," said the man.

"Nor do I like someone coming onto my property telling me what I have to believe. I am tolerant of people's religions, as long as they are not forced on me," said Michael.

"I have not said that. I will not force the true words of God on anyone," said the man.

"I beg to differ," started Michael, the words he normally used to go on a rant about a certain topic or opinion. "You said unbelievers, or let's call them infidels, are not willing to accept the words of God as spoken by Mohammed his prophet and will go to hell. You also said the Moslem people will rise up against the infidels and keep their religion safe. So, basically what you are saying is if I keep to my Christian faith, I'm an infidel and the Moslem people will rise against me, even if I do not pose a threat to them. You are coercing me to accept Islam as my religion or pay the price? Is that what you are saying?"

"You will only be persecuted if you choose not to accept the words of Allah," said the man.

"But I already accept the words of God into my heart. I believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God. I am a Christian. His words are in my heart. Am I still an infidel? Does the Islamic faith

not speak of Jews and Gentiles as the 'people of the book' accepting them as believing in the same God?" asked Michael.

"If you do not accept the words of Mohammed as true, you are an unbeliever," said the man.

"Do Mohammed's words not include Christians as being of the same God?" asked Michael.

"Mohammed mentions Christians as being of the same God, but they should also take his message from Allah into their hearts and be saved," said the man.

"So what you are saying, if I choose to remain a Christian and refuse the words of Mohammed as being true, I will be persecuted and killed? One of my Constitutional Rights is freedom of religion, freedom to choose what I want to believe. Are you saying I need to convert to a religion I do not want to in order to avoid being killed?" asked Michael.

Again, the man avoided the issue. "The Constitution and the United States no longer exists, so the old rules no longer apply. We are looking to create a strong Islamic presence in the former United States in order to help influence the start of a pro-Islamic nation here in North America."

Michael became calm in his answer. "So 'join us or die?' You force your faith on those that do not wish to become Moslems and create a nation which does not separate church and state?"

Again, the man never lost his temper and did not answer the question. "My friends, you have heard my message. Islam is the religion of the future and the only religion acceptable to Allah. Please consider this before making any hasty decisions or condemnations."

"So, if I choose to make a hasty decision to convert to Islam that makes it better? You are forcing your faith on us to convert here and now and that's not a hasty decision? If we do not follow the pathway of Islam we will become targets? That is what you are saying? I believe you are telling me if I do not choose Islam I will die. You haven't come out and said it, but if we reject your offer, you will attack us and we will not live. I can pretty much guarantee I speak for everyone here when I say bring it on! I have my faith and will continue to be a Christian. I'm content in my choice and don't see the need to convert to Islam."

"If you decide to attack me, I will defend myself and my beliefs. You may end up killing me, but not before I send plenty of you to your so called paradise. You believe me killing you makes you a martyr. You force your religion on me and I defend my beliefs, dying for the cause of Christ. I reject your religion on the basis that it clashes with my beliefs as a Christian. I think our conversation is over," concluded Michael as he rose, followed by Thomas and George.

George thanked the group for their offer but told them they were not interested and it was time for them to leave. He was polite, but his voice carried the steel of his resolve. The leader chose not to argue and prepared to leave. Two of their group did not look very happy with the decision and were whispering an argument with the leader. He finally snapped an order in a hushed tone which quieted the two.

Before leaving, he gave a final message and warning. "You do not realize the magnitude of the mistake you have made here today. The faithful numbers are growing every day and we will soon strike at the Zionists and Crusaders which have kept us under their boot heel for the last thousand years. The infidels will perish in the flames as prophesized by Mohammed his prophet. This is the only time we will offer to guide you through the conversion process. If you see us again, it will be too late."

"If we see you again, we will know you are not here to talk and will strike first. Now go, you came in peace; we will let you leave in peace," said George.

The group walked slowly towards where their weapons were at in the road. One of the younger members appeared to be arguing with the leader again. Through the meeting, he had given George, Michael and Thomas hard looks with eyes filled with hatred. When they reached their weapons and picked them up, the young man suddenly swiveled and pointed his SKS at the group still standing under the tree. He only got as far as swinging the muzzle over before six rifles fired and connected with his body. He dropped immediately to the ground, clutching his chest where the shots had connected. Only one member of his group attempted to avenge him. The second man turned and pointed his rifle at the tree line and was rewarded with six more shots connecting on vital areas of his body. He too, dropped his rifle and fell to the ground as death was instantaneous from a head shot.

The remaining two members immediately dropped their rifles and raised their hands over their heads. George, Thomas and Michael slowly walked down to them as they dropped to their knees with their hands over their heads. They stopped fifteen yards in front of the two.

"Not a smart move. We offered you a chance to go in peace and you rejected it," said George.

"My younger friend's actions were a bit thoughtless and hasty. It was not the time for such actions, but his loss will be mourned. What will you do with us now?" asked the leader.

"We will disarm you and send you on your way. You can bury your friends here or take them with you," said George.

"We will take them and give them a proper burial," said the leader, hatred glowing in his eyes.

"Then go as soon as we check your vehicle for more weapons," said George as he sent Thomas and Michael to check the vehicle. They found another rifle in the station wagon, a hunting rifle and removed it before declaring the vehicle cleared. They rejoined George carrying the rifle and told the two living members of the group to depart.

After they walked away, George got on his radio and ordered two members to bring a vehicle up to follow the two. Frank and Darren were already waiting with a truck that would follow the station wagon to wherever it went, although not too closely or obviously.

"I wondered why you got Michael to come up with me, now I know," said Thomas.

“He’s the best debater I’ve seen in some time and I heard him rant on about militant Islam one time. I couldn’t resist,” said George with a smile.

The two visitors returned with their vehicle and placed the dead bodies in the rear cargo area before getting back in without another word. As they left the Ranch, Darren and Frank followed them in a Ford Ranger at a discrete distance. They eventually disappeared from sight and the reaction forces stood down. The reaction force gathered around the trio and asked what had happened as they only caught part of the conversation. Many questions were asked, but not a lot of answers could be given. The most often asked question was “where did they come” from followed immediately by “are there more of them?” Everyone seemed a bit worried about the threat the visitors posed, but would remain calm until more information could be obtained. It was evening when Darren and Frank returned. Between the two, they told the gathered group what had happened.

“We were going down the road following them and they made three stops along the way. More houses they visited ‘spreading the word’ I guess. They finally pulled back out onto Highway 50 and we followed them as far as we could before we lost them in a curve which had two roads leaving away from it. We didn’t know which way to turn or if they were ‘home’ or not, but we have a general area where they were,” said Darren.

The group discussed the potential threat the men posed and quickly decided to make it a priority to find out where they were, how many of them there were and foremost, what intentions they had. A small debate started on what actions to take if they found out where they were coming from. Tracy Daniels offered the best insight.

“Look, these are the same kinds of people that destroyed twelve cities around the world and gassed another dozen. Just imagine for a second that these were the same people who were trained by the Lion Claw teams that were in the United States. Their standing orders were to destroy anything non-Muslim and spread the religion of Islam by the sword. Why wouldn’t we consider them a threat and go after them? I mean, Michael told them off and they tried to kill him for it. I believe we should not only consider them a threat and prepare to meet any assault from them, but to actively go after them. Instead of waiting around for them to come to us, we take them fight to them!”

A chorus of agreements followed her declaration and George, the community leader, consented with the verbal vote. The residents would reach out into the community and attempt to find the location of the potentially hostile gang and deal with them before their power base got too large for them to deal with.

CHAPTER 26 – GOING THE DISTANCE

Time since attacks: 5 Months, 21 Days
Date/Time: 11 October/0757 Local
Location: The Ranch

After Greg had gotten settled in, he again made his request to go back to the location his vehicle had been abandoned. "Even if the vehicle is long gone, I still buried some important things nearby in case I was ever back that way," he stated to Shannon, the group leader. She considered the request for a few minutes before looking over the road atlas and in the location his vehicle was at. It would be a dangerous trip traveling that far and she told him he would need a volunteer to go with him, but only one. She gave her hesitant approval as long as he could get someone to go with him. And she would only allow one other person to go with him since the threat of the visitors still remained. If more than one person decided to volunteer, she would pick the most qualified to go with him. He agreed and set off to find someone to go with him.

His first stop was at the Dayfield's house. He knew it was a long shot to get Thomas to go with him, but he would at least try. He met Sharon at the door, and she told him Thomas was in the backyard splitting some firewood. He thanked her and went around the house to find Thomas swinging a splitter at a large piece of seasoned hickory. The wood obviously wasn't taking the hint as the tool went in an inch and stopped.

"Looks like you've almost bit off more than you can chew," said Greg by way of a greeting.

"Almost as stubborn as my wife, but I will break this one, unlike her," said Thomas with a smile as he set down the splitter and went to shake hands.

"Yeah and you won't hit her with an axe that's for sure," laughed Greg.

"Are you kidding? She would take it away from me and stick it where the sun doesn't shine. But I'm sure you didn't come over here to worry about my problems with an old piece of hickory. What's on your mind?" asked Thomas.

"Well, I came over to ask a favor. I've got a tentative approval from Shannon to go to my vehicle and collect my things I left behind. Even if the vehicle is gone or stripped, there are still some things nearby I buried that can be of use," said Greg.

"And you want me to come along?" asked Thomas.

"Well, you were the first to pop into my head. I figured I can't ask too many more favors of you since you have allowed me to live here. However, if you can't go, I'm sure you can think of someone here I might ask to go along," said Greg.

"I could ask Sharon, but she would skin me alive for even mentioning it. I've kind of gone out

of my way looking for trouble since we got here and she is none too happy about it. But, yes, I can help you find someone," said Thomas, taking a long drink of water.

They talked about the Ranch residents for a few minutes before deciding to ask Stuart. Greg seemed to like the suggestion since he was single as well and the two had become friends since he arrived. Thomas and Greg walked over to the Conference Center where Stuart was reloading some ammo under the guidance of Rick. Greg explained the situation and Stuart readily accepted. "When are we leaving?"

"We have to come up with a plan to go there and get back, plus with the gear I had, we need a truck or something. It's a pretty good round trip and fuel might be a concern. You want to sit down tonight and plan it out?" asked Greg.

"No better time like the present and I can reload and talk at the same time," said Stuart.

Rick and Thomas both agreed to help out and sat down at the table. Stu seemed to grasp the concept of reloading well enough to do so unsupervised for the moment. A map of Colorado was brought out and the three looked closely at the map. Greg knew the coordinates from the military Defense Advanced GPS Receiver, or DAGR, he had brought out with him. After an hour, they decided taking the back roads into the area would be best. Although gangs, farmers or ranchers might have blocked off the roads leading in, there were plenty of county roads and farm paths to get them where they were going. The trusty Ford 6-Pack would be taken along with enough fuel this time even taking major detours into account. Besides their personal weapons they would carry, Thomas parted with a precision rifle for Greg and Stu would retain the M-203 he had begun to think of as his. The normal explosives and additional ammunition were planned on as well as enough supplies for an extended trip. Greg visited Ryan and Tim for additional advice on what to take and what not to take since they had experience with the long journeys. Greg also informed Shannon of the additional body and told her they would brief her in full the next day and that they planned on leaving in two days. She agreed and suggested they take a long range radio in case they ran into trouble.

Two days later, Stuart and Greg pulled out of the Ranch and headed towards eastern Colorado along the back roads. They planned on an overnight trip, if not two nights, since it would take them at least five or six hours to reach their destination. They traveled along taking frequent looks over their shoulders and into the rear view mirrors to ensure they weren't being followed. Just past Colorado Springs, they found a roadblock and had to detour. They detected it far enough out to back up and go around. After finding a safe spot, they stopped and refilled the tanks on the vehicle and ate a bite for lunch. Even though the tanks weren't empty, they wanted them as topped of as possible along the way. They continued going down the road, talking and getting to know each other better. Near Aroya, they ran into another roadblock and were fired on at long range. They doubled back again on a farm road, attempting to go around. After another four miles, they found another roadblock and backed off once again to consult the map. Shots rang out as they turned around and headed out, but didn't hit the vehicle. "No other way around unless we want to add another sixty miles onto our trip," said Stu.

"We might have enough gas, but who knows what we will run into if we go further south. We

can go north, but that puts us closer to the Interstate and I don't know about the roads up there. It shows several possible routes, but they might be blocked as well," said Greg.

"Want to get rid of this one and continue here?" asked Stu.

"I don't know about attacking them. I mean they might be setting up a defense of the nearby town and be deputy sheriffs or something. We should take a look first," said Greg.

"Yeah, you're right. I would hate to waste the wrong sort of people," said Stu.

They pulled the truck off the road well away from the roadblock and walked in on foot, keeping the vehicle and the roadblock within sight. The crept up a hill and peered at the roadblock through the binoculars and the scope on the precision rifle.

The roadblock had at least a half dozen vehicles off the side of the road that had been chewed up by bullets as seen through the optics. Small mounds near the roadblock but off in the fields were the same size and shapes of hastily dug graves. Several more holes were visible, but were not filled. They continued to look and could not see any type of badges on the individuals. They also didn't appear to be the Law Enforcement types as their demeanor and attitude were cocky and their appearance scraggily. After fifteen minutes of observing, they crept away from the apex of the hill back to the vehicle.

"You see anything that might make these types militia or LE types?" asked Stu.

"Nothing that I can see. And I don't like the looks of those graves or those shot up vehicles. Most of the holes are in the doors and not from the front like you might expect," said Greg.

"So this is probably or actually hostile?" asked Stu, more for reassurance than anything.

"Yeah, I believe so. We might as well give Tom's rifle he loaned me a workout. You think you might be able to get close enough to engage with the 203?" asked Greg.

"Probably could, but you need to keep their heads down. You think you can keep them occupied enough until I get close enough?" asked Stu.

Greg paused to think. He had zeroed the rifle the previous day at the range, but only shot out to five hundred meters with it. He wasn't very good that far out, but could keep the individuals at the roadblock occupied enough for Stu to get close enough to engage with the M-203. "Sure, I might not be able to hit the doorknob at this distance, but I can hit the barn."

They took their weapons and packs and headed off into the gently rolling terrain towards the roadblock. They arrived at the small hill overlooking the roadblock about seven hundred yards away. A wet weather arroyo lead somewhat close to the roadblock and would provide Stu enough cover to reach the distances to effectively engage the roadblock and the individuals there. Stu would wait until Greg had the range down before heading off and spot his rounds until he found his mark. They found nine individuals at the roadblock, doing various things, some

napping or resting, some eating and others doing various chores. Three stalled cars and several wooden beams blocked the road and the shoulder, making passing an impossible task without having to slow down and getting shot at in the process. A light machine gun, which looked like an M-249, was perched over the hood of one of the cars. No other heavy weapons were seen, but the personnel manning the roadblock all seemed to have magazine fed rifles at their disposal.

Greg used his pack to steady the rifle and poked the muzzle through the long grass on the crest of the hill. Stu pulled out a set of binoculars and picked a target on the left of the roadblock, a man napping in a chair. It was a nice still target for Greg to hit and they guesstimated the range at a little over seven hundred yards. Greg applied what he thought as the proper amount of elevation to the rifle and gently pulled the trigger backwards. The trigger broke and sent the round downrange to the target.

"Way low, elevate for another fifty meters," said Stu as he watched the round throw up a spark on the asphalt from the roadway.

Greg cycled the bolt and prepared to fire again, adding elevation to the rifle. He got still and pulled the trigger again.

"About fifteen feet short, I saw the impact in the dust," said Stu.

By this time, the men at the roadblock were alerted and heading for cover. The target Greg had been shooting at had moved behind cover and was peeking from behind a car. Greg applied the elevation for another shot and shot the rifle a third time. He was rewarded with a hit to the right of the man as the round ricocheted off the hood of the car. "Right by three feet. One last time and you are good."

Greg peered through the scope looking for another target since the man had now disappeared from view. He found another target on the other side of the roadblock and got still as he steadied the rifle for another shot. He drew in a breath and let it out slowly as he picked the point of aim on the man's chest and let another shot fly. He was rewarded when Stu exclaimed "Hit!"

Greg looked back again at the location and saw the man was now lying next to the car he had been using. He reloaded the magazine with another four rounds and prepared to fire again. Stu decided to stick around and correct for another round of shots. Greg fired again, this time only needing two shots before making a hit. "You are good; I've got the range now. Head on down to the ditch and give 'em hell."

Stu crawled backwards back down the hill towards the arroyo and headed off. The roadblock was now firing back at the two hilltops within view of their location. They came close to Greg on one occasion, but were randomly firing rather than making set shots. Greg saw a man attempting to get behind the M-249 and made him the next target. He pulled the trigger again and was rewarded with a first round hit, although only wounding the man. He decided to move to the next target and checked on the progress of Stu. The arroyo wasn't that deep, but provided enough cover for him to move almost fully upright. Stu was half walking, half jogging since he knew it was only a matter of time before the men at the roadblock zeroed in on the location of

Greg and bracketed him with effective fire.

Greg marked another target when a shot came close to hitting him. He found the responsible person and fired a round in his direction. The shot didn't hit and he cycled the action again for another shot. This time, the man fired, hitting the top of his web gear on his left shoulder. Greg shook off the close encounter with death and steadied his aim once again. Both he and the man fired at the same time with Greg hitting the man in the head and the other shot hitting the pack just to the left of his rifle. Greg reached up and checked the area he had been hit in and found he had been nicked by the round when he saw blood on his hand. The wound wasn't bad, but enough to cause concern if it wasn't treated. He moved his shoulder in a circular motion and found he still had full motion. The M-249 sang its deadly song and the tracer fire reached out at the hilltop. The gunner kept the trigger pulled back and walked the tracers up and across the crest. Greg pulled back just in time to avoid being hit and decided to move his location. He grabbed his pack and headed for the side of the hill closest to the roadway to prepare to fire again. While behind cover, he quickly slapped a handkerchief onto his wound under the shirt, reloaded the rifle and prepared to move to the next position.

After two minutes of crawling into position, he saw the heads poking up at the roadblock and that Stu had almost reached them. He readied the rifle and picked another target. He was totally focused on the target and didn't notice Stu creeping out of the ditch towards the group. Greg fired another round at the roadblock and missed his intended target. The machine gun fired again, although not hitting near his firing position. Greg shifted his line of fire to the machine gun once again when he saw an explosion immediately behind the gun. He peered in the general direction of Stu and saw him reloading the M-203 and preparing to fire again.

Greg picked another target, one who was shifting his focus to Stu, and fired again. He was rewarded with another hit and Stu fired another grenade. The round hit a group of two people and the final member decided to bug out, helping a wounded comrade with him. Both the men were long gone into the bushes before Stu and Greg decided to make a move. Stu gave a hand and arm signal stating he would move up and check the roadblock if Greg would cover him.

He watched as Stu made the two hundred meter dash to the roadblock and cleared it out. Another shot rang out from the general direction the men had evaced into and Stu hit the ground. Greg shifted his focus, but could not determine where the shot came from. He looked back at Stu and saw him launch a grenade at a group of bushes. The grenade landed right in the middle and ripped out several of the bushes. The man was thrown out of the clump of the bushes to the right and landed beside them. Apparently, the grenade had hit right beside him, giving him the full brunt of the explosion and thrown him out of the bushes. Not wanting to waste another grenade, Stu crossed the area and cleared the remainder of the bushes. He suddenly shifted and fired three rounds at an unknown target. He made a motion to rally up at Greg and walked back towards the roadblock.

Greg stood up and gathered his pack while looking at a bullet hole. There was an entry, but no exit. Greg unzipped the main pouch and poked around for the round, but gave up after reaching the truck and decided to look later. He would also wait until he reached the roadblock to have his wound treated. He jumped into the driver's seat, his shoulder screaming at the sudden twist.

He drove the short distance one handed to find Stu gathering the weapons from the roadblock.

“You’re hit!” exclaimed Stu as Greg hopped out of the truck.

“Nothing much, just a scratch,” replied Greg.

Stu went over to check on his friend and found it was more than just a scratch and fairly deep. The bullet had creased in fairly well and the bone still showed through the caked blood. Stu went to work cleaning the wound and bandaging it properly, cleaning it with some alcohol which generated a yell from Greg. Stu applied a generous amount of antibiotic ointment before covering it up with a dressing and bandaging it. After finishing up, they continued to clear the roadway and gather the weapons. The food and other supplies would be left behind for bands of refugees, but the weapons would be taken with them. They collected a good amount of weapons and ammunition, far more than the roadblock needed for the amount of people that were there. A good supply of gold and silver, both in the form of coins and jewelry were found and the two debated taking it with them. They would use the rest of the afternoon of clearing to decide. They kept a close watch on the horizon to ensure they were not taken by surprise by another group and gathered everything from the roadblock. The cars were pushed off the road with a lot of effort except the one without rims. They decided to use the cargo straps to move the vehicle away from the roadway and onto the shoulder. It took several minutes of loud scraping to get it moved, but it was finally off the road. The remainder of the supplies was left by the shoulder of the road and clearly visible from both directions. The silver and gold was left behind and the two hoped some passing refugee party that really needed it would find it and take it with them.

They loaded the weapons and ammunition into the back seat of the truck and looked over the weaponry as they loaded it. They all seemed to be in good shape and had been cleaned and properly lubricated recently. The M-249 had taken a piece of the shrapnel from the M-203 grenade to the stock, but otherwise was functional. Plenty of ammunition was on hand for the weapons and was loaded as well. It was getting to be evening time when they finally finished loading and clearing the roadblock. They decided to move the bodies off the roadway and into the bushes where the man had been hit by the grenade. Stu said a small prayer for the men and hoped God would forgive them of their sins when they stood in judgment. They loaded everything into the truck and drove a few miles down the road and found a good spot to camp for the night. An old abandoned barn stood about a half mile from the roadway while the remains of a burned out farmhouse stood nearby. There were no indications that the farmhouse or barn had been occupied in quite some time and it seemed reasonably safe for the two. They pulled the truck inside the barn and closed the doors after them. They created a small camp in the center of the barn using hay bales to cover their position so the light couldn’t creep out. The center was raked out using a garden and a leaf rake that were hanging near the door. A small fire using some old planking and boards that were stacked along the sides was lit in the center of the barn for warmth and surrounded by hay bales, although not close enough to catch fire from the sparks.

Greg checked the outside and found the fire could not be seen from more than fifty yards away from the barn, so their light discipline would be okay for the moment. Stu continued to saw up the old boards with a handsaw that also hung on the wall. Although the location was far from any of the small towns in eastern Colorado and the chance of them seeing anyone else was

remote, they still decided to keep a firewatch that night just in case. Each of them created an alcove of hay bales and lined the bottom with the loose hay that they had raked. Each rolled out his sleeping bag and turned in when it was his turn.

The next morning, they woke early just before sunrise and prepared to make the last part of their journey. They contacted the Ranch via the handheld ham radio and relayed their status and informed them they would probably be another night at least. They were told to proceed and they got underway again. The rest of the trip was uneventful except seeing several of the farms and ranches along the way. Several looked completely deserted, but others had visible people there, all armed. They attempted to be as friendly as possible and waved as they sped past. Some waved back, others kept weapons pointed at them the whole time. The two continued driving until they reached Interstate 70. There was not an on ramp for the vehicles from the county road, so they drove up the small incline and got onto the four lane highway. Instead of crossing over to the proper lane, they traveled on the opposite side of the road and headed westbound.

They reached the coordinates on the DAGR and pulled off the Interstate they had been traveling on for the past five minutes. They crossed the lanes and Greg got out walking as a ground guide in front of the truck. The ground sloped down gently and after two hundred yards, he told Stu to stop. In front of them inside a small copse of tress and under heavy cover of dead vegetation was the white Chevy Tahoe. Greg walked up and pulled some brush away from the back and exclaimed "It hasn't been disturbed!"

Stu pulled behind the dead vehicle in order to protect them somewhat from observation from the roadway and joined Greg. Inside were still boxes and bags of various items Greg had stowed prior to leaving. Greg walked a short distance to what appeared to be just a dead bush and kicked it to the side. "The loot is still buried as well! Awesome!"

They decided to go ahead and gather the items from the truck first in case they had to leave suddenly. Greg and Stu started pulling the various bags and boxes out and loading them into the bed of the truck. Some were canned foodstuffs and MREs while others were clothing and more held military equipment. After nearly a half an hour, they stopped to rest and pulled out shovels to dig up the rest of the items.

"You never really said, what's buried here?" asked Stu.

"Well, a bunch of ammo for starters. Some weapons, grenades, slap flares, trip flares and some other noisemakers. Some gold and silver I managed to get and other personal items. I was the supply guru at the location I was at in Kansas City, so I had access to just about anything I wanted," said Greg, a little giddy at getting his items back.

"How did you dig this hole anyway? I never saw a shovel or anything," asked Stu.

"I had an e-tool I brought out with me. It took a full day just to dig the hole deep enough to get everything inside and spread the remainder of the dirt around," explained Greg.

They finished their break and attacked the dirt on top. About a foot down, Greg hit the top of the first box, a wooden nesting box. They continued to dig until they were able to reach the handles and pull the box out of the ground. "Good grief, it's heavy!" exclaimed Stu.

"Got a few items in here that weigh a little. Let me check on them," said Greg as he took the top of the lid off the box and peeked inside. Several garbage bags and olive drab waterproof bags were inside. Greg poked around until he found what he was looking for. He pulled out one of the bags and took it over to the truck, unwrapping the ties as he went. Inside was a DSA SA58 broken down into the upper and lower receivers. Greg put the weapon back together and function checked it. "Nice to have my baby back," he said affectionately patting the rifle.

"That's a nice one. Why didn't you bring that one with you instead of your M-4?" asked Stu.

"I didn't know what, or let's say who, I was going to encounter when I came west. I still had the copy of the MCOs assigning me to Phoenix so in case I ran into Loyalist forces I would still look like I was military. I carried the issue M-4 instead of the non-issue rifle," answered Greg.

"Pretty sensible of you. But what about the pistol you brought?" asked Stu.

Greg paused before answering to gather the magazines out of another bag. "Honestly, the military never has enough pistols to go around and about half the troops I encountered were carrying non-issue pistols. The officers and senior NCOs I dealt with just turned a blind eye to the practice since a lot of them carried the same thing. A pistol can be explained rather easily, a non-standard rifle is another case entirely."

The two continued to dig the rest of the items out of the ground, including the heavy ammunition cans and crates. A final crate was on the bottom that was filled with M67 hand grenades, slap flares, trip flares, flash bang grenades, claymore mines, det cord, five pounds of C-4 explosive, blasting caps, smoke grenades and two M136 LAWs. They finished removing everything from the hole and loaded it into the back of the truck. Greg kept a can of the 7.62mm ammunition out along with his SA58 and the magazines. They decided to sort through everything at the barn since it was a safer location than doing it out in the open.

Stu briefly checked on the broken down Tahoe and found Greg's fear were correct, the engine had seized. They would have to perform some major maintenance before the vehicle would move again. They threw around the idea of towing the vehicle back to the Ranch, but decided it would be more of a hindrance if they were ambushed again. Everything was loaded into the truck and the two left the spot and didn't cover the Tahoe again. Everything of value was taken out, including two of the tires and the spare and thrown into the back of the truck. The gasoline still in the jerry cans was taken along as they might find a use for it eventually in the future.

They left the scene and had an uneventful drive back to the barn. While they were driving, Greg was stripping the links from the ammunition and loading the magazines for his American made FAL. They made another radio call to the Ranch and told them they were successful and would be coming in the next day. They decided to take the same route back since they knew the clear areas already. When they arrived at the barn, they closed the door behind them and settled in for

the night, but Greg was too excited to rest. He unpacked all the weapons he brought along with him, checking each since they had been buried in the ground for several months. Greg had obviously brought out his whole collection with him and Stu inquired as to how he had gotten them all the way to Kansas from New Jersey.

"Long story short, I took a pallet of goods on a C-130 from McGuire to Kay See International. Since it was just me going, I managed to download some unimportant things from the pallet and put my personal stuff on. Nobody ever checked the cargo against the manifest so by the time I got to Kay See, it was a done deal. I managed to hide them in the supply yard until I bugged out," explained Greg.

"Pretty smart, I wish we could have done something like that," said Stu.

"You guys did good enough as it was. You raped the government for plenty from what I saw," laughed Greg.

"That we did," said Stu as he went on to explain exactly what the group had escaped with.

"Hey, I've got an idea. Let's take a little side trip to Peterson and Fort Carson on our way back to see if anything is still worth having," said Greg.

"Maybe, how about we play it by ear instead?" said Stu.

"No problem, I'm just curious, that's all. But if we can find abandoned government equipment, who cares if we take it," said Greg.

They both decided to deviate from their planned route and take a look at the two bases to see if anything was still there worth taking. It would be their little secret and they would be on guard the entire time. Greg finished putting the weapons together and placed them back into the truck, keeping them separate from the weapons they had gathered at the roadblock the day prior. The two set the firewatch and turned in for the night after eating.

The next day was uneventful except for their small deviation. Passing by the former roadblock, they saw the supplies had not been disturbed yet and still sat on the side of the road for all to see. They continued uneventfully until they reached the outskirts of Colorado Springs on Highway 94 and continued until they met the interchange of Highway 24 and 94. They took the next exit from the highway, their senses on full alert. On the off ramp, they peered at one of their old watering holes, the Sufferin B Tavern, now only a shell of a burned out building. As they approached what used to be the main gate of Peterson AFB, it looked like a ghost town. The former Air Force Space Command Headquarters, Building 1, was a burned out hulk. The silver exterior was blackened in most spots and the other two buildings, 2 and 3 were in the same shape. They continued down Peterson Boulevard, passing by the Security Forces Squadron where they used to work. It too had burn marks on the outside. Most of the buildings on base had damage to some extent or another.

They drove to the warehouse area and found most of those buildings intact. After looking

through a few of them, they had been raided and looted but not occupied. They continued looking through the abandoned buildings until their curiosity had been filled. Most were filled with items that would do them no good. Other buildings were searched to the same extent. Stu did manage to gather a couple of boxes of printer paper, pens, pencils and notepads since they seemed to be short on it. They both got the eerie feeling they were being watched and decided to leave and try Fort Carson instead.

They departed the base, still feeling like they were being watched. They made the normal twenty minute drive in record time and found Fort Carson the same way as Peterson AFB. Since they didn't know the base that well, they picked random buildings and entered, again not finding anything of value. The base was large and the buildings extensive, so they decided to head back instead of looking around further. The side trip had cost them two hours and they were overdue at the Ranch. Both knew the base had items of value on it, but they didn't know where to look.

They made their way back to the Ranch in an again uneventful trip. They arrived in the late afternoon and given a through tongue lashing by Shannon for both being late and going into the urban areas without consulting her. Even though she seemed mad at the time, she was happy they had returned relatively unscathed except for Greg's minor wound. He was checked over by Janie Holmes was stitched up before the two went home for a shower and an early night.

The next day, the two unloaded the truck outside and contacted Shannon about the weapons found at the roadblock. They had a group meeting planned for that night and the disposition would be determined by the group. Greg separated out his weapons from the bunch and took them inside the Conference Center to the basement vault. The other weapons were stored at the Trading Post, now the unofficial armory for the group's weapons. Greg also returned the FN SPR to Thomas, who told him he could keep it if he needed a precision rig for the defense. "Fat lot of good it's doing in my basement gathering dust."

"Tom, no offense, but I'd rather you keep it. I seriously can't hit the broad side of a barn with it, no matter how accurate it is. I'm a machine gun man myself and will leave the sniper work to other more qualified people," said Greg, handing over the soft sided case with the rifle.

"Well, we might as well take a look at what was brought out, just to see what we have," said Thomas.

The two walked the short distance to the Trading Post and started looking through the gathered weaponry. Seventeen different civilian models and styles of the AK, AR and SKS were lined up along with five military M-16s and M-4s. Seven more commercial models completed the list of autoloading rifles. Twenty-seven different models of hunting rifles lined the other area and a variety of pistols were laid out on a rug. Twelve different shotguns leaned against a nearby display case. The M-249 was propped up on its bipod legs next to the counter. Rick had performed a cursory inspection on it and, besides the hole in the stock, pronounced it in perfect working order. Thomas was looking at one of the AR-15 style rifles a little closer when he exclaimed "Hello there!"

"What is it?" asked Greg, looking longingly at the M-249.

Thomas picked the rifle up and peeked at the manufacturer's stamp on the left side of the rifle. "This, my friend, is a Les Bauer Super Match rifle. It's a modification of the original AR line in a different caliber, 6.5mm Grendel. When it was rumored the Army was considering changing calibers, two new ones emerged, the Grendel and the 6.8mm SPC from Remington. The Grendel never really caught on like the other did but there was still enough interest in it to keep producing ammo and weapons. It's designed as a long range caliber with a larger punch than the 5.56 and has ballistics out past a thousand yards, I think. This rifle is one of the precision models of the AR made by a high quality company."

"So that's what the guy was shooting at me with! I thought he was just getting lucky with a regular M-16," exclaimed Greg.

"No, if he was shooting at you with this, he probably knew his business. I have some ammo for it around here someplace. A customer special ordered it but never picked it up before the Fall," said Thomas.

"I might change my mind about the sniper rifle. I've always like the ergonomics of the M-16 and this isn't any different is it?" asked Greg.

"No, the controls are exactly the same, just a different round," confirmed Thomas.

"You think I might get dibs on it as well as the M-249?" asked Greg.

"The rifle probably won't be a problem, but the 249 might be. We use them a lot more than the 240 or the old 60. We only have three of them and two are being used on patrols most of the time. However, considering the circumstances of how it came to be here, we might make the exception," said Thomas.

"I understand if we can't, good of the community and everything. I can at least ask the question though," said Greg.

They continued looking through the weapons and were joined by Rick and George, who had returned to finish their inspections. The other two assisted as much as they could and the idea of Greg "owning" the light machine gun was brought up. Rick and George seemed receptive to the idea, but agreed it would be better if everyone agreed.

That night, the matter of the weapons was put to a vote and it was a unanimous decision to let Stu and Greg pick and choose what they wanted. The rest of the group was invited to divvy into the remaining stocks and the rest placed into storage. Stu grabbed two rifles and a pistol. Greg picked out the Les Bauer rifle and two of the pistols. The M-249 would be donated to the group cause, but had been "earmarked" as Greg's own personal machine gun for his patrols. The rest of the group browsed through the various arms and picked a few hunting rifles and shotguns with the rest of the weaponry being cleaned and oiled prior to storage. The ammunition would be checked over by Rick to determine its condition before putting it with the rest of the stored rounds. While they were there, Thomas went into the basement and found the ammunition for

the rifle Greg had grabbed. He found the case of the unique rounds for the weapon and brought it back up for Greg. It added to the eleven boxes they had gathered from the roadblock and what was already in magazines.

Afterwards, the group agreed to have another shooting day at the range since it had been a while since they had one. They agreed to have it the next Sunday in the afternoon provided the weather held out. Everyone seemed excited and many planned on zeroing the hunting rifles and practicing on their trap shooting since they were taking wild game to help stock the freezers with meat. Some of the families needed a little practice with the game bird shooting since the first trips made were absolute failures for the most part. It would also give others the chance to hone their skills even further in the combat style shooting, which Rick was planning. Additionally, a training point brought up by Darren at one of the meetings was the point of not everyone being totally familiar with the different weapons the ground members carried. The teams, at a minimum, needed to cross train with each other's weapons and perform loading, reloading, clearing and immediate actions if the need arose. The M-249s would be brought out as well for the residents to familiarize themselves with the operations of the light machine guns. The M-203s would have practice grenades loaded and fired so the residents could become more familiar with the trajectories of the rounds as they were fired.

All in all, the tactical skills of the community were continually being honed by new ideas and different training objectives. Since the visit by the Islamic group, they had taken on the task with new vigor and knew they needed to train hard. As the old saying went, the more they sweated in training, the less they would bleed in combat. And they had no intentions of bleeding if or when they were attacked by a hostile group.

CHAPTER 27 – INFORMATION

Time since attacks: 5 Months, 29 days
Date/Time: 19 October/1111 Local
Location: The Ranch

Sharon heard the distinctive clatter of the field phone from the downstairs and went to answer it. She spoke briefly to the Control Center and hung up the phone before heading to the backyard where Thomas was building a box to store firewood in Angel's room. "The LP/OP just called in, the Minister is coming by for a visit."

Thomas finished driving in the last nail before setting down the hammer and replying. "Just pleasure or business?"

"I don't know and neither did the LP/OP. All they said was George was bringing him down to see you," said Sharon.

"Okay, let me get this last panel on and I will get cleaned up. It's almost time for lunch anyway," said Thomas as Sharon went back inside to prepare some drinks for the visitors. As she walked around the house, she saw Darren and Shannon walking towards the house as well. When she got to the kitchen, she opened the window and called out to Thomas. "I think it's a business meeting. Darren and Shannon are coming over as well."

"Okay, baby, I'm almost done. Can you keep them entertained long enough for me to get finished?" asked Thomas.

"Of course, I can play a good hostess when I need to," she said.

A Ranger pulled up with George, Misty and the Minister and parked behind Thomas's Explorer in front of the house. Sharon could hear Thomas finishing nailing the last side panel onto the wooden box while she went through the house to open the door for the two. She greeted George and gave the Minister a hug since it was the first time she had seen him in a while. She took George's rifle, cleared it and placed it in the gun rack by the door Thomas had made for when visitor's called. The Minister offered over his pistol, but was told he could keep it as long as he kept it on his side. Sharon further explained those homes with children had gun racks near the doors in order to keep the long guns out of reach of curious children. The Minister thought it was an outstanding idea and complimented the group on their thinking. She invited them into the dining room and left the screen door open for Darren and Shannon. Misty had gone off in the direction of the Conference Center and had not joined her father in the Dayfield's home. They were joined by Thomas in short order, who politely excused himself to go and wash up a little before joining them. Darren knocked softly on the door and announced himself and Shannon before entering and before Thomas could return. Darren and Shannon also cleared out their rifles and left them by the door, ready in case they needed them on the way out.

Thomas came back downstairs and greeted everyone in the room before taking a seat at the table. "Been a while since you got down our way, Minister. How are you doing?"

"As good as can be expected, but it's a long walk from my house to here," said the Minister.

"You walked all the way here from your house? That is quite a trip," said Darren.

"It's not like I have a whole lot of other things to do and besides, it serves a double purpose. First to get the blood flowing into my tired old bones and secondly to see about another barter," said the Minister.

"Well, you could have called over the radio and we could have gotten you," said Thomas.

"Nonsense, you don't have to come running to get me any time I call. Besides, I got to see some of the nice game birds on the way over here, which is the barter. I would like to trade for a bird hunting shotgun since I'm getting a little tired of the same foods over and over. I shot a decent sized deer not too long ago and I'm afraid I'm starting to look at venison with a minor distaste. Some game birds in my diet might do me some good" said the Minister.

"I think that can be arranged, but it's up to Shannon here. She is responsible for working out the barters with the neighbors," said Darren.

"Thomas can get you set up. What were you planning to barter for?" asked Shannon.

"Probably more honey, but if not that, maybe some more chickens or eggs. I've got a hoop of them that go to waste and need to do something with them. If not, possibly the coyote pelts and deer hide I got from those that I've shot. I'm afraid I don't have a lot of items to trade that you all would need and it seems like I'm holding out my hand like a beggar," said the Minister.

"Sir, you are not a beggar around here and it's the least we can do for all the help you've given us, especially as of late in what you did for Amy. As a matter of fact, with Shannon's permission, I think we can part with a shotgun with little trouble to make up for the counseling sessions you provided for free," said Thomas.

"I think it's a wonderful idea. Grab him whatever he would like before he leave," said Shannon.

"I can't accept that for doing the Lord's work. I have to trade something," said the Minister.

"Okay, one shotgun for one egg, how about that?" asked Shannon.

"You are all too kind. I guess I have no choice but to take it and say thank you and give you an egg in exchange," said the Minister with a smile.

"What gauge do you want?" asked Thomas.

"Hmm, it's been a while since I did any birding and I'm not as good at shooting a shotgun as I

am a rifle. Maybe something a little softer on the old shoulders?" asked the Minister.

"We can swing by the Trading Post and even have you come back on Sunday for our monthly firing. We plan to do some skeet shooting so you can get a little practice in," said Darren.

"I didn't realize you all did that sort of thing. Yes, I would be honored to do so," said the Minister. "Do you do it after your Sunday worship services?"

The group got silent at the mention of Sunday services since they didn't really have such a thing. Some families had individual worship services, but nothing formal as a group. "We don't exactly have a worship service on Sunday, Minister. We kind of leave it up to the individual families," said Darren.

"Nothing wrong with that. Everyone celebrates God's glory in their own way," said the Minister. "Maybe I could perform a service for you at some point. If everyone would like that."

"That is something we can consider. Although you might have to make it non-denominational. We have a variety of religions up here," said George.

"I can do that, just a simple service, nothing more. It keeps me in practice," said the Minister.

"It's almost time for lunch everyone. Darren, George and Shannon, I've got enough leftovers for everyone to have lunch if you would like," said Sharon.

"Let me call Janet and let her know I won't be back for lunch," said Darren going to the TA-312 and ringing up the Control Center.

"Minister, we are having some leftover ham, stewed tomatoes and potatoes. Will that be okay instead of venison?" asked Sharon.

"Of course. Anything other than deer sounds exceptional," said the Minister with a smile.

The Thomas helped Sharon set the table and turned down the offers of the others to help. Everything was brought out and the Minister offered to say grace for the food. It was a simple affair, although thanking God for kind neighbors and friends that helped out in a time of need. Small talk passed the time during lunch and the hunting season was mentioned. The Minister made a surprise announcement when he told the group he had encountered a band of refugees at his house. "Yes, they were a little off the beaten pathway, but fairly harmless. They were just looking for water and nothing more, heading out to a campground west of here on one of the reservoirs. Apparently, this campground is kind of a haven for refugees and it getting along okay. I guess they saw the roadway leading into the distance and walked down to my house."

"Kind of a long way to go out of their way. Your house is at least a half a mile off the main highway," said George.

"Yes, I found that strange as well and mentioned it. They told me they were staying well off the

main roadways on their journey since the roads were often watched by the gangs. Very nice family. Jewish, but we still prayed before they went on their way," said the Minister. The rest of lunch continued with the small talk until everyone had eaten. Shannon insisted she and Darren clear the table as a token of appreciation for putting them up for lunch. Glasses were refilled and the group got down to the real business of why the Minister was there.

"First off, let me say I'm not one to put people in harm's way. However, this is a potential problem for us all and being a preacher, I cannot sit idle and look the other way," he said mysteriously. "But I also cannot do what my heart tells me to do."

"You have us curious now. Please continue," said George.

"Well, a few members of my former congregation look in on me and help me out with this and that. However, they have brought me some bad news lately about a gang working somewhere near Cañon City. They had a neighbor with a daughter, about seventeen, that was kidnapped. The father of the family was murdered but the mother was left unharmed and told if she wanted to see her daughter again to give them a supply of food every week for six months. She has done that for four weeks so far but the neighbors don't think she will ever see her daughter again."

"Supposedly, the gang that did this came around a few days prior and was preaching Islam to the area my friends were in. It wasn't exactly preaching, but more like 'our way or the highway.' If anyone resisted, they were told that the faithful masses would rise up against them, heavenly fire and brimstone would rain. You know, the normal apocalyptic parts of the Bible. It seems this gang is either one of the Lion Claw teams or maybe someone that was trained by them. The neighbor had the good sense, or maybe the poor sense to follow them back to their hideout, an old farmhouse west of Cañon City. He managed to get away safely and wasn't followed back. He told me in order to preserve his family, they 'converted' to Islam, but still are Christians at heart. After seeing what happened to their neighbors, they decided to be wise and not try to fight the group that would slit their throat at the first sign of insubordination. I considered that to be a smart move and I'm sure God will understand. They are still practicing Christians, but put on a different face when the others come around."

"They decided to contact me since if anyone in the area might have had contacts with your group it would have been me. They have also heard of the Dayfield Ranch and are wondering if you might be able to help out with this gang who pervert the words of God into a hateful purpose. As a preacher, I've studied the world's religions and know Islam typically has some peaceful teachings, but heretics have twisted the words into what suits them. However, there is no tolerance with these people and something must be done to stop them before they destroy us all."

"I'm tolerant of other people's religions and have no problem if someone wants to be Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist or even an atheist. It's a free country and everyone should be allowed to practice what they want. I, of course, try and show them the error of their ways if they will listen, but will not force my religion onto anyone. These people are doing exactly the opposite, much like the crusades and the inquisitions long ago. Those that don't change their religion are being killed outright. This isn't right in God's eyes."

"Now, as a man of God I'm a conscientious objector and have been for a long time. But my heart tells me to strike out against those that would destroy my faith and the members of my former flock. I'm faced with a quandary here and I hate to ask your group to do something as vile as going after this group, but they have left me little choice. I cannot help you in your fight except to give you information and provide you guidance. I cannot turn my back on my oath to God to help you fight, but I almost wish I could. But, I also swore an oath to God to help His children in their time of need. If I can't help you in the fight, I can help find those that will fight for Him. Is there anything you can do to help?" he asked after the long speech.

The group sat back, lost in the thoughts of what the Minister had just said. This probably was the same group that had paid the Ranch a visit in September and the one they had been trying to track down ever since. George spoke for the group.

"We know about these people and how they bring Islam by the sword. We were visited by them last month," he said and continued to explain for a couple of minutes how the visit hadn't gone so well for the visitors.

"This sounds like the same group, or at least the same mode of operations. Will you be able to help?" asked the Minister.

"Yes, we have been looking for them ever since their visit, just waiting for them to poke their heads back up. They have been fairly effective at lying low and we haven't been able to locate them except for a general location around Cañon City. If your friend has information and a location, we need to talk to him about it," said Darren.

"I can arrange the meeting and be there when you go so you aren't unknowns just walking up to their house. People tend to be a little suspicious these days of strangers and even you folks, even as well known as you are, aren't really seen or heard. But you are known through the community grapevine so that helps. When would you like to go?" asked the Minister.

"Probably tomorrow if that is okay with you," said George. "But we will need to do some planning first."

"Tomorrow will be fine since their next visit probably isn't until Friday, the Islamic Sabbath. I don't want to put your group in a position of where it will be in trouble, but if they aren't stopped, they can be trouble for us all. Preaching their religion is one thing, but extorting the neighbors and taking hostages for their personal pleasure and calling it God's work is Satan in disguise," said the Minister.

"You have the guarantee of every member of the Ranch and that we will help," said Shannon.

"Doesn't your group need to vote on it?" asked the Minister.

"We all came to the agreement after the first visit we would actively look for this group and go after them if the opportunity presented itself. This is just a continuation of that agreement we had a few weeks ago. We can bring it up again as a formality and the strike won't happen

overnight, but we will get it done," said Shannon.

"All I can ask for is help. Help for those poor souls out there being forced into service to a false religion," said the Minister.

The rest of the conversation moved onto what the Minister knew about the areas the gang worked and how many they had. Unfortunately, he didn't have much information since he was out of the loop for the most part. Lucky enough for him, the Minister was isolated enough to escape the violence and looting going on as well as staying under the radar scope low enough to avoid the Muslim gang. The Ranch residents knew if they ever found out about the man, they would probably kill him outright since he was a threat to their power base. They would have to be dealt with quickly to ensure their feudal ways would not take too strong a hold.

As they departed, Thomas and Darren told George they would give him a ride home as soon as they got him the promised shotgun from the Trading Post. Shannon started making rounds of the various homes and work sites to let everyone know the news and prepare them for the discussion they would be having at the weekly meeting. Thomas and Darren escorted the Minister to the Trading Post and have him try several different shotguns before he finally decided on one. Thomas tried to get him to take one of the nice over/under shotguns, but he politely refused, stating he owned the same model when he hunted a long time ago. Thomas threw in the full set of chokes and several different weights and loads of ammo into the same backpack he had given the Minister on his first trip to the Ranch.

The ride to his home was uneventful and they promised to make contact with him the next day to go and see his friends. On the drive back, Darren and Thomas discussed the situation at hand. "Obviously, we are thinking of a strike against their hideout. Got anything in mind so far?" asked Darren.

"Well, I was thinking a long recon of the area with a fire team or maybe even two individuals…although I think a fire team would be better. If we could grab one of those dirt bags and make him talk, that would be awesome. Either way, we need reliable intelligence about what is going on there before we make a strike," said Thomas.

"That's what I was thinking. However, I don't think a normal fire team would do. I was thinking four of the most qualified people would be better. Give them some hardcore training before sending them out. The four most sneaky, best shooting and tactically minded people we have to do a recon for like three or four days. Gather as much intel as they can get and then prepare a strike. Practice, practice and more practice and go after them with a vengeance. Since I'm more or less in charge of the defensive operations around here, I suppose I should plan it out, but I would like to have you, George and Dave give me a hand," said Darren.

"No problem, I can help. Got anyone in mind for the recon team?" asked Thomas.

"Some people come to mind, but nothing concrete," said Darren.

The conversation drifted into how the group wasn't exactly prepared for the Close Quarters

Battle they might be having if they had to take on the gang at their house. They had trained exclusively for woodland and open areas and not in retaking structures or in confined spaces. It was a serious training problem that needed attention if they were going to strike. After returning to the Ranch, Darren asked to be dropped off at George's house and would meet up later on with the selected planning group. Thomas continued home and finished working on the box for his daughter's room. Sharon had gone out to one of the supply sheds and was grabbing some canned goods to restock the pantry. Thomas heard the Polaris Ranger coming into the main Ranch and peeked out and saw George and Shannon riding along. They went around the circular road and caught up with Sharon as she was coming home. She put the basket of goods in the back and rode with the two to the Conference Center, not to return for almost a half an hour. They also visited Garcia's cabin, Frank's, the Parson's, the Jones, and the Thompsons before George stopped by Ryan's before heading back up the road to his house with Ryan as a passenger.

When Sharon returned home, she was eerily quiet throughout the afternoon. Over dinner was when she finally broke the news about why she had been so quiet. "George and Shannon came to see me today."

"I saw them talking to you and I figured it was something important. I figured you needed time to think about whatever they talked to you about before telling me," said Thomas.

"They came to ask my permission for you to be on the team going to the gang's house," she said.

"And?" he asked.

"Thomas, I love you with all of my heart, but it's not my decision to make. George told me he was making the request of the spouses instead of the individuals themselves since everyone here would readily volunteer. George said if I objected, he would pick someone else. He said it needed to be a family decision and not just one for the individuals. I asked who the other three were, but he wouldn't tell me," she said.

"Okay, and what did you say?" asked Thomas.

"He said the mission would be dangerous and he wanted me to know this before I made my decision. I wanted to talk it over with you first and we can let him know before the meeting Shannon called for tonight," said Sharon, still not giving him an answer.

"Well, what was your decision?" asked Thomas.

"Thomas, like I just said, it's not my decision to make. It's your decision. I will let you know I'm not happy with the situation as it stands, but I will leave the decision to you," she said, still not giving a definite answer.

Thomas paused to think about the decision before responding. "Honey, you know I will volunteer if they ask me to go, but I want to make one thing clear, I won't go if you don't approve. Do you want me to go?"

"Of course I don't want you to go! But what choice do we have? George says this gang can become more powerful and be a threat to not only us, but everyone in this region. He also said you are one of the best we have and that's why you were picked. I won't want you to go, but you aren't better than anyone else we have around here who is faced with the decision. I know you are one of the best we have around here for that sort of thing and I will worry my butt off while you are gone, but I know you will come back. All it will be is you sneaking around in the woods observing the target. I know you will make it back unharmed," she said.

"You really don't want me to go, do you?" he asked.

"Of course I don't want you to go, but you have my permission to go. I will worry myself silly as long as you are gone, but if it means we have a safe place to live, I think it is best for everyone if you go," said Sharon.

"If you don't want me to go, you know I won't," said Thomas.

"No, you should go. I won't sleep a wink while you are gone and will get more gray hair than I should have at my age, but I can't think of anyone better to be on this mission than you. I know you will come home to me," she said with a tear in her eye. They embraced and held each other in a hug for what seemed like an eternity before finally releasing each other and preparing to go to the emergency meeting called by Shannon.

When they arrived, Shannon called the meeting to order and informed the group about the surprise visit from the Minister and the information he had given out. She also informed the group they would be sending out a few people to talk with the Minister's friends about the visitors that were probably the same group that had come to the Ranch earlier. After finishing explaining the details, she turned over the floor to George.

"Some of you already know we are planning on sending a team to the individual's hideout. I have contacted several of the members here and, with Shannon's help, have handpicked a team that is going to go there as soon as we have a hard location. Each of the individuals and their families has been contacted and we have our four. Darren, Frank, Thomas and Michael are the four who were picked," concluded George. The group decided that the four would go with the Minister the next day to meet the family that knew the location of the gang. Preparations were made for the trip and everyone agreed to the meeting place and time.

The next morning, Darren, Thomas, Michael and Frank left and picked up the Minister at his house. He carried his ever present Colt, while the others were armed to the teeth. He sat in the spacious front seat between Darren and Frank and gave directions to the nearby home of his friends that knew the location of the gang. They reached the house after traveling past Cañon City. The house sat off the roadway, but could still be seen from the offshoot of the state highway. The owner of the home stepped out, which Thomas immediately recognized as being one of the Deputy Sheriffs of the county. He carried what looked to be an M1 Garand held at the ready in case they turned out to be hostile. The Minister waved from the front of the truck at the man and he waved back, lowering the battle rifle. The group drove the truck behind the house and out of sight from the roadway and got out making their way to the front door. Michael and

Frank stayed behind to watch both the roadway and the vehicle.

As they approached the front door the man, named Carl, greeted the Minister warmly before showing surprise at Thomas. "Hey, I remember you! You owned that hunting lodge up in the mountains! Thomas, right?"

"Yes, and you are Carl if I remember correctly," said Thomas as he shook the man's hand.

"Indeed, what brings you out this way?" he asked, partially to Thomas and the Minister.

"These were the fellows I was telling you about, Carl. They might be able to fix our problem," said the Minister.

"Oh really? Come on inside out of the wind and let's talk," said Carl as he held open the door for the three.

They went inside where the man's wife brought out some water. "Some soup will be ready in a few minutes," she stated as she set the tray down and served the visitors.

"Ma'am, you shouldn't trouble yourself. This will be okay," said Darren.

"Nonsense, young man. You all took the trouble to bring a close friend out here and the least I can do is serve you up some warm soup," she said, turning away for the kitchen.

Thomas continued his conversation with the former deputy. "Carl, you are one of the deputies for Freemont County aren't you?"

"Was, retired about three months before the attacks and just in time as well," answered Carl. "Weren't you in the Army or something?"

"Was Air Force, kinda retired myself in a matter of speaking," said Thomas.

Carl didn't push the matter since he figured Thomas was one of the individuals that deserted to look after his family and moved on. "So besides the friendly visit and catching up on old times, what brings you out this way?"

"Well, Carl, as we were saying, I told my friends here about our little problem. It appears they already knew about it and were kinda looking to go and find them as well. Since you know where they are and they don't, but don't have the manpower to go after them and they do, I figured an arrangement could be made," said the Minister.

Carl thought about it for a moment before answering. "That lot seems to be a little more than a normal militia could handle. They have about twenty to twenty five folks in that gang with some good weapons. I don't know about tactics, but what they lack in technique, they can make up for in brute force."

"You remember my friend George? The one who worked the place with Thomas? He is one of those same guys," said the Minister.

"The former Green Beret? Okay, the stock went up a tad with that. So you need me to show you where they are?" asked Carl.

"That's about the skinny of it," answered Darren.

"But before we come to any agreement, we need to set some ground rules and have some questions answered," interrupted Thomas.

"Questions first, then ground rules," compromised Carl.

"Okay, so you were a deputy and retired. No problems, but how did the Sheriff let this gang get this far out of control, especially out here where it should have been quiet?" asked Thomas.

"Long story short, there isn't a sheriff anymore or a police department. The sheriff was killed when he tried to stop an armed robbery. Faced down six individuals and took five of them with him, God rest his soul. Pretty much after that the Cañon City Police and Freemont County Sheriff's Office closed up shop and tended to their families. The State Patrol closed up not long after as well. Most of the former cops are either now dead or in hiding since the convicts staged that escape from the state prison and came back to find the cops responsible for putting them behind bars. Most of the convicts have moved on now and those that didn't have either been killed or joined together in some gang. There isn't any law to be had these days," answered Carl.

"I'm sorry to hear that, I knew you both were pretty good friends," said Thomas.

"He went out like a true lawman, gun in hand and dead criminals at his feet," said Carl.

"Okay, that answers a couple of questions. How do you know where the gang is?" asked Darren.

"Okay, so they came around here one day, preaching their crap about how Islam is the wave of the future and all that. I told them I wasn't interested until they put a gun to my wife's head. It tends to change your perspective on life and your principles aren't quite so dear after that. Anyway, we 'converted' to Islam, but begged God for forgiveness after they left. They come around every so often and demand food, weapons and gasoline, but lucky for us, I have ten acres behind us where most of our stuff is hidden. We give them a little and they go away, somewhat content. So one day, I followed them on my motorcycle back to their hideout. Either they never noticed me or didn't care. It's an old farmhouse off Highway 50. Let me get my map and I can show you," said Carl as he stood up to grab the map.

His wife reentered the room carrying the same tray with glass mugs of tomato soup and some homemade crackers. "I wish I could have had more time to prepare something else," she said apologetically.

"Ma'am, this is more than we could ask for and we thank you," said Thomas as he sipped the

Campbell's out of the mug.

"I have more for your friends outside, if you need anything else, let me know," she said as she departed and Carl returned.

"Okay, let's have a look here. This is where we are," he said as he pointed at the map. He paused as the group looked at the position and then pointed at a different location. "And they are about here, give or take."

"That's the road where we lost them," said Darren as he pointed at the crossroads. "We followed them after our little visit but lost them here."

"The other road is a dead end, doesn't lead to anything. It was going to be a housing development, but never got started," said Carl. "When did you boys find them?"

"After our own little visit," said Thomas as he went on to explain the visit and what happened after they were asked to leave.

"Good job! I'm glad at least two of them are out of the picture," said Carl. "Do you want me to help lead your group to them?"

Not wanting to explain fully how they planned on doing an extended recon of the area, Darren declined. "No, just any information about the local area would be good. Anything you can tell us would be valuable."

Carl spent the next ten minutes explaining the layout of the area including terrain and vegetation, how the house was situated and even included a diagram of the house and outbuildings. He included minor points that would normally go unnoticed by a casual observer. He also included the trails and pathways into the forest which could be used to conceal their vehicles and the best way in or out on foot.

"You have a pretty good eye for detail," said Darren.

"I should, I worked LRRPs in the Army for ten years before I got out. They paid us for that sorta thing," said Carl with a smile. "Now you mentioned some ground rules?"

"Okay, you know about us and you know where we are. What they don't know is exactly who we are, but they know a bunch of mean S-O-Bs are at the Ranch. They also don't know we are looking for them to stage a strike. Let's keep that low profile. You don't mention us at all and please, let us do our thing. I know you were one a LEO, but we have to do what we have to do. I won't tell you what or when, but we will take care of this problem," said Thomas.

"The only law these days is at the end of a barrel. You boys go and do what you have to do to make this problem go away. We've got enough problems as it is without having to deal with this sorta...thing. I might use some other choice words if the good Minister wasn't here, but you boys get the idea. Nobody will question your methods or the manner in which you conduct yourself

unless you happen to be worse than they are. If the Minister is on your side, I suppose whatever you do will be righteous," said Carl.

"We just want to live our lives and survive whatever comes our way," said Darren.

"Don't we all? Just fix the problem, that's the only thing we could ask," said Carl.

"We will. Anything else we can help you with for the time being? Anything your family needs?" asked Thomas.

"No, we've got plenty of beans, band-aids and bullets. I've got my own ethanol still, a flex fuel truck and alcohol converted bike and wood stoves for heat. Our propane tank was filled the day before the attacks, so we will be good for a few years on that. However, some other families aren't so fortunate and we donate to them. If you are looking for a good charity, let me know, I know a few families in need," said Carl.

"We'll keep it in mind," said Thomas as he gathered the hand drawn maps and notes Carl had made. "We'll let you know when everything is done. For now, we'll let you two catch up for a while since we have some business to conduct with our friends."

Thomas and Darren shook the man's hand and thanked his wife for the hospitality before going out back to discuss what they had learned with Frank and Michael. It took about ten minutes to catch them up to speed and show them the map and notes Carl had made. Both asked questions which were answered by answered by the two. The issue of the recon came up and they decided to postpone any serious planning until they were able to get back to the Ranch to discuss it with everyone on the planning group. The Minister spent another half an hour with Carl and his wife before coming outside to return to his house. The ride back was spent mainly in silence as the five contemplated what would be happening over the next few weeks during the recon and the strike. The group did make a short stop by the Ranch to gather some preserved foodstuffs for the Minister. He objected, but in the end took the items.

CHAPTER 28 – PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Time since attacks: 6 Months, 1 day
Date/Time: 21 October/0811 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, the planning began at the Conference Center. They discussed not only the recon of the farmhouse, but of the overall security of the Ranch. Between the four, they decided the defenses were a little down with the cold weather moving in and the teams weren't training as much.

"We need to get them back out as well as having more recon on the perimeter. I think we should go ahead and cancel all the long range patrols off the property for the time being and have everyone stick closer to home," said Michael.

"That's a good idea, but the further out we pick them up, the better our defensive plan can be. We can limit the long range stuff to a two man team and the four man teams patrol inside the wire, so to speak," said Darren. "This way, while we are gone, there are only six people down instead of eight or twelve."

This compromise seemed to work for the other three and they would bring it up to Shannon the next time they saw her. The next patrol was not due to go out for another day and they could hold that one in close. The next item was the planned recon and they all added in their ideas.

"So the four of us, split into pairs. Tom, you want to pair off with Michael since Darren and I have already been working together?" asked Frank.

"Yeah, I don't have a problem with that," said Thomas.

"No problem, I'll take care of you, baby! Once you go black, you never go back. Kristy will never be your partner again," said Michael laughing.

The rest of the group laughed along before getting serious about the mission and decided on a five paragraph Operations Order, or OPORD. The Situation was clear, the enemy forces were terrorizing the residents in the local area and this was unacceptable. The Mission paragraph was discussed and agreed on. Service and Support would also need outside help from Kristy and the four planned out their logistical needs and created a list for her. They discussed and agreed on packing lists, weapons out loads, ammunition requirements, food and water requirements, vehicle requirements and unique items they might need like grenades, other pyrotechnics and GPSs. Command and Signal was determined by basically drawing straws to lead the mission. Since all four pretty much had the same experience, minus a couple of years here and there, and each was fully qualified to perform patrol leader duties they decided to draw straws to decide who would be in charge. Michael drew the short straw, followed by Frank, Thomas and Darren. Radio frequencies would be gathered and the radios would be reprogrammed by Ryan before the

mission. They planned on taking a long range radio with them to communicate with the Ranch.

Execution was taken by all four since they would all be a part of it and needed to agree on the plan to recon the target. Normally it fell between Mission and Service and Support, but since it was critical and probably going to be the most discussed item, they held off until last. They agreed on the roles and responsibilities with Darren carrying the M-249, Frank being the designated marksman, Thomas carrying the M-203 and Michael, being patrol leader, got the lightest load although carrying spare ammo for the M-249.

They went over actions on contact, patrol formations, danger crossings, ambushes, both hasty and deliberate, retrograde operations and escape and evasion. On the maps, they marked emergency rally points, objective rally points and pick up points. They discussed the training schedule prior to the mission and decided to do a three day rehearsal on the Ranch before leaving. Marksmanship would be practiced every day prior to leaving and each would cross train with each other's weapons, including pistols, prior to leaving. By the time they had ironed out some of these points it was past lunch time. Heather and Amy had come back from whatever detail they had been doing and heated up some canned chili for themselves. After finding the four in the dining room, they put on more for them and served it up. The four continued working through lunch, discussing more and more items they would need to accomplish.

Everything was written down, typed up on the laptop and agreed on. They decided to have a bag drag in two days with each person packing their extended mission packs whichever way they saw fit. However, each member of the group would have to present the contents of the pack for inspection for everyone to see. The mission was planned for seven days and the group requested ten days of rations to be taken along with enough water for ten days as well. They chose the armored HMMWV as their vehicle since it protected them the most and also had the ability to be locked along with their extra supplies and munitions. By evening, everything planning wise was set and the group called it a day and planned on meeting the next morning at 0600 for PT. They would do PT for an hour then move on to the physical portion of the recon, walking through the various actions they had agreed on that day. As they were set to leave, Shannon and Tracy paid them an unexpected visit.

"Hey Tom, you have any old burlap sacks?" asked Shannon.

"Yeah, some old sandbags that are starting to dry rot, why?" he replied.

"A little going away gift for you all," said Tracy with a smile.

"What kind of going away gift?" asked Darren.

"It's a secret!" said Tracy.

"Oh, never mind that foolishness. We found plans on how to make a ghillie suit and we want to make you all suits before you go," said Shannon.

"That's not a bad idea, but those take quite a bit of time to make. Something like a hundred

hours or more. But you are in luck. I have a bunch of commercial ones that should do nicely and I never thought about them for this mission. Frank has his own, but the rest of us could use them," said Thomas.

"Okay, so we don't need to worry about them?" asked Tracy.

"Here's the problem, to be truly effective, they need local colors. Basically, a ghillie suit just distorts the shape and colors of normal humans making them blend in naturally in the surrounding environment. They need more of the local colors around here to be truly effective. If you want to help, what you can do is take a look around here at the local environment and find what colors are predominate. Then either weave old vegetation into the suits or dye the colors into the old burlap strips and weave them into the suit. Yes, it will help, but getting a suit made in time for us might be impossible," said Thomas.

Frank concurred on what Thomas had just said and offered to show them the next day what to use and how to go about it. He would work on a small section of his suit that night and give it to them to complete. They agreed to grab the suits the next morning after the team had completed PT and before they went out to practice their drills.

Thomas arrived home to find dinner almost ready and Sharon waiting for him. "Hey, you. I was wondering what kept you so long," she said with a smile.

"Sorry, sweetie, we got into it so much we lost track of time. Something smells good," he said sniffing at the direction of the stove.

"I improved on Cynthia's recipe for potatoes and added a little extra something to them. The roast will be done soon as well. You want to get cleaned up before supper?" she asked.

"Sure," he said as he went upstairs and cleaned his face off in the sink. He then went into his bedroom and looked over the BOB sitting in the corner. He knew it was well set up to go away from the Ranch in a hurry, but it was not meant for the long term recon they would be performing. In order to go out, he needed a larger pack that could haul several days' worth of food, clothing, water and other accessories. He went back downstairs to check on the dinner and found he had about another ten minutes before everything was ready. He went to the basement and looked around for the battery powered lantern hanging at the staircase. The batteries had died at some point in the past few weeks and he looked for the reliable back-up to the lantern.

Thomas peeked around in the dim light and found an old GI issue angle head flashlight, the same design used by the military for a long time. It was rugged, simple and cheap. While it was not as half as bright as some of the more modern designs, it had one thing going for it; it was reliable. If one was to create an owner's manual for this particular device, it would read something like this:

"Install bulb and batteries. Switch on. If it doesn't work, whack it against something hard until it works. Replace bulb and/or batteries as needed. Continue whacking until it works."

Thomas flicked on the old flashlight and had to proceed to step three and whacked it against his hand a couple of times before it came on. He looked around in the basement at the various bags and bins of collected military equipment and found one labeled "packs." Inside were various different packs he had collected in his years of service, some used and some never taken out of the plastic wrapper. He decided on the same pack he had bugged out with and decided to add some extra pouches to it. He grabbed a bag full of MOLLE pouches and returned upstairs to put everything together in the light of the living room. Although the kitchen was warm, the rest of the house started to get a tad chilly. Before sitting down at the table, Thomas went to the living room and placed a instant start fire log in the wood stove and lit it up, placing two more pieces of wood on the front and back sides. He went upstairs and did the same in Angel's room and their bedroom. By the time he had come back downstairs, everything was on the table and ready to go. They ate through dinner, passing small talk between the two of them and hearing about Angel's adventures during the day. When they were finished, Thomas cleared the table and cleaned the dishes, giving Sharon a chance to give Angel her bath and freshen up herself.

After cleaning, he went back to the living room where the fire was going well and added another log on top of the ones inside. He looked through the pack and started configuring it to the mission specific needs by adding some pouches and taking others off that were not suited for the mission. When it was to his satisfaction, he set it off to the side and looked over his web gear. Since he would be carrying the M-203, his PTR-91 would stay behind and his Patriot Ordnance P-415 carbine would be taken in its place. While looking at his pack and deciding the camouflage would probably be sufficient, his rifle might stick out like a sore thumb. Thomas remembered having various cans of camouflage paint in the shed that would come in useful in camouflaging the rifle, his pistol and those of his teammates. He decided to go ahead and pack some of the items that night and finish everything off the next evening before supper. He replaced some of the items from his trip out and replaced the spare uniform with something a bit more effective in the current environment. Other basic clothing was added or prepared to be vacuum sealed by his food preserver. More little items were added, those which he found indispensible out in the field. After an hour of packing and repacking certain items, he called it a night and went upstairs, carrying the mission notes to read before going to sleep. Sharon was tucking Angel into bed and reading her a bedtime story so he prepared himself for bed. He started reading the printed notes and got deep in thought about the upcoming mission. He didn't even feel Sharon slipping into bed beside him until she pulled the covers away from him slightly.

"Hey sweetie, Angel all tucked in?" asked Thomas.

"Sleeping like a baby, although she is still a baby. You seem pretty involved with whatever that is you are reading. Important stuff?" asked Sharon.

"Not as important as you are," he replied, lifting his eyes from the papers to look at the lady of his life and giving her a wink.

"You are too sweet. Seriously though, if it's important, I'll leave you alone," she said.

"Nothing that can't wait until tomorrow," he said as he put the notes back together and set them on the nightstand. He rolled over and pulled her in closer to him.

"So what was that wink about anyway? Hoping to get lucky there, sailor?" she whispered.

"Nope, a lucky Airman maybe, I'm not a sailor," he whispered back.

"I wouldn't know; I was never in the military," she whispered back.

"No matter, I love you and I'm just lucky to have you," he whispered again.

"No, I think I'm the lucky one to have you and I love you right back," she whispered.

"I love you more," he whispered.

"More, more…why are we whispering?" she asked in a whisper.

"I have no idea, but it's funny," he whispered back.

They both started giggling and Sharon snorted, causing Thomas to laugh harder. They both started laughing more and more while Thomas tickled her sides, making her laugh harder and plead for him to stop while laughing. They finally ended up stopping laughing and face to face. The passion that followed made him completely forget about the worries he had earlier about the upcoming mission and focus on the task at hand.

The next morning, Michael led the PT and took the small group on a five mile run around the premises, carrying their rifles. Rick struggled a bit since he hadn't been keeping up with his running that much and by mile four, Thomas was wavering a bit as well. However, Michael kept the pace a little slower than his usual six and a half minute mile and ended the run at forty-five minutes. The next day they would do the same and the day after shorten the run, but add packs to it. They ended up doing the standard military "daily dozen" exercises. After the PT, each went home to catch a shower and get into the training fatigues they were wearing to start their mission training. Since they were working exclusively on the Ranch, most came back out in sets of desert camouflage or mix matches of ragged uniforms that were fairly unserviceable. They dropped off their supply requirements to Kristy, who told the group she would start immediately on gathering what they had requested.

Through the morning, the four walked through each action they had discussed he day before. Minor adjustments were made and by lunchtime, the four were starting to move quicker through the tactical movements. They sat down in the nearby woods and discussed more of the issues facing the recon of the area. Thomas also brought up the plan to camouflage his weapons and spare equipment with the spray paint and offered to help each member do the same to theirs. They planned to do it the next morning right after PT and after each of them could clean their weapons dry that night. Firing practice was postponed until after the weapons were painted since they would dirty the weapons up. The rest of the afternoon was spent checking on the supply situation and they found Kristy, Stu and Misty had just about gotten everything on their list. They were pulling out spare ammo for the group to carry and for proficiency firing when they caught up to them. They found Misty had put together an IFAK for each of the members with

various other stores from the medical supplies. Since the issue kits didn't offer many items inside, she repacked the pouches with extra bandages, dressings, ointments and pain killers. A CLS bag was included in the mission pack of Frank, who would also double as the corpsman for the group. Since it was on their mind, they took an hour studying the various emergency medical procedures they could encounter and practicing on them.

It was still daylight left when they divided up the supplies and headed home to pack their bags. When Thomas arrived, he found Sharon was still out on her work detail and started dinner for the family. While it was going, he repacked his bag again and added in the supplies they had gathered that day. Since they would be without proper bathing facilities for a week, he also packed away unscented baby wipes and a washcloth. After he figured it was good, he shouldered the pack and found it a little heavy, but not completely unbearable. The next pack to finish up was his patrol pack, a smaller pack they would carry while out on the mission and not in the base camp. He loaded it similar to the larger pack, but only with the bare essentials to survive. His minor survival kit was transferred over from his "Ranch BOB" and placed onto the patrol pack. In the end, the load was around fifteen pounds, minus the water. It strapped in nicely to the larger pack and increased the load, but again, only for a short distance.

He took out the rifle and pistol he was going to use and cleaned them both dry. After PT and the ruck inspections, the foursome was going to gather at his house and paint their weapons. It would take a little longer since they would have to wait for each layer to dry before putting on the next one. Other individual equipment would be painted as well, like the binoculars, holsters and radios. Dinner was going well and Sharon arrived home with Angel. Each person in the house took their time to get cleaned up and ate dinner with the same chit chat as usual. After dinner, Thomas made some final adjustments to his pack before calling it a night and going up to play with Angel after her bath. As with billion of parents before him, he silently wondered "where does all the energy come from?" And, as with most children her age, she wound down fairly quickly and was getting tired. Thomas tucked her into bed and read her a story. He had to restart it twice when she would wake up and ask him to read it again. She finally fell asleep by the time he reached the fourth page and joined his wife, falling asleep rapidly.

The next day, after PT, the group gathered in the Conference Center and unpacked their rucks for the entire group to inspect. Some items were discarded and other items were added at the suggestions of the others. The weight didn't change on the packs very much and the team found that Shannon had started a group effort to complete the ghillie suits and also pack covers for the team. She had the group working non-stop throughout the day dying and sewing the various burlap straps into the covers which she was making from an old nylon tent painted mud brown.

The group broke apart and took their packs back home and gathered their various weapons to take to the Dayfield's workshop to the rear of the house. They would all use their pistols as examples and as a trial basis since they wanted to get the techniques down before moving to the larger rifles. They started with a neutral base color and finished the entire pistol before leaving them to dry, talking over more of the mission in the process. Thomas had gotten a propane heater with a fan to help the drying process and placed the heater to where the hot air would blow over the weapons. They applied more colors and used natural vegetation to help break up the color patterns to create a natural look to the colors. After drying from the final coat, they

checked them against the local vegetation and found from thirty feet away, the blended in nicely with the environment. Happy with the outcome, they got their rifles ready to paint.

After placing masking tape on the critical parts of the optics and accessories, they painted the entire rifle as they had before with the pistols. The other equipment was subjected to the same treatment. By the time they were done, it was almost lunchtime and they left the weapons in the shed to finish drying. They ate at the Dayfields' and continued to plan accordingly. After lunch, they went out into the nearby woods with replacement rifles and ran through the drills yet again. They planned on leaving on their FTX in two days for a three day recon of the Ranch in which the residents would play the OPFOR and attempt to detect the patrol as they watched the area. As they broke for the day, each person gathered the painted equipment and headed home.

Two days later, the team left out in the HMMWV and set up a patrol base outside the Ranch. They used natural vegetation for the vehicle camouflage and left it well away from their intended patrol base. Almost a half a mile away, they set up their patrol base and again, used natural camouflage to hide their equipment and shelters. The shelters were basic lean-to types built using natural materials and blended in perfectly with the surrounding area. They finished out the day creating their base camp and decided to start their recon early the next morning.

Early the next morning prior to daylight, they crept into position watching over the Ranch, ghillie suits on and all but indistinguishable from more than twenty meters away. They watched the various households doing whatever daily duties they were off to and made notes about what they saw. They moved away from the area at lunchtime and ate in pairs with the other pair watching their backs. They moved back again and continued to watch, undetected. On the second day, just after they had returned to the base camp, the fire team patrol was sweeping in the general area. Each person froze and dropped to the ground and covered their head with the hood of their suits. They watched as the recon patrol came within twenty-five meters of their location and pressed on, even after looking directly at the team several times. The team continued past their base camp, never seeing the makeshift shelters and natural camouflage of their stored equipment.

That night, they crept back into position, going by the LP/OP to see if they would be detected. They were not out of sight of them the whole time and made their way into the Ranch proper and two crept up to the Conference Center where the weekly meeting was taking place. The discussions were recorded in the notepads of the two individuals and they silently waited as the group departed the Center and went home after the meeting was over. Another conversation between George and Ryan was recorded as the two stood on the deck, fifteen feet away from Frank. The third day was uneventful as well and the team returned on the fourth day. The group was called and given the report and found out they had never detected the team as they watched silently for the past three days. Even the vehicle was never detected even though the fire team patrol came within two hundred meters of the location. They didn't believe at first they had come so close to the recon team until they showed the maps and times they hit the various points. They conceded they had gone right past the camp and the team and never knew they were there.

The recon team would now take a three day stand down to rest, relax and get into the proper mindset of accomplishing the mission. They would meet in the mornings to do PT and only do

proficiency firing. The pack covers were completed and handed over to the team and the vehicle was readied by Kristy and Ryan, who packed away extra items inside to help the team along if needed. During firing, each person fired to the effective ranges of their weapons and beyond. Even Thomas took his 5.56mm weapon out to five hundred meters and fired off twenty-five of the practice grenades from ranges of thirty meters out to four hundred meters. They traded off weapons including their pistols and continued to fire. Each person fired a two hundred round belt from the M-249 and practiced on clearing jams, reloading and firing from different positions. The group also fired ten practice grenades apiece at various targets. Each day, they got a little better, except for Frank, who was about as perfect as he could get.

CHAPTER 29 – WATCHING

Time since attacks: 6 Months, 12 days
Date/Time: 1 November/0811 Local
Location: The Ranch

The team departed the Ranch early in the morning with tearful goodbyes from their significant others. They mounted the M-249 into the turret of the HMMWV and drove slow enough down the road to detect potential ambushes, but fast enough to get out of them quickly if they had too. When they reached the side road leading away to the farmhouse, they parked on the opposite side and concealed the vehicle. From there, they mounted their packs and started towards the target area, slowly and silently. Michael led off, followed by Thomas, Frank and Darren in a ranger file. They found a suitable spot for the base camp and stashed their packs away and loaded the coordinate into the GPS devices they carried as well as taking a bearing from the roadway and the approximate amount of distance between there and the encampment.

"The farmhouse should only be about a mile away at this point," said Darren.

"We should go and check it out before we move that loud diesel back this way," said Michael.

All four agreed this was the best course of action and prepared to move again. They grabbed their patrol packs from their main packs and ensured the ghillie covers were in place before combat checking each other. They departed as silently as they had before and moved on in the direction of the farmhouse. Each time they reached a clearing or pathway; they either boxed it or scrolled the path. Eventually, they came to a large clearing and could see the house clearly through the trees. It was a larger farmhouse with two levels and they backed off to discuss the recon. They would split into pairs, with one team moving clockwise and the other counter clockwise around the clearing.

It took almost two hours for the two teams to move their way around and meet up on the far side. During that time, each person took notes on how many people they saw, guards posted and conversations they heard. No additional security beyond one guard near the front of the house was seen and they created a detailed map of what they found. After meeting, they decided to continue in the directions they had been going so each team would have the opportunity to see something the other had missed. After another two hours they met back up in the original location and moved away from the site.

At the base camp, they ate and discussed what they had seen. The map from Carl was fairly accurate and they didn't need to modify it much to suit their needs. As planned, two would stay at the base camp and two would move up for an extended recon of the area. They decided to leave the vehicle where it was since it was only about three quarters of a mile away from their base camp and the engine could potentially give away their position. The long range radio was brought out and several coded phrases were sent to the Ranch giving their intent to initiate the mission and remain in place. The remainder of the day was spent preparing the base camp like

they had outside the Ranch with the natural shelters making observation impossible from more than twenty meters away. After which, they started their recon and the first pair went out. They continued to rotate in to the house and observe all manner of activity every four hours.

It was on the third day they finally saw significant activity. Thomas and Michael were watching the area silently on the west side of the house. About half the group came out after loud yelling was heard from the inside. They got into an old Chevy truck and the Subaru wagon and departed the area. Thomas radioed this to Frank and waited for a response. Frank responded they were sitting tight at the base camp and would wait for further before moving up to replace them. After several minutes of waiting, Frank radioed they heard the bad muffler on the Chevy as it had passed the patrol base. They waited another hour before moving up to the south side to watch the house.

The group that departed did not return that night and brought back a hostage the next day. Frank and Darren were in position to watch them pull the screaming female from the truck. She was younger, maybe seventeen or eighteen and full of fight. She kicked and bit at her kidnappers until they "leader" came out to inspect the girl. It was the same person from before at the Ranch that had been preaching Islam to George, Michael and Thomas. Frank silently peered through his scope at the small group and Darren watched with the binoculars. When they saw the leader coming towards them, one of the two forcefully ripped the shirt off her back, exposing her upper body. She attempted to cover up, but was unable to do so since the two yanked back her arms and held them tight.

The leader strode up to her and waved the other two holding her off. Quickly, he backhanded her across the face, knocking her to the ground. He yelled at her to get on her knees, shaking his fist at her. She wiped the blood away from her mouth and stood upright looking him in the face before attempting to strike him back. He blocked the halfhearted slap with his left arm while laughing at her and retaliated in kind, backhanding her again across the face. She fell to the ground and attempted to get up and run away.

The leader grabbed a shotgun from a nearby member and racked the slide. Darren saw Frank out of the corner of his eye pull his rifle back into his shoulder and prepare to fire. He quickly dropped the binoculars and covered the front of Frank's scope with his hand. Suddenly, a shotgun blast was heard and the girl took the full load of 00 buck to her back and fell to the ground.

"I've got a clean shot!" growled Frank in a whisper.

"Our mission here is more important! You give away our position and everything we have done so far is lost!" growled Darren in reply.

The leader had racked the slide again and walked slowly to the dying girl. He held the shotgun one handed and pointed it at her head from two feet away. He pulled the trigger again and the shotgun flew up in recoil. The girl would have died from the first shot, but the second shot straight to the head from close range was far too gruesome and entirely cold blooded.

"We can't just let them get away with this!" growled Frank again.

"In due time. If we fire now, we have to evade and get out of here. The entire group is outside right now and they will come after us. Now is not the time for revenge!" said Darren.

They watched as the leader arrogantly strode back towards the group and made an announcement. They couldn't hear what was being said and Frank had picked up the binoculars to observe the targets. He burned the face of the leader into his mind and vowed one day he would have his revenge. The girl was carried off by three of the men into the woods near Darren and Frank. They thought for a moment they might have to move from their position and prepared to grab their packs and sneak away. However, the men brought her just inside the tree line and dropped her into a small hole that had been dug out before the team's visit. As they dropped her into the hole, another member came back carrying two shovels. They covered the girl in two feet of earth before leaving and returning to the house.

Thomas and Michael were on duty the next day when the next significant activity took place. They had taken up a position on the north side of the house and were about to be relieved in another hour by Darren and Frank. It was close to 1500 and the three watched as the gang members went about doing various tasks around the farm. They kept notes as they always did and counted how many individuals they saw. Suddenly, they heard the report of a large caliber rifle near the roadway. Michael continued to watch the house and how the residents reacted while Thomas watched the area the shot had come from. One of the members of the gang had been hit by the rifle shot and lay on the ground bleeding and screaming. He didn't last long as the large caliber bullet had struck him in the heart and he was close to death. Thomas radioed to Darren and found out the two were still secure at the base camp, but were preparing to move in case they were needed. Thomas radioed they were fine for the moment when the report of another shot was heard.

Another man dropped and the gang in the house started firing in the direction of the shots. Almost every member came from behind the house and started firing in the general direction of the roadway leading in. Suddenly, a man carrying an M16 style rifle came out and emptied a full magazine on full auto at the house. He was in the middle of reloading the magazine when several shots from the house found their mark and ended his life. Another man rose up and started firing in his place, wielding an SKS. He rapidly fired the clip and reloaded before he, too, met the same fate. Another single rifle shot was heard and another member of the gang dropped from behind his cover. The firing from the house was now rising and several bursts of automatic fire were heard as the gang sprayed the area where they thought the rifle fire was coming from. The firing continued for several minutes before a man emerged, bloodied from several wounds. He rose up, unsteadily and pointed a pistol in the direction of the house and started firing single shots. His shots were not accurate and the defenders of the house took careful aim at the man and unleashed a firestorm of lead and copper. The man was hit repeatedly and finally fell to the ground. The gang continued shooting at his lifeless body and at those of the other two before a cease fire was finally called.

"Who were those guys?" whispered Michael.

"I don't know, but they were pretty brave and stupid for taking on that house all by themselves," answered Thomas.

"We might need to think about an early ex-fil," said Michael.

"We should be ready, but we need to see what kind of actions these guys are going to do now," said Thomas.

"Okay, but we need to be ready to go in a moment's notice," said Michael.

He relayed the contact report to Darren in case they didn't make it out and the observations they had seen during the firefight. During this time, five members of the gang came out and shot each one of the men in the head as a just in case measure. They collected the weapons the three had been carrying and went back to the farmhouse. The entire gang was still milling around outside, holding their weapons in tight. The leader of the group announced that at least ten of the gang would be taking a patrol around the perimeter to see if there was anyone else. When nobody volunteered, the leader picked at random and sent them on their way. When one refused to go, the leader spoke a few words to the group and he was immediately attacked by five other members. After disarming him, they took to kicking and beating him for almost two minutes before the leader made them stop. Another "volunteer" was picked and the group got underway, waling single file towards the woods.

Thomas and Michael watched intently as the group first swept the area where the firing had started and moved clockwise through the woods, now on line with each other. While they couldn't see them, they could hear curses every so often and heard the group breaking their way through the rough underbrush in the surrounding woods. The two prepared to move back away from their observation point and silently crept into the woods to their rear. It took the gang nearly an hour to make their way to where Thomas and Michael were hidden. Their ghillie suits blended them in perfectly with the surrounding areas. The natural camouflage put on by Shannon and her group helped the two evade observation, even though one of the gang members was less than thirty yards away from the pair. They continued on, not really looking for signs of additional attackers more than just walking through the woods.

Suddenly, one of the gang members stopped and raised his rifle towards Thomas and Michael. They were alarmed at first before a deer jumped through the bush and headed into the forest. The man sent off several shots from his SKS at the retreating deer, missing every time. Two of the shots came close enough to Thomas and Michael that they could hear it as it whizzed by. Neither man reacted before the leader of the patrol got the man to stop firing and went off to investigate. His pathway took him within thirty feet of the silent pair, but he never saw them since they were somewhat covered by a large bush. Not finding any blood trails, the leader of the patrol went back and completed the tour around the farmhouse. They returned to the house and informed the leader there were no additional people out there watching them and the area was secure. Thomas and Michael decided not to return to the tree line since the group was probably more alert now than they had been in the past four days. Instead they moved back towards the roadway to try and determine who the men were that attacked the gang.

It took them a little while longer to move since the gang still watched the area which the attack had come from with a sharp eye. Darren and Frank were still waiting on the radio call to either come relieve the two or come up for mutual support. They had already started moving towards the farm house, covering about half the distance when Thomas called them and told them to stay put for the moment. It took them about an hour of sneaky walking to get to the area where the attack had started. They looked over the area and found plenty of shell casings for the SKS and the M16. Not wanting to disturb anything, they continued looking until Michael found the rounds used by the "sniper" of the group. He picked up one of the .338 Winchester Magnum rounds and eyed it before handing it off to Thomas.

"No wonder the guard dropped so quickly," whispered Thomas.

"Yeah, pretty big round to be hitting a human with," said Michael.

"Is there really anything else keeping us here?" asked Thomas.

"I don't know, but probably not. I'm thinking we have seen just about all we could see. To be on the safe side, we should observe to see if these guys change patterns," said Michael.

Thomas replaced the round on the ground in case the gang actually counted the brass from the engagement. He seriously doubted they would, but it never hurt to make sure. They kept a silent watch on the house and called for Darren and Frank to continue with their relief.

The next day was a repeat of just about every other day since the gangs pattern hadn't changed with the exception of one member walking over to the wood to investigate a noise he had heard. It was well away from the position of Darren and Frank as they watched the individual walk over and peer into the woods nonchalantly. At around 1400, they left the house and joined Michael and Thomas at the ORP. The other two had already struck camp and were ready to get under way. Packs were shouldered and the team moved off silently into the woods to where the vehicle was located.

They loaded their packs into the vehicle and rapidly departed the scene. On the way back, they discussed the recon and what had transpired. They would type everything up in chronological order on the laptop when they got back to the Ranch and brief the group as a whole. The ride back was uneventful and the group got back just as dark was starting to fall. The families were reunited and the entire group came out to meet the team. While questions were asked, the Ranch residents knew the team was tired and needed a good meal, a shower and a good night's sleep. The HMMWV was left at the Conference Center and the team made arrangements to meet at the Center the next morning and discuss everything that had happened.

The four returned the next morning and felt worlds better after a long sleep and a shower. They started by pooling everyone's notes about the recon and discussing each over a map of the area. They focused on the defenses of the target and the patterns they saw during the week long recon. The report was typed up and prepared for everyone before they discussed some of the minor points about the recon. On the whole, the gang didn't seem too prepared for an assault by a well trained force, although they made up for the lack of tactics with firepower. The former military

members of the group were brought in to help and offer suggestions. Several questions arose that they had not written down, but had observed.

"During the day, they have more people outside since it's daylight, although they aren't farming or anything else. If we want a siege, it might take a while. I know the pump has to run into the house since I never saw them gathering water from the outside," said Frank.

"Okay, so we are looking at the target having twenty-four, twenty-five people maximum unless they get more members in the next little bit. How do we deal with them?" asked Darren.

"Easy, crossfire from the exterior, machine gun teams at the corners, two additional teams for an assault. Either we fire up the house and wait for them to come out and surrender or we wait them out until they run out of food. During that time, we snipe them out as they snipe at us. Get some precision shooting down cold, one machine gun and one precision rifle on each corner with one more person for security and do it that way. We cut down the numbers as we go. Or we go in. Opposite corners with machine guns, snipe those on the exterior and do a dynamic assault with flashbangs on the interior. Should be simple," said Thomas.

"Sounds simple, but I think it's a little more complicated than that. You want to take a stab at planning it?" asked Darren.

"Sure, it shouldn't be that hard. Hand selected, twelve members and I would say three days observation before an attack. You know, this could be easier. They go out at least once a week for a supply run and at least half of them go. You think we might be able to catch them in an ambush while they are out raping and pillaging?" asked Michael.

"I would say at least a week in position, but that's definitely a thought on an ambush we need to cover. Plus, we choose the teams now and start training hard. Close quarters battle in groups of four. Darren as one team leader and me as another. Darren, what would you think of planning an ambush on these people?" asked Thomas.

"I like the idea. We saw at least half of them heading out on the last raid but there weren't any kind of patterns. We have to look at the target as well, there could be friendlies inside. We've already seen them take hostages already," said Darren. "However, if we could cut the numbers in half, that would be a huge help."

"Okay, Thomas, you plan the assault and Darren the ambush. The only suggestion I would make is the ambush be off site. The reason is not to alarm the occupants that something is happening to half their force. You said they were gone for an overnight visit somewhere; that alone shouldn't alarm them if they didn't return. Strike that night or early next morning and hit them hard. This is beginning to sound like a plan," said George.

"Okay, so Michael and I come up with a plan to force an assault on the farmhouse and Darren and Frank come up with the ambush. We get a rough draft for the plan and bring it to the group to refine it and put it in motion. Sound good?" asked Thomas. Everyone agreed this would be the best course of action for the group and the two teams prepared to meet the next day after

spending some quality time with their families.

The next day, Thomas went to the Parson's cabin and started planning everything out. They focused on the assault on the building and how the distance between the trees would pose a problem. "That's over two hundred yards from the tree line to the front door and further to the back. It's only about seventy yards from the north side to the house, but in order to get close enough, the guard outside needs to be dealt with. Plus, if they are alerted, that puts us in a bad situation since that would bring us right in front of the house," said Michael.

"So we have to come from the east directly at the door. Maybe we could crawl that distance, take down the guard silently and then make our way inside," said Thomas.

"You have to be really good and sneaky to pull that one off. We have Amy's silenced pistol, but at more than twenty-five meters, you risk not getting the target and him alerting everyone inside. Plus it's only a .22, it's not the most effective caliber for a one shot kill," said Michael.

"So we take out the guard and have a diversion on the north side of the house. The secondary team provides cover fire in the form of a diversion and we can make our way inside. Their focus should be on the firing coming from the north, making it easy for us to sneak in. These folks aren't military trained and they did flock to the side with the firing when those crazy dudes came up," said Thomas.

"But we wait until the targets come out and get some of them as they come out the door. We already saw them come out and take cover in those woods to try and flank the aggressors we saw. Diversionary fires until they pop out, we take whoever comes out and enter the house then," said Michael.

"We take out the solo guard out with one shot and that's the signal to attack. Darren and the second team fires on the target along with a machine gun and keeps them pinned down inside. My team waits on the outside with another machine gun crew in place for security. After they pop out, we hit them hard and make out way inside. Take down everyone holding a weapon or those deemed a threat. Rescue any hostages and get the house cleared as quickly as possible," said Thomas.

"Get everything rounded up inside and give it to the neighbors they took it from. The Minister's friend should be able to help with that. We keep the firearms unless someone really needs them. Leave the house as is in case someone needs to move in sometime," said Michael.

"This sounds good. Let's plan it a bit more," said Thomas as he got comfortable and grabbed a large art pad and the two went to work planning everything out. A little over two hours later, they had the basis for the attack plan, team alignments and weapons load out. They backwards planned the strike and provided timelines for the group to follow from the moment of the strike as far back as training. The plan came together and was written out and prepared for the group to see that night. More drawings were made on the large pads with each individual member's responsibility during the attack.

Darren and Frank had done the same thing, although they had visited George and asked for his expertise on a certain matter. They gave George the brief overview on the plan and he liked it. He also agreed to train Rick to use the explosives they would need to pull it off and offered his services to get the job done. The two met Thomas and Darren at the Conference Center and both teams swapped plans. They finalized the roster of the teams and provided backups for everyone. If all went well, they would move within ten days to the ORP they had already found during their recon of the farmhouse. Training would begin the next day and go hard until the day they left on the trucks for the mission.

They came up with a simple third plan to lay the house under siege by placing two man teams at the four corners of the house. Two of the teams would have machine guns along with a precision rifle and the other two corners would have a precision rifle only. They would dig in and reinforce the positions as best as they could during the siege and wait the group out. That evening, all the plans were briefed and agreed on by the group with minor changes to each. The listing of personnel was briefed and nobody backed out of the team assignments. The group continued to talk over the mission over the next three hours, coming to an agreement on everything from call signs to ex-fil plans to rally points, actions on contact, any situation they could think of. Finally the plans were concrete and agreed on. The selected teams would begin training the next morning, early, starting with PT by Michael. They would be ready…they had to be ready.

CHAPTER 30 – WHERE'S MURPHY?

Time Since Attacks: 7 Months, 7 days
Date/Time: 27 November/1207 Local
Location: Near Cañon City, Colorado

The team had been in position for the assault for four days and was still waiting for the gang to leave the house to go on one of their "missions" to one of the local communities to extort the local residents. During that time, they had planned on a supply run from the Ranch and they made contact every three hours to ensure everything was going well. The gang had made some short range patrolling during their stay, but had gone no more than a quarter mile away from the house and even then had only covered the eastern and southern edges of the property. Rick came up with a problem to Darren since he was acting "Camp Commander" while Thomas was away with Kristy observing the target facility.

"Dude, we really need to send him back to the Ranch," said Rick looking at the green faced Stu.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Darren.

"I don't know; something he ate maybe?" said Rick.

"Stu? What about it?" asked Darren.

"No, Darren, I think I'm good to go. I don't want to leave and can hack it," said Stu weakly.

"Stu, nobody is going to hold this against you. You could only put us in danger if you stay and aren't one hundred percent," said Darren.

"I'm straight, I can handle it," said Stu before turning green again and leaving to vomit.

"Okay, that provided the answer. Supply run is due in another hour, get your things packed. Rick, you going to take him to the rendezvous point?" asked Darren.

"I'll take him up," said Rick.

"Head on down the road and let George know he is staying. You can still make the assault in three days when you get better," said Darren to Stu. Stu weakly nodded and turned to gather his things. Rick turned to Stu and offered his assistance in gathering up the items he had unpacked. Eventually, they got everything packed up and departed the area, heading towards the resupply point.

Three hours later, they were joined by George and Amy, not the expected Michelle. "Where is Michelle?" asked Darren.

"Took sick, something she ate we think. Green as grass. And since Rick is needed around the household, I sent him on back. They are checking the MREs when they get back," said George.

"You think she is up to this?" asked Darren in a low voice, nodding towards Amy.

"Amy? For observation, no problems. For an assault, I don't think so; however, if we had to force an assault, just put her on the support element with me. On the ambush, I take Rick's place as demolition and she takes Stu's place as overwatch, we will be okay," said George.

Darren had learned to trust George in these matters and consented to the position swap. The only huge factor in a forced assault would be Michael and Greg now joining him on the second team for an assault and not the expected Rick and Stu. However, it was a contingency they had prepared and trained for, so it wasn't a major concern. George knew how to operate the M-249 that Greg would have been using, so a weapon swap would not be a problem. The rest of the day went without incident and the group settled in for the night. Amy was a little apprehensive about being with the teams on the mission, but George calmed her down and started going over the rest of the procedures with her. She picked up things quickly and was repeating them like a parrot before long. The next day, it was business as usual except for two members of the gang filling the tanks on the Subaru and the Chevy truck.

"It looks like a group is getting ready to move," said Darren, peering through the field glasses at the farmhouse. "Two vehicles, the long bed Chevy and the Subaru wagon, ten, no twelve men getting in. All armed with long guns, some pistols, cheering about something."

The two vehicles pulled out, four men crammed into the first vehicle and eight into the second. They drove away from the farmhouse and passed the team sitting in the woods watching their every movement. They didn't notice the two watching them as they departed and continued down the road as usual. "Boston, this is Chicago," called Darren over the radio.

"This is Boston, go ahead," said Ryan through the receiver.

"Group of two vehicles, twelve men enroute to your location, E-T-A three mike. Are you prepared to trail?" asked Darren.

"Affirmative, Boston will trail," stated Ryan.

"Roger and out," said Darren as he turned to Frank. "Get everyone ready to move. Wherever they go, we follow."

Frank turned and alerted the team to the rear of their location. Ryan called in the contact and stated he was moving to follow as everyone was heading back to the vehicles. Darren had everyone quick marching the distance in ranger file formation towards the vehicles a mile away. Ryan continued his pursuit of the vehicles, riding his motorcycle as it offered good speed and somewhat stealth. He started breaking up, but another vehicle with Greg was already pulling behind and trailing them, relaying the reports to Darren.

It took almost a half an hour to reach the vehicles and get mounted. By this time, Greg was starting to break up as well but from they heard the last report stating the vehicles had stopped. They were on a long stretch of dirt road leading out to a small housing development that was half finished before the Fall. Ryan followed as closely as he could without being detected and finally saw the targets pull off into the small cluster of houses and people coming out like zombies. Ryan pulled off the road and shut his bike off before the vehicles stopped at the houses and watched as the targets jumped from the vehicles and started barking orders at the residents. He continued to watch as several were slapped around before returning to their house to gather the food the gang was demanding. He had lost contact with Darren shortly after leaving and was losing contact with Greg, but he came back into range soon enough and stated Darren was not far behind.

After another fifteen minutes, Darren came into range and requested an update. "Chicago, this is Boston. Be advised, targets are not preparing to leave soon and are settling down to eat. Still only twelve hostiles and no hostages. Will continue to observe, over."

Darren acknowledged the radio call and started making preparations for the ambush they had planned on paper thus far and were about to find out how practical it was. He had two teams minus Ryan available for the ambush and didn't want to put a single one in danger. Turning down the road the hostiles were on, he finally came across a tree that would work for their plan. "George, there is the tree we need, can you get the charge set?"

"I think so, it leans the right way, but had a pretty thick trunk…might take a bit more than I planned to use," answered George.

"I don't care if it takes the whole block, we have more. This is the opportunity to get twelve of them in the open and not inside where we have to dig them out," answered Darren.

"This ain't no cherry bomb and a mailbox. I know what I'm doing so relax a bit will you," said George as he prepared to climb the side of the tree to place the explosive charge.

"I'm sorry, I've just wanted to get these people ever since the recon," said Darren as he was busy sending the vehicles into the woods and out of sight, well out of the projected ambush zone.

"Tom, get your cannon and Brian with the machine gun set up right down there by that hook in the road on top of that mound. You should have full field of fire all the way out with no backdrop. We will be clear of everything and you shouldn't have to worry about us in the line of fire. Greg, you start getting the Claymore set up in the road and Kristy, get the ones set up on the right side of the roadway, Amber on the left side."

"Frank, get Amy into her overwatch position watching down the road to the east to warn us, then pick your spot with Thomas. Let me get the visual marker in for the go, no go line," said Darren, quickly making the ambush come to life. He ran down the road to a spot about fifty meters from where Kristy and Amber were placing their mines and shoved a wooden stake into the ground with a piece of orange engineering tape on top. This visual marker would be the point of no return for the group. Anything after that point, they would not be able to escape the ambush.

Each person went about their duties in an efficient manner and got ready for the coming ambush. Greg was busy attacking the dirt roadway to cover an M18A1 Claymore mine in the middle pointing upwards. It was never designed as an anti-vehicle mine, but worked reasonably well for that purpose. Kristy and Amber were busy placing four more mines on each side of the road, angled upwards in order to catch the upper portions of the vehicles. Thomas and Brian were busy setting up the Barrett rifle Thomas had brought along specifically for this job and the M-240 machine gun on a small dirt mound overlooking the roadway. It was the remains of the dirt scraped off the roadway when the site was still under construction. It sat almost ten feet higher than the roadway just off the side and offered a commanding view of the roadway. It had overgrown with weeds and grass since the Fall and would provide them excellent concealment during the ambush. They would have little problems engaging the two vehicles with plunging fire from the machine gun and direct fire from the large rifle when they came down the road.

George was busy wiring some of the C-4 explosive to the trunk of a tree leaning across the roadway. When detonated, it would hopefully sever the tree and block the roadway. He had just begun to spread the explosive across the trunk of the tree when Darren appeared and offered to help. George tossed him the wiring for the detonator and told him to stake it down just inside the woods and find a spot for the ambush. Kristy and Amber were busy placing the other Claymores and daisy chaining them into a common detonator. They ran the wire across the road and covered it up using loose dirt, hoping it would show too badly from the passing vehicles. They would dig a small trench after they had covered the wire, but wanted it concealed in case they had to go earlier. Kristy was busy running the rest of the line back to the woods where Darren was getting the rest of the wiring ready. When she returned, she placed loose grass around the mines to conceal them from the passing vehicles.

After twenty minutes of preparation, the ambush was almost complete except for the Claymore Greg was digging in and the C-4 George was currently working with. George stated he needed three more minutes to complete and Greg was having a hard time getting through the packed earth in the roadway. He stated he might need almost ten more minutes to get down enough to bury the mine properly. Thomas and Brian had quickly dug four hasty positions in the dirt and gotten the machine gun set up on the tripod, hidden from view. Thomas went down to assist the others and started helping dig the small line across the road and was joined by Frank after he had gotten Amy into position and concealed her as best as he could. Ryan continued to give contact reports and told the group the gang had finished eating and appeared to be packing up the items to move. This report spurred the group on and they redoubled their efforts, finally getting the wires buried for the Claymores and getting the other into place.

As planned, Ryan would remain concealed until the convoy passed and the ambush had been sprung. He would pass off the visual duties to the sniper and machine gun element, which was in a position to watch the small convoy as they rolled past. Thomas, Kristy and Frank ran back to the machine gun position and Brian full loaded a belt into the large gun. Greg finally got the mine covered and joined the rest of the teams hiding in the woods, preparing to meet the gang as they came down the road. He slipped the wire into the clacker, but kept the safety on and waited. After fifteen minutes, they finally received the last call from Ryan. "Chicago, this is Boston. Group is moving and count still at twelve. Repeat, count is as twelve, no friendlies mixed in.

You are clear to engage. Passing my location…now! E-T-A two minutes to your location and plus one to location Denver," stated Ryan over the radio.

"Chicago to all units, stand by for status starting with Boston. Boston status?" called Darren.

"Boston is green at this time, have visual of targets," called Ryan.

"Denver?"

"Denver and Miami are yellow, no visual," answered Thomas.

"Fargo?"

"Fargo is yellow, no contacts at this time," radioed Amy.

"Chicago and Atlanta are yellow, no visual, standing by," called Darren.

Everyone tensed as they prepared to meet the gang and if all went well in the next four minutes, fully half the gang they had been tracking would be dead or dying. Time seemed to slow as they waited until finally, the vehicles came into view, not traveling fast due to potholes in the road.

"Chicago, this is Boston, update, ninety seconds to your location," radioed Ryan.

"Chicago copies, break, Denver, copy last?" asked Darren.

"Denver and Miami copies, ninety seconds. Contact! Denver and Miami are now green. Visual made, going hot at this time," radioed Thomas. The four in the overwatch position flipped off the safeties on the various weapons and peered through the sights at the slow moving convoy. Finally, they had passed the spot in the road designated by Darren as the final go, no go line. Everything seemed to be in order as they passed the normal looking stake with orange engineering tape around the top. In normal times, nobody would have paid it any mind and this was the case now as well.

"Stand by to execute…ten seconds…five…four…three…two…one. Execute! Execute! Execute!" shouted Darren into the radio.

George detonated the C-4 explosive in the tree and it went off as planned in a thunderous roar. Darren looked back up as the top half the tree fell onto the roadway in front of the vehicles. The drivers had already slammed on the brakes and the first was in an almost picture perfect position. "Hit it!" yelled Darren at Greg and Amber.

Both detonated the Claymore mines they were assigned. Greg's Claymore went off almost directly underneath the engine block of the Subaru, lifting the front of the vehicle almost three feet off the ground as the explosion also wrecked everything inside the compartment and blew the hood off the vehicle and the engine partially out. Amber had detonated her mines as all four went off at the same time in a manmade thunder. The twenty eight hundred steel projectiles

ripped through the thin steel of the body and on into the less tough flesh of the occupants.

After the mines detonated, Thomas aimed at the rear vehicle and sent an armor piercing round into the engine block of the truck. He was fairly sure the Claymores had already disabled the truck, but it never hurt to be sure. Brian opened up on both the vehicles with the machine gun, shifting fire as necessary as he swept the ambush area. Kristy let a grenade fly from her M-203 and was rewarded with a hit right next to the trail vehicle. She fired a second grenade at the front vehicle but was slightly off due to the wind blowing it to the right. It landed close to five feet off the roadway and detonated, but still catching the Subaru in the shrapnel pattern. Frank was still looking for targets and hadn't found any yet until a figure jumped out of the now burning front vehicle. He tracked in on the target and provided the correct amount of lead before pulling the trigger and stopping the man in his tracks. He recognized the man as the leader of the group and the same that had killed the young girl in cold blood. Frank engaged a second time, this time a head shot, ensuring the target was dead. Brian continued to engage the vehicles as did Thomas with the monster Barrett. They had both gone through a magazine and a full belt of ammunition between the two vehicles and reloaded while there was a lull in the firing. The firing stopped and an eerie quiet came over the area. "Denver, this is Chicago. Chicago and Atlanta are preparing to sweep, hold your fire."

"Denver copies."

"Miami copies."

They kept watching as Darren, George, Greg and Amber swept out of the woods and went to the vehicles. After sweeping through the entire kill zone, they returned and checked on the victims of the ambush. None were left alive.

"Denver, Miami, you are clear to displace. Fargo and Boston, I need you to remain in position," ordered Darren over the radio.

"Fargo copies."

"Boston copies- standby! Non hostiles coming down the road toward your location. Unarmed, I say again, unarmed. Eight to ten individuals, running towards your location, civilian dress, unarmed and on foot," said Ryan, calling in the modified SALUTE report.

"Roger, Boston, keep an eye on them. Break, Miami and Denver, stand by in position," called Darren as he pulled everyone back into the woods.

Several minutes passed and Ryan had continued to call the individuals in. Finally the individuals were in view, although now walking. The ammunition was starting to cook off in the front vehicle and the burnable material inside the passenger compartment was starting to catch fire. The residents from the development stopped almost a hundred yards short of the vehicles and watched the front one burn. Several tense moments passed before the group cheered and clapped. "Chicago, this is Boston, can you see this?" asked Ryan over the radio.

“Roger, see it. I think they are non-hostile,” said Darren. “Miami and Denver, I’m preparing to meet them with Chicago-Alpha. Stand by in overwatch for now.”

Darren and George stood and walked out of the woods, avoiding the burning front vehicle. The group saw the two camouflaged up and were initially a little afraid of the two men. Darren and George walked slowly to the small group of people so not to alarm them. When they were within speaking distance, Darren called out. “We are friendly and don’t intend you any harm.”

The small group looked at each other like Darren had just spoken Greek to them. He repeated himself and walked a bit closer. Finally a man emerged from the group and strode towards the two men. “Hello, I’m Bob Riley. Who are you?”

“Darren and this is George,” answered Darren.

“Are you responsible for this?” asked Bob.

“We are,” answered George.

“Just the two of you?” asked Bob.

“No, we have more watching over us right now,” answered Darren.

“We don’t want any trouble, mister. We are just glad someone took care of these bastards for us. Praise God!” answered Bob. “Can we shake your hands?”

“I think that will be okay,” answered Darren, stepping out and taking the offered hand. He was joined by George and the rest of the group and surrounded the two men thanking them for taking away the men who would treat them like animals to do their will. After the initial round of gratitude, Bob pulled Darren off to the side and explained further.

“These people have been coming around for quite some time now, at least two months and demanding food, gasoline and our women every time. They called it ‘protection tax’ for keeping us safe. Made us convert to Islam, evil devils! We tried to resist at first, but between all of us living here, we only have three guns and maybe a dozen rounds between them. They killed two of us as an example and told the rest of us they would take our daughters and wives if we didn’t work for them. We didn’t have any choice but to concede to them. They treated us like crap and took what food we raised during the summer. We still have some, enough to get us through the winter, but barely. I don’t know where you all came from, but I know God sent you. Our prayers have been answered!”

“Well, Bob, I don’t know about being sent by God, but I know we got here at just the right time. We still have the rest of their group to deal with, another dozen or so. I suggest to you that until we make contact again, you stay out of the open and hide nearby. We will make contact with you as soon as it’s safe to do so. We have some further questions though, can you wait a second?” said Darren, forming a plan in his mind.

"I'll answer whatever I can," said Bob.

"Denver, Miami and Atlanta, you are all clear to rally and get the vehicles. Meet me by the group of people. Fargo, Boston, stand by, we will pick you up when we are done," said Darren into the radio before turning back to Bob. "Okay Bob, some of my friends are coming out so don't be alarmed. You think you could answer a few more questions?"

"Sure, partner. You just ask anything you want," answered Bob.

"Did these guys ever spend the night here?" asked Darren.

"Sometimes, maybe a third of the time they would stay overnight, get drunk or whatever and kick us out of our homes," answered Bob.

"How long has it been since that happened?" asked Darren.

"I dunno, maybe a few weeks. Why?" asked Bob.

"Well, if they spend the night sometimes, it would be ideal…" said Darren trailing his voice off thinking about the plan Thomas had devised and would lead against the farm house.

"What are you talking about, boy? Are you crazy or something?" asked Bob.

"No, sorry sir, just thinking about the rest of them. Listen, we have to leave here but you are welcome to whatever is still in those vehicles. Like I said, I would hide nearby until we make contact again, which might be as soon as tomorrow. If you see a vehicle coming up, look for a blue bandanna on the driver side mirror. That will be us. Understand?" asked Darren.

"Sure, mister, I understand. We will be waiting for you to show back up and then we will know that it's safe," said Bob.

"Exactly, well, Bob, it's been a pleasure and we hope to see you soon," said Darren as he shook Bob's hand again.

"You too, mister. Again, we can't thank you enough for what you did here. You all need anything before you get going?" asked Bob.

"No, I think we'll be okay. We might be back to bring you some stuff later though," said Darren and he and George left out to rejoin the rest of the group.

The remainder of the group had arrived except for Amy and Ryan and was briefed by Darren. "According to our new friend here, these jokers spend the night about a third of the time. I was thinking, Tom, your plan calls for the dead of night but we always thought it would be impossible to get in with twenty-five people there. Now they are down to twelve and the other dozen missing probably won't cause them any concern. They just might think they are having a sleepover at this place. I think your plan is a go for tonight."

"You think? I mean, cutting the defenders in half makes our job quite easy, especially with the other half sound asleep which is what the plan calls for. I think it is doable," answered Thomas. "What do the rest of you all think?"

"No better time than the present and these are the teams that have trained for the mission. We still have Michael and Tracy there watching everything and can make contact with them as soon as we arrive. I think we are a go," said George.

The rest of the group agreed and prepared to move. Ryan would contact the Ranch and let them know the raid would be moved up to early the next morning. They planned to go at 0300 in the morning, when human reaction times were at their worst. They mounted their vehicles and picked up Amy, who had been patiently waiting. The drive back to the rally point was filled with apprehension and fear about the upcoming mission. It was the largest tasking the Ranch residents had undertaken so far and everyone was a little nervous about the outcome. They reached the ORP in less than forty-five minutes and stashed the vehicles under the camouflage again. Thomas took over as mission director and immediately put half of those who had returned to cleaning weapons and the other half to pulling security. He and Darren crept away from the rally point to make contact with Michael and Tracy, who were continuing to watch the farm house. Thomas had already alerted them they were on the way over the radio.

The two crawled up to the position Michael had chosen to watch the target building. "Anything happen while we were gone?" asked Thomas.

"About an hour ago, two came out and got into a fist fight. Guard rotation was normal, still only one outside. Nobody else came along and still no friendlies inside. Everyone except the guard is inside right now, eating I suppose," said Michael.

"Sounds good. We go tonight," said Thomas.

"Moving the timeline up? Was the ambush successful?" asked Tracy.

"Yep, no problems there at all. Sorry to have your combat cherry popped on this one. I'm going to have you on the support team with Ryan since you haven't trained fully yet," said Thomas.

"No problem, I wouldn't want to put anyone in danger by going into the house. Support is just fine by me," said Tracy, laughing slightly at the off color remark from Thomas.

"Keep us posted and we will send some relief in about a half an hour," said Thomas as he and Darren crawled away from the secluded spot in the tree line.

As they were walking back to the camp, Darren mentioned Amy. "What role will she be on?"

"The other support would be best I think. Her and George with the M-249, Ryan and Tracy with the M-240. George stands by with us and takes up the overwatch on point one, Ryan and Tracy take point three with the diversion team. As a matter of fact, let's go ahead and get George and

her up here to replace Tracy and Michael so we can go through the mission brief," said Thomas.

When they returned, Thomas briefed George and Amy on the changes. He asked Amy if she was comfortable with her role in the mission and got a positive yes in return. George promised he would look after her and they would be fine on the support role. Thomas sent them up to relieve Michael and Tracy so they could be part of the briefing. It would take close to an hour to get everyone back, so he put half the group on down time another quarter on security and the other quarter eating and cleaning weapons. Darren commented Thomas needed some downtime himself. Thomas informed him he wanted to review the plan one last time and told Darren to catch a nap. An hour passed and Michael and Tracy made their way back. Everyone was woken from their nap or finished what they were doing and gathered around Thomas.

"A few minor changes to the order, so listen closely. Situation is unchanged. Unacceptable hostile forces occupy a farmhouse which is a base of operations for extortion, murder and rape. Mission plans are still the same as before. A four man team will assault the farmhouse while covering fire from a diversionary team provides support."

"Execution changes as follows: Assault Team One, lead by me will force an assault on the main door and sweep the interior, taking down any hostiles remaining in the target. Assault Team Two, lead by Darren will be in diversionary role unless Team One is compromised or killed. Team alignments have changed, so stand by."

"Team One remains unchanged. Myself as team leader, paired off with Kristy. Brian as second in command paired off with Amber."

"Team Two has changed. Darren as team leader, paired off with Frank. Michael as second in command, paired off with Greg."

"Support Team Three changed. George paired off with Amy will be at Point One of the facility and provide overwatch for points one and two for the assault and engage any personnel who escape the facility after we enter."

"Support Team Four has changed. Ryan paired off with Tracy will be at Point Three of the facility and provide overwatch for points three and four and provide diversionary fires as necessary at the direction of Darren. Additionally, they will engage any personnel who escape the facility in case Assault Team Two has to force an entry."

"In case of compromise of Assault Team One, Team Two will enter the facility utilizing the rear entrance and clear in the same manner as Team One."

"We only have twelve known hostiles in the facility thanks to the work of Darren's ambush this afternoon. Execution will be single shot fired at the sentry outside by myself. Team Two will provide diversionary fire on the facility until the defenders exit the facility. Upon reaching a point fifty meters away or when they take cover, Assault Team One will open fire on the orders of Team One leader. Support Team Three will remain in place while Assault Team One enters and dynamically clears the facility from the front entrance. Entry will be at the discretion of

Team Two Leader in case Team One gets taken out. Go time has changed. We go in the morning at 0300 instead of two days from now. From what we heard, the groups sometimes spend the night at the places they raid, so their absence wouldn't be immediately noticed by our targets."

"Service and Support: emergency evacuation plans have not changed. Teams will ex-fil to the vehicles and escape the area or go on foot to pre-arranged pick up locations to wait for pick up by Ranch personnel. Ryan has contacted the Ranch already and they know about the timeline moving. Vehicles are already standing by to make the pickups in case of emergency."

"Command and Signal: no changes to command structure, call signs or to the radio frequencies we will be using. Any questions?" asked Thomas concluding the makeshift Operations Order.

Nobody had any questions, however, Darren had a look on his face that he did not agree. Thomas called on everyone to strike base camp and prepare all their items to be moved as soon as the assault was over or they had to leave the area quickly. He told them as soon as they finished getting their gear squared away, they were on down time except for the guard rotation. Thomas called on Darren to join him and speak his mind.

"Tom, there are a lot of unknowns here. First off, changing the assault teams this close in without more practice is going to be hard. Second, Amy is not fully vetted yet by our group. Third, we don't know for sure if the targets are going to be alert since half of them haven't shown back up. Fourth, moving the timeline up by two days is tricky," said Darren, being honest with his friend.

"Do you think your team needs more training?" asked Thomas.

"No, I think we are good to go, but I would like to have a few more practice runs just in case," answered Darren.

"I take that as a yes, you are ready in case my team gets it in the head. Everyone always wants a few more practice runs Darren, but I've seen the team you have run through the course. I think you are probably better than we are, tactically speaking. We were just a second faster. Second point, do you think Amy will have a problem, especially being with George?" asked Thomas.

"A monkey would be okay with George Taylor. Never mind; that was kind of a silly point to bring up," said Darren.

"And three? Do you think they are going to be alerted since half their buddies are currently dining in hell tonight and won't be showing back up? Even in light that they do it at least a third of the time?" asked Thomas.

"No, if they are used to seeing those guys away for an overnight visit, than it's a moot point. But I'm worried that the leader told them to show back up. Not really a good point since these guys aren't too disciplined," said Darren. "And moving the timeline up by a few days isn't really going to hurt anything. It might actually help out since we aren't doing anything except losing

the edge we got in training."

"So what's the major issue? If you aren't happy with something, let me know," said Thomas.

Darren hated making last minute changes to any plan, but three things were not in his favor. First off, Thomas was in charge, and second, he was right with the personnel swaps. Darren felt comfortable being the second assault team with Greg and Michael and thought it through in his head. There was nothing more they could have done to prepare except for a few more practice runs that had already been near perfect. Three, he had been the one to suggest changing the timeline to begin with.

"No, it's just me being me, everything is going to be okay. I'm just a worry wart," said Darren with a smile. "Now go and get some sack time. I'll cover you while you are down."

Thomas went back and repacked his gear. It would be dark soon and he needed to catch a nap before he would lead the mission to get rid of the gang using religion as reason to terrorize the local population. After packing his gear, he kept out his poncho liner and some easy to eat parts of the MREs they had been living on the past few days. Wrapping himself up in the liner, he leaned against a tree and was asleep within minutes, still worried as he fell into a deep sleep.

At 2300, Michael woke Thomas and told him it was time to get ready. Thomas took a moment to shake off the sleepiness and stretched the kinks out of his body. He stood up and noticed the darkness in the woods was worse than the previous nights. Looking up, it was an overcast sky, almost perfect for the assault to take place in four hours.

"Ryan and Tracy are almost ready to head that way and everyone else gets woken up in another hour. George stayed in place and did a one up and one down so they will be good to go when we get there. Everything is good to go for now," said Michael.

"Okay, any contact with the Ranch?" asked Thomas, still not fully awake.

"Nothing except 'awaiting further' and 'proceed on mission.' They are waiting for us to call when it's all over. I'm sure everyone has been up all night waiting or will be up at 0300 waiting," said Michael.

"Go ahead and get yourself a nap. An hour is better than nothing," said Thomas.

"Okay, can I borrow your poncho liner?" asked Michael.

"Go for it. Just shove it in the top of my ruck when you are done," answered Thomas.

He moved across the way to Ryan and Tracy who were getting ready to make their way to the overwatch position. It had been decided to move the support teams first since they were carrying the heavy weaponry and the smaller groups might avoid detection easier than a large group would. He wished them luck and shook both their hands before they moved away in the darkness, using night vision to guide them in the darkness. He faintly heard them for the first

fifty meters, then lost their noise in the natural sounds of the woods.

Thomas looked over the small encampment through the PVS-14 on his M-4 and saw Kristy silently looking out at the woods, scanning with the same NOD on the top of her rifle. She lowered it and slowly turned her head, trying to make out any noise that might be out of place. Thomas did the same, although he closed his eyes since a person's hearing would work better if another sense was taken away. Nothing sounded out of the ordinary and he crept across the camp and put his hand on her shoulder, giving her a "Hey." She jumped and gasped at the sudden touch.

"Tom! Don't ever do that again. You scared the crap out of me!" said Kristy.

"Sorry, I thought you heard me coming up behind you," said Thomas.

"No, didn't hear a thing. Good Lord, you are sneaky," she said, catching her breath.

"Yeah, good thing for us I'm on our side," said Thomas with a chuckle.

"You think we are ready for this?" asked Kristy in a whisper.

"Absolutely. We are gonna rock, you'll see," said Thomas. It would help to be a little positive and provide a good example, especially for the pre-mission jitters everyone seemed to be having. He felt her smile in the darkness and moved back across the camp to his perch where he continued watching and listening to the forest around him. He pulled out the MRE parts and ate them slowly, gaining energy for the mission. Silently, he went over the plan again in his mind, trying to think of some small detail they might have missed. The defenses at the target were halfway down, not as planned, but better. This scared Thomas a bit since the inevitable Murphy might show up at the wrong moment. He put the thoughts out of his mind and took another look around the camp, especially into the dark woods. Nothing could be seen or heard as he continued his thoughts.

At midnight, Kristy and Thomas went through the camp waking everyone to get ready for the mission. It would take them an hour to walk to the target and another hour to get into position. The eight members of the assault and diversionary teams woke and prepared themselves for the mission at hand, eating a bite and reviewing last minute plans. Nothing had changed on the mission orders and everyone seemed to know what their role and responsibilities were.

At 0030, they left for the march to the farmhouse in a ranger file. Thomas was on point and the members behind him made little or no noise at all. At a point a half a mile from the farmhouse, Darren and his team split off and went a separate direction to their respective zone. Thomas halted his team for a moment to have them drink some water and communicate with the two overwatch teams to ensure nothing was going on. They both confirmed the target was still quiet and nothing was out of the ordinary. The team of four continued their march silently through the woods to the target building.

Thomas and his team reached the clearing to the house a little earlier than planned, at 0150.

Thomas wanted a full hour to move through the tall grass to get closer to the target, so he had everyone make a final bathroom break and prepare to move at 0200 as planned. He looked through the trees at the lone sentry standing outside the target, finishing a cigarette. The cigarette would ruin his night vision close up and hopefully, he would be sufficiently bored enough to light another when they started their move. Everyone completed their break and had one last bite of food before going to the edge of the clearing and preparing to move.

At 0204, luck was with them and the sentry lit another cigarette, the flash of the butane lighter flaring in the night vision scope of Thomas's rifle. His team lined up on the right and left of him and got on the ground just outside the trees in the long grass. It wasn't especially cold that evening and light dew covered the grass. The water helped muffle the brief sounds of his team made as they crawled towards the target. George and Amy, at their overwatch position, kept the team updated as they moved through the two hundred yards to the position selected as the final spot. They were moving extremely slowly, but they were making progress. The sentry didn't seem to notice certain death creeping his way and continued to light cigarette after cigarette and paced in a circle five foot in diameter.

At 0247, Thomas and his team arrived in position. Ryan and Tracy and George and Amy radioed they were in position and awaiting the signal to begin the assault. Darren radioed he needed another four minutes to be finally prepared to go. Thomas thought again about the attack scheduled in less than ten minutes and thought about the unknown factors of the operation. Murphy still hadn't made his appearance until the last minute radio call from Darren.

"We are red, say again, red. Possible activity in the second floor. Stand by," the radio receiver in Thomas's ear pronounced.

He knew it would be better to wait for Darren to relay any further information. After two minutes, at 0257, Thomas impatiently made the call. "Chicago, this is Denver, status?"

"Red. One individual in the window looking out and peeing out of the second floor. Finishing up, another minute we will be green," said Darren.

Thomas clicked the mike twice in acknowledgement and brought his carbine to his shoulder. He sighted it in on the sentry and dialed up the power to its highest setting. The sentry still wasn't aware of the team lying still in the grass eighty meters away. If this is our only run in with Murphy, it's going to go off without a hitch. Thomas continued to observe the sentry smoking as his thoughts drifted away again…

CHAPTER 31 – REFLECTIONS

Time since attacks: 7 Months, 14 Days
Date/Time: 4 December/0809 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, after breakfast and prior to them starting their daily chores, Sharon asked an unusual question. "Thomas, do you love me?"

He was curious not only by the question, but the seriousness of her tone. She only called him "Thomas" in the tone of voice she had just used when it was really important. "Of course I love you Sharon, more than anything else on the planet. Why would you think otherwise?"

She stopped dressing for a moment and looked at him with a worried look on her face. She walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed with tears in her eyes. "I just wanted to hear you say it. I know you do love me, but I needed to hear it before…" she said as her voice trailed off, not finishing the statement she was about to make.

Thomas was a little worried at this point, not sure what was going on. He knew whatever it was; she needed a little support right now more than anything. He walked over to the bed and sat down next to her and took her hand in his. "Baby, there is nothing that could ever make me love you less. If something is wrong, let me know, don't keep it in. I will love you no matter what."

She leaned over into his arms and sniffled while saying "I know you love me, but something is wrong and I don't think you are prepared to hear about it."

Now he was seriously worried and beginning to think she was sick or something even worse. "Sharon, what is it? Please tell me. You have nothing to worry about."

"Well, if you think you are ready, I will let you know," she stated, clearing up somewhat.

Good Lord, women could cause a preacher to drink when they wanted to, he thought before continuing. "I am ready for whatever you can tell me. Just let me know, please. You are killing me by not telling me."

She took a deep breath and wiped away a tear from her eye with the bed sheet. She looked him straight in the eye. She had a serious look on her face as she said two simple words that would change his life forever. "I'm pregnant."

A wave of relief swept over him as the concerns of her having an illness went away, but the question remained. "Why were you worried about telling me that?" he asked and also started another thousand worries any new expecting father will have.

"I just remember a few weeks ago you saying at one of the group dinners about how bad a time it

is for people to be getting pregnant since there isn't any medical help available," she stated, tearing up again.

He looked at her and kissed her on the forehead, smiling as he did it. "Well, not that it's an issue now is it? You are pregnant? I'm happy for you…for us! But I mean…how…umm…I don't…how did it happen?"

She started to regain her composure and fell back into her normal self. "Well, it's a complicated process, and I would need some pictures, but really, your parents should have explained it too you long ago."

"Not that, silly, I mean, we were being careful and using protection most of the time. I know your birth control pills ran out, but we have been careful. I didn't think that it would happen," he stated, feeling the joy every man in the world feels on hearing he will be a new father.

"Well, I suppose the ninety-nine percent went by the wayside and the one percent managed to cause some trouble. Are you sure you aren't mad?" she asked.

"Of course I'm mad! I'm furious! How dare you go off and get pregnant! Like I had anything to do with it!" he proclaimed with a huge smile on his face. "Seriously, love, I can't even describe the feeling of joy I have right now. I love you no matter what and while we weren't planning on a family, it's no big deal. I kind of like the idea of being a father. Of course I'm not mad, why would you ever think I would be?"

"Well, some men are funny that way, wanting to have more of a say so in the pregnancy thing. Plus, with your comments, I wasn't sure you would be okay with it," she said seriously.

"Even if I wasn't okay with it, it's not like we can do anything about it. I don't believe in abortion and neither do you. I take full responsibility for this," said Thomas with a smile.

"Oh, I beg to differ there, stud. I believe you only had a fifty percent part in this. Besides, I have to do the hard work now, at least for almost eight more months," she said with a grin.

A grin came across his face. "Oh yeah, hard part huh? Like I won't have it easy, going out at two o'clock in the morning looking for butter pecan ice cream and chicken nuggets. Or the complaining about your swollen ankles. Or how about the heat flashes and you putting out the fire in the stove. Like I'm going to have it easy? You have it much easier, my love."

"Nah, my unusual cravings are limited to olives and beef jerky. I think we might be able to substitute the beef jerky for another animal and I think we still have a stash of olives around here. You will be safe for the next few months," she said with a grin seeing he wasn't upset about her being pregnant.

"Speaking of which, how far along are you?" he asked.

"Maybe six weeks as far as I can tell, maybe a little less, but I'm not sure," Sharon answered.

Thomas grabbed her and gave her a gentle hug but not too hard since he didn't want to squeeze her that much. "I love you more than my own life. Do we start picking names now or wait…"

That evening, Thomas and Sharon were going to surprise everyone during to the community dinner. As everyone was eating, they were preempted by the Garcia's. "Kristy and I have an announcement to make. As far as we can tell, Kristy is about six weeks pregnant with our first child!" proclaimed Stephen proudly.

Congratulations came from around the table to the Garcia's as Thomas stood up. "Not to take anything away from the two of you, but I think someone needs to go check the water supply tomorrow. It seems like there is something causing pregnancy as Sharon and I are expecting as well. Close to six weeks too."

Again congratulations and applause came from around the room for the two families as everyone came up to hug Sharon and Kristy and shake Tom's and Stephen's hands. Thomas turned to Michelle with a twinkle in his eye. "You know you and Rick are next," he said with a mirthful grin. Thomas knew the two didn't want any more children, but neither of them had gotten "fixed" before the attacks in the spring.

"Thomas Dayfield! If you jinx me and I get pregnant, I am going to give both Rick and you a vasectomy the hard way!" she stated with a beet red face while wielding a bread knife.

Laughter came from around the table as Rick joined in poking at his wife. "Don't worry, Tom. If she cuts like she shoots, you will probably get your appendix cut out, or maybe a lobotomy, which will not be a big deal for you." Everyone in the room roared with laughter as Michelle turned red again and hit Rick in the arm.

"You know, we need some sort of nightlife around here, something to keep you younger folks entertained, other than the entertainment you already are providing for yourselves. If there was something else to do, maybe you all wouldn't be off making babies," said George thoughtfully, but with a grin on his face.

"Easy for you to say old man, your wife has been fixed and you are too old for that sorta nonsense anyway," said Dave, joining in the poking match that had erupted.

However, George didn't miss a beat in his reply. "Sure, sure, you young buck. My wife knows otherwise about my unending machismo and sexual prowess."

Cynthia could not stop herself from responding to that comment. "Of course he is right. He could whip your young butt six ways to Sunday doing shots of Metamucil or in a snoring contest. He wears himself out just taking a shower much less anything else."

"I beg to differ, dear wife. What about that weekend getaway we had in Greece?" he asked.

"We were twenty years younger, twenty pounds lighter and you didn't have a bad back. And

yes, one of our daughters came about from that little excursion, but alas, since then it's been nothing but boredom and Reader's Digest," stated Cynthia with a theatrical sigh.

Everyone in the room howled at the comments and started whistling cat calls at George. He held up his hands in surrender and continued to eat. The mood tonight was very jovial with the announcements of the pregnancies and the good natured ribbing. However, some of the group began to worry since getting snipped or tied had been out put off prior to the attacks. They were beginning to worry about it now since the supply of birth control was gone and none was available to be picked up from the local pharmacy. Plus, conditions were not ideal for childbirth or for newborns living at the ranch. But they would make it work for sure. Although this was Stephen and Kristy's first child, there were plenty of mothers around the Ranch to help out and to offer advice.

After dinner, some of the group residents had taken to playing Texas Hold 'Em in the conference center. It was normally a friendly, yet competitive, game within the group. It was about 7:30 now and the normal card players sat down at the table. For the most part, everyone had pretty much broken even during the games and a continued tally was kept. Those members that didn't choose to play cards found themselves either talking to other group members, playing other games or listening to the occasional broadcast from other countries with Ryan, Stephen or George translating when they could. None of the State radio stations could be picked up but there was a lot of the chatter was on the ham radio bands.

It began snowing again, adding to the eight inches they already had on the ground at the Ranch. Communications checks with the LP/OP or the patrols were always increased during bad weather like now, but Greg had gone up to the LP/OP after dinner to visit Frank and the group didn't have any patrols out at the moment. After the cheerful dinner, everyone's spirits seemed to come down a bit, like a dark cloud hanging over the group. It was possible since the Holiday Season was coming around and this was the first Christmas they would spend at the Ranch, or maybe it was the weather. Either way, everyone seemed a little down.

General conversation turned to the subject of what was being missed the most. It seemed this was a topic on everyone's mind and the entire group gravitated towards the poker table. Tim was the first to bring the subject up, asking the table at random. "So, since the Fall, what does everyone miss the most?"

Brian was the first to respond. "You mean besides Bud Light?" Brian was a man who knew his way around a case of beer prior to the collapse, but rarely imbibed now. Although there was still a good supply of wine and liquor at the ranch, nobody seemed inclined to drink in excess.

"Yes, you lush, besides beer. I mean, there is that one thing you have to miss most of all. We took a lot of things for granted that we had before the Fall, but there has to be that one thing you miss more than everything else," stated Tim.

Everyone in the room grew silent for a moment as they thought about the things they had given up before moving to the Ranch. It was hard to think about what they missed the most, besides the creature comforts of their own homes before the attacks. "Golf…I miss golf the most.

Going out and playing a round on the course used to set my mind at ease. Unless I was having a bad day, then golf sucked," said Brian.

"Riding my motorcycle. Being alone riding along through the mountains with the wind in my face was pure heaven. I would give anything for a day of just riding along taking in the scenes, but we can't spare the gas and the threat of getting shot at shoots that plan down," added Ryan.

"Nachos Bel Grande, my eternal weakness," said Sharon and turned to Thomas with a sly grin. "Speaking of which, Mister I-Thought-Of-Everything-In-The-World-To-Stock-Up-On, how you ever forget the nachos is beyond me! You could have bought less ammunition or toilet paper or matches and thought to buy the nachos!"

Everyone had a good laugh at the dramatic performance while Dave chipped in his thoughts. "Football and getting to watch my Patriots whip everyone in the league and win the Super Bowl. No other team comes close to my Patriots on the field."

A chorus of denials from around the room erupted as everyone booed Dave and informed him their team was superior. This caused the conversation to go off on a tangent for several minutes about which team was the best, both college and pro and why they were superior.

Kristy brought the conversation back on track with her next statement. "I miss the convenience of having a supermarket right around the corner. Run out of something? Go to the store. But now, we plan a convoy and make a two day trip armed to the teeth to get to the warehouse."

"Fresh lobster. I remember when I was little being able to go down to the docks and pick out a humongous sized lobster straight from the ocean. After I grew up, I remember not being able to stand it for many years, but I do miss it now. Just fresh seafood in general," said Renee.

"Funnel cakes, like the kind you get at fairs and carnivals," said Amy. "I could just about live off those things. I know I would be fat and quite useless around here, but I would be happy eating funnel cakes all day long."

And so the conversation continued with every person saying what they missed the most. Even Frank and Greg were called at the LP/OP to get their opinion. It seemed as the more they brought up different things, the darker the mood became.

Finally, Darren offered his opinion. "It's been almost six months since the Fall and our escape up here. I saw, along with each of you, enough violence and hatred to last me three lifetimes. I can't really say what I miss the most. Sure, I miss some things, but at the same time, I can't really say I miss anything. My family and I have had the opportunity to come together with other families and have a life, and not a life living hand to mouth. Over the past six months, you all have become my adopted family and even closer then my own relatives had ever been. As corny as it may sound, I don't miss a thing since I have my wife and children, my brothers, my sisters and everything else around here that I would ever want. As hard as this life has started, especially after the attacks, getting here and settled in, preparing for the harvest and getting ready for the winter, I have missed nothing since I have been too busy to notice what I could have been

missing. I miss nothing since I have my family and my adopted brothers and sisters here with me every day. What more could we want or miss?"

Everyone grew silent at the proclamation Darren had made. Never a man to give long speeches, it was like a mouse had given out a great roar when he spoke. Everyone in the room grew silent pondering the thoughts he had shared. Even those that weren't well known in the group had been eventually accepted as family. And the same was true, everyone in the room felt closer to the people in this room than their genetic families. The silence was almost uncomfortable when Darren finally exclaimed "Come on people, I didn't just give the Gettysburg Address, talk or something will you."

Everyone laughed and started talking again, mainly small talk to pass the time. Suddenly, Stu came running from the radio room and shouted at the group.

"Quick! Quick! We're getting a radio broadcast!" shouted Stu. "Ryan seems to think it's from somewhere in England!"

The group ran to the rear of the Conference Center where Ryan had plugged in a speaker for all to hear. "I got this on one of the bands that the BBC used to broadcast on, but I don't think it's the BBC. Hang on, let me get this adjusted," stated Ryan as he fiddled with the radio controls. A noise came through the speaker like something off of a movie with static and a high pitched squeal until a faint voice with a British accent came through the speaker.

"…still have no word for the unexplained disappearance of medical supplies three weeks ago. Some say what is left of the government is hiding the supplies for the wealthy that can still pay with silver or gold for them.

Chinese Communist government officials stated Taiwan's declaration of independence is invalid and in violation of Chinese law. Taiwan declared their independence from the mainland over two weeks ago and broke all ties with mainland China. China attempted to move military naval forces into the area, but with the civil war and limited amounts of fuel to be had, these moves were entirely symbolic and were countered by Taiwanese Naval Forces. Free Chinese Forces under the command of Marshal Tong applauded the move for independence and stated his government would recognize the government of Taiwan when he is successful in gaining control of the country.

In other Chinese news, Free Chinese Forces under the control of General Jiang took control of the port city of Quingdao from the communist forces. The town reportedly was over seventy five percent destroyed in the siege that lasted almost sixty days.

Closer to Europe, Islamic Union Forces advanced slowly into Turkey, gaining control of the towns of Siirt, Tatvan and Ercis. The Islamic Union forces invaded that country almost a month ago after Turkey refused to join the new confederation. Turkey has been requesting help from all nations, including the NATO alliance since the invasion, but no country has been able to send help due to domestic security concerns. IU government spokesmen claim the invasion was in reaction to repeated cross border incursions by Turkish forces in pursuit of Kurdish rebels.

Tunisian, Pakistani, Algerian, Uzbek and Yemeni delegations stated they are closer to aligning their nations into the Islamic Union. The delegations, meeting in the city of Jeddah, stated negotiations are "going well" and an accord could be reached as early as next week. Additional delegations from a half dozen more nations are observing the talks in order to determine if their countries will join the Union in the future.

In other Islamic Union statements, the Minister of the Interior claims recovery efforts in the cities of Qum, Harvand and Yazd have been completed. Qum was the original site of the retaliation by the United States in response to the attacks in America and the other two cities were struck by Russian Strategic Forces after the nuclear attack in Saint Petersburg. IU officials state the radiation levels in those cities are still "at an unacceptable level" and they will not be able to be repopulated by citizens of the confederation for some years to come. Additionally, recovery efforts in the remaining fifteen cities struck in retaliation are ongoing.

Russian rebel forces under the control of General Andreyev stopped marching his army towards the city of Volgograd in order to consolidate and resupply his forces. His army suffered great losses during the battles with the communist rebel forces under Marshal Tarasov and had to be stopped before their continuing march to Volgograd. Seven different factions inside of old Russia are vying for control of that nation with no one army being more powerful than the other.

Switzerland stated they discovered and destroyed one of the original Lion Claw teams operating in their territory. Swiss forces said the credit mainly went to the local militia forces which discovered the group and reported it to the local canton level and kept them surrounded and pinned down until regular military forces could be brought to bear. None of the terrorists were taken alive in the two day standoff and following raid.

This is Ian Reynolds operating on 17 megahertz out of the old BBC station. Some of the news might be out of date, but we are broadcasting it as we receive it.

From North America, the Alliance of Free North American States, or AFNAS, again claimed it had no knowledge of the terrorist bombing of Andrews Air Force Base. The United States President has claimed the Alliance is attempting to provoke an open conflict between the two nations. The United States Army and the new Alliance Territorial Guard have been sent to the borders of the two nations. An Alliance government official stated Washington is overreacting to simple homegrown terrorists and is attempting to lay the blame for its failed socialist policies at other's feet. It also stated the military forces moved to the border were in response to the United States military moves.

The acting Governor of Maine declared that States non-allegiance with Washington DC and started taking the steps to become a fully independent nation aligned with Vermont and New Hampshire. The surprise move caught the United States President off guard after she disbanded the state legislature and arrested the state Governor almost two months ago for "acts of treason" and had yet to call for new elections. Sources say the rebel militia in those states has been making good progress in their fight against the Loyalist forces retreating from the territory.

The mid western states of the former United States are in limbo, claims delegations from AFNAS. Washington has withdrawn all military, economic and relief aid from states west of the Mississippi river. Those states not currently aligned with any of the new nations from the former United States are at risk from gang related warfare and starvation. With the approach of winter, hordes of refugees are fleeing towards the Texas Republic, Pacifica and AFNAS.

In other American news, English was finalized as the new national language for the AFNAS states. The North American Alliance Conference, the group of delegates charged with founding a new Constitution, was one step closer to finalizing the Articles of Alliance between the states. Other sources say the moves are entirely symbolic in nature as violence, gang warfare and terrorist attacks are still on the rise in those States. Daily battles between the criminal element and security forces are also on the rise in both urban and rural areas.

The states formerly known as California, Oregon, Nevada and Washington have now decided on a new name for their country. The nation, which came about after the breakup of the United States, is now calling itself Pacifica. Daily gang battles still are ongoing in the urban areas in those states, prompting the newly reorganized National Guard to deploy troops to attempt to contain the violence. When asked about her home state removing itself from the United States, the US President was quoted as saying "They have not removed themselves as it is an illegal act to do so. They are still very much a part of the United States of America and the treasonous members of the Legislature will be arrested very soon." Unconfirmed radio reports from the Pacific States reject her claims and restated their claim to independence.

Texan President Guy Alexander proclaimed today the city of Tyler has been secured by militia forces from the gang related warfare that had been ongoing there for several months. The major urban areas of Texas are still battlegrounds for gang related warfare and the retaking of the city of Tyler was seen by some as just a token gesture. Suburban and Rural areas of the new Texan Republic are still being overrun by criminal gangs and terrorist bands, claims radio reports received from the area.

In other Texas news the government spokesman for…

The voice faded out as the atmospherics which allowed the broadcast to be heard started going away. Everyone stood silent for a few moments while Ryan tried to get the reception back in, but after several minutes of work, he could not find the transmission again. The group silently let the news wash over them since it was the first time they had received news from the outside world since the bug out of the military members. Ryan had thoughtfully recorded the news broadcast and played it over again for the group.

…government troops stationed in Yorkshire suppressed the riots using tear gas and non lethal ammunition. Sources say the riot was started after food banks ran short and had to close.

His Majesty today called on all citizens of the United Kingdom to remain calm in the face of the recent terrorist attack with biological weapons against the city of Edinburgh. He is reportedly going to address what remains of Parliament and request the royal treasury be given to the people in order to support the now defunct British Pound. Inflation reached over five thousand

percent four months ago and the paper monetary unit is seen as nothing more than kindling for a fireplace. He is also reportedly going to propose a one year tax relief on all countries in the Commonwealth. With hard currency released into the general population and the relief of taxes, His Majesty believes the citizens of our proud country will once again establish commerce with each other.

His Majesty is also believed to possibly propose a lifting on the dangerous weapons band as the population could better police themselves. With wholesale desertions from His Majesty's Regiments, the Armed Forces have been unable to react quickly enough to the violence in the country. It is also believed he will issue a Royal Pardon for all individuals arrested for possession of firearms, but have not committed a violent offense. If Parliament rescinds the ban and the pardon goes in effect, tens of thousands could be released from prisons on the British Isles. It is believed over ten million firearms are already in circulation in the population with the number growing.

In other news from the United Kingdom. The Irish Republican Army again stated they would be willing to take up arms to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland against bands of looters and brigands. With His Majesty's troops being called back to the Isle of Britain to help there, Northern Ireland is in dire need of military and security help. The IRA spokesperson said the assistance of British troops was not needed and "we can defend ourselves from this mob of unruly terrorists."

This is Ian Reynolds calling from London on 17 megahertz. News from Asia and the Pacific.

The nations of North and South Korea have decided the official date for reunification will be on 1 January. However, all cross border travel restrictions have been lifted and local elections for town and local government officials in the North are already underway. Communist bands still are fighting in both North and South Korea and government troops are hard pressed to react due to large civil unrest in the major urban centers.

Government officials in Vietnam have started confiscating all food stockpiles from farmers to distribute to the population in the cities. Vietnamese citizens living in the cities have been on food rationing since the beginning of the crisis and food supplies are running low. The move by the government has been resisted by the farmers, ending in some cases with confrontation.

The nation of Australia seems to be weathering this crisis with little or no problems according to reports from the Asian areas. Initial violence from riots was soon put to an end by the Royal Australian Army and order was restored to their cities. The dangerous weapons ban was lifted by the Australian Parliament almost immediately after the city of Sydney was attacked by Al Qaeda forces and the fall of the United States. Parliament considered the lower domestic security aspects of the ban after several Lion Claw teams were discovered in Australia and government troops and police were unavailable to respond. Those citizens with firearms need not register them with the local government and those individuals arrested on weapons possession charges have had their records cleared and been released. Local governments have released those firearms confiscated so far, often in trades for supplies and hard currency. Military armories have opened their doors and have voluntarily given out weapons to those

citizens that were either former military or have "proven capable of operating such weapons." Australia has become the focal point for relief efforts in Asia and the Pacific, exporting food and medicines to other nations in need.

Singapore officials have begun a form of medical rationing stating they can only provide care for the extremely ill. Officials said medical supplies were running low and they could only afford to tend to those whose life may be in danger. Singapore received an emergency shipment of medical supplies and drugs from Australia over a month ago, but has since vanished. Singapore government officials still have no word for the unexplained disappearance of medical supplies three weeks ago.

Chinese Communist government officials stated Taiwan's declaration of independence…

The broadcast repeated itself and the group listened two more times before Ryan shut off the system. It was quiet as the members moved back into the central dining room.

"It sounds like the world is still in bad shape," stated Michael. "And not getting any better."

While the world seemed to still be tearing itself apart, the focus came back to the home front, especially the news about all aid and military forces being pulled from the Midwest. Not that the Ranch needed the aid to survive, or even the government troops to help secure it, but the refugee problem was more of a concern. No refugees had been spotted "staking a claim" on the property, but it was just a matter of time.

"It sounds like the Alliance is getting their act together, getting a Constitution and all," said Rick.

"Yeah, I would like to know what all that entails and how much crime is still going on over there," said Shannon.

"It seems like Texas is starting to pull through," said George. "But I wonder just how far they have to go and how much resources they have."

"And with one of the cities attacked in the State, how they are coping with that?" asked Darren.

"Honestly though, these are government released news briefs. How do we know it isn't still as bad as it was out there? Governments change, but the way they conduct business won't change. They will still try and put on a happy face on whatever they are doing," stated Michael.

"True. We've heard quite a few ham broadcasts from North America and it doesn't look good. Nobody outside of the government channels probably knows or cares," said George.

The discussion carried on for several more minutes until it changed over to world matters. "I wonder about the Russian and Chinese civil wars and what kind of threat that poses to us? I mean, who has control of their nukes? And what if they start using them on us?" asked Amy.

"I don't think that will happen," stated Dave.

“I don’t know with all those different factions out there; who says they won’t drop one on us just to say hey, we dropped one on America, you are next if you don’t comply,” said Amy.

Each person thought about it and agreed with her to an extent. E ach person knew if it did come to that, there was little they could do to stop it anyway. The talk went to Switzerland. “I wonder how many more of those Lion Claw teams are still out there?” asked Sharon.

“It’s a good bet they have been whittled down a ways, but we don’t know for sure how many were sent out in the first place,” answered George. “But is does say good things about the Swiss for finding one and taking it out. Our former government could learn a thing or two from the Swiss about military weapons in the hands of civilians.”

George was referring to the common practice of the each Swiss male in the military reserves from the age of eighteen being issued their own SIG rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition. Even after mandatory military service, Swiss citizens can elect to keep their issued rifle, although the automatic function is removed by the factory. Recreational and proficiency firing is common in the nation and military caliber ammunition is subsidized by the government. Although there were regulations on the rest of the weapons in country, Switzerland was one of those countries which had never been invaded due to the fact of being able to put large amounts of highly proficient, well armed manpower in the field. It was said during military maneuvers in 1912, the observing German Kaiser asked a Swiss soldier “Your army may be two hundred and fifty thousand, but what if you are invaded by five hundred thousand?” To which, the Swiss soldier replied “We will shoot twice and go home.”

Others wondered about the validity of the news, and whether or not it was just some spokesman saying things were getting better as opposed to worse as often occurred in government broadcasts. So far the groups they had contacted only had news of the local region and nothing of national or international news. The threat of the new Islamic Union was not a major concern right off for the group, but it was still in the back of some of their minds since other nations were planning to join.

Eventually the card game came to a conclusion with the “winnings” being tallied up and saved for the next week. Stephen got ready to replace Frank on the LP/OP and the Taylors made their trek home. It was starting to snow pretty well but if they stayed on the road to their house, it wouldn’t be that hard to find their way. And so it ended, it was just another “normal” day at the Ranch with individual and collective families feeling safe in each other’s company. Darren had given each person some food for thought that evening and each person thought about how close they had become to the people they now lived with. While those thoughts crossed his mind, Thomas had other thoughts on his mind, mainly protecting his wife and unborn child. Although Janie and Misty had received some medical training, they were not trained doctors or midwives. Professional help would be needed when it came time for birth. Thomas made it his first priority to find some help for his wife and friends so they could worry less about their children.

CHAPTER 32 – 'TIS THE SEASON

Time since attacks: 7 Months, 21 Days
Date/Time: 11 December/1941 Local
Location: The Ranch

The dinner and meeting started a little earlier that evening since everyone had gotten there ahead of time. "I think we need to head back to the warehouse to get more supplies," stated Michelle.

"Good point, we are running low on some cosmetic items and I know for a fact other folks need some kitchen items. We know how much we need now and the families are requesting almost double what they did the last time," said Kristy.

The group debated the idea for a few minutes before deciding to gather lists for what was needed to bring to Kristy tomorrow. As before, the group planned on an overnight trip, leaving early in the morning the day after each of the lists was received and put on a master "shopping" list. When it came down to what Smoke might want, nobody had the first clue. The group debated several items for a few minutes before Rick brought up the idea of giving him a good scope for the M-16 they had given him before and bringing more ammo up to him. Several of the families planned to get gifts for both their children and their close friends on the Ranch as well since it was so close to Christmas.

Two days later, two fire teams were ready to go to the warehouse, Thomas's team again and this time, George's team. It was decided Kristy wasn't too pregnant to make the trip and she was included in the small convoy. As before, they took two large trucks and two smaller vehicles with two people inside of each. The drive to the warehouse was uneventful and no signs of roadblocks were seen. They saw several bands of people out in sight along the way, which scattered at the sight of the military vehicles heading for nearby trees. The group wondered if it was because of what was happening before and decided to try and contact some of those groups to find out for sure at a later time.

When they arrived at the warehouse complex, Thomas and Brian went inside the fence at the opening and made contact with Smoke. He seemed to be doing well and opened the gate for the group to drive the vehicles in. When presented with the scope and mount, he, again, was grateful and offered whatever the warehouse complex had to them, but this time, he had a surprise as well. "I just found something recently, down the road a ways, maybe a quarter mile or so is another distribution warehouse used by Sportsman's Warehouse. I'm sure you might find some stuff in there fairly interesting. Also, there is a construction supply yard a little further down past that, about a mile but still off the beaten path. They have just about everything you could imagine in there for building materials."

"Now I couldn't tell you who belongs to the outdoor warehouse place, but I know for a fact the construction yard guy told me to take whatever I needed from there. I wouldn't really call him a friend, more like a bar acquaintance or even a drinking buddy than anything. Before he bugged

out for Texas he told me I had free reign over whatever was in there. So please, use whatever you need 'cause it will eventually go bad. And you, Mister Thomas and Miss Kristy, there are baby cribs in Warehouse Four. I figure you two will be in need of one sometime soon."

Thomas was flabbergasted. "How did you know my wife was pregnant?"

"I know things and hear things," said Smoke with a mischievous smile.

"Nobody outside the Ranch knows she is pregnant. Seriously, how did you know?" asked Thomas adamantly.

"Seriously, I know things. You have the look of a man who is expecting and I'm pretty fair at figuring people out. You have a very proud look on your face like a man busting to tell the whole world he is gonna be a daddy. It's also the same reason I know Miss Kristy is expecting, but she isn't that far along," said Smoke as he smiled again.

Kristy looked like she had been floored. "I'm not even showing with my clothes off and I have on these baggy ABUs, how did you…" she asked as her voice trailed off.

"Smoke, that kind of worries me," said Thomas with a frown.

"Seriously now, friend, I know things. And I'm not the lonely hermit you all think I am. I still talk to folks and they talk to me. You might be surprised at what I know and how easy it is for me to figure people out," said Smoke, still smiling.

The group gave up on further questioning and decided to focus on finding the items they were there for. George and Michelle started to head down that way, giving a detailed plan of how long they would be gone and when they might return. Michelle checked her radio with Brian before heading out, finding she needed to replace the batteries. After they left, Kristy gave Smoke their new listing and asked if he might be able to help them out. She made it a point to wear one of the necklaces he had provided the previous trip to show him his thoughts were appreciated. After looking through the list with several "hmmms" along the way, he stated he would start looking after he had the chance to speak with Thomas in private, but also told the group to go ahead and start looking themselves if they wanted to.

Thomas was curious about why the man would want to speak with him in private and was worried he might ask for something they couldn't part with. They walked away from the group into the warehouse. When they were out of earshot, Smoke stated "I have a little problem and I think you folks might be suited to help me out with."

"What problem could that be? It's not like we have a warehouse full of stuff," said Thomas.

"Fairly funny, friend, but seriously. I have something I cannot keep. Well, not really mine, but something here that doesn't belong here," said Smoke.

"You have my attention. What do you have here that doesn't belong here?" asked Thomas.

"Hang on, let me go get it," said Smoke as he walked towards a small room in the middle of the building. After a minute, he walked back out with a woman and child in tow. Thomas looked closely, and tried to determine if the woman was who he thought she was. She bore a striking resemblance to the girlfriend of a man he had worked with prior to the Fall. However, if it was the same woman, she had lost considerable weight, hardly a shell of who she was before.

Smoke brought her over to Thomas and started to introduce her. She stopped him stating "Smoke, it's okay. I know who he is."

Thomas was surprised, as the woman was the former Staff Sergeant Julie Clayton, USAF. Again, Thomas looked closely at her, trying to determine if she really was who she said she was. "Yes, Sergeant Dayfield, it's really me."

"Well, I'm not really Sergeant Dayfield anymore, how about calling me Thomas?" said Thomas.

Thomas and her shook hands and he attempted to say hello to her daughter, a young girl of five. But she shied away, moving behind her mother's leg. Thomas tried to remember the last time he had seen her before they left and couldn't really remember. While he had been assigned to convoy duties and base security, she had worked the FEMA camp security. He had worked with her a couple of years before but had only met in passing since. Little did he know she was wondering the same thing, although she had several more questions to ask him than he had to ask her.

Between Smoke and Julie, they told the story about how she had come to be at the warehouse. "After you all left, which was in July if I remember correctly, things started getting really bad. You all might have been the first to leave, but you weren't the last. It started getting really bad around the base since quite a few people deserted, following your lead I suppose. We ended up working double shifts to make up for the loss in manpower. Captain Bradley started putting anyone in confinement who even made the smallest remark about bugging out, no trial, no hearing, nothing except someone's word against them. It was pretty bad, believe me."

"Anyway, in the first part of August, there was a protest in the FEMA camp. It was a very coordinated type of protest, not a spur of the moment thing at all; it probably had been planned for at least a week. They took the guards in the camp first to 'holding cells' then took out the towers around the camp, but not in a violent way. The people in the camp didn't really harm our guys, just tied them up and took their weapons. They were hungry, that was all, and were trying to make a point. Nobody was hurt and nothing was really damaged. Captain Bradley ordered us to use deadly force to quell the protest, then turned tail and ran. So, some people used force to try and stop them and it turned into a bloodbath. Even those that didn't help initially in the protest joined in with those that started it and it became a full blown riot."

"Peterson was overrun in a little less than an hour. We fought as best we could, but ended up losing control of the base. My boyfriend Jake was killed in the first defensive line, before the protestors got onto the flightline. I continued to fight as best as I could, trying to make my way off the base so I could find my daughter. I finally just found a place to hide out to wait for it to

be over. After about a half an hour, the rioters went past where I was hiding and I managed to sneak off base. I picked up my daughter and headed out into the city, trying to make it home."

"By that time, the riot had spread to the city with looting and fires everywhere. It was purely medieval looking. I managed to get home and got what food I could to try and get out of the city, but I got trapped by the riots. Kirsten and I managed to get by for a time, but we started running low on food. I started going out in the local area; trying to look for food to bring home," she said and was interrupted by Smoke.

"So about a month ago, I see her and her little one out at the gate. Normally I don't pay any mind to the people that come around here, but she seemed like she needed help. So for once, I decided to open the gate to someone I didn't know. They have been here ever since," he said.

"Smoke, he needs to know where I came from before I ask," said Julie.

Smoke ran his fingers through his beard before saying. "No, Miss Julie, he really doesn't need to know that part of the story."

"Yes, he does need to know," she replied adamantly before turning back to Thomas. "Finally, we had heard of several places outside the city where people were going to try and live. Supposedly, there was food and water to be had in these places and I was going to try and find one so at least my daughter might be able to eat on a normal basis. I managed to get together enough food and water for three days before we left. After we left our home, we made it only so far before running out of food. We never really made it out of the city due to the large scale looting and gang violence that was still going on. I saw several people who got shot down just for wearing a backpack because someone wanted what was in it. So for days, we moved as far as we could, mainly at night, but didn't really cover much distance."

"I tried to bargain with other, less violent, people for food for myself and Kirsten, trading what little I had brought out with us. What little food I got in trade I gave to her, only eating enough myself to keep me going to get out of the city. Eventually, I came into a group of people, savages really, who took me in. The first few days were not a big deal; they gave me food, water and clothing. After that, they started demanding…things of me. They never forced me to do anything, but instead cut off my food ration when I didn't comply. At first, I resisted their demands, but it's hard to sit and watch your hungry child slowly starve when you could do something to help it. The only reason I stayed around so long was because they did have food and water, when nobody else did. I didn't know for sure, but I think they would have killed me and her if we tried to escape anyway in the beginning. I never knew where the food came from, but I can only guess they were the looters going out killing people for supplies, food and water."

"So I did what they asked me to do, just to keep my child alive. I was used by the group and in return, given enough food to keep Kirsten and me alive. I didn't want to be there, but for that time, I was only thinking of survival. Survival for myself and my daughter. I'm pretty ashamed to think of the level I sank to, but all I wanted was for my daughter to keep on living. After a while, they got used to me there and made me stay. I was told Kirsten would be killed before my eyes if I ever tried to escape, but one night, they got really drunk and we made a run for it. I

managed to steal some food before leaving and when the time was right, we snuck away from them in the middle of the night. We ran and hid pretty much non-stop for three days before they finally stopped looking for us. I managed to find small stockpiles of food and bartered with other people for food to get this far. One day, while we were wandering by, I saw Smoke over here and he invited me in, where we have been ever since."

Thomas silently soaked in what she had said before asking the obvious question. "Okay, why tell me this?"

"Because of one simple fact, she doesn't need to be here," said Smoke. "I enjoy the company and all, but they deserve to be safe. Plus, if that group of animals ever tracks her down here, my supplies will be gone quicker than a hundred dollar bill in Vegas. I don't mind having a pair of lovely ladies around, but at the same time, I cannot protect them as well as you all can. I can keep myself pretty safe here if it's just me, but if I have to worry about watching out for them as well, it gets harder. So, I suppose the question is this…can you take her and her child with you?"

Thomas again was silent as he thought about taking another person in, but under the circumstances, how could he say no? "It's a bit complicated. In order to get into our group, you have to be voted in. I'm not the one that makes the decisions to bring someone into our group. I can say this though; I will bring it up as soon as we get back. If the group is willing to hear you out, we can come back the next day and pick you up to make a personal appeal to the group."

Smoke seemed a little upset over that announcement. "If that's the case, you aren't the good people I thought you were and the conditions of the barter are coming to an end very quickly."

"No Smoke, it's okay," said Julie stepping in. "I understand why they might be a little hesitant to bring in someone they don't know. I can go along with them bringing it up to their group."

"No, Miss Julie, it's not right. You have had a rough time and need to be shown a little compassion," stated Smoke firmly.

"My friend, I never said no, but if we were to take in every person with a sad story, we would quickly run out of room and food for everyone. We haven't said no and I think our group would probably find her request favorable since we know who she is. We just have to wait and see what they think of the idea first," stated Thomas. "Besides, with eight of our group here we can get the mood of what will happen. A 'maybe later' sure beats a 'no' right now."

Smoke contemplated what was said and thought about it from the other people's perspective. In his mind he understood, but didn't really like it. He agreed to the principle by simply nodding his head. Thomas knew he wasn't very happy with the decision, but he seemed to understand the situation when Thomas broke it down. Julie and her daughter were taken off to meet the rest of the group and to catch up with some of her old friends and acquaintances she knew before. Thomas and Smoke continued to talk for several minutes before Smoke went off to help the rest of the group find the items they were looking for.

About an hour later, Michelle and George returned from the other warehouse with big smiles on

their face. George spoke for the both of them. "It's just as described. A warehouse filled with more outdoor goodies than we could imagine. Remember that day I was complaining about not catching any fish and I said they were probably at the middle of the pond? Well, they have canoes and rafts there that we could use to get to the middle of your pond and actually get those fish. I think they either have firearms, which we don't really need, and powder for reloading in a vault we found. Speaking of reloading supplies, they have a mountain of new brass for almost any caliber you can think of. They even have new progressive reloaders that we could use to double our output on shells. Plenty of winter, summer, every season types of goods. More items than I care to shake a stick at. Man, you ought to see the boxes just laying about in there!" It wasn't often George showed such enthusiasm over such a thing, so Thomas decided he would go and see for himself what the uproar was about.

A calmer Michelle added in as George caught his breath. "Clothing, shoes, nice boots, fishing gear, which we are woefully inadequate on, camping supplies, the works. He's not kidding. We just scratched the surface of this warehouse. I 'm sure there is plenty more, but getting into the vault could be a problem. But just based on the clothing alone, we are pretty well good to go."

Thomas briefly considered the actions of taking the gear. With Smoke it was barter and trade. By breaking into the warehouse, it would be outright theft. He voiced this concern with the two of them. "Do we know who owns it? I mean, trading for items from here is one thing, but are we any better than looters if we take from the other warehouse? Yes, they have some nice stuff, but what do we need and can we get it from here?"

"Very true, but at the same time, there are groups out there that care little about the barter and trade idea. They will loot and plunder at will and not care who gets in their way. And…" started George before he started thinking about what he was saying. "Yes, I see your point. Here is the way I think of this. Smoke wouldn't have told us about it unless he was worried about it falling into other people's hands. Besides, I think someone has already been in there. There were boxes opened up with several items missing, like someone was going through them looking for the right sizes. Obviously someone else knows about the place, why should we wait to see who else comes along? It's not like we are looting, but rather safekeeping the goods until the rightful owners come along to claim it."

"George, you know that dog won't hunt with me. However, you are the most levelheaded member of our group and you know what you are getting into. I say we bring it up to the group we have here and see what they think of it first," said Thomas.

George, Thomas and Michelle all agreed this was the best course of action. Thomas then brought them up to speed on the situation with Julie Clayton and the request Smoke made for her to come with them. George brought up the point that there weren't any spare cabins and someone would have to share their space. They debated the point for a few minutes before agreeing to discuss it that night with the rest of the group. The threesome picked up Kristy before returning to the other warehouse down the road. They went into the warehouses through the open side door and looked around at the items already spoken about. Thomas could now see why George was so excited about the whole matter. While the Trading Post had been well stocked, this was like the Mecca for their group. Thomas saw a box of his favorite type of cargo

pants, lying open on the floor. Looking through, he found a pair in his size and almost took them with him until he remembered he was the one protesting the grab for goods. He would put some thought into it before coming to a decision about the supplies.

While they were down that way, they decided to check out the construction supply yard as well. After entering, the group saw there were enough building materials in the yard to last a lifetime for the residents at the Ranch. Various buildings held almost every fastener known to man as well as other items which could not be stored outside in the weather. Various grades, types and sizes of dimension lumber, plywood, molding and other various wood products were stacked neatly under open overhangs and construction equipment sat unused in other parts of the yard. Prefabricated A-frames for roofs were stacked neatly under another. A mobile concrete plant and large generator sat with the other construction equipment. "With all this, we should never have a building problem again. We have the materials here to make new homes in case we wanted to have more people join the Ranch," stated George.

"Everything we would ever need for building materials is right here," said Thomas.

Kristy, knowing the supply situation better than everyone, followed up. "For the moment, we really are sitting in good shape. But, if we ever need anything, we know where to find it."

They took a little more time to look around the yard and inside of the buildings. Quite a few had locks, but they could open them if they needed with a pair of bolt cutters. The open buildings held a nice surprise. "Hey! Is that solar panels and batteries?" asked Kristy.

Thomas came over and looked at the boxes and found she was correct. "Yes, the same brand I used on the cabins! Seriously, if we wanted to build new buildings, we are set for everything!"

They spent another thirty minutes looking through the yard before coming on a large warehouse that stored prefabricated buildings. "Do you know what these are?" asked George.

"These look like the pre-fabricated forms for log cabins," answered Thomas.

"I think you're right. We could build additional homes without major trouble," stated Kristy.

Michelle shouted from another warehouse and the others went running that way, thinking she was in trouble. When they arrived with weapons drawn, they found her looking at some large containers standing neatly near a wall. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry to have startled you. Look at these!" said Michelle with a grin on her face.

George, Kristy and Thomas looked over the large cardboard containers and found they contained the parts for a greenhouse. "This is a really good find," said Thomas.

"Now we can grow year stuff round as long as we have the heating for it. You know, Tom, I was wondering about that and why you didn't have at least one," asked Michelle.

"It was on my list of things to do, just somewhat near the bottom and I forgot to put it on the listing George had for things to buy. One of those hindsight things," answered Thomas.

"Yeah, I kept trying to remember to purchase a few, but it kept slipping my mind as well. If I don't write it down, I completely forget about it," said George.

"We need to grab one or two of these, depending on size. If they are smaller ones we should take more, but either way, get them up and start raising vegetables year round," said Kristy.

The foursome continued to look through the construction yard until they decided to head back to the warehouse. They traveled directly back where they helped load the gathered supplies into the trucks brought for that purpose. Smoke came up and joined George and Thomas as they were putting a box in the truck. "Now, while the deal is not contingent on your decision, I have another deal to make you. You are welcome anytime to anything in this place if you take Miss Julie and Miss Kirsten with you. No other barter or trade will be necessary. You have become my friends and I know if I ask you for anything, you will provide it. You have taken in one of my other friends already and if you take her and her daughter in, this will seal the deal with me. I can even go out to the other warehouse and get those goods moved to here so you all can have better access to them in the future. If you decide against taking her, we will continue to barter and trade for goods, just as we already are doing."

George and Thomas thought hard about that deal and told Smoke they would consider it before coming to a decision. They finished loading the trucks and laid out the gear to sleep the night in the warehouse. As before, they would keep one person on fire watch all night and leave early the next morning. George planned to have an impromptu meeting that night and made a small request of Smoke. Smoke wandered off into another warehouse and returned with a box and told George it would be outside the warehouse whenever they were ready. Thomas stopped him as he was wandering around doing various things and asked him a question. "You have known about the outdoor goods warehouse and the construction yard for some time. Why didn't you mention it before now?"

"Well, I was still getting to know you. And plus, you folks are pretty good to go, or at least that's what I hear. I just wouldn't tell anyone about it," said Smoke.

Thomas just shook his head and wondered exactly what Smoke had heard about the group. He figured he might not like the answer, so he let the matter drop and joined the rest of the group that were meeting inside a warehouse to have dinner and rest for a while. The group sat down to eat dinner and after George asked each member to step outside to have a meeting. They went outside and found Smoke about to finish putting together an outdoor fireplace like the ones from the Conference Center. A pile of old pallets were nearby along with two handsaws, pry bars and hammers to finish breaking and cutting them up. George checked the location and found it covered from the road on all four sides. After twenty minutes work, they had a decent pile of wood and a good blaze going in the fireplace. It was a little chilly outside, but the fire helped as each person hugged as close to the fireplace as possible.

George called on Thomas to start the meeting and inform the group on the proposed deal made

by Smoke about Julie. Julie was present at the meeting but did not speak until called on. Thomas told the group her story, but left out the parts about being with the gang and then informed them of the deal proposed by Smoke. "Now, this decision would affect the community and for the better, I think. Some of us know Julie and know she is a good person. We haven't really taken anybody else in besides Greg and Amy and our food supply won't be hurting with two more people. I haven't asked her what skills she might bring to the table or what she might be able to provide to the community. I would rather have her explain that if she doesn't mind."

Julie seemed a little nervous about being put right into the spotlight by Thomas and spoke briefly to the group about her situation and her wishing for a safe place to live for her daughter. She briefly answered the few questions asked of her by the assembled group. They found out she really didn't bring any new skills to the group they didn't already posses. Even so, the group found the request favorable and decided to bring her back with them tomorrow on the condition she would speak to the group as a whole in three days at their weekly meeting. She agreed and asked to be excused to go and pack enough goods for her and Kirsten for the four days.

The subject soon passed to the other warehouse down the road and the items it contained the group might find useable. A debate about taking the items raged for twenty minutes with one side taking the moral highroad and the other a practical approach with "if we don't get it, someone else will." The debate was brought to a halt by a surprising member, Smoke. "If you all don't want to take the items from the other warehouse, that's all well and good. But your group is one of the good ones out there and there have been several bad ones around. I would much rather your group has that kind of stuff than some other group. If something was to happen and I wasn't around, who knows who might get their hands on it. Do me the favor of taking some of it with you instead of me worrying about who else might be prowling around out there. I know of several bad, bad groups out there that won't hesitate to slit my throat for the items here and in the other warehouses."

The group sat quietly for a few moments thinking of what Smoke had said. Even those who opposed taking the items began to look at it from that point of view. They told Smoke they would consider it for a few days and return if the group agreed to it. The group finished their meeting and returned into the warehouse to go to sleep. They would awake early the next day and leave the complex with two visitors to the Ranch. Thomas got lucky in the rotation and had the first watch, waking Michelle at the end to take his place.

The ride back was uneventful except for the scattering of the people like before. Thomas asked Julie if she knew why this was happening. "I'm not sure for certain, but I think they figure some of the military is still out there trying to confiscate weapons, food or gasoline. They probably think we are a military unit coming to take their goods. From what I know though, some military units went rogue, well, maybe not the whole units, but a lot of guys took their weapons and equipment and started their own gangs. While I was with the gang, I heard about one in particular that had over one hundred people with good training that operates somewhere between Denver and Cheyenne. The guys holding me were pretty scared of them, but I never saw them."

"Were they vigilantes helping people or something like that?" asked Kristy.

"I don't think so. I think they were overpowering smaller groups and taking what they wanted, at least that's what I heard. Smoke had heard of them as well, but told me not to worry about them, not all stories were true," replied Julie.

"That man is strange. How did he ever know I was pregnant?" asked Kristy.

"I don't know that, but he knew I was in trouble and had been through a rough time even though I never mentioned it. He seemed to know what happened to me before I came there and made every effort to help me out. It drove me crazy when I was about to ask for something and he would reach behind him and grab it. It's like he is a mind reader or something," answered Julie.

"For certain he knows more than he lets on. It does drive me up the wall that he knows about the details of our group, especially details nobody outside the Ranch knows," said Thomas.

The rest of the drive was spent in silence and upon their arrival, Julie and her daughter were put up in the Conference Center bottom floor for the time being. One of the side rooms was cleared out and two cots set up with inflatable mattresses for them. They were given a brief overview of the Ranch and areas they should stay away from and asked to refrain from wandering around too much. Julie agreed to the terms and asked if there was any way she could help over the next few days until the meeting. Thomas didn't know about any of the current work projects going on at that moment, but told her to get with Stu to find out where she might be able to help out.

Over the next two days, Julie helped out where she could and gained some knowledge in the process about what went on at the Ranch. The afternoon before the meeting where a vote would be taken deciding on whether or not she would stay, Thomas invited her to have lunch and talk more with her about how she was taking it all in. "So, you've pretty much seen what goes on here, what do you think about it so far?"

"Well, it's not really what I expected, that's for sure," she answered. "But from what I've seen, it's somewhere I wouldn't mind being a part of. I will tell you though, you people work! Always doing something, going here, going there. It's not a bad thing; I just pictured some sort of big camping trip instead of what really goes on here. I had this image in my mind of some frontier town where there wasn't electricity or running water."

Thomas and Sharon laughed at the comments. "Yeah, that's pretty much what everyone says when they first get here. While we might be survivalists, we also believe in our creature comforts." He moved on to the next point. "Tonight will be the fish or cut bait time for you, though. Can you handle it here?"

"I guess I can, but I do have some questions though before I say for sure yes," she replied.

"Okay, shoot," said Thomas as he leaned back in his chair.

"Well, I guess my first question would be the education of the children here. How exactly is that going to happen?" she asked.

Thomas pondered the question for a moment before replying. "Honestly, it was something we hadn't put much thought into since we got here. I suppose we need to think about that. Is that something you might be able to help us with?"

Julie sat back in her chair and pondered the thought for a moment before answering. "I suppose I could help out in that area. I was working on my degree in teaching before the Fall and learned quite a bit. I volunteered to help out at the local schools with both administration and tutoring. Teaching is something I could do if we have some textbooks and other school supplies."

"What else would you be able to help out with and what would you need to learn if you were to stay here?" asked Sharon, joining the conversation.

Julie replied she couldn't really think of what else to contribute since she wasn't very familiar with the way things were ran at the Ranch. She also had a brief list of things she knew she would probably need to learn. Sharon ran through the list in her head and found most of the items were on her list she had made when she first got there. They continued talking throughout lunch until it was time to leave for the afternoon chores. She stuck close with Sharon that afternoon and helped out until it was dinnertime. Julie politely excused herself to go and wash up before the meeting and the group dinner.

That evening, the Thompsons were responsible for cooking up the group dinner for everyone. After dinner, the group started its meeting with the customary fires being built and the group gathering around. Over the past three days, Julie had gotten the opportunity to meet everyone, so she was familiar with most of the people sitting around the group. The first order of business would be debating on whether or not she would be allowed to stay at the Ranch. Julie was asked to give a small talk about how she might contribute to the Ranch.

"Honestly, I can't think of very many ways to contribute except possibly being able to teach the children here. I don't have my certificate for teaching, but I was in college to do that for when I got out of the military. Other than that, I would just be able to help out around here and learn whatever I needed to learn to fit in. I honestly can't say I'm totally useful, but not totally useless either," she concluded.

Laughter followed her useful and useless comments and the next question came from Janie Holmes. "So what would be the greatest advantage to living on the Ranch that you can see?"

Julie paused for thought before answering. "Probably the biggest advantage to living here as opposed to living at that warehouse would be the security. And that's one of the biggest things I'm looking for, security for my daughter and me. I know here she and I would be secure and not have to worry about where the next meal comes from or if we were to be raided by a gang at any time. Security is the biggest advantage I can see."

"Would you be willing to work on all work projects?" asked Stephen.

"For those I was knowledgeable of, yes. For those I wasn't sure of, I would need some training in it prior to working. I mean, there isn't anything I wouldn't do, I would just feel more

comfortable helping out and learning before I tackled a job on my own," answered Julie.

Sharon asked the next question, a repeat from lunch. "What would you need to learn to learn if you were to stay here?"

Julie thought for a second Sharon had set her up with the question, but thought in the next second she had just prepared her for the question that would be asked. She quickly ran down the things she knew right off the bat that she would need to learn and at the end added the things she knew about already and wouldn't need to learn. After the group finished their questions, Julie was asked to leave so the group could discuss the proposal in private. After she was gone, there was little debate as to whether she would be able to stay as a few of the group already knew the story about her escape from the gang. The most positive benefit would be her being able to teach the children, something the group had seriously lacked in thus far and needed to rectify. The issue now came down to housing.

"We can't have her stay at the Conference Center! There is limited room and she has a child as well," stated Renee.

"Well, are we going to evict someone from their cabin? I mean, she is only on her one month probationary period. What happens if she doesn't cut it and leaves? Are we going to move someone just to turn around and move them again?" asked Greg.

"We can always build a new cabin for her. We know where to find the materials," said Kristy.

"That will take some time to do with everything else we have going on here. Either way, we are looking at having to put her up either temporarily in another cabin or in the Conference Center for the time being," said Thomas.

"She can use my cabin," said Frank, ending the debate. "I will move into the Conference Center and just leave my stuff there. If she gets voted in after a month, I can move everything entirely."

The issue was put to the confidential vote and she was voted into the community by a unanimous decision. Julie was brought back to the group and told the news. She thanked the group and promised to make her contributions. When told of her housing, she immediately declined to take someone's cabin. "I can't take your cabin, Frank. The room we have here is more than enough."

"It's decided already. I will move in here temporarily," he stated.

"Nothing is decided yet. I will not make you move on my account," replied Julie.

"It doesn't bother me, besides the cabins should be for the families anyway," he told her.

"Well, I'm not a complete family and neither are you. I will stay in the Conference Center where I have been," she returned.

Frank tried another angle. "Julie, there just isn't the privacy you should have in here with Greg

and Stu. Plus, with everyone running in and out of here, it will be hard to have that privacy. You could get the privacy you need in my cabin."

"You mean I won't have any privacy if I stay in here?" asked Julie. "Both of them have been total gentlemen towards my daughter's and my privacy. And those people running in and out haven't been a problem so far. You have to do better than this."

"Why are you being difficult about this?" asked Frank.

"Because I don't want to cause problems here. And you moving causes a problem," she replied.

"You two argue like you're married. Why don't you just share the cabin?" chuckled George.

George was actually just joking, but saw Julie and Frank thinking seriously about it. "I could handle that," said Julie.

"Yeah, that wouldn't be a big deal," agreed Frank.

"Well, I wasn't serious about it guys. But if you two are comfortable with it, I guess the rest of us can't have a problem with it," said George. With that problem solved, the debate moved on to the newly discovered outdoor goods warehouse. As expected, the debate was spirited.

"If we just go in there and take what we want, what makes us any better than the gangs out there doing the same to normal people?" asked Brian.

"And if we don't take them, what happens when that same gang attacks us for what we have, after being outfitted by the goods we could have properly secured?" asked Cynthia.

"It's the point behind what do we actually need as opposed to what do we want?" asked Tracy.

"Okay, we need very little from in there that we don't actually have. Other than that, yes, a lot of the stuff is 'nice to have' as opposed to 'need to have.' However, as Smoke said, if we don't get it, who will?" stated George.

"I can think of a few items that would be nice to have from there, but nothing absolutely necessary," stated Thomas.

"Look, I'm not one to advocate stealing anything from anyone, but there is a ton of stuff lying around out there. Let's say for instance there was a case of hand grenades lying in the road. Would we take those? You bet! Not because we wanted them, but to secure them so they don't get used on us. I look at it more like scavenging than theft. Is this equipment something that could harm us? Maybe, maybe not. If that vault does have firearms in it, you think we wouldn't secure those? What is the difference? Is it a matter of firearms as opposed to winter clothing that would help one of those gangs attack us in the winter time? Is the firearm more valuable or the equipment used to help an attacker? I'm not saying we need to go look through everything out there since we are fairly well set for most everything, but this is one opportunity to get

equipment we didn't have to start with," said Dave, almost out of breath after the long speech.

Julie offered another angle to the debate. "I think Smoke intends to move a lot of the stuff from those warehouses to the complex where he is. As highly as he thinks of your group and how excited you were when you looked it over, it's probably already done."

The debate went on for almost a half an hour before being called to a vote. The vote was being called in favor of taking what goods they actually needed, but not what they just wanted. As hot a topic it was, the vote was cast in secret again. After gathering up the ballots and counting them out, the vote was decided in favor of gathering what items they needed and not what they wanted. The group decided to make a run back to the warehouse complex in another four days to give a fire team patrol a chance to do a loop around the Ranch. They discussed what was absolutely necessary to gather from the new warehouse area and made out a "shopping list" for the group to go from when they got there.

However, the group agreed to gather additional items from the warehouse if they saw the need for them. Plans were also made for George to blow the lock off the vault to both see what was inside and to gather reloading supplies if needed. The list was completed and agreed on by the group and the meeting moved to the other business normally discussed. After all other business was completed, the meeting broke up and the group went their respective ways. Frank helped Julie carry her belongings to his cabin and get her settled in. Other families offered items to help her and her daughter get by for the next four days until they could return to the warehouse.

Time since attacks: 8 Months, 1 day
Date/Time: 21 December/1146 Local
Location: Warehouse Complex, Near Fountain, Colorado

The group returned to the complex as planned and found Julie had predicted it right. Smoke had begun moving the items from the other warehouse complex to the one he lived at. He had barely made a dent in the overall items, but had also found the manifest of what items were where in the building and began to move the important ones. George had brought back some C-4 and the means to detonate it. He was a little rusty, but he knew he didn't want to use too much of the explosive opening the vault. It took him two tries to get the massive lock off before they were able to open the door. When they entered, it was as expected and stored inside was enough gunpowder, both smokeless and black powder that the group would never run out. Since Rick was the expert in reloading, he went in to start gathering the correct powders and primers for the group to be able to reload. As with most reloading, he needed a large variety of the different kinds since firearms are often picky about what types of propellant are used and work better with some more than others. Firearms were stacked in their packing boxes against another wall and the group took the time to look through some of the boxes to see what was available. Ammunition for almost every caliber was stored in the vault as well. They knew Smoke would never need ammunition or firearms from the group again since everything he would ever need was right here. He appeared out of nowhere and promised the group he would properly secure what they didn't take.

While the first group was going through the vault area, a second group was looking through the rest of the store gathering the items the group had agreed on during the meeting. Smoke offered his help in what he knew already and assisted the group in gathering the items. The main items picked up were fishing gear and the boats for the pond. Clothing was next on the list, with summer and winter clothing being gathered for all the families. Julie had gone into the other warehouse complex gathering up the items she knew she and Kirsten would need to get into the group. All in all, over two days everything was gathered and loaded into the trucks. Smoke had gotten a bunch of baby supplies out of the warehouses and had them stacked neatly waiting to be loaded in one of the trucks, including three cribs for some unknown reason. He also had several boxes of stuffed animal toys for the group's children, even though he had never been told about them. It was eerie again thinking about how much he knew about the Ranch and its residents, but they accepted the fact some things were out of their control. Julie had gotten everything she would need for Kirsten and herself and gotten it loaded as well. Smoke made a promise to keep moving the items to his complex "to better keep an eye on it." The group said their goodbyes and started the trek back to the Ranch.

On their way back, Julie was riding with Thomas and Kristy again and the conversation turned to how she was getting settled in. "He insisted I move into the master bedroom although I could have just gone into one of the others. He is seriously going out of his way to make sure we are as comfortable as possible. It's nice to see someone who doesn't treat a woman like some animal. Your group and Smoke have refreshed my outlook on humanity."

"Any other major problems?" asked Thomas.

"Nero was a bit of a pain when we first got there since he was a bit protective of Frank and the house. He eventually softened up and is getting along great with us now and has taken to sleeping at the foot of Kirsten's bed every night. He is fairly protective and he and the Parson's cat don't really get along, but that's not a problem yet. Frank loves that dog but I'm not fond of the K-9s. However, he hasn't been violent in any way so far, so it's not a problem," said Julie.

"A big dog is a lot of work," said Thomas, briefly explaining how several of the former military dogs were brought out and several of the families had taken them in. Plus, more of the families had adopted the various animals that had managed to make their way to the Ranch. The Thompsons now had two cats in addition to Benny the dog and their other dog, a Labrador retriever named Bert. Heather and Amy had taken in three kittens and the Parsons also had a mildly feral cat they were currently trying to housebreak. The animals were put to good use as they were good mousers and kept the homes free of potential rodent problems. Strangely enough, most of the dogs they had encountered had been wild and attacked nearly everything that came their way. The varmint rifles a lot of the residents now owned had been put to use over the past few months to effectively deal with the problems.

"Anything else we might be able to help on?" asked Kristy.

"No, no other major problems…well, I had to help out Frank and his organization skills around the house. He is such a male," said Julie, saying the word 'male' like it was an alien. "Do you

know he kept his winter and summer clothing in the same closet?"

"Honey, I know. Stephen used to do the same thing before we were married. I think I civilized him though," commented Kristy.

"My ex-husband did the same thing as well and kept doing it throughout the marriage. Probably why I divorced him," said Julie as she laughed.

It was all Thomas could do not to burst out laughing. He bit his tongue and just muttered "You don't say."

"Thomas Dayfield! Don't even try to act surprised. Sharon told us you did the same thing before she moved in," exclaimed Kristy.

"Okay then, ladies. Explain to me the importance of not having winter and summer clothing in the same closet? Is it that big a deal?" asked Thomas.

"Of course it is! But we wouldn't expect you to understand. You're a guy and aren't meant to comprehend something so complicated," said Julie with a smile on her face.

"Okay, I'll give you that. We men are simple creatures. We like things that go bang, big, fast trucks, heavy machinery and cold beer. And if it can't be cooked on a grill, it doesn't need to be eaten," stated Thomas.

"Poor Stephen. I don't think he knew what that box under the stovetop was for until we got married. You should have seen the first time he tried to bake bread," said Kristy with a laugh.

"Now that is one thing Frank can do. He can cook and he's not that bad at it," stated Julie.

Kristy said the comment on both Thomas and her minds. "It's nice to see you and Frank getting along so well so far."

"Yeah, we kind of clicked right away and with the exception of a few other minor points, it's going well," replied Julie with a smile.

"Other minor points?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, since he lived by himself, he was used to just dropping his guns wherever he wanted to. He isn't used to being around curious children and Kirsten is about as curious as they come. I kind of had to remind him a few times to put them either in the closet on the top shelf or back into the gun safe. Speaking of firearms, is there any chance of me getting something when we get back?" asked Julie.

"Not a problem, we kind of forgot about that this trip. Anything in particular?" asked Thomas.

"I guess I'm most familiar, or let's say comfortable, with the M-4 so something along those

lines," said Julie after she thought about it for a moment.

"I think that can be arranged. We have a few M-4s that are in storage that you are more than welcome to use. And don't forget about the pistol hunting rifles and shotgun" replied Thomas.

"I've never been hunting before. My father did sometimes, but he never took me along since I was kind of opposed to shooting Bambi. I suppose that will change now since there isn't a supermarket for us to buy meat at," replied Julie.

The rest of the drive was passed in light conversation. It was good to see Julie fitting in so well in the group already and the group as a whole would help her transition as a full time member. They hoped it wouldn't turn out like Tracy Daniels, but so far it hadn't been going that way. A rather odd thing, Tracy had been the most vocal proponent of Julie being accepted into the group before the meeting. The group figured since Tracy hadn't gotten off on the best foot with the group she was trying doubly hard to make sure new residents started off right. She had volunteered to help with the transition of Julie and Kirsten and had gone out of her way to teach her the things she needed to know to get by.

Tracy had been a rather large pain in the rear both before she left and after she was allowed back into the group. For the first two months, she had constantly badgered the residents trying to learn everything she could. The group tolerated the constant questioning since it was a nice change to being shunned as they had before. After a while, Tracy had started backing off on the training but still demanded to be in the front of the line to learn new things every so often. She had an aggressive personality and attacked most chores with a boundless energy much like Shannon did. As a matter of fact, Shannon was the only Ranch member that could keep up with Tracy when it came to working on projects.

The next day, the trucks were opened up and each family took advantage of the goods that had been gathered. The community goods were stored in the various sheds and shelters around the complex or handed out as needed by the residents. Kristy took a close count of what went out for the inventory sheets in order to accurately make projections for goods in the future. The individual goods were taken by the respective families and each was happy with the additional clothing and shoes brought from the outdoor goods warehouse. The boats were taken to the pond and plans were made for a small dock to be added to the pond next to the Conference Center. It would not be easy, but they would try, none-the-less. Sharon promised to look through her engineering books to determine the structural needs and materials necessary for it. She thought she remembered one of the books having detailed plans on the necessary preparations for a dock. While it wasn't completely necessary to have since the pond was only a little over one hundred and fifty feet across at its widest point, it would be nice to have to keep from getting their feet wet when launching the boats.

The group met to discuss options for continued scavenging. First on the list was former government equipment. Since the US government no longer existed in their part of the world, they would make it "finders-keepers" items. They would only take those items purely necessary for the continued survival of the community and not just the nice to have things. Second on the list were weapons and dangerous items like explosives. This was more to do with the safety and

security factors of the Ranch more than actually needing the items. The third on the list was completely abandoned property. It would be up to the Ranch residents to decide if the property was abandoned or not. A case would be made at a meeting and reasonable proof would need to be made before the property would be taken. Also, the property, if not needed, would be stored or given to the local population if they needed it. Gasoline, kerosene and diesel were briefly discussed, even though the remaining stockpiles outside the Ranch were going bad even as they spoke. George briefly mentioned they had enough to the stabilizer on hand to bring the fuel back to life if they found a sufficient quantity of it. The entire group agreed the fuel would be in the second category unless it was in clearly marked Government tankers or on government property.

While some of the group did not agree with this policy, they did feel the need for the first two items. The third item caused them more trouble in their conscious. However, when the idea of giving it out to local friendly groups or refugees, their mood softened somewhat. Depending on how far down civilization fell; they would continue to reassess the situation on the scavenging of goods. For the moment, the group was content to gather their goods from Smoke.

Time since attacks: 8 Months, 5 Days
Date/Time: 25 December/1238 Local
Location: The Ranch

It was the first Christmas for the group that year at the Ranch. It was a simple affair with the group having a large banquet for lunch after the morning of gift giving. Since presents were hard to come by, families often gave up personal items to each other or items they had made. Shannon had taken the time to weave up throw blankets for each household on the Ranch. George and Cynthia had started making deerskin moccasins for the other members and used old tires for the soles. They hadn't gotten everyone's made in time, but promised everyone a pair in the near future. Rick, at the request of Thomas, had gone out and built a new marksman rifle in .243 Winchester caliber for Sharon, who had been bugging Thomas for one recently. They had the necessary parts on hand to do so and while she laughed at the unique item, she was happy for the gift. In return, Thomas gave Rick his pre-64 Winchester Model 70 in .458 Winchester Magnum. Rick had often kidded Thomas to include him in his will leaving him the rifle and now seemed to be the best time to part with the fine rifle. While the rifle wouldn't really find much use on the Ranch except maybe for the occasional bear, it was something Rick had often dreamed of having. He had a grin a mile wide when Thomas handed over the rifle with a bow attached to the barrel. Other families gave items of a personal nature to each other during the dinner. The gifts of friendship helped lessen the dark mood of the holiday season and brought them even closer.

Other minor gifts were gathered during the trip to see Smoke, who seemed to know about the group needing something prior to coming out. He already had a full line of children's toys lined up when the group reappeared prior to Christmas and showed them where the rest of them were stored. The group tried to think of something to give him for Christmas, but what do you give the person who seemingly has everything already? As if he knew what they were thinking he offered "Now, it's Christmas time and I don't want you folks thinking you need to give me

anything. I'm perfectly fine out here and there ain't nothing you can give me that I don't already have. Just seeing you all and making your kids happy is a good enough present for me."

Even so, Darren parted with an elk skin jacket he had for several years. It was the hide of the first elk he had ever shot in Colorado and meant a lot to Darren. Smoke initially tried to refuse the gift, but was told they would leave it behind in the warehouse when they left if he didn't take it right there and then. He tried it on and found it was a little large, but accepted the gift anyway with a smile. The group promised to look in on him more often and not to always show up with their hands out.

The children were the ones that did not understand the unique day as well as the adults. Fathers and Mothers sat down with their children the night before and told them that Santa was coming around, no matter what and there would be a Christmas that year. Families did the best they could with gathering the gifts from the warehouse complex and from other residents and wrapped them in plain newspaper. Children's eyes lit up as they found presents under the trees that sat in their living rooms. Most had thought Santa had forgotten them that year and didn't know where they had moved to. It was like a Norman Rockwell painting that morning as it had snowed the previous night and a gentle layer of the pristine white snow covered the landscape.

A trip was made out to the Minister and he was brought back for the group dinner. A Colt Single Action pistol in .38-40 had been exchanged for the pistol he currently had after they had discovered a supply of ammunition at the outdoor goods warehouse. A family heirloom Bible, well over a hundred years old, was given to him by the Lawsons. He remarked it was one of the best Christmases he could ever remember having and was thankful he had such generous Christian neighbors around in the darkest time of the world. Other gifts of food and supplies were given to him and the other neighbors near the Ranch the group had become closer to. Several members spent the previous afternoon driving to the houses and cabins they knew about to give the gifts of friendship. The neighbors often didn't have anything in return, but the Ranch members didn't care. It was the season of giving and they were giving from the heart. They all knew in this season it was better to give than to receive since they were far better off than most in the world.

Throughout the day, the dark moods everyone seemed to be having recently vanished. Even Amy, this being her first Christmas ever away from her family, seemed to be sharing in the holiday cheer. The group became closer and even those at odds with each other let bygones be bygones and worked out their differences silently. The mood that day was jovial but those with families still out in the world worried about their safety. The Minister offered a prayer for the lost family members and asked the Lord to watch over them in their time of despair.

Close to two weeks after Christmas, Frank and Julie made a surprise visit to Thomas and Sharon. They requested to make a small trip to the Minister to see if he would be willing to perform another marriage. Thomas was floored by the request since it seemed like Julie had just gotten to the Ranch and was just now starting to get her life back to normal. They both informed the Dayfields that they had hit it off almost instantly and couldn't think of any better person they would be willing to spend the rest of their lives with. Thomas agreed to take the couple to see the Minister and make the request under one condition, they be allowed to plan another wedding.

Frank shied away from having a formal event and Julie thought it was an outstanding idea. Thomas told him it was better to go with the formal event and not argue. "While you are wearing the pants in the family, be reminded it's always the pants she picked out for you. You wear them, smile and act like you are actually in charge of the house, but we all know better," he said with a wink.

Frank and Thomas made the short trip to the Minister's house and he readily agreed to perform the ceremony. Another quick trip was made back to the warehouse to see Smoke and pick up a wedding band set he had put away. After looking over Frank for some time, but not saying a word, Smoke simply stated "I think you'll do" and extended his hand for Frank to shake. Julie extended the invitation for him to come out to the Ranch for the wedding but was politely declined. Smoke stated he was "pretty busy" for the next few weeks but wished the new couple happiness and told them to come back out to the warehouse and get their wedding gifts from him in about a month. Thomas silently wondered what Smoke was doing that might keep him "pretty busy" but decided not to ask. Since Julie and Kirsten were now going to be family members of a group member, the issue of voting was quickly forgotten. Two weeks later the Ranch had another wedding and reception.

CHAPTER 33 – TO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Time since attacks: 11 Months, 6 Days
Date/Time: 26 March/0723 Local
Location: The Ranch, Colorado

Thomas and his team, now consisting of Brian, Amber and Greg, who had replaced Kristy during her pregnancy, got ready to set off on an extended four day recon of the southern and eastern portion of the Ranch. Instead of walking for a while, the patrols had taken to leapfrogging the patrol routes with one team moving into position and another independent team waiting on trails and animal paths. It took a little coordination, but they had been practicing the technique for almost a month. The teams were rotated out every four days with a two day overlap on the patrols. Thomas's team was just started their four day patrol and Darren's team would conclude their patrol in another two days and be relieved by Ryan's team. The weather was very nice today with temperatures in the low sixties. *I guess spring is finally here,* thought Thomas. *It's about time since we had a particularly bad winter.* He continued thinking the thoughts on the weather until they were on their patrol route. Each member checked and rechecked each other's equipment and the camouflage face paint was applied by the members. Each had another check their work and touch up on some areas before calling it good. Thomas shouldered his ruck, heavy from the four days of food and additional water he was carrying. Even as heavy as it was, it still was more bearable than it had been when they first started doing the extended recon patrols. His daily exercises were helping and the four day patrols helped keep himself, and the entire group, in shape even more.

They started away from the Conference Center in a non-tactical file formation walking south towards the Dayfield's house and continuing on in the direction of the Taylor's house. They would pass close by, but not within sight of the lonely house near the highway. After passing by his home and into the woods directly behind them, the patrol spread out into a wedge formation with Brian at the point. His mind then focused on the task at hand and went into what he called "combat mode." He stayed alert to out of the ordinary sounds, sights and smells while concentrating on making himself as quiet as possible.

The patrol moved a little slower now they had entered their designated route off the southern border of the Ranch. Their route would take them from the south to the east and well off the property in some places. There had been little contact over the winter and the group figured with the weather warming, there would be more refugees soon. They did their best to cover the back paths and trails both on and off the property and to hit the areas where natural shelter was offered. They would set up on the pathways and jeep trails watching for both vehicle and foot traffic and observe to see where they were heading. The tactics had been working fairly well lately and they had intercepted a few groups heading in the direction of the Ranch and redirected them into other areas away from the property.

They reached the first observation point at 1011 hours and silently crept into an observation position. Since Kristy was off the team due to her pregnancy, Thomas was now paired off with

Amber. Brian and Greg had been paired off since they were good friends and during the team training it seemed like they were able to read each other's mind. Their tactics were outstanding and they moved as one fluid unit, only separated by the two bodies. Amber was still learning to keep up with Thomas since he had honed his woodcraft skills to a razor sharp edge and was just about as good as anyone could get. She was still a ways from reaching his level, but was very good herself. Their team was just about as good as it got and was only matched by Darren's team of himself, Frank, Heather and Shannon. The two teams were fairly competitive and often exercised against each other in training sessions, both teams winning as much as they lost.

Thomas and Amber set up on the jeep trail and observed down the road both ways. They were a little off the trail, but had a clear line of observation in each direction. Brian and Greg were at their rear watching their six o'clock. In another half an hour, they would switch positions and responsibilities. The planned stop at this spot was two hours unless they observed a group. If they made contact, they would continue to observe and stalk the group as needed until they were off or range of the property and no longer deemed a threat.

The two hour stop was uneventful and they ate before preparing to move. When they finished, they were just about to shoulder their rucks when suddenly, Amber dropped down to one knee and looked down the roadway. Her left hand came up in a fist meaning "Freeze! Don't move!" The rest of the team stopped where they were at and Thomas peered into the direction she was staring. Brian and Greg had already silently moved to the rear and were providing rear security. Thomas made his way to her, barely looking like he was moving at all and not fast enough to draw the attention of any observer. He finally saw what she was looking at. A group of people numbering thirteen were coming down the roadway.

"Thirteen individuals coming up the road, about one hundred fifty meters away, mixed camouflage and civilian clothing and about half are armed," she whispered to Thomas, now at her nine o'clock position close to ten feet away.

"Got 'em," he whispered in reply and activated the radio relaying the report to Brian and Greg. He silently crouched down behind a tree and continued to observe the group and Amber did the same. The group of people, now at fourteen and including six children of various ages, wasn't making any special effort to be quiet while traveling down the roadway, as they were having a conversation amongst themselves. The weapons they carried were a mix of hunting rifles, shotguns and two autoloading rifles. A few pistols were visible being carried by some and Thomas silently wondered whether more were concealed on the other people. All the long guns were slung and the group didn't seem like they were worried about making contact with any other group on the jeep trail. The group was carrying heavy packs and dragging two homemade wagons with large bike wheels behind them along the trail. As they got closer, they could hear the conversation clearly.

"What do you all think about stopping at that campground near here?" asked one.

"You mean the one that has those Army folks living there that took down that Lion Claw team? They won't want us up there. They turn away just about everyone, said another.

“I hear they are only looking for a doctor anyway,” said another.

“Well, it can’t hurt to ask can it? What do we have to lose?” asked the first.

“Our lives! I hear they are ruthless and if we don’t leave, they shoot us on sight!” said another.

“That’s not true, but they have made examples of some of the gangs around here. Hung them on telephone poles, I heard,” said the second in line.

“Well good! They probably had it coming to them!” said the first.

“I doubt very seriously they are going to let a bunch of out of work janitors come into their place to live. What do we have to offer them? Clean their toilets? There aren’t any running toilets these days. It’s best we move on to that other campground on the reservoir near Buena Vista. We will be okay there,” said another.

The group continued their trek right past the waiting team. Amber and Thomas were only twenty meters away from the group as they passed by and none of them noticed the well camouflaged team sitting silently watching them. After they passed, Thomas contacted the other three with hand and arm signals and one specifically invented by Darren for their next task. His left hand went out as if a cat’s paw was scratching at something, the sign for “We are going to stalk them.” Darren had come up with the hand and arm signal while sitting at home watching one of the stray cats they had taken in stalk and pounce on a housefly. The rest of the group readied their gear silently and Greg called in to the Control Center to relay the contact and their intentions to follow the group for a while.

In the Control Center, Kristy made a mark on the large map for their location and annotated it in the event log. She warned Darren’s patrol that the Maverick patrol was deviating from established patrol route and would be continuing to observe the group. He acknowledged the transmission and continued his recon of the observation point they were at.

Thomas and his team followed parallel to the course of the group and back almost one hundred meters off the roadway for another mile. The group they were following took a break and sat down to eat some lunch. Thomas and his team set back up and consulted the GPS they were using to navigate. They found they were well off the property and would only follow another half mile before turning back to their original starting point. After a half hour of rest, the other group started to move again. They only moved two hundred yards down the road before an ambush was initiated on their group. Shots rang out from the right side of the jeep trail in a well established linear ambush. Thomas, who was on point, immediately went to cover followed quickly by his team. They saw the group on the trail getting cut to shreds by the ambush. Only two individuals were able to fire back at the attackers and those were hit in the next volley.

Thomas watched as the remaining members of the group rolled around and moaned from the injuries. He saw a group of four come out of the tree line and walk through the group, firing a pistol shot into each of the heads. The entire group, another five, came out after the foursome was finished with their gruesome task and started gathering all the goods off the jeep trail.

“Looks like we got some good loot off this group. I told you most are staying off the paved roads now,” said one.

“Not just that, that ranch is keeping watch over the nearby property. I think we are too close as it is and we used up way too much ammunition on this one,” said another.

“Come on man, this was easy, even your stupid Marine butt can agree to that,” said the first.

“I get the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end when I think about those people at that ranch. Let’s get this over with and get back to our base,” said the second, evidently the leader.

The group continued gathering the goods, even going to the extent of taking off clothing from the dead individuals. Thomas burned with anger since these people obviously were the kind of criminals who went after weaker groups. To attack adult refugee parties was one thing, but to outright murder children was another entirely. They had little regard for human life and exploited the refugees coming down roadways and by the trails. By the time he turned to send another hand and arm signal to his group, Greg had already radioed into the Control Center and given them an update. Thomas again gave the “stalk” hand and arm signal and was rewarded with nods from everyone.

An ATV with two trailers was being brought out for the group of ambushers to put their loot into. The packs were not gone through at the site of the ambush, but rather thrown into the trailers. It took almost an hour to get everything loaded and when they were done, one individual left on the ATV down the road. The other got into a loose formation and headed off in that direction as well. The fire team stood up and started following the ambushers along the trail. During this time, they received a message from the Control Center that another team was being put on alert to help out if they needed it. They continued to give position updates as they went along, finally moving off the trail into the forest. The teams were somewhat tactical, but making far too much noise as they went along. From time to time, the rear guard would turn around and look behind them for anyone following. However, the camouflage and tactics of Thomas and his team kept them out of observation.

The pathway took them northward towards the hard surface roadway. After close to a half mile, the group stopped and went left into a large covered area which contained their base camp. From there, they could strike at either the jeep trail to the south or at the paved road to their north quite easily. The ambushers went into their camp and Thomas followed, but not too closely. He was unsure of any additional security put out by the group and didn’t want to chance them being detected. He did see several large tents up along with smaller ones in a circle around a central fire pit. He now counted fifteen of the individuals in the camp and silently wondered how many more were in the camp.

Brian and Greg had gone to the other side of the camp to perform their own recon of the area while Amber was at his rear taking care of their six o’clock security. Thomas started making mental notes of where the tents were at, what weapons they had and how many of the forces were vigilant to their surroundings. After fifteen minutes, he counted no more than fifteen

people who were currently going through the gathered items from the trailers. Whoops and shouts of joy were heard from the individuals who were going through the packs as they found items that were obviously valuable. He changed over with Amber and had her watch the camp for fifteen minutes while he took rear security and transferred the information to a small notepad. Brian and Greg called over the radio stating they were en route back to the Objective Rally Point established by Thomas before they went towards the camp. Amber and Thomas both left the scene as well and rallied up with the two and they departed a little further so they could talk without being heard by patrols that might have been put out by the attackers.

"Who are these people?" asked Brian.

"Obviously nobody we want this close to the property. How are we going to deal with them?" asked Greg.

Thomas consulted the map and the GPS, finding they were about four miles off the Ranch but still far closer than he felt entirely comfortable with. They were in the National Forest and technically off private lands so the individuals couldn't be politely asked to leave, nor did the castle laws apply out here. "I don't think they are going to just leave and fifteen of them are a little more than I am totally comfortable with to take on with just us."

"How about the alert team?" asked Brian.

"They could make it here in time, but I have another idea," said Thomas. He called the Control Center and found Darren's team was only an hour away by foot from a nearby Checkpoint the teams used as a map reference. Thomas called for a rendezvous for the two teams and was granted permission by the acting defensive coordinator, Dave. He briefly explained the situation about the hostile group near the property and his intentions of taking them out. Dave originally didn't give his permission until Thomas told him about the murder of the children on the jeep trail. He quickly changed his mind and inquired if Thomas needed additional forces. Thomas told him all he needed was Darren's team and they would be set. The message was relayed and Darren informed him directly he would be enroute.

Thomas and Amber left for the nearby Checkpoint and waited for Darren and his team to arrive. Brian and Greg stayed behind at the encampment continuing to observe the group, although at a little more distance than they had done before. It took almost an hour and a half before Darren's patrol team arrived and was challenged into the checkpoint area.

"I only caught part of your transmission; mind filling me in?" requested Darren.

Thomas explained the situation with occasional injects from Amber. Darren agreed the group posed a threat to the Ranch and agreed to a quick and lethal strike against the gang. The six individuals left the Checkpoint and made their way quietly to the ORP that Thomas had established before. Brian and Greg were called back and readmitted to the area and the two teams held a quick planning group in the late afternoon. Between their two groups, they had sufficient firepower with an M-249 that Greg had and the M-203 that Heather had. However, fifteen people, even without a proper defensive plan, would be hard to take down at one time.

The decision was made to strike after dark when the hostile party least expected it. The two teams had the use of night vision equipment but were unaware of whether or not their adversaries had any available. They would establish bases of fire of the camp on two sides with one being a base element to support the main attack. Greg, Brian, Frank and Heather would form a base of fire while Darren, Shannon, Amber and Thomas would attack through the targeted area and eliminate any opposition. There wasn't any time for rehearsals, but the two teams had practiced a similar tactic before and were already proficient in the maneuver to be performed that night starting at 0200 if all went well. They informed Dave of the intention and the generic plan and were given a go-ahead over the radio. The two teams spent the rest of the afternoon and evening observing the enemy camp, resting or taking combat naps and preparing equipment for the raid. Night fell eventually and the enemy group built a fire, not a large one, but enough to ruin the night vision of anyone nearby. They were drinking from several bottles of liquor stolen from the band of refugees and didn't seem to know certain death waited inside the darkness nearby.

The leader of the group set a guard rotation for the night and had several groans from the chosen members. He slapped one in the face and told him to "shape up or ship out" before ensuring the force was ready. The man complied at the orders and silently went to retrieve his rifle for the guard duty. The other guard decided it would not be in his best interest to argue and went to grab his newly acquired shotgun. At around 2300 hours, most everyone went to bed, except a few that were passed out in camping chairs around the fire. The "guards" took to infrequent patrols around the perimeter then returning from the chilly night air to warm themselves by the fire. Darren called over the radio without call signs to Thomas. "Do you think we can get these guys when they come out?"

"Knife or my ASP will work. Standby," said Thomas, knowing Darren meant silently.

Thomas still carried the baton on patrols since it was useful as a defensive tool but was unsure if he could open it without alerting the guards. They had practiced with the batons and he knew if he could hit the man in the right spot he could render him unconscious. He also had his fixed blade knife he could use just in case. The problem with knives was they were never guaranteed to make a quick kill and he would have to have pinpoint precision with the first strike.

"I can take mine with a knife if you can too. Silent is the way to go since they are pretty much going out at the same time. We can then take care of the rest of the camp," said Darren.

Thomas agreed this was the best course of action, but worried about the last minute changes and the unsure tactic of the knives. *This is what I get for not going ahead and getting a suppressor before the Fall. I had the chance and decided it was too much trouble to try and apply since I was gone to the sandbox a lot. If I had done it, this would have been a piece of cake. Hindsight is 20/20* thought Thomas as he pulled out the baton and readied it for action. He wanted to make as little noise as possible and decided to creep away from the position to open it up. Darren was moving the support teams into position and getting the strike force ready to go. They decided to slightly modify the plan and have two angles of approach with Thomas and Amber on one side and Darren on the other to take out the guards as they did their loop just outside of the camp. Everyone was set and they decided to go at 0030 instead of waiting until later. The alcohol

would impair the enemy's decision making process and they wanted to take full advantage of that tactical edge.

At 0020 everyone was in position and Thomas had opened the baton, the sound of it opening being far louder than he wanted, but still had not alerted the guards to his presence. He waited for the guards to come back out and turned on his night vision and silently waited. Darren was in another position and had pulled his knife from the sheath. The razor sharp edge shined briefly in the dull light from the campfire and he also prepared to meet the guard as he came on his patrol.

As luck would have it, the guards were coming out at 0034 and one going counterclockwise and the other doing his in a clockwise fashion. Darren's would reach his first and the other would reach Thomas about thirty seconds later. They both waited like the proverbial tiger in the grass for their targets to reach them, both blending in perfectly with the dark woods. Darren's target had reached him a little longer than anticipated since he had to stop and urinate along the way. When he reached the point Darren was intending to strike, he passed by a large tree. Darren swiftly came from behind the tree and grabbed the man from behind, covering his mouth as he did so. He slammed the knife into the base of the man's skull just above the neck and felt the knife slide up to the hilt. The man's initial reaction was to reach up and grab the hand, but found his arm wouldn't respond and eventually found a darkness envelop him as the knife found its way into the deeper part of his brain. Darren twisted the knife for good measure and gently laid the limp body down. He then prepared to engage the targets and waited for Thomas to complete his gruesome task and join the rest of the strike team.

Thomas had to wait quite a bit longer since his target not only had to urinate but also defecate along the way. Instead of waiting, Thomas shifted his position and moved silently through the woods to the waiting target. He waited along the expected pathway until the man finished his business and watched as the man pulled up his pants and grabbed the rifle he had leaned against a tree. The additional time in the woods had given the man a little of his night vision back and he could now see some forms in the woods in front on him. He thought he saw a figure standing halfway behind a tree, but figured it was just his mind playing tricks on him. He slung the rifle and started walking, eager to get back to the warm fire in the camp.

As he approached the tree where Thomas was hiding, he peeked around the back but didn't see anything. He reversed his course back to the other side and continued his walk. Thomas had to change positions quickly and in doing so, made a little noise. The man registered the noise and started to unsling the rifle at his side when Thomas struck. His right arm snapped forward from the shoulder in a sideways hammer motion while his right wrist snapped the baton forward even more. He made contact with the small steel ball at the tip of the baton and felt it strike the left side of the man's head. Although not knocked unconscious as Thomas had planned, the man was dazed by the strike and fell to the ground hard. He started to yell, but found a hand on his mouth covering it up. Thomas dropped the baton on the ground and went for his knife. The man continued to struggle as Thomas eventually freed the knife from its sheath and plunged it into the right base of the man's neck just above the collarbone, stabbing two more times in the center and on the left side. Blood spurted from the severed arteries and veins in the man's neck and he let out a gurgle as the life slipped away from his body. After thirty seconds, he stopped resisting and his arms fell away, void of life.

Thomas quickly wiped the knife on the man's pants and retrieved the baton. He didn't want the noise of closing it and left the spot he was at to rejoin the team waiting to strike. He left the baton with Greg on the M-249 and silently went to the other waiting team members. Upon his arrival, Darren came over to him. "Took a little longer than planned."

"My guy was taking a dump and the baton didn't work as planned so I had to go to the knife. We still on track?" asked Thomas, unfazed by the run in with Murphy.

"Yes, and I think we might be able to take a few more of these guys silently. There are still thirteen of them with another three by the fire. If we took them out, it would bring down the odds to just about even. Want to give it a go?" asked Darren in a whisper.

"Maybe, how does that affect our plan and if they are alerted? We would be in the middle of the camp, surrounded. Give me some odds here," stated Thomas.

"Fifty-fifty? Sixty-forty in favor of? Who knows? It might be nice to take most of these guys silently. I wish we had Amy's silenced pistol," said Darren still looking into the encampment.

"I was thinking the same thing earlier," Thomas chuckled. "We can wish in one hand…"

"Yeah, you want to give it a go? At least the three by the fire?" asked Darren.

Thomas was unsure if the tactic would work or not, but decided between the two teams they might be able to pull it off. Either way, they would not expose their teams to danger and would only be themselves. They would keep Amber and Shannon in position where they were at to provide a crossfire if they were taken out. Shannon started to object but was reminded by Darren she hadn't done that well in the knife fighting class. He also explained she needed to be there to watch his back when they went to work in the camp. Thomas radioed the support team and informed them of the slight change in plans. He and Darren decided to leave their rifles at the location and rely on their pistols if they had to use a firearm. Each man had four magazines for the pistols and might be in trouble during a prolonged firefight, but decided it wasn't worth the risk of getting jumbled up with the larger rifle when they were taking care of their business.

They left the covered position silently, both men seemingly not making any noise or moving at all. They silently covered the ground between themselves and the sleeping individuals. The support team followed their movements and then divided their weapons, each taking a different tent and aiming at the ones which had more than one person staying inside. Darren and Thomas got to their points immediately behind the men sleeping by the fire. B oth plunged their knives into the back of the heads of their targets much like Darren had done before. Both men also covered the mouths of the men they were currently eliminating silently. Both men reacted to the first poke into the head and then went limp. Darren and Thomas both attempted to get a response by jabbing the knife into the sides of the men, but they were already dead. Darren moved to the next target as Thomas pulled his pistol from the holster to cover him.

Darren moved silently around the fire and Thomas took cover by a large log, both men

seemingly floating across the landscape like ghosts. Darren completed his next task and his head snapped to a noise to his left. A zipper in one of the tents was heard coming up and an occupant was coming out. Thomas immediately moved towards the tent and waited just outside the doorway. He holstered his pistol and went for his knife, but the head and shoulders poked out of the tent before he could get to it. Instincts went into motion as Thomas grabbed the front and rear of the man's head and twisted violently, tucking it into his bent right arm. He raised up and let gravity and the weight of the man complete the process of breaking his own neck. They had learned how to effectively complete that move during one of their training classes from Kristy and Amy. Thomas finished the hold in textbook fashion and the man fell to the ground, halfway inside and outside the tent, opening the tent doorway fully. Thomas immediately pulled his knife and went inside the tent to finish off anyone inside.

Apparently Murphy wasn't far behind the team as the noise of the zipper had awoken the man inside. He saw his friend lying in the doorway and then saw a dark ghost coming into his tent to take him away to a dark place as well. He screamed just as Thomas reached him, waking everyone in the camp with his bloodcurdling screech. Darren immediately went for cover behind the log near the fire and Thomas plunged his knife into the neck of the man, but their cover was already blown. The support team started firing into the other tents and Amber and Shannon held their fire since both Thomas and Darren were in their fields of fire. The rapid bursts from the M-249 and rifles went right through the lightweight tent material and found targets as the enemy was hit coming out of sleeping bags attempting to get into the fight. One man made it out unscathed and was engaged by Darren with his CZ-85B from behind the log. Three .40 S&W hollowpoint bullets found their mark center mass of the individual as Darren fired from a position of lying on his back and shooting between his knees. Thomas had finished off the man who had sounded the alarm and was racing to reach the cover with Darren so the support team would have a clear line of fire into the entire encampment.

He arrived just as Darren completed his shot pattern into the escaping man. Thomas took a position just behind Darren and watched their six o'clock position. A brief movement in the dim light caught his eye and he saw the muzzle of a shotgun poking out of the lower corner of a tent flap. The muzzle looked huge in the dim light and Thomas engaged the general area with four shots from his pistol and emptied the rest of the magazine into the tent. He quickly reloaded and continued to watch the tent as the firing began to slack off. One of the tents was burning from the tracer fire from the M-249, lighting up the entire area. Soft moans were heard from wounded men from the tents and one attempted to emerge, carrying a pistol. Frank fired one shot into the man, ending his pain and his life.

It was eerily silent after the small raid and all that was heard were the moans of the wounded men. Thomas heard the support team starting to reload one at a time, replacing half empty magazines and the belt on the M-249. They still waited for the rest of the occupants to emerge and when they didn't, Thomas and Darren stood up. Shannon and Amber joined them in the camp and covered two of the tents while moving forward. They knew they needed to complete clearing of the tents, but it was not a tactic they had practiced, much less thought of. Thomas and Darren split off with their respective "wingmen" and took a tent where they didn't hear wounded men in. Instead of going in through the front door of the tent that might be an ambush, they decided to approach from the side where they wouldn't be silhouetted from the fire and cut

a hole in the side of the tent and had their overwatch shine in a flashlight mounted to the front of their weapons. Since Amber didn't have a rail system on her WASR, she used Thomas's PTR which had a flashlight mounted. The teams had cross trained enough with each other's weapons over the past and each knew how to operate the weapon almost as well as the owner. Thomas relieved her of her rifle and slung it across his back and used his pistol for the close quarters work.

Eventually, each tent was cleared and there were three wounded. One died as they brought him out of the tent and the other two were brought out to the fire. One would die for sure if he wasn't taken to a hospital soon and the other, the leader of the gang, had several wounds, but none life threatening at the moment. Thomas and Darren attempted to patch them up with their aid kits while the rest of the teams moved up into the camp.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked the leader of the gang, grunting as Darren applied a pressure bandage none too gently.

"We haven't decided yet," replied Darren.

"Are you going to kill me?" asked the man with a little fear in his voice.

"If we were, would we be taking the time to patch you up?" asked Darren.

The man silently watched the two teams gather the dead men from the tents and place them immediately outside the camp. He finally figured out who these people were. "You! You all are from that ranch down the road!"

Darren was silent as he continued to plug the leaks in the man. He might make a full recovery if he had more proper medical care, but would be out of commission for a while even so.

"You killed everyone! We never heard you coming! I was awake the whole time and didn't hear anything until the scream! You people are ghosts!" exclaimed the leader.

Darren ignored the continued comments and finished his work. The man wasn't happy with his situation and continued trying to get a prompt out of the unknown assailants. "You killed everyone here! What makes you so different from us? Huh? We're doing the same thing to survive! Survival of the fittest! Just because we are better armed than others doesn't mean we are different! You killed everyone here to survive and we do the same to survive! Are you going to kill me? Well, fine! Go ahead and do it! Kill me now and take everything I own! Murderers! Who do you people think you are? What makes you think you are better than me?!"

Darren had just about enough of the man's talking. He pounced on the man, drawing his knife as he did so and put it up to the man's neck. The wet blood from the previous engagements could be seen in the dim light and the man felt the wetness on his throat. "Because we don't kill children, you bastard! That's what makes us different! You would already be found guilty in a court of law if there was one to be had these days. Don't give me an excuse to find you guilty myself and invoke the death penalty," said Darren in a hiss.

The man shut up for the moment and realized these people weren't going to kill him. Maybe there really was a sheriff nearby that they would turn him over to. He figured silence would be his best option for the moment. They attempted to help the other member but his wounds were too severe. He never regained consciousness and quietly slipped into death just prior to dawn.

The two teams decided to wait until daylight to inventory the camp and the items. They did take the firearms just outside the camp and covered them with a poncho, hidden from sight for the moment. They radioed the Ranch and gave their SITREP and requested a resupply just after daybreak. While they could replenish their ammo from the stores in the camp, they wanted munitions that were guaranteed to work and would wait until these had been inspected and given the okay to be used. They gagged the leader and tied his hands behind his back before moving him away from the camp. They eventually would take the man up to fifty miles away from the Ranch and let him go without weapons except a multi-tool he might use for personal survival.

The night passed with one team being on alert and one team resting. The sleep came and went for the team members and Thomas found himself and Frank on duty before dawn. Frank drifted towards Thomas in the early morning right before the sun came up. "And I thought I was sneaky. You and Darren were like some sort of phantoms going through that camp. I've never seen someone move so quietly. You, my friend, are my better in the sneaky department and thank God you are on our side."

"Nothing to it, Frank. I'm just glad we found these goons before they got desperate enough to hit the Ranch. I don't like the fact they were that close to begin with," said Thomas quietly.

"I was thinking the same thing. We should question him before we let him go," said Frank.

"I think you have a good idea there, especially where they have been and any other intel we can get out of them. Who know how many more of them might be out there," said Thomas.

"I can do that if you would like. I mean, he probably thinks Darren will kill him if he speaks again and he saw you helping Darren. You two probably scare the crap out of him and it might be better if an unknown questions them," said Frank thoughtfully.

"Yeah, after I saw him and his group gun down those children, I'm still thinking the death penalty might be a worthy judgment. But we'll go as planned. You go ahead and question that dirt bag once the sun comes up," said Thomas, worrying about the security of the Ranch since these people had been here for some time and hadn't been detected.

Daybreak was just about on them and the two went to wake up everyone for the morning. The other four were sound asleep and it took a pretty hard shaking to wake them up. After everyone woke up, Thomas got into his pack and pulled an MRE out, ripped open the bag and pulled the main meal and heater out. It was pretty chilly that morning and he added the water to the heater unit before placing it against a rock to warm up. Everyone else was digging around for breakfast as Thomas looked at his hands and uniform. He hadn't noticed last night after the engagement, but he now saw in the early morning light his hands and uniform were covered in blood. He

pulled out a small bottle of hand sanitizer and put a generous blob on his hand before attempting to clean them off. He saw Darren looking at his hands the same way and Thomas tossed the bottle over to him. Amber assisted each man by pouring water over their hands and each soaped up as well as they could with a small bar she carried, trying to remove the stains. Darren contacted the Control Center again and requested a new uniform be brought out for himself and Thomas, stating they both were okay, but needed clean clothing.

After breakfast, Frank questioned the individual, giving him part of an MRE and water as a reward for telling his story. He questioned him for close to a half an hour before joining the two patrol leaders and telling them the story. Brian and Greg had gone out to the paved road to meet up with the truck that was being sent to resupply the teams and to gather the items from the camp. There was just enough room on the overgrown jeep trail for the deuce to make its way into the camp and for it to turn around.

"Okay, these guys have been here for a little over three weeks now and hitting refugee traffic coming down the highway and the jeep trail. According to our new friend here, they only hit four parties coming down the road, probably killing each of them. According to him, they normally let people go after getting what they want, but I don't believe that. Normally, they remove the bodies that are killed from the area and work a little further from where they were at since they didn't want us to know they were here. Anyway, he is an ex-Marine that was in Denver during the Fall and got these goobers together right after the Loyalist forces started moving east. They were supposedly living quietly in Colorado Springs until they ran out of food then moved into the mountains searching for more," explained Frank.

"And the group he hit yesterday? What was the story about that?" asked Thomas.

"According to him, they fired first and they were defending themselves. I don't believe that and I told him we were watching the whole time. Even though I was lying, he never knew the difference. He clammed up after that," said Frank.

"Whatever, we go with standard procedure and drop him off at least fifty miles from here, but the further the better. Gather some food and equipment from the camp and make sure he has a Gerber or something. We will have them take him to the Ranch and transfer him into another vehicle before they send him out," said Darren.

Since it was now light enough to see through clearly, four went back to the camp, leaving the prisoner with Frank and Shannon. The gathered firearms from the night before were brought back to the camp and laid down with the rest of the items. The tents were gone through and anything of value was brought out and placed in neat piles according to what it was. The bodies were taken outside the camp and rigor mortis was already starting to set in. It was decided to burn the rest of the tents and sleeping bags that had been shot up since they were now unserviceable. Darren rekindled the fire and the items were thrown into the pit. Black smoke went upwards into the air, but hung lower than usual, indicating a possible change in atmospheric pressure and incoming rain. The smoke also worried everyone since it was a pretty clear cut signal to their location. They would have to hurry the burning and made the fire larger than they wanted, completely covering the fire ring with the clothing, tents and sleeping bags.

The deuce arrived at the camp and the group started loading the items into the truck. The firearms and ammunition were first and then the rest of the items. Amy Kerns and Tim Daniels hopped out to help out and handed over two changes of uniforms for Darren and Thomas. "Sharon says 'you had better stop playing hero or else!' Her words, not mine and I'm not going to argue with your ill tempered, pregnant wife," laughed Tim as he handed over the uniforms and a box of baby wipes.

"Tell her I'm fine and not to worry about the blood on the shirt. But make sure she washes it as soon as she gets it. Use the laundry detergent with bleach and put both mine and Darren's in at the same time. And of course, tell her I love her," said Thomas.

He and Darren found a secluded spot and changed out of the soiled uniforms into new sets, but also took the time to clean up with the baby wipes. They placed the soiled clothing into a garbage bag and before putting it in the truck. Finally, everything was loaded and the rest of the items burned. When it came to the bodies, everyone agreed it would take too much time to bring out the backhoe to dig the graves and decided to leave the bodies in place. Natural scavengers would be able to feast on the dead men for some time to come. Ammunition was passed out and magazines reloaded. The group attempted to gather the brass from the engagement and put it in an empty box to later be reloaded if they could. With the M-249, it chewed the brass up pretty well around the neck and opening, but they saved it none-the-less.

When everything was complete, the fire was still burning a little and the rest of the items were thrown onto it. Thomas and his team would watch from a short distance until it no longer was a threat to the forest and then continue their patrol. Darren and his team left and continued their patrol route, glad this was their final day before they were able to go back and rest up.

After the fire died to an acceptable level, enough to be left unattended and the team set off making a beeline shot to their original patrol route. A little over two hours later, they were back on track and heading northwards towards the eastern edge of the property. They continued their observation of the trails and the likely spots for people to camp, finding nothing. They briefly remembered the bodies on the jeep trail to their rear and decided to at least take them off the roadway. They requested permission to deviate once again from their patrol route only to find out Darren's team had already taken care of them.

The leaders of the brigands was again debriefed and checked over by Janie. He was pronounced okay with the exception of the gunshot wounds and was given enough food for five days, a Gerber Multi-tool and some other survival items before being taken near Fairplay and being dropped off. He was left with a small supply of antibiotics and enough foul weather gear to last in case of bad weather. He watched as the vehicle departed and wondered what to do at that point before heading down the road aimlessly.

The two patrols continued to the next day when Darren's team went back in and was replaced by Ryan's team. Thomas and his team had made it to the eastern edge of the property and were stopped by a nearby camping site that had seen recent activity, marked by the garbage left by some party and the recent campfire that had been built. They called in the report and found the

tracks leading away from the Ranch, but followed the tracks for a half mile just to be sure. In the late morning, it got noticeable colder and the sky started to cloud up. The team stopped for lunch around noon and watched the sky with interest since it could have meant possible bad weather.

They moved away at 1300 hours and resumed their patrol route to the next recon area, a lightly used pathway, more of an animal trail than anything. Amber made a thoughtful observation. "You know, normally we see wildlife out here on our patrols, deer and elk, even a rabbit or two. We haven't seen anything so far, even the birds aren't out."

Thomas thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, that's kind of weird. You're right; normally we see a few small herds of deer and whatnot. It's almost like there is someone else out here that scared off the animals or something is about to happen."

The team was more vigilant now since the lack of wildlife might have meant someone else was in the area with them and had scared them off already. They were still enroute to their next point at 1500 hours when it started snowing a little. The wind picked up slightly and the snow was just flurries at the time. They made a determination to continue on the patrol unless it got worse. The Control Center contacted each separate patrol and informed them it didn't look good on the horizon. They were advised to make contingency plans to move back towards the Ranch in case the snow got worse and to monitor the weather accordingly. Ryan made the command decision for his team to start heading back in the general direction of the Ranch and deviate their patrol route accordingly. Thomas consulted with his team and they decided to continue on mission until the storm got worse.

What they didn't know, but what the wildlife knew, was that one of the famous Albuquerque Lows was heading their way and a cold front from the north was coming in at the same time. The last time it had happened with equally large fronts moving in at the same time was the famous October blizzard of 1997. The main difference this time was the weather fronts were much larger than 1997. While the nuclear explosions the previous year didn't cause major havoc with the weather patterns as expected, they did have a slight change in weather around the world, making larger than normal storms over land and slightly larger and stronger hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic. This year was a little colder than normal and had above average snowfall, but the Ranch residents just thought it was a bad winter they had been expecting in Colorado for several years. They continued on mission while the weather front continued its dangerous pathway rapidly towards the unsuspecting patrol.

CHAPTER 34 – LOST BOYS

Time since attacks: 11 Months, 8 Days
Date/Time: 28 March/1610 Local
Location: Near the Ranch, Colorado

An hour later, the snow started getting thicker and came down faster. Dark clouds filled what sky they could see and the wind started picking up. Brian, in the lead, called a halt and gathered the group in the leeward side of a pine tree. "According to the Garmin, we are about four miles away from the Ranch. I have it entered as a waypoint and with the storm getting worse, I think we should head that way instead of continuing our patrol. If we hurry, we might be able to make it back in time."

"This storm is rolling in pretty fast and the DAGR shows a prepositioned shelter site at a little over a mile. I don't think we should chance going back to the Ranch. We can make it to the site in under a half an hour and be settled in before the storm gets really bad if we hurry. We should ride it out there since I don't want to get caught out in the open if it gets worse," said Thomas.

The prepared shelter he was referring to were basic shelters built over the winter by the Ranch residents. They had been built using treated lumber and stocked with provisions in order for a team to last through a bad storm if they had to. Camouflaged and concealed, the positions were off the normal drift of trails and had been steadily improved since they had been put in. One of the sites was near enough for the team to get to before the storm got worse.

The four agreed they should head for the prepared shelters instead of trying to make it back to the Ranch. They dug into their packs before moving on and pulled out Gore-Tex pants, jackets and gloves. Thomas noticed Amber only pulled out her jacket and slipped it on. He could see she wasn't wearing enough layers of clothing already and probably needed to add at least one more. After he suggested it to her, she replied she was fine and could wait until they got to the shelter. They all grabbed goggles from their packs and put them on over their caps so the freezing wind would not hurt their eyes. They wanted to move quickly, so they didn't waste any time in putting on heavier items. They all had seen the violence of the late winter storms in Colorado and knew they had to act quickly.

The patrol was preparing to move again when Greg took out a small roll of cord and tied it off to the back of Brian's web gear. He unrolled about twenty feet of the cord and looped it through both the front and back of his own web gear before handing it off to Amber. Both Amber and Thomas repeated the process with Thomas stuffing the remainder of the cord into his cargo pocket. If one person was to go down or stray off course, the rest of the patrol members would immediately know about it. It would slow down their reaction to an ambush, but they weren't worried about that at the time as much as getting into a sheltered position. As Brian lead off, Thomas checked the DAGR again to ensure they were on the correct heading. The patrol moved slowly, not because of being tactical, but because of the weather. The snow fell harder now and the wind was really picking up. Thomas could see Amber in front of him and faintly see Greg in

front of her. Every few minutes, Thomas would check the DAGR for the correct position and saw the distance slowly winding down. He looked at Amber and saw her starting to shiver even from the distance as the snow started to lie on top of her pack.

In a little over thirty minutes, Brian called a halt and gathered everyone around. "The Garmin just died. The last time I checked, we were within four hundred meters of the site. We should be close."

Thomas checked the DAGR for their current position and found they had strayed off course. "I show it at about five hundred meters to our eleven o'clock." He pointed to emphasize the direction and yelled to be heard over the howling wind. He took the DAGR off the lanyard he had attached it to and handed it over to Brian while pulling out his magnetic compass. Thomas checked the magnetic heading off the DAGR and Brian began to walk in the direction the unit showed. The patrol started to bunch up to maintain eyesight of each other with only five foot of distance between them. Periodically Thomas would check to the see that Brian was maintaining the correct heading by using the compass and kept a pace count as well. Progress was extremely slow as Brian was making sure they were on the right track by checking more frequently.

At almost three hundred meters covered, Thomas saw Amber drop face first into the snow. At first, he thought she had tripped, but when she didn't move, he ran to her side. He saw the slack from the cord going taunt so he knew Brian and Greg would know something was up in a moment. When Thomas arrived at Amber, he rolled her over and brushed the snow away from her face. He saw her jacket had been unzipped all the way down and the freezing winds and snow had driven right into her core. Her face was extremely pale and had a bluish tint around her eyes. He placed his face next to her and shouted out her name while shaking her. Her eyes fluttered open and her mouth moved. Thomas got even closer and heard her say "Can't…go…on…leave…me."

By this time, Brian and Greg knew there was trouble and were heading back to Thomas. Brian consulted the DAGR and shouted "We are within two hundred meters! We can carry her that far!"

Thomas pulled the straps on her back to loosen them up and unhooked her rifle from the carabineer. With strength he didn't know he had, he picked her up and threw her across the back of his pack in a modified fireman's carry. Brian and Greg picked up her pack and rifle as the three started off towards the shelter at an increased pace, not slowed by the storm as adrenaline shot into their systems. After a few minutes, Brian stopped and started searching around for the shelters. Finally, he found one and reoriented himself before yelling at Thomas. "Get her inside! I know where the other one is!" Thomas let her down easy while Greg and Brian uncovered the entrance to the shelter. Thankfully, it was in the leeward side of the storm and not buried that deep. Greg shoved her pack and rifle into the shelter and made sure it was out of the way while Thomas cut the cord away from her web gear. Thomas entered the shelter first and pulled her inside by her web gear, having problems getting her around the L shaped entrance. He saw Brian and Greg head off in the blowing snow to the next shelter about fifty yards away. He closed the entrance to the shelter and piled both his and her gear off to the side.

Thomas heard Amber moan behind him so he knew she was okay for the moment. He pulled the flashlight from his rifle and started looking around in the prepared boxes for a heat source. He knew he would have to work quickly if Amber was to survive much longer. He located a catalytic propane heater and a fuel bottle and quickly put it together, having to rip off his gloves prior to doing so. After a minute of messing around with the bottle and finding a pack of matches, he had the heater lit and it started to run. He cranked the heat all the way up and dug out the sleeping bags stored in the prepared boxes. He took the time to check on Amber and start preparing her to get some heat. She was very groggy and somewhat coherent and he asked her how she was doing. She replied very slowly, slurring her words, almost as if she was drunk.

"Verrrrry…coooooooold…Tom-asssssssss…geeeeeet…meeeeeeee…warmmmmmmm." He returned to the boxes and located two tea candle lanterns and an emergency candle. Lighting all three, he hung the lanterns from hooks installed in the plywood roof and put the candle in a place where it wouldn't tip over. Thomas rolled out the sleeping bag he had dug out of the kit and placed it next to her before finally finding out why Amber was so cold. She not only wasn't wearing enough layers of clothing but was also wet from head to toe. In addition, she never zipped up her Gore-Tex jacket so the wind cut right through her fatigues and the lightweight thermals she was wearing underneath. Between the snow falling down her front and her sweating, she was probably drenched underneath. Thomas started to remove her web gear and remembered her modesty before starting to remove her clothing. After removing the outer layer of clothing, he finally gave up on trying to look away while undoing the various zippers, buttons and Velcro, figuring she would rather be alive than modest.

Between moving around and the shelter starting to warm up, Thomas had to pause briefly to remove his jacket and over pants himself. He returned to Amber and started removing the layers of clothing one at a time. Getting down to the lowest layer, he found the lightweight thermals she had on next to her skin were soaked as well. He removed them, getting down to her sports bra and panties. He didn't want to take them off, but looking at the gray fabric of the sports bra, he knew it was wet as well. Trying to be modest now, he turned his head while he used his Benchmade strap cutter to cut up both sides of the sports bra.

Taking a closer look at Amber, he noticed her face was still bluish as were her fingertips and toes. He found the heater wasn't cutting the chill quick enough and her body was already well into hypothermia and starting to shut down. She needed immediate warmth if she was going to survive the night. He spoke as he started unzipping the sleeping bag. "Amber, you are getting hypothermia and I have to get you warm quickly. I'm going to get into the sleeping bag with you so we can share body heat."

Thomas started removing his clothing as Amber replied "O…K…Tommmm." He grabbed the other sleeping bag and unrolled it quickly. He rolled her into the first one, planning to use it as a bottom cover. He had gotten down to his boxer briefs and t-shirt and unzipped the other bag, laying it over the top of Amber. He slid in between the two bags with her and pulled her in close. He body was cold and clammy to the touch, so he gripped her in as close as he could, placing her hands under his armpits. After about twenty minutes, she stopped shivering as much and started to pull herself in to him. She didn't feel as cold to the touch and the color was returning to her face. She spoke more coherently than before, but still wasn't completely out of

the dark yet.

"You…very…warm…Tom…Hold…me," she said with a few shivers along the way.

After almost an hour of lying there, she was almost back to normal, speaking and talking normally, but Thomas knew she could relapse at any moment. Thomas knew her core temperature was still down and some hot liquids would help warm her up faster. He left her under the sleeping bags and started looking around in the boxes finding a pair of heavy socks and a pair of sweatpants and a hooded sweatshirt in another box. He donned them in the candlelight before starting to search the pre-packed food box. He found several packets of instant soup, hot chocolate and tea. He dug out his stove from his pack and started it up after getting it primed. When the stove was operating correctly, he put on a canteen cup of the correct amount of water for the hot chocolate. Although not necessarily good for these conditions due to the caffeine, he knew her body could use the sugar to help warm up. More solid foods would come as soon as he could build a fire and get the shelter warmed up more. The propane heater was barely cutting the chill in the air so he made it the next priority after the hot liquid.

While keeping an eye on the stove, Thomas found someone had already separated the wood into the appropriate piles for fire starting. Each shelter had a small fire pit built into it for additional warmth. He also knew there was another stash of firewood just outside the shelter to supplement the hardwood supply already inside. Thomas figured it would be better to gather it now before the snow got too deep and grabbed his gloves before heading outside. Finding the water was ready, he pulled it off the stove and added the packet of mix and stirred it up. He handed over the cup with a nomex glove to Amber and told her to cover herself as he was about to go outside.

Before going outside, he heard the radio come alive with Greg's voice over the earpiece. Searching through the pile of web gear, he finally located the radio and called back. "Greg, this is Tom. You have a message?"

"Just checking to see how everybody is doing over there," stated Greg.

"Amber is okay now and we are still working on setting everything up over here. How are you guys doing?" he asked.

"Pretty good over here. We got the fire started and the MREs heated up and are going to turn in soon. We tried contacting home base over the radio, but couldn't get them to come up. Probably interference from the storm. We are going to try again in the morning, but until then, we should probably conserve our batteries," answered Greg.

"Sounds like a plan. Give us a call if you need anything," said Thomas.

"Will do. Have a good night," said Greg as he signed off.

Thomas put away the radio and unplugged the earpiece so it would come through the speaker. He saw Amber had already finished the cup of hot chocolate and was under the bag with only her head uncovered. Thomas knew the wood outside would only get more snow on top if he waited

so he grabbed his winter gloves and jacket, slipped on his boots but not lacing them up and went to the entrance. Opening the shelter, he found it was warmer inside than he originally thought as a blast of cold air hit him in the face. Someone had thoughtfully piled the wood close to the entrance so it wasn't hard to find. The snow was still coming down pretty hard with almost a foot on the ground already. He brushed the snow off the pile and started to toss it inside the shelter. Thomas was able to get almost two-thirds of the pile done before the cold got to him and he returned inside the shelter to warm up. Hugging up to the propane heater, he heard Amber call from under the sleeping bags to see if he was okay. He replied he would be fine and quickly warmed up, determined to finish the job before it got snowed under too deep a pile.

After a couple of minutes, he went back outside to finish the job. The wind was cutting right through the light clothing he had on, but Thomas continued until the last piece of wood he could find was inside the entrance to the shelter. Going back inside, he was shivering almost uncontrollably as he moved to the heater. He had not fully recovered from the first trip outside and was chilled to the bone. He heard Amber from behind him. "Thomas, are you okay?"

"Just cold. I'll be okay," he said through chattering teeth.

"You don't sound like you are okay. Why don't you get back in here for a few minutes and let me repay the favor of warming you up," said Amber.

Thomas contemplated what she said before removing the sweatshirt and crawling in between the bags with her. After he slid in, Thomas felt her hands at his waist pulling down his pants. He suddenly felt uncomfortable knowing her past feelings for him. "Amber, I don't think that's a good idea. The pants can stay on."

Amber apparently saw right through the excuse. "Why? Because you're married and I had a thing for you a long time ago? You've already been in half naked before, just do it to warm up."

He considered telling her to stop again, but knew she was right, it was only for warmth. She removed the sweatpants and socks, but left his t-shirt and underwear alone. She saw he seemed to be less tense having the other clothing on, so she didn't press the issue. They laid there for almost thirty minutes before Thomas started getting dressed again to start a fire and get some food ready. Looking at the softwood he brought in, he found some of it still had a good layer of snow caked on. He knew they would have to dry it out before burning it to prevent as much smoke as possible. He started laying out the firewood over the fire starter bricks and paper. He lit one of the bricks and had a good blaze going in no time. The wood inside the shelter was dry and produced little smoke so they were lucky for that small fact. And the chimney they had installed in the roof was working perfectly. The next concern was food. He found two MRE meals in the food box as well as two cups of the instant soup. Pouring enough water into the largest of the cookware pots to heat the MRE meals, he put it over the stove to heat up. He broke open the meals and started sorting through the various items in the tan plastic bags. He finally found the water was warm enough to dump the entrees and side dishes in to start warming up.

He also fixed two cups of the instant soup for himself and Amber as a starter. Thomas knew warm food would help her recover faster and help prevent a relapse into hypothermia. By the

time they were finished with the soup, the MRE meals were warm enough and ready to eat. The water used to heat the meals was set aside for future use and where it wouldn't be tipped over. They ate in silence as the wind continued to howl outside. After they finished, the empty bags were collected, filled with snow and set immediately outside the shelter.

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"Ryan's patrol checked in around 1700 hours. They were at the Trading Post putting up the heavies and were heading home as soon as they were done," said Heather to Darren as he walked into the radio room from outside.

Darren was quiet for a moment before asking the obvious question. "What about Tom's patrol? Have they checked in?"

"Not since we called them near Checkpoint Six almost seven hours ago. I've tried to contact them, but I think the storm is interfering with the radios. We have the generator running right now and I switched the radio over to the generator power hoping the additional juice might help me hear them, but it didn't work," said Heather dejectedly.

Darren was quiet and again looked at the map overlay showing their patrol route. Their expected path took them somewhat near several of the newly built shelters, but with the storm moving in as quickly as it had, it would be difficult to make it to the prepared areas. *That's the worst thing about these late winter storms; they are fast and violent and tend to stick around for a while. I know Tom would have thought about the prepared sites and I have to trust his judgment. He knows better than to brave out these kinds of things and knows they should seek shelter as quickly as possible. Now we just play the waiting game to see when they check in, but the waiting and anticipation is going to kill everyone here,* thought Darren. "Keep trying to reach them, every fifteen minutes on both their patrol channels and the main freq. I don't care if your finger falls off from using the transmit button, keep trying to make contact."

After giving the instructions to Heather and writing it up in the pass on book, he headed home himself. He pulled on the heavy parka and put his goggles on over his eyes before zipping everything fully all the way. After buttoning all the fasteners, he could barely see out of the front, but it would be a short trip. He braced himself for the bitter cold and headed out the door into the freezing wind and snow. Although only eighty yards between his cabin and the Conference Center, it felt like an eternity as he trudged forward in the blowing snow. When he arrived at what he thought was his cabin, he was surprised to see he was at the Jones's cabin. He politely excused himself and went one more cabin down to his home. *If it's this bad out here in the clear, I can't imagine what it's like for them out there. I only hope they made it to a shelter and have settled in. If anyone can survive this, it's them* thought Darren as he hugged up to the woodstove and warmed after the brief exposure to the freezing wind.

Heather's outlook on the situation was far different. She knew her mentor was stuck out in a blizzard with little shelter nearby. She would obey the instructions given by Darren but her hope

kept slipping away every time she was met with silence on the radio receiver. However, she learned one valuable thing from Thomas Dayfield and that was to never quit. She looked out a nearby window at the snow continuing to fall and said a silent prayer for her lost friends, asking God to watch over them and bring them home safe. Afterwards, she religiously continued broadcasting on the three separate frequencies throughout the night and the next morning, never accepting relief and never quitting, although never making contact.

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Thomas added more wood to the fire, noticing the shelter felt warmer than before, although still a tad chilly. He silently blessed his wife and Heather Davis for coming up with the idea of the shelters in the first place. He looked at his watch, noticing it was close to 9:00 PM. He was getting a little tired and figured with the physical exertion from walking all morning and from carrying Amber to the shelter, it would be good to have an early night. He pulled out his sleeping bag from his ruck sack and one of the sleeping mats and started to lay out his bed when Amber stopped him.

"Tom, I want to ask something. The temperature is going to continue to drop and I don't know if it's a good idea if I'm in here alone. Can we spend the night together to stay warm?" she asked.

Thomas let out a sigh before replying. "Amber, I think that's a bad idea. I have to say no."

Amber seemed mildly offended by his answer. "Why is that such a bad idea? Because I think you are handsome and had a puppy crush on you before? You are married; I know and respect that. I'm just looking at the practical aspect of staying warm tonight. If I happen to chill and relapse into hypothermia, who knows if I can warn you in time? Listen, I will be on my best behavior. Nothing is going to happen, I can promise you that. Not because I wouldn't want it to, but because I respect you and Sharon that much."

"But you are still naked," stated Thomas, temporizing.

"Well, give me some clothes to put on then," she said with a shake of her head and a grin at his silliness. "I have some extra underwear in the left outer pocket of my pack and a spare t-shirt under my sleeping bag."

"You are already wearing underwear, Amber, I never took them off," said Thomas, again, trying to steer the subject away from making a decision.

"Oh, I took them off while you were getting the wood inside. They were wet and cold," she said.

Thomas snapped his head around at that comment. "You mean to tell me you were completely naked the last time we were in the bags together?!"

"Yes, I was," she replied with a roll of her eyes. "Now see, it's going to be easier now that I

have clothes on. Please, you are acting a bit silly about this; it's not a big deal. Just a simple request to make sure I am okay tonight and nothing more."

Thomas wasn't really comfortable with the idea, but knew she was right. If she slipped back into hypothermia during the night, he might never know. Better to be safe than sorry and he knew George would kill him if anything happened to his daughter. He searched the outer pocket where her underwear was located and found a pair of her panties. He searched in her bag for a t-shirt before giving up and grabbing one from the supply boxes. Turning back around, he found her completely uncovered, slipping on the panties. Thomas turned his head quickly and held out the t-shirt over his right shoulder.

"No! You big goof! Don't hold it over the fire!" shouted Amber. Thomas felt her snatch the shirt out of his hand. "Thomas, you have already seen me naked before. Why is it a big deal?"

"Because it's not right. Because before it was for your survival and I wasn't thinking about it. But now, it just doesn't feel right," he replied.

Amber let out a sigh. "I understand, but it's not a big deal to me. Stop being awkward about it."

"I'm not being awkward, Amber. I just think looking at you naked is wrong of me. First off, I'm married and shouldn't be looking at other women that way, especially in a situation like this. Second off, I know most guys would be trying to sneak a peek at you when you are naked. I'm not like most guys and I won't look at you that way. Third, I feel uncomfortable being in here with you naked. It doesn't matter if it bothers you or not, it bothers me. Okay?" stated Thomas.

"I know you aren't like most guys; that's why I don't think it's a big problem if you see me naked. I know you are married, that's why I feel totally comfortable sleeping with you tonight. I'm safer with you than plenty of other married men. You won't try anything with me, I know that and that's the only reason I asked," said Amber. "I'm sorry it bothered you and I didn't even think anything about it before I did it. I suppose it was rather audacious of me to do that, but I did it, no changing the past. I'm sorry for doing it and are you going to stay?"

Thomas again paused, thinking of a good reason not to get under the covers with her. The only reason was because of his wife, which was good enough. But again, he knew she was in a critical state right now where her cold weather injury could return quickly. He knew he could control himself and ward off her advances if it became necessary. He felt she wouldn't try anything, but there was always the other side of the shelter if it became necessary. Nodding his agreement in the candlelight, he made the judgment call to go ahead for the heat factor and nothing more. He grabbed the two sleeping pads and inflated them, putting them below the sleeping bags. Before going to bed, he restocked the fire so it would hopefully last the night and put out all but one of the candles. Taking off the sweat shirt and pants, he slid under the open sleeping bags as Amber snuggled up next to him. He fell asleep with Amber next to him, still feeling very uncomfortable about the whole situation.

At around 1:00 AM, Thomas woke again to find the fire had died down to coals. He slid from under the bags, taking Amber's arm from across his chest. The tea candle lantern was also out so

he grabbed another candle from the bag and replaced the aluminum shell in the lantern. He restocked the fire and hoped it would last until the morning. He returned to the sleeping bag where Amber stirred in her sleep and pulled herself in closer to him. Thomas fell back asleep, too tired to feel uncomfortable like before.

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At that same moment, Sharon was looking out her living room window at the snow continuing to fall. She was joined by Janie Holmes from behind who handed over a cup of hot chocolate. Janie had come over earlier when the patrol didn't make their scheduled radio check in and was unresponsive to the calls from the Control Center. She had helped Sharon put Angel to bed and was attempting to keep Sharon's spirits up. Sharon waved her hand at the cup and said a halfhearted "No, thank you."

"Sharon, it can't hurt," she said as she offered the cup again.

"How can a cup of hot chocolate replace my husband right now?" asked Sharon as she turned.

Janie led her over to the sofa before speaking. "Sharon, your husband is fine, I can tell you that."

"But how do you know that? How can you sit there all smug thinking everything is going to be alright?" said Sharon with tears running down her face.

"Sharon, I know what you are feeling-" replied Janie before she was cut off by Sharon.

"You have no idea what I'm feeling right now! I want my husband back!" yelled Sharon, who instantly regretted snapping at her friend. "I'm sorry for yelling at you, but this is killing me!"

Janie understood what Sharon was feeling and was patient in her reply. "Honey, I do understand. You forgot I've sent Brian off to the Middle East four times since we've been married. And I went through my own personal hell each time he went. Iraq was the worst. Sitting up at night watching the news channels to see what was going on. Wondering every second whether or not he was safe. Reading his e-mails about the rocket attacks and the bombs going off near the base. Sending packages off to him wondering if he would ever receive them. Hearing his voice just made it worse during the times he would call. It was almost too much."

"By that time, I learned to cope with it and only saw him safe. That was the only way I could ever see him over there. Right now, my husband is out there with yours, and I'm glad it's your husband there with mine. When I saw Brian was going to Iraq with Tom, I knew he would come home safely. Your husband is a survivor. He loves you and will do anything to get back here, especially to you. Not only will Tom make it home alive, he will make sure everyone else out there comes home too. I feel the same hurt you do, but I've just had to go through it more times before and can hide it. I know this isn't what you want to hear nor will it make anything better, but I will say it, there isn't any other person on this planet I would rather have out there with my

Brian than Thomas Dayfield. He loves you and will come home to you. And he will make sure my husband comes home to me as well. Don't think something bad has happened to him. Think of him as he walks through that door and takes you into his arms," she concluded.

Sharon silently thought about what was said as she stared into the fireplace looking at the burning logs. She turned to Janie and fell onto her shoulder crying more than she ever remembered. Janie was patient with her, remember a time when the roles were reversed and she fell onto a friend's shoulder crying over Brian. Sharon finally sat up and recomposed herself. Forcing a smile through the sniffles, she said "Thank you for the cup of coco. Now, I'm going to wait for him to come walking through that door."

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Near Fairplay, the wounded leader of the former band of brigands stumbled through the blowing snow. He kept seeing flashes of light in front of him and kept following them, hoping to find shelter. He had already dropped the pack he carried earlier which contained the sleeping bag and tent he might have used to survive the storm. His fingers had already stopped working from frostbite and his legs wouldn't move properly. His thinking process had been altered by the cold slowly creeping into his mind. Suddenly he felt really hot and removed his jacket to cool off. He also removed his outer shirt, dropping it on the ground while continuing to follow the lights. He continued his aimless wandering until nature finally took its course and he collapsed into a snow bank from hypothermia and exposure. He fell into a deep state of shock until his body's core temperature finally fell to a level where life could not be sustained. After hours of exposure, he finally succumbed to the freezing cold and slipped off to a dark place.

His body was found twelve days later by a family living in a hunting cabin they had been occupying since the Fall. The man was found halfway covered in snow since the snow bank was still melting. They wondered who he was and how he came to their property during the blizzard, especially since he wasn't outfitted for the cold weather. The family buried the body as soon as the ground thawed enough to do so, saying a prayer that God might have mercy on his soul.

He was less than twenty yards away from their front door when he collapsed and died.

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Thomas woke up the next morning to the clanging of a pot. He rolled over in the sleeping bags to find Amber, properly dressed for the chill in the shack, heating up some water for a freeze dried meal packet. The fire was going good and he saw Amber had replaced the softwood around the fireplace to dry out. It was not cold in the shelter, but, not that warm either. He located the sweatpants he had been wearing the night before and slipped them on before getting out of the sleeping bags. He noticed Amber was wearing the hooded sweatshirt he had been wearing the night before. Amber saw he was awake and greeted him. "Good morning, sleepy

bear. Ready for some breakfast?"

Thomas didn't reply and instead looked at his watch. It read 7:37 AM. He could still hear the wind howling outside, although it was more muffled than the night before. As if she had read his mind, Amber spoke again. "It's still snowing outside. We have almost three feet on the ground right now. The entrance is partially blocked, but the chimney is still uncovered and we can still get out of here in a hurry if we needed to. Want a cup of coffee?"

Thomas snapped out of his early morning wake up funk and finally replied. "Sure, coffee sounds about right. How long have you been up?"

"Cream and sugar, right?" asked Amber. "About a half an hour or so. I went ahead and got the fire going this morning and I figured food would be the next item on the agenda." She poured the creamer and sugar packets from the two MREs from the night before into a canteen cup before pouring in the two packs of coffee. She poured two cups of the hot water into the mixture and stirred it up before handing it over to him. "Other than that, the other two are doing okay over in the other shelter, we still can't contact home base, it's still snowing outside and breakfast should be ready in ten minutes, or so the package says. I hope you don't mind chicken stew for breakfast. Oh, my bad. Let me find you a sweatshirt to wear." She looked through the boxes, found another sweatshirt and handed it over.

Thomas took a sip of the hot coffee and looked around the shelter, trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain. Since she had been up, Amber had hung both his and her wet clothing up to dry on the hooks placed in the ceiling. She had replaced the candles in the lanterns and stacked the wood by wet and dry on opposite sides of the shelter. She had also untangled the web gear and weapons, placing each person's on opposite sides of the shack. Amber hardly seemed like the same person from the night before that was close to death. He moved to the entrance of the shelter and cracked open the door and saw she was right about the amount of snow that had fallen. It continued to come down, although at a slower pace than the last night.

Closing the door, he went back to the fireplace and warmed up his hands and sipped at the coffee she had made for him. He watched her stir boiling water into the meal packet and got the left over peanut butter and crackers from the MREs ready. After the meal was ready, they ate in silence until Amber finally broke the maddening silence. "I hope last night doesn't make anything weird for us. I mean, we only shared a bed, it's not like we had sex or anything."

"I have to say, I do feel a little weird and guilty about last night, even though nothing happened," Thomas admitted. But she had kept her word and had been on her best behavior throughout the night. Chances were, she would have been fine without him in her sleeping bag, but he wasn't entirely sure. "I just feel wrong about last night."

"Well, I'm not going to go around proclaiming we shared a bed," stated Amber. "First off, Sharon would kill me, but that's only right after she kills you. No matter what, you have nothing to feel guilty about. We did nothing more than was necessary to keep warm. You acted like a true gentleman last night and I know a lot of guys who would have tried to take advantage of me. You didn't and that counts for a lot. As far as I'm concerned, I'll tell everyone we slept on

opposite sides of the shelter and keep what we did between ourselves. You can tell Sharon if you want to, but will she understand? I don't know if I would in her position. I'm sure if she were here, she would understand, but on the outside, looking in, I'm not sure. Either way; nothing happened and we did nothing wrong. End of story."

Thomas knew it wasn't really the end of the story, as he knew he would end up telling his wife about the previous night. He wasn't sure what he would say, but he knew he could never keep the secret from her. He knew over the next day or so he would have to come up with an idea of how to tell Sharon. They spent the rest of the morning playing cards and chatting. Thomas had wondered why someone had placed a deck of cards in the prepared stores and knew why now. He found Amber was a good rummy player and they had a good conversation throughout the morning. She seemed to have changed a lot from when she had started out immediately after the Fall. She seemed more grown up and matured than the girl he and Sharon had problems with the previous summer. *I guess everyone has had to mature quite a bit over the last year*, he thought.

The wood supply was lasting longer than anticipated, so they probably wouldn't be without heat for their stay in the shelter. The other two were doing well in their shelter and all attempts at contacting the Ranch via radio were met with silence. Around noon, Thomas braved the cold to go outside and make sure the chimney was uncovered. He found the lower part that was heated was clear, but the upper portion started to cover up from the blowing snow. He cleared the area around it and quickly went back inside to warm up. The storm was lasting longer than expected; continuing through the morning and by 2:00 PM, there was almost four feet of snow on the ground outside. When it finally did let up, they would have serious problems getting back to the Ranch without help. They were still well stocked, carrying enough food and water to last another five to seven days if they needed to by combining the shelters stores with those left from their packs. They didn't have a plan to leave just yet and Thomas knew it would take the four of them to come up with a good plan to get them back to the ranch safely. *Hindsight is 20/20, we should have put a couple of pairs of snowshoes in here*, he thought as he wondered what else was missing. *At least we thought enough to build the things; else we would have been screwed.*

Lunch consisted of leftover MRE parts from their patrol packs and a cup of soup, heated up over the alcohol stove. Both Thomas and Amber braved the cold to go outside and use the bathroom and Thomas noticed his water intake was suffering. After returning, both he and Amber drank down a quart apiece to help make up for some of the lost fluids. Later in the afternoon, they both took the time to freshen up by using some of the baby wipes from the prepared kit. Modesty took over as they both turned their back while the other was cleaning. They continued the card game from the morning and listened as the storm continued outside, although the snow was now letting up considerably. The wind was picking up now, blowing the loose snow into large drifts around the shelter. It started getting dark outside and colder still. A noticeable chill was coming down in the shelter, so Amber stoked up the fire with two additional pieces of wood and Thomas relit the propane heater. He also took out his small thermometer from his survival pack and hung it right outside the door out of the harsh wind and after twenty minutes, it read -10 degrees. Even the brief encounter with the cold outside made him shiver as he went back to the fire to warm back up. It seemed the majority of the storm had passed and all that remained was the freezing wind.

At nine o'clock, both Thomas and Amber got ready for bed. Thomas rolled out his sleeping bag and pad on the opposite side of the shelter and got down to his skivvies and t-shirt before sliding down in the heavyweight bag. He called up Brian and Greg and told them he and Amber would be turning in for the night and would contact them again in the morning. After making sure the fire was properly set and the heater was still on, Thomas replaced one of the tea candles and covered up. Amber was already deep inside the two bags on her side of the shelter and looked to be asleep. Seeing all was set for the night, Thomas rolled onto his side and thought about Sharon and how worried she would be before drifting off to sleep.

It was close to midnight when Thomas woke up to Amber calling his name. The fire had died down and the propane heater wasn't putting out enough heat to cut the chill in the shelter. Shaking off the sleepiness, he called to Amber and heard a faint reply.

"Can't…stop…shaking…very…cold…again…" said Amber through chattering teeth.

Thomas looked over and saw her shivering uncontrollable under the sleeping bags. He immediately put more wood on the fire and turned up the propane heater to high before going to her sleeping bags. He slid between the two and found she was still wearing the sweat pants and sweatshirt she had been in before bed. Either she was wearing too much again or didn't have enough body heat to sustain her temperature. Thomas grabbed her and pulled her in tight against his chest.

After ten minutes, she didn't seem to be any better so he took off the pants and shirt as well as his own t-shirt and pulled her in close again. Her body was cold and clammy to the touch again, so Thomas figured she had on too much clothing. Taking off the excess clothing seemed to do the trick as gradually her shivering went away and he felt her body start to warm up. After laying there for another fifteen minutes before she spoke again. "What is it with you taking my clothes off and ending up in bed with me all the time?"

Thomas couldn't help himself and started giggling at the comment and was joined by Amber. They laughed uncontrollably for almost a minute before both Thomas and Amber had to stop to catch their breath. After they had calmed down, Thomas asked if she was okay. Her reply caused more laughter. "Well, I'm half naked in bed with a cute, warm guy who happens to be half naked as well; but he's married and I'm know I'm not going to get any action. Just how okay should I be?"

Normally, this might have seemed inappropriate, but the way she said it Thomas knew she was joking and started laughing again. Amber started snorting which caused Thomas to laugh harder. Eventually, they got themselves under control and Thomas and Amber ended up forehead to forehead. Out of the blue, Amber leaned over and kissed him on the lips. Thomas immediately pulled back, releasing his grasp on her and said "Whoa, Amber. Hang on there."

He saw Amber blush in the pale light as she stammered out an apology. "Oh my God, Thomas, I am so sorry. I got caught up in the moment and it happened on instinct. I am truly sorry."

Thomas felt extremely uncomfortable at that moment and started to get out of the bags. Amber

stopped him by grabbing his arm and pleading. "Thomas, it really was a mistake, I promise. I didn't intentionally mean to do that to you. I remember you are happily married and I wouldn't think of ever hurting Sharon or you. I just got more comfortable with you for an instant and forgot you weren't mine to do that too. You are here taking care of me after rescuing me twice now and I forgot we were two separate people."

Her voice cracked and a tear trailed down her cheek as she continued. "I mean, you rescued Sharon like something out of a fairy tale and didn't leave her to fend for herself. You didn't leave your wife to run across Europe looking for your family leaving a simple note trying to explain why you left your wife in the dead of night to fend for herself. It was never an option with you, you had to get her and bring her to safety instead of just leaving her. You loved her enough to get her to a place of safety and not leave her alone. You are there to protect and care for Sharon. She doesn't have to worry about where you are or if you are alive or dead or even if you still love her or not. You didn't run away never to be heard from again. You will always be there for her…"

Amber's voice broke completely now as she broke down crying uncontrollably. Initially Thomas thought she was trying to take advantage of the moment with him, but he knew he was wrong. He had made a harsh judgment on her actions, but it was probably the first time she had been comfortable with a man since her husband had left. Thomas didn't know the whole story about her husband leaving before that moment, but now understood she had just been lonely. She had replaced her lost husband with himself for a moment and completely forgotten they were two different people. He pulled her in close and let her cry on his shoulder. Cry for her loneliness, cry for her lost husband, cry for the situation they were in…just cry to cry. After a few minutes of crying, she sniffled and wiped away her tears with a t-shirt. He held on to her afterwards to help provide some moral support in her time of need.

While holding on to her, he noticed she was falling asleep. Now he was faced with a moral dilemma of his own. On one hand, she had made an advance towards him and he wasn't very comfortable with that. On the other hand, she almost had a relapse with the hypothermia and probably needed the shared warmth again with him. She also needed some company that night for reassurance, but that wasn't something he could provide. She had drifted off to sleep in his arms now and he knew it would wake her if he got out of the bags. Although not totally comfortable with the arrangement, he made the decision to stay based on her needing his additional warmth more than needing companionship.

Thomas had almost fallen asleep when she asked him a question softly. "If you hadn't married Sharon and I wasn't married, do you think we might have gotten together?"

In a state of half awake, half asleep, Thomas answered without even thinking. "Maybe. I am a little older than you, but you are a nice lady with a good personality. I don't see why we couldn't have if the situation were different."

"And not because you think I'm pretty?" she asked.

"You are very pretty Amber, but your personality plays into it more than that," answered

Thomas. "You being physically attractive is just a bonus to an otherwise wonderful woman."

She gave him a hug and replied. "Thank you Thomas, you know how to make a woman feel special. Sharon is the luckiest woman in the world."

With that, she rolled over and both of them fell asleep. The next morning, the two woke up at about the same time. Thomas was the first out of the bags, replacing his pants, sweatshirt and heavy socks before moving over to the almost out fire. It took almost a minute of smoking madly before the flames finally caught the small kindling. Thomas spent several more minutes stoking it back to the previous level before moving on to the propane heater. Amber started to get out of the makeshift bed before the cold hit her and Thomas stopped her. "You might want to wait until it gets a little warmer in here before you venture out," he warned.

"No objections here. Now how about breakfast in bed?" she replied.

"You aren't that lucky, do you mind if we have chili for breakfast?" asked Thomas as he replaced the bottle on the heater. He checked the thermometer lying near the entrance before getting the food ready. It read 35 degrees, but it didn't feel that cold to him. He slightly opened the door to peek outside. The wind had died down, but a light snow had started again, although not as bad as before. This would only add to the four feet already on the ground and complicate their problems of leaving. Being able to go out on foot would be impossible for several more days barring a miracle.

Thomas considered miracles for the moment and replaced the batteries in his radio before turning it on. Switching the channel for home base, he put the earpiece in before transmitting his call sign and the one of the control center. "O.K. Corral, O.K. Corral, this is Maverick Patrol on Channel Four, do you read me?"

He waited several seconds before moving closer to the door and repeating the transmission. Several seconds passed before a faint reply was heard. "Maverick, this is O.K. Corral, we read you, but your signal is weak, how is mine?"

Thomas almost didn't catch the response, but recognized Darren's voice on the other end. "You signal is weak also, but good to hear your voice, over."

Amber immediately snapped her head around and asked. "Do you have contact with them? Is my father there? What are they saying? Are they going to come get us? How -"

Thomas immediately stopped her with his hand. "Amber, we haven't had a discussion yet and I can barely hear them. Give me a minute please." He requested Darren repeat his transmission.

"It's good to hear you too. Where are you and what is your status, over?" asked Darren.

"We are at the prepositioned shelters near Checkpoint Eight. Everyone here is doing fine. Amber had a bout with hypothermia, but otherwise is doing well. We are snowed in pretty well here so getting back to the Ranch will be a problem. Any plans to come get us?" asked Thomas.

Darren paused before replying. "Honestly, not yet. We weren't sure exactly what happened to you all and were making plans to send out search parties today to cover your trail. The problem is, we are as snowed in here as you are out there. Give us a little while to discuss some options and we can figure out something. Is everyone holding out for now?" said Darren.

"We have enough food, water and firewood for a few more days, but we probably need to get out of here soonest. How are things going otherwise out there?" answered Thomas.

"You had a bunch of people worried to death out here and I don't think Sharon has slept two hours since you all went missing. Give us an hour to discuss a rescue plan and we will get back to you," said Darren.

"Okay, call us back on channel three so we all can listen in," said Thomas before signing off.

Thomas switched the frequency on the radio over to the channel they team had been using to communicate during their patrol. He contacted the other two and relayed the message and told them to replace their batteries and be ready to hear from the Ranch soon. After almost forty-five minutes, Thomas and Amber had finished eating and he was cleaning up when Amber exclaimed "This is Maverick! Go ahead!"

Several seconds passed by as Thomas waited patiently for the transmission to come through from Darren. A few more seconds passed and she replied to the message. "Yes, we can hold out until tomorrow or the next day. We have enough food and water." Amber turned to Thomas, "Darren says they are coming, but it will be tomorrow, maybe the next day until they can get us."

Again, a brief pause as Darren relayed more information over the radio and in turn was repeated by Amber. "Darren says it's going to take most of today just to get the vehicles unburied and ready to go out and with the cold at night, they would rather not risk sending out parties after dark." Again, she replied to the message. "So we can count on seeing you as early as tomorrow and at the latest the next day? Over."

Another brief message from Darren. "Darren says tomorrow evening at the earliest, but they will get back to us this afternoon with a better timeline," she told Thomas. "Okay, talk to you all again at three o'clock then."

Brian and Greg checked in to Amber stating they had heard the conversation with Darren and would be waiting at one to hear more info. The rest of the morning was spent in anxious anticipation of the three o'clock radio call from the ranch. It snowed off and on throughout the morning, adding a little to the already existing amount on the ground. It didn't really matter, but it was hindering matters by adding more loose snow that could be blown around.

At precisely three o'clock, the radio came to life, with Darren's voice coming through weakly, but readable. "Okay, here is the deal. We have two teams working right now to get the backhoe uncovered and two HMMWVs to get you. The problem we are facing is the amount of snow that had banked up on the door to the barn, so getting in there is taking more time than we

thought. We are also trying to uncover the Bobcat to help out, but it's just about as bad as the backhoe. Either way, once we get the equipment uncovered, we are going to start making a pathway out to you. I don't need to tell you it's going to take a long time to go the four miles to your location, but it's what we are planning. The other problem is we can't exactly go in a straight line to you, so it's probably going to be more like five or six miles. No matter what, we are looking at tomorrow evening at the earliest. If it keeps snowing and the wind blowing, we might even have to dig in reverse. But no more than one more night out there, maybe two."

"That sounds good. Like Amber said, we are good to go out here for two more nights, but more than that, we would be pushing it. Our wood supply is down a little, but we won't be without heat if it doesn't last longer than two more nights, maybe three. Food and water wise we are still good to go. Anything else for us out here?" asked Thomas.

"Three things," Darren replied. "One, we aren't sure how long it's going to take to get out to you. We can give you a ballpark estimate tomorrow after we have started, but I seriously doubt it's going to be fast. Second, we figure the temperature will drop again tonight, so be prepared for another night like last night. And one more thing…wait one."

Thomas stood by on the line for a brief moment before a new voice came on the line. It was Sharon and she sounded like she was about to cry. "Thomas?! Oh my God, Thomas! I've been worried sick over you! Are you all right? I haven't slept for three hours since you went missing! Are you staying warm? Oh my God I do love you so much and I want you home right now!"

"Baby, I love you more than life itself and I will be holding you soon, sooner than you realize. I'm staying warm, but hearing your voice makes me even warmer inside. Nothing will keep me from you. I can't wait for the moment when we are in each other's arms again. Before I get home, please get some rest baby. How is Angel?" he replied.

"Angel is fine, but is wondering where Daddy is. I told her you were coming home soon. She doesn't understand what happened to you and I haven't told her anything bad happened to you. She knows you are coming home," answered Sharon. They continued talking for a couple of minutes before Thomas knew the other families would want to talk to their loved ones as well.

Thomas felt the tear run down his cheek as he said his goodbye so the others could talk to their families. "Sharon, give Angel a big hug from Daddy and let her know he will be home soon. You get some sleep now, baby. And remember, I love you more than life itself and nothing will keep me away from you. Even if I have to crawl through this snow, I will make it too you."

Sharon said her goodbye on the other end of the radio just before breaking down completely, crying tears of joy. A new voice came on the line. It was George requesting to talk to Amber. Thomas handed over the radio to her and tried not to listen in on the conversation, although Amber talked loud enough for the dead to hear her conversation. "Daddy? Oh Daddy!...Yes Daddy, I'm fine…Thomas took care of me and kept me alive…yes Daddy, I'm staying warm…Yes, I've been eating and drinking water…I'm going to be fine Daddy, really I am…I promise you! How are Mom and Misty...give them both my love…Daddy! I really am going to be okay. I have Thomas here to keep an eye on me…yes, tomorrow you can see I'm okay…yes

Daddy, I love you too…tell Mom I love her…goodbye now Daddy…yes it's good to hear your voice as well…goodbye now."

Amber handed back over the radio to Thomas, tears running down her cheeks. Thomas didn't listen in to the next conversation, but heard Brian and Janie having much the same talk he and Sharon had several minutes before. Thomas waited until it was over and heard Darren come back on the line. "The families can rest easier now they have heard from you. George pulled out his snowshoes and walked here from his house just to speak with Amber. He was thinking of walking out to you to make sure everything was okay, but we talked him out of it. Anyway, we will give you a call in the morning at eight o'clock to let you know if we started on time and every two hours after that with progress updates. Anything else we forgot?"

Both Thomas and Brian replied no before everyone signed off. Amber and Thomas shared a hug at the news they were going to be rescued soon. They spent the rest of the afternoon playing cards and making a list on what was effective in the shelter and what might be needed to be added. They also made a list of what they had used so it could be replaced as soon as possible after it cleared up. One thing was for certain, without the shelters, they four probably would not have survived. The rest of the day was spent in somewhat excited anticipation of being rescued. The two spent the rest of the day cleaning up in the shelter and themselves as well. They both ended up turning around so each could have some privacy and cleaned as best as they could. Amber had been melting snow for the past two days and had a good supply in the larger pot over the fire. They used it along with the soap and got as clean as possible. But being Amber, she had to say something.

"You end up getting my pants off all the time in here," she grinned.

"Amber…" he started and rolled his eyes.

"Want to inspect my work? Find out how clean I am?" she asked.

"No! I don't want…you said that just to get a rise out of me, didn't you?" he asked.

"Of course I did. You're cute when you blush up," she giggled.

Thomas couldn't help but laugh at her comments and just shook his head in reply. Being cooped up with her over the past three days had been an experience for him. He had a newfound appreciation for her and gained a new friendship out of it. He was quickly learning to enjoy her sense of humor, although sometimes a little off color, and her jokes. He was even learning to deal with her lack of modesty. One thing for certain though, he still wasn't sure how he was going to tell Sharon why he slept in the same bed with her. No matter what, he would have to tell her, plus, he made plans to stay with her again tonight. They were too close to leaving for anything to happen and he wanted everyone to get home okay. As he was about to put his ditty bag away, he noticed the deodorant in the top and applied some before stowing it away.

Dinner was rice and canned beef with some tidbits of leftover MRE parts. After the sun went down, it became noticeably colder in the shelter. It had stopped snowing for the moment, with

the sky becoming partly cloudy. The wind was picking up now, dropping the temperature down even further. Thomas hung his thermometer outside and in a half an hour he checked it. It read 17 degrees just shy of 7:00 P.M. However, that was ambient and Thomas knew the wind chill was probably far below zero. He stoked up the fire larger and was about to turn on the propane heater, but decided it would be better if they conserved what propane they had left until they really needed it.

By 9:30, both he and Amber were ready for bed. She had already gotten into her sleeping bags and was down to her panties and a t-shirt. Thomas turned to her and said "Amber, I'm not taking any chances tonight. We are sleeping together."

"Oh, Thomas, I've been waiting forever to hear you say that to me," she said in a sexy voice.

As soon as he said it, he regretted the words he had used. Thomas stammered out a reply. "Umm, Amber, I meant us sleeping together and didn't mean, like, umm, sleep…you know what I meant!"

"Hey, mister, I'm not that easy. But bring it on, big boy," she playfully replied.

"Amber, I mean sleeping together to keep warm and not sleeping together…why am I even trying to explain this to you? You know what I mean!" he replied.

Amber laughed at yet another round of embarrassment. "I know what you mean, silly. I think I will be okay tonight, but I wouldn't want to take the chance either. If you think it would be better, I have no problem with it. You are too cute when you get embarrassed."

"Did I blush up again?" he asked.

Amber giggled and replied with mirth in her eyes. "Of course you did. It's fun to watch you blush up when I throw a random comment like that at you. You know I'm not serious, so relax. You are safe with me."

"About as safe as a rabbit with a hungry wolf I would imagine. How many more times are you going to embarrass me this trip?" asked Thomas.

"As many times as I can get away with before you bury me in a snow bank for embarrassing you every chance I get," she said with a twinkle.

"Don't tempt me, missy. I'm sure your father would understand perfectly if I did that to you," he warned her with a wagging finger.

"Of course he would not! He knows what a sweet, innocent girl I am. He is probably worried sick about me being trapped in this shelter with such a dirty old man like you. A dirty old man like you that would take advantage of me when my back was turned," she said in mock horror.

"Yeah, right. Anyway, yes, I think it would be better if we stayed together. The temperature is

only going to drop again tonight and we need to make sure you get home safely," said Thomas while dressing down for the night. "So you just get ready there Little Miss Innocent, because dirty old man is coming to bed."

"Thomas Dayfield! Was that possibly a joke? A joke from the man who is never anything but serious?" said Amber.

"I'm not serious all the time," protested Thomas.

"You really are around most people. You should learn to relax more," she suggested.

"Relax more? You mean when we aren't under the threat of freezing to death or Muslim extremists or even worrying about people you meet on the road?" asked Thomas.

Amber sighed before continuing. "There you go again, being all serious. Just relax for once. There isn't really any threat out here right now. Come to bed, I'm already getting chilly."

"Come to bed? I thought you said you weren't that easy," smiled Thomas.

"See? Was it that hard to crack a joke? I bet it would almost be fun to let lose every once in a while," replied Amber, ignoring his comment.

"I never realized I came off as that serious. I suppose I might have to change that," said Thomas.

"I'm sure you have a good sense of humor, even a mischievous side to you if you just let yourself relax a little. I'm sure Sharon gets to see your naughty side. Probably a good thing for me you are being a good boy," she laughed.

"We've had our moments, I will say that," he laughed as he slid into the bed.

Amber sniffed at him as she got comfortable. "Did you put something on?"

"I didn't want to smell like a wild boar, so I used the deodorant. Is it too strong?" he asked.

"Not at all, it smells nice. If I only had some perfume, it would be all good," responded Amber.

"I'm not so sure Sharon would understand why I came back from three days and nights in a shelter with another woman smelling like her perfume. I figure she would shoot first and ask questions later," said Thomas.

"Yeah, really bad idea. It would be bad to have survived this little ordeal to be shot on sight after you return home. I suppose I will just have to put some on to go out to meet our visitors that way. Perfume and a bikini, I'm sure they would become more cordial," she laughed.

"No, no dear. A bikini is made for the summer and inappropriate in this weather. A one piece is more appropriate for this time of year," said Thomas.

Amber laughed at his bad joke. "Wow, Tom, two jokes in one day. Any more of this and I might start thinking there is hope for you."

"There isn't any hope for me," he chuckled.

"I think you'll be okay. I think I've grown on you a tad and you figured I'm not as bad as you thought I was," she laughed.

"I don't know if that's a good thing or not," he laughed in return.

"I'm innocent! I really am!" she protested.

"Yeah, right. You aren't innocent, dear, but very naughty," he chuckled.

"But I am innocent, naughty girls get caught," she laughed.

"I caught you though! Trying to take advantage of a married man," said Thomas with a smile.

"I haven't taken advantage of you yet, just wait until you are asleep," she laughed.

"Should I even bother worrying about it or just regret it in the morning?" asked Thomas.

"Don't worry, I won't leave bite or scratch marks so no sense in worrying about it," she said and he could feel her smile.

Thomas got comfortable as she slid up next to him and cuddled in at his side. He wondered how different things might have been if he had been single and unattached with her in the shelter for the past three days. His thoughts were of Sharon when he heard Amber speaking to him.

"Thomas, I'm going to talk to Sharon for you about all of this. I'm sure you could explain it, but you really can't explain it. This sort of thing needs to be a girl-girl chat, and I know what to say so you won't get into trouble. Trust me, by the time we finish talking, she will probably be happier," proclaimed Amber.

Thomas thought for a moment before responding. "Are you sure that's a good idea, considering your history?"

"Tom, there are a lot of things you don't know about women. We have a way of communicating most men just don't understand. Trust me, she won't be mad," answered Amber.

"You sounded like Sharon when you said that. She always tells me I'm backwards when it comes to women," he laughed.

"Not just you, sweetie, every man. You are all backwards when it comes to understanding us, so don't feel like the Lone Ranger," Amber said.

Thomas let the matter drop and wondered how well that would go over with his wife. He had no desire to spend the night on the couch when he got home and wondered if he should just tell Amber not to worry. He fell asleep wondering how well it would go when he got home.

The soft beeping of his wristwatch alarm woke him the next morning. Amber groaned under the sleeping bags and rolled away from him, stealing the top sleeping bag in the process. For some reason, Thomas was still tired and wanted some extra sleep. Looking at the watch, he saw it was 7:00 on the dot. Without disturbing Amber, he reset his alarm for ten minutes to eight and pulled back the sleeping bag from Amber. She rolled back over in her sleep, getting closer to him in the process and laying her head on his shoulder and draping her arm across his chest. Thomas fell back asleep for a quick snooze before the radio call came in to report the progress of the rescue.

The alarm went off again, this time waking Amber. Noticing Thomas was still deep in sleep, she managed to locate his alarm and shut it off without disturbing him. It was very cold in the shelter this morning, the fire having gone out during the night sometime. She quickly got dressed and lit the propane heater and started laying out another fire. She also grabbed the radio and turned it on, putting the earpiece in and waited for the call.

While placing down the tinder, she thought about the past three days with Thomas. *Why couldn't I have found a man like him? A good and decent man to love and take care of me. He had so many opportunities to take advantage of me over the past few days and not once has he ever been anything but a gentleman. A good man to have in my life. Sharon, you are one lucky woman to have him to yourself. I'm jealous of you for having such a fine husband. My time is up with him, however, and there probably won't ever be another time like this. Thank you, Sharon for sharing your husband with me for a short time. Thank you, Thomas, for making me feel special and needed for a brief time. You never will know part of me deep down inside wanted you to make love to me, but it would have ruined the special friendship we have gained if we had slept together. It's better to just fantasize about it, but even that is wrong. You have a special lady in your life, which unfortunately isn't me. You saved my life and I will always love you for it. That is the only love I can ever have for you, but it is enough to last me a lifetime.*

Several weeks later, Amber committed these thoughts to paper. It lay in the bottom of her chest of drawers under a towel for many years until she discovered it one day, fondly remembering the time she spent with the man she first felt true love with, but couldn't have.

The Control Center called right on schedule with good and bad news. Greg answered for the stranded group while Amber listened in on the conversation. The good news was the backhoe and the Bobcat had been uncovered and both were working on the trail to them. The bad news was they were moving a lot slower than planned due to unexpected large snow banks and downed trees. They were making good progress though, but shouldn't be expected until late afternoon or early evening if at all today. More good news was the wind had died down and was no longer blowing snow back onto the plowed areas. It was overcast also, but a bit warmer today, helping melt the top layer of snow.

Both Greg and Amber acknowledged the transmission and signed off, remembering the radio

schedule for two hours. Amber had gotten the fire going and was preparing water for one of the freeze dried meal packets for breakfast. She used the stove to heat the water as she watched Thomas continue to slumber. *What I wouldn't have done to have made him mine, but fate just didn't give me the chance*, she thought as a tear formed and ran down her face as she continued to think about her lost husband and this fine man in front of her.

When breakfast was ready, she woke him up and provided a makeshift breakfast in bed. She relayed the news about the late arrival of the rest of the group. After breakfast, they did their morning hygiene with the baby wipes and cleaned around the shelter. Today would be the day to start clearing a pathway out to the nearest area where they thought the tractor might come in. After finishing cleaning, they dressed for the cold and Thomas grabbed the small entrenching tool for the snow clearing. Amber thoughtfully grabbed the top of one of the plastic boxes to be used as well. Upon exiting the shelter, they started gradually working their way out of the entrance and towards a large cleared area where it was hoped the vehicles would be coming in. After clearing the entrance and moving out from the shack, they saw Brian and Greg doing the same from their shelter. Thomas yelled across and the other two started angling their pathway to intersect the pathway he and Amber were shoveling out. After an hour, the pathways met and they stopped working to share the moment. They hugged like long lost friends that hadn't seen each other in decades and went back to the shelter to have an early lunch and warm up.

Amber put on the water as Brian went back to his shelter to grab two MREs for himself and Greg. When he returned he found the other three chattering away like a troop of monkeys and quickly joined in the conversation. The meal packs were dropped in the water to warm as they continued to talk nonstop. Even after the meals were ready, the four only stopped long enough to take a bite and chew before continuing. After they were done, they continued the pathway out to the clearing, which was only another fifty yards from where they had stopped. It was finished by the combined foursome in a little over two hours. After they were done, they learned some good news, the pathway out to them would be done by that night, probably around six o'clock. It was one o'clock then and the four decided to get a little rest and warm up from being outside.

Brian and Greg went back to their shelter while Thomas and Amber stayed in theirs. They repacked as much as they could into both the boxes and their packs, but left out the sleeping bags and mats for the time being. Both silently contemplated the remarkable events over the past three days and how it had forged a friendship not easily broken. Amber sat silently looking at the fire when Thomas reached over and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back and gave him a smile. Each had found a new respect for each other over the past few days. For Thomas, Amber admired his love and devotion for his wife and his being truly faithful to her when he didn't have to be. In Amber, Thomas saw a woman who had been abandoned by her husband and hid a hurt inside from nearly everyone. Although lonely, she never crossed any serious lines of impropriety except for her lack of modesty and the unintentional kiss.

Thomas smiled back at her and gave her a wink. They both then hugged with Thomas giving her a quick peck on the forehead before releasing her. Amber snuck in a quick peck on the lips "just to see you blush one more time." She was completely surprised when Thomas reached over and kissed her right back. Her face turned beet red and she drew back with a shocked look on her face. "Okay, now we are even on the embarrassment. I promise not to make you blush

anymore," she said with a laugh after recomposing herself.

"Was that all it took? I would have done it three days ago," he laughed.

"Honey, had you done it three days ago, we would have ended up sleeping together. I n the Biblical sense mind you and we wouldn't be sitting here laughing about it," she replied.

Thomas shook his finger at her before going on. "No sweetie, you forgot my resolve and determination. No nookie for me until we get back home."

Amber turned serious for a moment. "Tom, that's what I like about you; your love and devotion to Sharon. I really hope to find a man just like you someday. I think I am about as divorced as I'm ever going to get without filing through the courts, which don't exist, and I'm going to go back to my maiden name. So from now on, Amber Taylor is back."

"You've given up all hope of your husband?" Thomas asked.

Her eyes turned cold as she replied. "A real husband won't run out on his wife, just like you didn't. I suppose I gave up hope when I found the note saying he was leaving."

"I'm sorry for bringing it up Amber. You are a special lady and I know you will find someone to treat you the way you deserve to be treated someday," said Thomas.

Amber warmed up again and said with a wink. "Someone like you would be nice and of course, as good a kisser."

"How could you ever know I'm a good kisser? We kissed for exactly half a second. How on earth could you ever figure I'm that good?" asked Thomas.

"Because silly, I'm a woman and all we need is half a second to figure out how good he is. And while I think I need a more detailed analysis and evaluation, I reserve the right to keep my opinion that you are probably a dynamite kisser and a handful in the sack," she said with a wink.

Thomas just shook his head side to side and laid back on the sleeping bags. Amber looked over at him and saw he had a smirk on his face and heard him mutter "a more detailed analysis and evaluation" while continuing to shake his head side to side. She laughed once again and she had gotten his goat yet another time and joined him lying down.

The afternoon seemed to creep by as they waited and heard regular reports from their rescuers. They were getting closer to their position at what seemed like a snail's pace. In the late afternoon, Thomas went outside to use the bathroom. Tromping out to a spot, he noticed the scene with the snow was eerily quiet and tranquil in the growing sunset. After he finished relieving himself, he stood near the entrance to the shelter taking in the last shards of daylight and peaceful quiet.

Right before Thomas turned to go back inside due to the cold, a sound caught his attention. It

was very faint, and he scanned the area with his ears to make sure his mind wasn't playing a trick on him. After several seconds, he heard it again, the low rumble of a tractor engine. He quickly scanned the area looking for the headlights while yelling into the shelter for Amber. Greg and Brian came out of their shelter as well, having heard Thomas whooping to Amber.

Before Amber came out, Thomas ran back into the shelter to grab his flashlight to attract the attention of the backhoe. He ran back outside and heard the sound very clearly now, but still couldn't find the lights in the woods. The four ran out to the clearing and looked around vainly at the surrounding woods for any indication of the tractor. Brian finally located it about two hundred yards away from them. The distinctive headlights of the backhoe shone through the woods and were followed by the headlights of the Bobcat.

The four jumped and yelled while shining their flashlights at the tractor, but were unnoticed by the driver. Brian took off like a shot through the deep snow, falling over several times before finally being noticed by the driver of the Bobcat. The operator raised a radio to his mouth and radioed the operator of the backhoe and pointed to make his point. Amy, who was driving the backhoe, angled towards the group and the pathway they had created. Ryan, the Bobcat driver, picked up his second radio and radioed the Ranch to notify the HMMWVs to start moving towards the stranded group. Brian finally reached the tractor and shook hands with Amy before pointing them towards the pathway they had created. The other three went back to their shelters and got the gear ready for the trip home that was soon coming. By the time they finished clearing out all the gear, the backhoe had cleared the path and a turnaround point for the HMMWVs. The HMMWVs were already rolling and the four were greeted warmly by Amy before starting to head back. The earthmovers would hold up the progress of the trucks, so they decided to start heading back early in order to not impede the flow of the other vehicles.

In twenty minutes, two HMMWVs appeared, one in the cargo configuration and the other in the four seat model. They turned around and pulled up to a stop when the driver of the cargo HMMWV ran out of the vehicle towards the group. It was being driven by George who practically tackled his daughter trying to grab her in a bear hug. They both were laughing and crying at the same time. He barely released her long enough to make his way over to the other three and shake their hands and give them hugs. The other HMMWV was being driven by Tracy who informed the rest of the now rescued team their families were waiting for them at the Conference Center. The gear was loaded into the vehicles and the group left out.

They drove fairly quickly before catching the backhoe and Bobcat about halfway home. The speed dropped to an infuriating 15 MPH; however, the group was still heading in the right direction towards home. Just before the Ranch, the tractors pulled off into a small area which had been plowed out allowing the vehicles to pass and continue towards the Conference Center.

They pulled directly in front of the door which had been shoveled out and shut down the motors. Sharon and Janie came running out at full speed and leapt into their husbands arms before they even had a chance to fully get their footing in the snow. Janie and Brian ended up falling to the ground, but they didn't care. Thomas managed to keep his footing as he and Sharon embraced for what seemed like a lifetime, both of them crying tears of joy. Other group members unloaded the gear into the Conference Center before lining up inside the doorway to welcome

the lost patrol back home. When Brian, Thomas and their wives were finished, they all walked inside where the rest of the Ranch residents were waiting in a receiving line to welcome them home. Both the men were reunited with their children and the entire group settled down for a dinner in their honor.

The group had gone all out to prepare a dinner in honor of the lost patrol and had spared no expense to fix the finest foods they had. After eating freeze-dried foods and MREs for a week, the feast hit the spot. Neither Janie nor Sharon left their husbands sides and George watched over Amber like a protective bear the entire time. After dinner, the hard liquor was broken out and a couple of stiff drinks apiece loosened the entire group up. During this time, Amber approached Sharon and asked to speak in private. Sharon looked at Thomas with a puzzled look before agreeing and walking off to a secluded corner. Several minutes passed with Amber mainly talking and Sharon mainly listening before the two hugged each other with smiles on their faces and tears on their cheeks. Amber rejoined her family and Sharon with Thomas. When she got there, she embraced Thomas and gave him a long passionate kiss before saying "I suppose we have a lot to talk about."

Thomas felt like this might have been the calm before the storm so his defenses immediately went up. "I can explain."

"Explain what?" asked Sharon. "You did what you had to do in order to keep her alive. You think I'm mad? I'm not, baby. I know you know what you have at home and you know I'd kill you if you did anything like that. I can tell by the look on your face nothing happened more than the two of you sleeping in the same bed. It took a lot of guts for her to come up to me and tell me face to face she shared a bed with my husband in order to survive. She wasn't bragging or asking for forgiveness, just explaining her actions and telling me what you did probably saved her life. It's okay Thomas, I know you aren't the kind to cheat. It might have been tempting, but I think I can solve that problem for you."

"I'm glad you are understanding about it," said Thomas, relieved as it could have been far worse.

"I read the cold weather survival manual too, baby. I know what the procedure is for two people to keep warm and for emergency treatment for hypothermia is," explained Sharon. "One thing is for certain though; she fell in love with you. Not a puppy crush either, a full blown case of love. But I think she has matured enough for that not to be a problem. I know where she is coming from; I kind of love you too."

Thomas looked at her with a smirk on his face. "Kind of?"

"Yeah, just a little," she said with a wink.

"Maybe there is a little loving for me tonight then?" he asked with a sly grin of his own.

She responded with her own sly grin. "I think that could be arranged. An early night for Angel and an early night for us too."

The dinner started breaking up and Thomas collected his rifle and pack while Sharon got Angel bundled up for the walk home. Getting out of the Conference Center was a trial in itself as Thomas made his way around the room saying his good-byes for the evening and had a brief conversation with nearly everyone before getting out the door. It was cold out that evening but the walk home was thankfully short. The pathway had melted some making the trip a little slippery, but they managed to get home without falling down. When they arrived, Thomas found that Sharon had already gotten the stoves going in the bedrooms earlier that evening and had the beds turned down already. Mongo jumped around and barked at Thomas, happy to see his master back in the house again after nearly a week. Harley paused to look at Thomas and the annoying dog for a moment before going on to whatever task he had in mind for the time. Thomas spent a few minutes with Mongo before restocking the wood in the stove downstairs and the one in the bedroom. Before Sharon got Angel ready for bed she told Thomas. "There should be plenty of hot water since I ran the generator today to charge up the batteries. Go ahead and get a shower and a shave, I'll wait up on you."

He doffed his clothing quickly and had a quick hot shower, although he wanted to remain under the warm stream of water for longer. He shaved just as quickly and went back to the bedroom. By this time, Angel was already in bed and slumbering away peacefully. Taking a long look at his daughter, he went back to his bedroom and saw that Sharon was good on her promise of waiting up for him. He closed the door softly and slid under the covers with his wife to take up her promise of that little loving.

An hour and a half later, the two lay cuddled up together in the bed when Sharon made the proclamation. "Thomas Dayfield! You should get stuck out in a blizzard more often with a sexy blond that you can't do anything with. One word for tonight…wow! You, my husband, are an animal. Thank you very much."

"I'm just glad you weren't too pregnant for this little escapade, sweetie. I enjoyed that and am looking forward to continuing tomorrow morning," he chuckled and drew her in.

"What makes you think tomorrow will be a continuation of tonight?" she groaned slightly.

"Hoping perhaps?" he asked with a smile.

"We will see, but I think the odds are in your favor if you can match tonight's performance," she said with a smile.

"I suppose I just have to try, try and try once more if I can't," said Thomas with a smile.

Sharon turned somewhat serious for a moment. "Be honest though, was it hard to sleep in the same bed with her?"

Thomas thought about that for a moment before responding. "Somewhat. While she is a very attractive woman, she is not you, which I am hopelessly in love with. I know what I have at home and even if I had been tempted to do something, all I would have had to do was think of you and remember you were waiting for me at home. It was hard to think I wasn't doing

something wrong by sleeping in the same bed as her, but I knew she would probably be dead if I hadn't done it."

"Well, baby, you can keep me warm tonight and be naughty with me all you want since you can get away with it," replied Sharon. With that, the two kissed deeply and fell asleep in each other's arms.

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At her parent's house, Amber tossed and turned uncomfortably, alone again. She had gotten comfortable to having a man in bed with her over the past three nights and now missed his company. She shed a tear knowing she would probably never get to experience having the man she fell in love with to share her bed again. She also knew he had another woman who loved him just as much, probably more, but she wasn't that woman. He loved his wife and she knew very little would ever change that. Amber fell asleep wishing and hoping to find someone like Thomas to fill the void in her life.

CHAPTER 35 - NEIGHBORS

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 9 Days
Date/Time: 29 April/1349 Local
Location: Near the Ranch

Darren and his team were on patrol to the northwest of the Ranch where the other cabins stood. Although the group checked as regularly as they could to see if the cabins had seen recent activity, they only get the chance to stop by every two weeks or so. This time, it was close to a month before they could recheck the cabins. Darren made it a point to extend his patrol by a few hours to check since the next patrol out would be going to the south and east of the Ranch. They approached the site with caution, at the end of their three day patrol. Everyone was looking forward to getting home and resting after the trip filled mostly with rain. As the patrol came closer to the grove of trees where the cabins stood, Darren thought he smelled smoke and went on alert. He halted the team and gathered them around and told them to be on alert. Amy, who had temporarily replaced Shannon because of a minor injury, told him she thought she smelled it as well several minutes before but had been unsure. Now with the wind coming from that direction, she positively identified it as a wood fire.

Darren relayed his instructions to the team and watched as they silently fell in behind him in a wedge formation. Quietly, they went into the tree line and continued at a slower pace towards the cabins. The smell was stronger now inside the woods and each member of the team made sure they were making as little noise as possible. When they were within one hundred yards of the cabins, Darren called a halt and set out security as he continued forward alone to check out the cabins. Walking forward at a pace no faster than a crawl, he approached within fifty yards of the cabins and looked at the closest one. In the window, he could see a woman inside sweeping up in the living room area and a boy of about six years old looking out the window. From behind the cabin, he could hear what sounded like sawing noises. Darren called up his team and started moving around the cabin so he could see who was behind. Upon reaching a point near the back, he could see a man in his thirties sawing up a long log with a bow saw accompanied by a boy of about ten years old. He immediately noticed the man had a pistol on his side and two rifles were nearby leaned up against the wall of the cabin. Darren relayed this information over the radio to the Conference Center. He also told his team to close the distance and reform to his rear as he intended to make contact with the individuals. After several minutes, he faintly heard his team positioning at his rear. He figured the sound wouldn't go much further than where he was sitting at and the individual hadn't made any moves as if he noticed the group coming up.

Darren was faced with a quandary. He could go out tactically and ready for anything, but this might be seen as threatening by the man and his family. He could also go out with his rifle slung across his back to appear as benign as possible. Darren decided on a middle road to be safe. He let the rifle hang by its three point sling in the front and let his hands go down to his sides. Darren doubted that anyone would start a gunfight with their children right next to them, but anything was possible this day in age. Stepping slowly and quietly through the woods, he was within twenty yards before the man's son saw him and said "Dad, someone is coming."

The man looked up towards Darren and then immediately to his left where the rifles were leaning against the building. It seemed he was about to go for his pistol when Darren stopped him. "Sir, we are your neighbors and don't want any trouble. We only want to introduce ourselves."

The man paused for a moment, his hands still at the ready. "You from the ranch up the creek?"

Darren knew there could still be trouble if he didn't act fast to get the man's defenses down. "Yes, we are from that way about three miles, the next ranch over. We didn't know you moved in up here and figured it would be proper to introduce ourselves." He noticed the man relaxed a little as his hand wasn't as close to his holster.

"Okay, if you don't mean any harm, why don't you tell your support element in the trees to stand up and show themselves," said the yet to be identified man.

Darren was a little concerned that they might not have noticed another person in the woods with them, but would comply with the man's request just to show a little trust. He called over the radio to have his team show themselves, but be at the ready. After the other three stood up, the still unidentified man relaxed a bit more.

"Okay, now we can talk business. It's about time you folks showed up," said the man.

"What do you mean?" asked Darren, a little puzzled about the last comment.

"I've been down that way a couple of times and seen your ranch, but never made contact myself. I suppose you wanted your privacy and I kind of wanted ours as well. I figured in due time you guys would come over to make contact. You have nothing to fear here, we just want to live our lives away from the madness sweeping the planet," said the man.

"I know what you mean," stated Darren. "How long have you been here?"

"About three weeks," replied the man. "Got here right after the blizzard. And you folks?"

"Since right after the government started shredding the Constitution," replied Darren, realizing they hadn't been introduced.

As if the man read his mind, he stated "Mark Williams; and this is my son Kevin."

"Darren Thompson and this is my patrol team," he replied, introducing the other three by pointing them out. "Is that your wife and other son inside?"

"It is," replied Mark.

Knowing the man was still uneasy, Darren sought to help reduce the anxiety he felt by walking towards him to shake his hand. Mark immediately seemed to go on alert. "Sir, I'm just coming over to shake hands like normal human beings."

Mark Williams visibly relaxed for a moment before laughing and walking towards Darren. "Sorry, but you don't know if strangers want to kill you for your shoes or not."

"Yeah, I know the feeling," replied Darren as he shook the man's hand and then his son's. "So how did you find this place anyway? It's kind of off the beaten path."

"My wife, Trisha, and I came up here four years ago for a hunting trip. Since that time, the owners went out of business and sold the property to some corporation in Florida and it never reopened. We felt it would be out of the way for us to wait out the troubles," said Mark.

"Oh?" said Darren, genuinely surprised. "We didn't know who owned the property."

"Yeah, after the first year, we tried to come back and never could find out who to contact about the property, else we would have bought it ourselves," he replied.

"Buy the property?" asked Darren, wondering who this person was.

"Yes, I'm a little better off than I let on and could have afforded the cabins and property here," said Mark. He turned towards the house and waved at one of the windows. The back door opened and the man's wife and younger son came outside with the wife carrying a shotgun. Mark introduced them, the younger son's name being Todd. The rest of the patrol team gravitated towards the family and shook hands and the tensions started to melt away.

The two groups moved to a shady area and sat down while Darren contacted the Ranch with the information about the new neighbors. Michael stated Thomas, George and Janie would be coming out to meet them, but would take a little while. Darren informed the neighbors of this and rejoined the group. Wanting to break the ice further, he asked a few non-pointed questions.

"So what's the deal with your M-4? There are more toys on there that I've seen in most SOCOM games," stated Darren.

"Yeah, I'm kind of a gadget guy and most of the time I can't help myself. I don't feel comfortable unless I hang sixteen pounds of gear on a six pound rifle," Mark chuckled.

And it was true. Darren thought Thomas was bad, but this guy took the cake. About the only thing still recognizable as an AR-15 was the profile of the upper and lower receiver. He had replaced most of the factory parts on his rifle and attached enough items to the front rails to weigh it down pretty good. Although Darren wanted to take a closer look at the rifle, he knew it would be improper to ask the man to see it until they got to know each other better. Other talk passed the time until they were joined by the group from the Ranch who came rolling up on two ATVs and a Ranger. Introductions were made by Darren and the others joined the group already sitting in the shade of the trees. Mark started telling their remarkable story.

"We are originally from Arizona, although not far enough away from the major metropolitan areas for my liking. After the fall, we had enough supplies, food, gasoline and ammunition on

our property to hold out for a pretty long time, but we also had an plan to come here in case things got bad. I had a five acre plot outside of Phoenix with a well, good land for growing crops and a house. We were able to make it for a while before we started getting into trouble."

"After the food started running out in the city, gangs started coming to the suburbs and beyond. Lucky for us, we were far enough outside that most of the really bad gangs didn't make it that far, but some did and took notice of our land and house. We managed to fight off one band of looters, but some got away. The gang returned with almost thirty people and attacked the house the night before we planned on leaving. Lucky enough, we had already loaded the trucks with what we were going to take and were ready to roll out. Trisha got into one truck with the kids while I stayed behind to distract them. They pretty much ignored her leaving except for one vehicle, which I was able to disable on the roadway, effectively blocking it. I ran to the second truck and got out of there before they were able to follow us."

"We came north into Colorado through New Mexico, driving by night and sleeping during the day since two large orange trucks would be sure to attract unwanted attention. It took us another day to get the roadway cleared to the cabins off the paved road, but we finally got settled in here. We kind of made plans to contact you all down at your ranch, but decided you probably wanted your privacy. We figured if you were smart you would be sending out patrols and would find us eventually anyway, and here we are," concluded Mark.

"Pretty interesting story. Do you own the property here?" asked Thomas.

Mark went over the facts again before he asked Thomas about his own home. Thomas explained for a couple of minutes the facts behind the group that now occupied the Ranch.

"Hey! I know who you are! I read about your retreat in an outdoors magazine the year before the Fall. I wanted to come here last fall, but couldn't get away from work!" exclaimed Mark. More questions were asked from both groups before George asked what Mark and his wife had done before the Fall.

"Well, honestly, my family is an old money family, silver mining from way back, but we got into construction in the Fifties. After World War Two, Grandfather started the business, but didn't really get it rolling until after Korea. We aren't a huge company, but have done well enough to keep it going, especially during the construction boom of the 90s. I also started another company about six years ago, a demolition and recycling company. Honestly, my degree is in business management and I only have a passing knowledge of the specialty work my company did. By the time I took it over, I was the Chairman and didn't really ever get the time to get my hands dirty. We were doing pretty well until this crap happened," answered Mark.

"I had just completed law school when I met Mark," answered Trisha. "But after we got married and had our two children, it was hard for me to keep up with both clients and two kids, so I gave up the practice, but still remained registered with the bar. I had just restarted my work when the attacks happened."

"Yeah, that's all we need around here is a lawyer," said Frank, who let out a laugh. The rest of

the group, including Trisha laughed at the comment.

“Well, honestly, we are happy to have met you all, and we are going to have to introduce you to the rest of our group sooner or later. So here is an invitation to you, three days from now we are going to have our weekly meeting and dinner. You are invited to dinner and to attend the meeting to introduce yourself,” said Frank, currently the leader of the group.

Mark thought about it for a moment. “Not that I don’t appreciate it, but that would put us out here stumbling around after dark. We have to decline as of right now.”

“We can have you picked up and returned after the meeting,” offered Frank.

“We wouldn’t want to impose,” Trisha answered.

“It’s not imposing on anyone. In fact, I’m sure we’d all insist,” answered Frank.

Mark thought for a moment before looking at his wife. He found his answer there. “Well, if we aren’t going to be imposing, I suppose we can. What time should we be ready and you don’t have a problem with us bringing our weapons do you?”

“No problem at all and we can send out a vehicle at around six or so,” said Frank.

“I suppose it’s a good way to get to know our neighbors,” said Mark. “You all aren’t formal or anything are you?”

“But of course we are! Tux and tails for our dinners with top hats and canes being checked at the door. Of course, we also stand on social graces of having a stainless or satin finished pistol with your dinner attire,” Frank laughed.

“So obviously, jeans and boots work well with you all,” Trisha laughed.

“That’s about as formal as we get except for weddings and such,” answered Janie.

“Well, it’s a date then,” stated Mark.

Three days later, the Williams family was picked up in a HMMWV by Darren and Janet and driven back to the Ranch for introductions, dinner and the weekly meeting. The ride was described as “cool” by Kevin Williams, who had never been in a military HMMWV before and enjoyed playing in the turret of the vehicle. Mark and Trisha were shown the general layout of the Ranch, which generated a lot of questions. Mark specifically wanted to know about all the military equipment and how it came to be at the Ranch. But the two kept the questions to themselves until they got to know their neighbors a little better. The new neighbors were introduced to everyone before dinner and they were treated to polite small talk. The meeting went as planned and nothing out of the ordinary came up. Mark and Trisha sat back and observed, amazed that the meeting went so smoothly with such a large group.

After the meeting, the family was invited to the Thompson's cabin and was joined by the Holmes and the Dayfields. Mark asked a few of his questions and was answered with somewhat cryptic responses since the new neighbors weren't really ready to know everything. Trisha answered the questions for them.

"My guess is; you all were part of the same military unit and left after the Army pulled back east. From the amount of firearms I've seen around here I can deduce you did not take to the firearms confiscation orders very well and decided enough was enough. At least one of you was not in the military since the land you have here is more than could be afforded on a military salary, but were probably in the military at one point so you knew everyone. You are secretive about who you are and where you were from because you feel someone could turn you in to the remaining Loyalist forces that would in turn raid this place. Don't worry; we are about as far away from them as anyone could get and enjoy our privacy as well," she concluded.

An uncomfortable silence followed as most of the points were dead on. "It seems that your time as a lawyer wasn't wasted as you have an eye for details," said Darren.

"Not to worry," added Mark. "We want nothing to do with the Loyalist forces either."

Hoping to steer the conversation back into areas the group would find more comfortable, Darren spoke up. "Speaking of rifles, Tom. Mark has your rifle out-gadgeted."

"I noticed," answered Thomas with a laugh. "I suppose I have to dig out more of my ninja stuff to slap on my carbine since I can't be outdone."

The group had a good laugh since they knew Thomas was halfway serious about it. He requested and was granted permission to look over the items attached to Mark's rifle. The conversation moved towards firearms, something everyone in the group could take about without fear of revealing anything sensitive.

"I have rifles in all the major military caliber rifles for everyone in the family. Auto pistols in the common calibers we could expect to find and shotguns in easy to find calibers as well. Several hunting rifles in common calibers and of course .22s. And enough ammo to not have to worry for a long time and reloading components for everything," stated Mark.

"The kids aren't old enough to carry the standard rifles yet, but we bought them for when they grow up. Kevin knows how to shoot and has been carrying around the Ruger Mark got for him. We figured we would start early with them since we are probably going to be carrying around firearms for quite some time," said Trisha.

"Sounds like our kind of people," stated Brian.

"Hey, our Second Amendment rights were being exercised and I'll be darned if some government thug is going to take my weapons away from me," Mark stated with resolve. "I mean no offense to you folks that were government employees."

The conversation continued on for another hour before Thomas finally spoke. "Mark, you and your family seem like the same kind of people we are around here. I hope we can continue to have friendly contacts with you in the future as well as mutual aid in case either of us needs it."

"I don't think that would be a problem at all. You folks seem like the kinds of neighbors we would enjoy having and definitely a sight better than some places," answered Mark.

"What do you mean?" asked Janet.

"Well, honestly, some of the prepper groups we talked to before the Fall were kind of out there on the fringe. You know; the kind that wanted the world to end as we knew it just so they could point their finger and say 'I told you so!' And others that stashed enough guns and ammo away to last them three lifetimes were a little dangerous. They are more like shoot first and identify you later. Honestly, I don't see many of them actually pulling through like you folks seem to be doing here since they make themselves targets and won't work with everyone to get through it."

"You folks aren't like either of those types from what we can tell. It seems you all just want to get through this and take everything day by day. I mean, you all have a plan to survive and what happens, happens. From what I can tell, you don't have any hidden agenda or anything and really no plans for the future except to survive. That's a good combination," said Trisha.

The entire group was silent afterwards, both sides trying to figure each other out. Eventually they decided it was fruitless to try and do so and the conversation moved on.

"So what are your hidden talents then?" asked Darren.

"Well, besides the lawyer bit, I'm a trained midwife and a graphic designer. It was what I was planning on before pursuing a law degree instead, but I did manage to accumulate enough classes to get an Associate's Degree in that. I'm pretty handy with free hand drawing if you need that particular talent and have all my CAD software on my laptop as well. And the normal gambit of survival skills: shooting, hunting, fishing, skinning, canning, sewing, you name it; I know it or can learn it quickly. And from the looks of a couple of the ladies around here, my talents as a midwife might come in handy," said Trisha, giving a polite laugh while looking at Sharon.

"Trust me; that particular talent will come in very handy indeed. I hope you are used to screaming women during childbirth?" asked Sharon with a laugh of her own.

"I've dealt with a few before. Do you have a doctor or anything here to help out?" asked Trisha.

"No, just me and I only worked the maternity ward for six months or so," said Janie.

"I will be happy to help out when the time comes," offered Trisha.

Mark picked up where she left off. "My talents are much the same, but not for the bloodsucking lawyer bit." The group had a good laugh at his comments as his wife gave him a look and punched his leg. "Honestly, I'm kind of a jack of all trades, but master of none. I'm a basement

inventor and other people's trash is my treasure. That's why I started the recycling company. Besides turning a tidy profit for us, it gave me all sorts of things to play with. I'm a good accountant and like I said, dabbled in the construction, but not nearly enough to be good at it. Oh, I also enjoy metalworking as a hobby. I can weld and have most of the tools to do most jobs. I even have a little mini electric arc foundry to melt most metals. I haven't used it in a long time since it eats up power like nobody's business and we don't have a generator to power it up. We need a larger genny to make it work, but other than that, the same skills she listed."

The group was interested in the foundry and Darren asked about it. "It's a little job, probably no more than forty or fifty pounds of scrap can fit in it at any given time. It melts steel, copper and iron fairly easily and goes through aluminum and tin like a knife through hot butter. It sounds like you are interested in it," said Mark.

"We are somewhat since like a lot of places, we have a garbage problem. We have a mountain of old steel cans and various other scrap metals, glass and plastics that we can't find any use for. Someone suggested we use them as makeshift armor plating, but we didn't have any way of properly melting it," said Darren.

"If you need it, I can loan it to you. But the power requirements are enormous," said Mark.

"We have a way around that," said Thomas, knowing they had the towed generator at the construction yard that would supply power to most anything.

"Let me know and I can set it up. Armor plating huh? That's a pretty good idea but I'm sure the old cans and other scrap metal might not be enough to make much," said Mark.

"Scrap steel can always be found. We have several vehicles that don't run any longer and can be scrapped. Do you have the technical know-how to help us in that area?" asked Thomas.

Mark thought about the problem for a moment before answering. "I believe so. We can't forge out the plating since I don't have the equipment to do the job properly, but we can just do a simple casting using oil-sand templates. Of course it won't be as strong as a forging, but we can make up for that with making them a bit thicker. We could forge it out, but it will take forever and a day. Just small arms fire right?"

"We don't expect to do battle with tanks around here. Casting them out sounds like what we could use the most. What would you want in return?" asked Brian.

"For the most part, I think we are set for now. However, if we are going to be friendly neighbors, I think we can just say you are borrowing it. It's not unlike a neighbor that borrows your lawnmower. Since I can't run it anyway, I might as well let someone who can run it use it. I'm sure in the future we will be asking to borrow something from you all," answered Mark.

The two groups continued to talk, learning a little more about each other. The gathering set the foundation for the long relationship they would have with the Williams family.

CHAPTER 36 – RETREAT FROM THE RETREAT

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 27 Days
Date/Time: 17 May/0933 Local
Location: The Ranch

The LP/OP called in a contact and was soon followed by another report. "It looks to be Mike Dugger and two other unknowns in a vehicle. They are stopped by the hardball and the entrance road, waiting for something."

George was working on the Ranch that day and informed the control center he would be enroute, but for someone to make contact with the visitors. Ryan and his team were in the vicinity and told the center they would make contact and bring the visitors up to the Ranch. They arrived within five minutes and made contact with the unexpected group.

"Howdy stranger, been a while," said Ryan as he shook Mike's hand.

"Yeah, we've been pretty busy at our place, but wanted to check up on you folks here and maybe do some bartering," said Mike as he introduced the other two, John Meredith and Jim Simmons. Ryan recognized Simmons from the time the groups had first met when they had stumbled onto the Ranch.

"Let's go on up the road to George's place and get out of the public eye. Just park out back and we will be there as soon as we can," said Ryan.

The three returned to the vehicle and drove up the road. Ryan paused for thought before heading up the road himself. Mike Dugger looked a bit different, but Ryan couldn't put his finger on what was wrong. He chalked it up to everyone changing a little after the Fall and would inquire later after they had a chance to talk more. George arrived at the house after another fifteen minutes followed closely by Cynthia, Kristy and Michael, the leader of the community. Kristy looked about like she was ready to burst from the pregnancy although she was only seven months along. Mike commented on this and asked if the group had any medical help.

"No, just the other wives from the Ranch and Janie. I'm pretty sure I've got twins with all the kicking and fighting that's going on in there," said Kristy with a glow.

"Well, congratulations for you and…Stephen, isn't it?" said Mike, trying to remember her husband's name.

"Yes, he is the one that did *this* to me!" she exclaimed in mock anger while pointing at her belly.

Mike laughed since his wife Candy often kidded him by exclaiming "you did this to me!" when she was carrying both their children. "If you don't have any professional help around here, I can see about sending down Scott to check you out," said Mike.

"Scott is always welcome here since he helped Stephen last year. But, I'm not the only pregnant woman around here. Thomas and Sharon are expecting as well. Something in the water we think," she said with a laugh.

The entire group laughed at the comments since they knew both Stephen and Kristy strutted, well, in the case of Kristy since she waddled, around the Ranch, proudly. Everyone knew they were both proud of the pregnancy and looked forward to having healthy children. Stephen often stuck his chest out a little more when someone commented on the growth of their yet-to-be born baby, or maybe babies. He and Thomas were fairly intolerable with the amount of pride they showed when someone commented on the pregnancies and each was overprotective of their pregnant wives, to the annoyance of them both.

Mike explained to the other members of his party the situation with Stephen accidentally shooting himself and the help provided by Scott. They continued to catch up for several minutes before moving on to business. "While we are doing pretty good up there, we are lacking a few items you folks might be able to help out with."

"Such as?" asked George, who picked up on the same wrongness that Ryan had sensed earlier.

"Three things for certain. Some two inch nails, at least five pounds worth, rechargeable C cell batteries and some new boots, mainly for the women. Whether they are hiking, work or military boots doesn't matter, anything will work," said John.

"And in trade?" asked Kristy.

"To be worked out. We don't know what you need so we can deal once we know," said John.

"I think we can arrange something," said Michael. "Kristy, anything we are short on right now?"

"Nothing immediately comes to mind, but I have to check the supply sheets. The nails are easy to get. The boots, depending on the size, aren't a problem either. The C batteries might cause a problem since I don't know how many we have ourselves. We don't use a lot of them around here for anything, so we might be able to get you some. Whether they are rechargeable or not is another matter. But I can promise they will be within the expiration date," she said after looking upwards trying to remember off hand what they had in the supply sheds.

"Well, whatever you have will be okay. If you have rechargeable, that's perfect, if not, then a supply of alkaline will be fine," said Mike.

John and Jim shared a look. This wasn't the deal that Morgan made them promise to keep. But with most barter situations, if the other party didn't have what you needed, you made do with what they did have. It could be explained to him and they felt like he would probably agree.

"It might take us a few days to gather everything up. Do you have sizes for the boots?" asked Kristy, knowing full well they had plenty of those on hand, both at the Ranch and at the

Warehouse with Smoke.

"Yes, mostly, but you know boots, people have to try them on first. We want several sets of, for lack of a better term, demonstrator models and we can get you the exact sizes," said Jim, speaking for the first time.

"We can let you *borrow* some example sets to have folks try on and if they don't fit, you can exchange them," said Michael, emphasizing the word borrow.

"That sounds like a deal we can agree on. As for the trade, do you all still need medical supplies?" asked Mike.

"Again, we won't know until we check the records," said Kristy. "If you can excuse me, I can waddle down and check and get you an answer in about an hour or so."

She dismissed herself from the group and was driven back to the main Ranch by Amy, who was waiting outside with Greg. The remaining members continued to talk for several minutes before Mike politely excused himself to go to the bathroom, using the excuse "Travel always does it to me." After several minutes, he returned and Jim asked if he might use the facilities as well. He was showed the way by George and returned himself after several minutes. Since it was close to lunchtime, George invited the visitors to eat with them and prepared some leftover ham and potatoes from the night before. The groups ate and shared some stories about what had happened since they had last seen each other. The discussions ran around the security and the raids that had happened against both the Ranch and the Gable retreat. Neither side gave away any information about their defenses nor about the tactics each group practiced, but did let the others know they raids had not been a problem for the defenses. Mike's group was partially lying since the last raid had almost forced the Gable Retreat members to abandon their position. Only a last minute mistake made by the attackers and exploited by the defending forces enabled them to defeat the raid and hold the retreat.

Mike asked another question. "It seems there is a story about a Lion Claw team that got taken out somewhere close to here. You folks hear anything about that?"

George and the rest of the group got silent. "We've heard," was the only answer he gave.

Mike, having spent a lot of time with George in the past, knew there was more than the simple answer given. He also figured this was the group that probably staged the raid against the gang that had been terrorizing their neighbors. Jim, on the other hand, didn't let the matter go.

"So you've heard about the team or heard about the raid?" he asked.

"Both," George replied simply.

"Well, the group that staged the raid must be impressive. The locals say there were fifty people in that Lion Claw team and the attackers only had four. They went through the house like a hurricane and took no prisoners. Not that I'm upset about that since the team apparently had

been taking hostages and extorting the locals for food," said Jim, probing for more information.

George stopped eating for a moment. "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to believe everything you hear? It was more like twenty-five people in a criminal gang and not a Lion Claw team. And I've heard there were twelve people on the raid and, from what else we heard, there weren't any survivors. Half the number was hit in a vehicle ambush the day prior from what we heard. Now for the rest of the story, you have to ask someone who was actually there. You can ask around, but the group that pulled it off tends to like keeping a low profile. I doubt you will get any more information than what I just told you, except in exaggerated stories told through the grapevine."

Mike knew George enough to know if Jim pressed the matter further, he might lose his temper. He quickly changed subjects. "Well, whoever it was, it was an impressive job. Anyway, I have a question about the fruit here. Where did it come from?"

George had returned to eating so Michael fielded the question. "From an orchard off the property. It was a farm a long time ago and we don't know who owns it now. We canned a bunch of it last fall and we are waiting on this year's crop. We transplanted some of the trees out here and they are producing fruit this year, but not enough to sustain us. We also make trips out to the original orchard to gather more. Are you interested in some of that as well?"

"Actually, yes. We need some fruit in our diets and if you have a steady supply, we could trade for it or even transplant the trees to our retreat like you did," answered Jim.

"We can show you where the orchard is, but the manual labor needs to be provided by your group. Otherwise we can work out another trade," said Michael.

"I think we can get them. Is it accessible by vehicle?" asked Jim.

Michael paused for a moment before answering. "For the most part. The old farm road in from the hardball road is in bad shape, but with a four wheel drive, it shouldn't be a problem."

"You think you could show us or point it out on a map?" asked John.

"We will probably escort you in. No offense, but our recon patrols might get a little squirrelly if they see a bunch of armed people that close to the Ranch," answered Ryan.

"You don't trust us?" asked Jim, a little offended.

"If we were near your retreat property with a large armed party, what would you think?" asked George, who was starting not to like Jim.

Jim got silent from the passive rebuke. John answered for him. "Yes, it would cause us concern and we see your point. We can work out the details of that later."

"We also have a member here that worked in a nursery and can help you out with the problems

we ran into. Does your property have a stream or creek on it?" asked Michael.

"Sort of, we have a wet weather streambed that the overflow from the well drains into. Whenever the tank gets filled, the overflow goes back into that. We don't have the normal float and ball to shut off the pump, but keep it going full time. Our solar pump runs twenty-four hours a day, even after dark. Anyway, the streambed eventually drains into the reservoir off the property, but I honestly don't think the water ever gets that far," answered John.

"Maybe you could run piping off that and into your new orchard and eventually loop it back into the wet weather stream. Those little fellas like water a lot more than the pines and scrub oak around here and it helps to have a good supply of water," said Michael.

The visitors agreed that this was a good idea and modifying the current drainage system wouldn't be too much trouble. They briefly discussed supplies between themselves before coming to the deduction they had enough on hand to do what was proposed.

Kristy came back and brought along the supply listing that had been printed off the computer. "From the looks of it, you guys are in luck. We haven't used any C cell batteries and we have twelve on hand that are rechargeable. We also have the charging mount and the solar panels or the inverter to run it on a generator. As for the alkaline types, we have enough for whatever you might want to trade. The boots…depends on whether or not you want military or civilian boots. We probably have enough here to trade away, depending on the numbers. As for the nails, there are more than enough to go around and even keeping back some for us, you would have enough to build anything you could imagine."

"So five pounds, no, call it ten pounds, could be available?" asked Jim.

"Yes, we can do that easily. Now the issue of trade. We are fairly well set here, but medical supplies are always a good thing to have on hand. Also, any spare propane bottles, the one pound kind, you have would be nice as well," answered Kristy, thinking about the prepared shelters along the perimeter.

"Those would be a problem since we don't have that many ourselves. As for the medical supplies, we might have what you are looking for. We will have to ask Scott," answered John.

"And we would need to ask Janie, so we can give you the boots now along with the nails and to be determined amount of medical supplies coming back," said Michael.

The threesome briefly discussed it and decided military style boots would work best. Kristy promised to give them example sizes so they could try them on before making a determination on whether or not they would fit. The Ranch still had the majority of the boots brought out by the group when they arrived and giving away some to a neighboring retreat wouldn't hurt them too badly since they had more women's sizes than anything. Kristy left with Amy again to collect the items and George disappeared into the bathroom. When he came back, he had a neutral expression on his face. The group passed the time again in small talk before Kristy called back she was enroute with the items. Mike had been looking at the bookshelf during the time

and George asked if he was interested in something.

"Well, we aren't really stocked on the latest stuff and I'm dying for something new to read. Recommend anything?" asked Mike.

"Yeah, hang on a few, I've got a book I just finished I think you will like. It's one of those military novels you used to read all the time. Give me a minute to grab it" offered George.

He disappeared for almost ten minutes before coming back and handing it to Mike. "Sorry, Cynthia put it away and it took me a while to find where she stashed it. She's always putting things where only she knows to look and I can't find them, but I did find it. Makes me want to run like an escaped convict from time to time."

The trio gave George a smile except for Mike, whose face registered brief acknowledgement before smiling. Nobody else in the room except for George saw it. By this time, Kristy was back with the supplies and the group from the Gable Retreat loaded it into their vehicle. They said their goodbyes and told them they would contact the Ranch via the radio the next day to relay the shoe sizes. George and the rest of the small group watched as the group drove off before saying anything.

"We need to get the guys together now," said George. "You, Ryan, Darren, Thomas and I need to meet like yesterday."

"What's going on George?" asked Michael.

"Nothing good and I'd rather explain it once," he replied as he walked off to make the calls.

Michael decided it was not the best time to argue with George and got on the radio to notify the members he had asked for. After completing it, George also told Michael he was going to have Mark present for the meeting and it would be held in the Conference Center. He was leaving to grab Mark with Ryan and would be back in less than half an hour. Michael was still puzzled as to what was going on and why George had a bug up his butt over the whole thing. He wasn't one for patience, but George left him little choice as he drove off with Ryan in a roar.

In forty-five minutes, the key players were in place. Mark was a bit puzzled as well since George had not told him what was going on, but merely the same thing, he wanted to explain it once. As they sat down at the table, George unfolded a letter and began speaking.

"Mike left me a note in the bathroom when he was there. The two that came with him were watching him and he left me a hint as to where it was at. The key phrase was 'travel always does it to me.' When we were assigned to an ODA in 10th Group, Mike often suffered from motion sickness and always had Dramamine available. Neither Cynthia or I have ever used it and when I found the box of it in our medicine cabinet, I checked it out. Mike also knew that and knew I would find it eventually and know it came from him. Hiding in plain sight just in case someone took the time to search for something he might have left, which they did. Anyway, long story short, Mike, Scott and another are in trouble."

The group looked over the letter, a single page handwritten note and handed it around for the others to read.

George,

I'm coming to you because I know you and I know you can help us. Morgan has gone off the deep end up here and I'm starting to fear for my family's safety. He thinks he is some sort of Biblical prophet or something and tells us he is talking to God. He keeps telling us he is the chosen one and will lead us from the depths of evil to the "promised land," He hasn't asked us to bow down to him yet, but that's probably only a matter of time. However, he has started requiring the women around here to sleep with him since it is "God's will" that they do so to keep him happy. I think you know what Candy told him when he asked her to do it as well as Gwenn Carlson. Another member of our group here is Ashley Scott. You might remember her from when we ran into your ranch before coming up here. All three of them are resisting the requests, but peer pressure is starting to set in. Scott and Gwenn are resisting as much as they can but Ashley's boyfriend keeps encouraging her to do it. It hasn't come to forceful means yet, but I think that might be coming soon since everyone except us have fallen for his stupidity. All three ladies don't feel safe here anymore and Scott and I have daughters to think about.

I need to make a huge request of you, old friend. I know space is limited at your place, but can we move there to avoid the confrontation that will be coming soon? We can leave with our personal items and possibly some of the food, medicine and ammunition we have stashed away here over the years. If it comes to it, we would be willing to leave with the clothes on our backs as long as we are safe, however, we would need transportation for the larger items. We can throw up tents if we need to and use the conference center for cooking and cleaning.

I hope I dropped enough subtle hints for you to find this and I hope you can figure out I want the book code done on the radio broadcast. You remember the drill from our days on the team.

Your Friend,

Mike

P.S. The folks with me are not here because they want to be, they were sent here to keep an eye on me. Watch what you say to them.

"Okay, that seems a little odd to me," said Thomas after reading the letter. "What's with the book code?"

"An old trick. Find a book with a matching book that you both can read from. Give them a page number, paragraph number and word number and pass the information over a radio. Kind of like a poor man's one time cipher pad. He wants to know our decision by the book code. I gave him a duplicate of one I had here and it took me that long to find duplicate books," said George.

"Yeah, but how do we know Mike or Scott are going to be on the other end when we send it?"

asked Michael. "Furthermore, are we deciding to let them stay here?"

"I've got no problems with it and I doubt the rest of you do either. He is right though, space is limited," said Ryan.

"Which is why I brought Mark here," said George. "Feel up to some new neighbors?"

"I can't say no, can I? We don't own the property, but I do have some questions," Mark replied.

"Best to ask them now," said George.

"Okay, who are these people and will their other group members hunt them down?" asked Mark.

George spent a few minutes telling him about Mike and Scott. He didn't know Ashley, but if Mike had included her in his note, he had probably vetted her already. "Long story short, their group knows about the Ranch here, but not the cabins so you should be safe up there. If they are stupid enough to come here and attack, we will be able to clean their clocks. Mike is the security coordinator up there and without him planning an attack, there really isn't anyone else who knows how to do it."

"Again, I can't say no, can I? Sure, the more the merrier!" said Mark.

"Mark, we wouldn't want you to feel uncomfortable, especially since we just met not too long ago. Seriously, is this going to be a problem?" asked Thomas.

"Okay, in all honesty, I'm not sure. I guess I wouldn't mind having some friends around in case of attack, but I really don't know these folks. Trish also needs to have a say in this. How about this? They stay at your place when they first arrive and we meet them. Then we both decide on whether or not they move out there. I'm sure they are good to go, especially since George speaks so highly of them. But on the flip side, who knows if they want to move into those rat-hole cabins where we are. It took us almost three days to clean ours out to make it habitable. I mean they might just say forget it and live in a tent," said Mark.

"True, George, what do you think?" said Michael.

George pondered the idea before answering. "Okay, I think that's probably the best. But if I know Mike like I think I do, he will want to move out there though. Just my two cents worth."

"It's settled then, they are coming here. When do we go get them?" asked Thomas.

"The sooner the better I think," answered George. "I can set the code up and have Mike get everyone ready. We make the deal on the boots and personally deliver them. When we get there, Mike, Scott, their families and Ashley all decide spur of the moment to move to the Ranch. There is a slight problem, though. With Mike being watched, we have to give a more simple code. I'm sure he will get the gist of what I send when Heather relays it. We can have her go 'hot mike' on the radio and act like she is talking to someone else. Mike knows the transmission

schedule we just set up and he is sure to be there."

The group decided to break away with Ryan and Michael driving Mark back to his cabin. They briefly discussed putting in a roadway between the two areas, but decided it might not be wise since someone could follow it both ways. However, with the ATV tracks between the two areas, there was already a road starting to form and they decided to go for it anyway. It wouldn't take long to do since the area near the creek was level for the most part. It would also cut down the drive time and provide another fallback point for both groups if the need arose.

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 29 Days
Date/Time: 19 May/1956 Local
Location: The Ranch

The time came for the radio call from the Gable Retreat. Heather was in place and had been fully briefed about the code and what her actions needed to be. A small sleight of hand was all that was required now to transmit the code.

"Fox Four-Eight, this is Zulu Nine-Seven, over."

Heather keyed the mike and gave her best "Valley Girl" imitation. "This is Fox Forty-Eight, go ahead."

"Fox, this is Zulu. Zulu will now be call sign Moses. How copy?" replied the Gable retreat.

Heather rolled her eyes. "Oh brother, he really does think he is a prophet." She keyed the mike again while doing the imitation again. "Roger, Moses. This station is now Inferno, go ahead."

George gave her an inquisitive look. "It's all I could come up with on short notice, give me a break," she said.

"I like it," said George with a smile.

The brief pause was ended by the next transmission. "Inferno, this is Moses, prepare to copy."

"You're on," said George.

"Moses, this is Inferno, send-standby one," Heather kept the mike keyed and turned her head slightly as if she was talking away from the microphone. "No, Michael, line one is two forty-eight dash two, line two is three nineteen dash one, line three is seventeen dash three and line four is four forty-seven dash three. These are the numbers we have to go with! Duh! Oh man, the mike is still keyed. Moses, hang on."

On the other end, the radio operator turned to Mike who was standing behind him. "Who is Michael and what was all that about?"

"Michael is the current community leader down there and she is kind of a ditzy blond if it's the one I'm thinking of. I wouldn't worry about it," he said and shrugged his shoulders. He hoped his little act didn't seem too canned while also going over the numbers in his head. Mike Dugger was the kind of person who had a memory that stored everything he heard. He would need to check the book since the code was off.

"And those numbers? What was that about?" asked the operator.

Mike paused for thought, looking upwards like he was actually thinking about it, but actually thinking the code was off by one number. "Maybe supply numbers or something, like line numbers on datasheets like ours are."

"She sure sounds like she's as dumb as a box of rocks," the radio operator laughed.

It was all Mike could do to keep from anything but polite laughter. He gave the operator a good laugh but in his mind was rolling on the floor since he knew what the Ranch had just done and had gone completely unnoticed.

The speaker came to life again. "Hellooooo? Can you not understand this? Subtract the last one and go with that instead. Listen, I've got to talk to these people on the radio about shoes or something, I will wait for your figures later…Zulu, I mean Moses, this is Inferno, you can tell me what you want to now."

The man operating the radio receiver had to stop laughing before he could respond, since he heard the exchange and figured the ditzy girl on the other end wasn't familiar with the equipment and sounded like an idiot. However, Mike instantly knew to drop the last number of the code, which normally indicated the number of words into the paragraph. He knew the code was a little too complicated to send in true form, especially since George knew he was being watched. Mike would have to rely on figuring out what each paragraph meant and the message it contained instead of having a one word at a time message. Heather had done an outstanding job of passing the information to decode the message in the clear and in a totally inconspicuous manner.

Heather on the other end copied down all the numbers the Gable Retreat gave them and read them back. She informed them they would be coming up in three days with the items and for them to be ready to bargain for the medical supplies. Each station acknowledged the last transmission and signed off. Heather and George started laughing so hard they thought their sides were going to explode. George could not believe she had pulled it off as well as she did and her "valley girl" act hopefully had the other group convinced she was quite the idiot.

Mike went to his home and checked the book against the numbers in his head. He found the paragraphs were not vague at all when he read them. Line one in the message translated into *"We will come get you, you are welcome here."* Line two translated into *"Bring all supplies you can."* Line three was *"We will provide you transportation."* Line four was the most troubling and most promising *"We will rescue you if you are in trouble."*

That night, Mike paid a visit to Scott and Ashley. He found Ashley was on duty in the radio

room that night and could send a message back to the Ranch undetected as long as she shut off the recording system. Mike got a message ready for return and gave it to her. It was just a bunch of numbers on a small yellow sticky note and she hid it very easily. At 0230 in the morning, Greg copied down the message from the Ranch and translated it from the book.

"Situation getting bad. No hostilities yet. Unknown if arrival will prompt them. Need to leave soonest. Come get us."

The reply was easy and Greg transmitted it immediately. *"Three days."*

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 1 Month, 4 Days
Date/Time: 24 May/1007 Local
Location: The Gable Retreat

As planned, the Ranch sent two teams up with four trucks to retrieve the Duggers, the Carlsons and Ashley Scott. They had spent the previous three days packing away all their goods and Ashley had taken to living with the Duggers since her ex-boyfriend kept trying to get her to sleep with Morgan. The small group was treated differently within the retreat now, especially since they were at odds with Morgan. However, as not to arouse suspicion, they continued working on their various duties until the last minute. Michael was heading up the vehicle convoy and went to the gate on foot to notify them of the procession that was following was all secure. The guard at the gate knew the group from the Ranch was expected, but not four vehicles worth. He radioed in to Morgan and gave him the news while the trucks were passing by.

Mike and Scott met the vehicles in the middle of the compound and led them to their individual cabin and trailer. The families and Ashley immediately started loading up the various bags and boxes from their houses. The Ranch members stood watch over the vehicles in a semi perimeter, weapons held low, but not at the ready. Morgan saw everything that was going on and came storming over.

"Just what is the meaning of this?!" he yelled.

"It's very easy, Morgan, we are leaving the retreat," answered Scott.

Morgan looked at the cabins and saw his group members starting to emerge. He saw Thomas standing near one of the vehicles and immediately stormed over to him. "You! You are responsible for this?" he shouted in Thomas's face.

Thomas, normally not fazed by someone throwing a temper tantrum, had one pet peeve, someone yelling in his face. It had gotten him into trouble in the military before and he had learned to control it. But, he wasn't in the military any longer and didn't have to take that kind of abuse from anyone. He got right up into Morgan's face and yelled back. "That's right! I promised them safe harbor! They are coming with us! Now get away from me!"

“Who said you could take them away from here?” shouted Morgan again.

“You don’t own them Gable. They are free adults and can go as they please, unless they are being held prisoner here and then we have a problem,” said Thomas, getting quieter.

“I might not own them, but I’m the leader here! I say when they can leave!” yelled Morgan.

“Apparently, they don’t want to be a part of your group anymore and have decided to leave. They arranged for transportation with us and we gladly obliged,” said Thomas, calmness in his voice, but not in his mind.

“How did they arrange for transportation from you? No! They can’t leave! Period! They signed on with my group and have to stay until I throw them out,” yelled Morgan again.

“You really need to stop yelling at me,” said Thomas in a calm voice, the voice he used before he lost control.

“This is my property and I will yell at anyone I feel like! You are no longer welcome here and I want you to leave!” he yelled again.

“I’ve asked you nicely to get away from me. We will leave as soon as our friends are done packing up the trucks. Now leave us be and we will leave you be,” said Thomas calmly.

Morgan was amazed the individual in front of him was so calm. But he didn’t know Thomas was on the verge of punching him in the face just to make him shut up. Thomas also knew that by doing so might set the retreat members off and he wanted to avoid a confrontation. He also knew the time for a peaceful resolution to the disagreement was slipping away rapidly.

Morgan knew he had invited these people into his property to trade, but didn’t know they would be taking his medic and his security director along with them when they left. They were also taking the totally hot Ashley with them, whom Morgan had desired since the day he met her. He had to do something to stop them. But as long as they were armed and could resist, he couldn’t do anything.

“How dare you come into my retreat with weapons! Disarm them!” ordered Morgan as he turned his head to relay the message.

When he turned back to sneer at Thomas, his eyes automatically focused in on the nearly half inch hole six inches away from his head, pointed right between his eyes. The .45 caliber hole preceded the Springfield XD it was attached to. Enough light was going down the five inch barrel that Morgan could see the hollowpoint shell in the chamber. The opening in the barrel looked as large as a five gallon bucket and the bullet looked like a jagged martini glass. He could see Thomas had his finger on the trigger and was applying a slight amount of pressure backwards. The smirk immediately disappeared and was replaced with a look of fear.

“Now, I’ve been patient with you so far, Mister Gable, but the only way you are going to get my

firearms is from my cold dead hands. Your friends may get me, but not before I make your head look like a funnel. Now, very nicely and softly without yelling, tell your people to stand down," ordered Thomas softly.

"Do as he says! Put down your weapons!" ordered Morgan.

"I've got a shot, Morgan!" shouted a member of the Gable retreat.

"No! I'm a dead man if you miss. He will kill me if you try!" said Morgan in a quivering voice.

"Yes, I will Morgan. Now everyone just needs to calm down a little and take a deep breath," said Thomas in an eerily calm voice.

The rest of the group with Thomas had raised their weapons and took aim at the members of the Gable retreat. Although outnumbered almost three to one, not everybody on the Gable side had a weapon immediately available and some of the Ranch group had decent cover. It would be a slaughter on both sides if anyone started shooting. The standoff continued for what seemed like an eternity, neither side willing to provoke the other.

"Morgan! Let us go! We are only taking what we came here with and nothing else! There doesn't need to be bloodshed! You keep all the medicine, food and ammunition we brought," said Scott from the truck he was loading.

"You would just leave it behind?' asked Morgan.

"Yes, I don't want anyone's blood on my hands. Let us leave in peace," said Scott.

Morgan gave the matter split second contemplation. "Then go. Everybody stand down!"

The guard inside the retreat wavered a bit, and then took their weapons off their shoulders. The Ranch members did much the same, although keeping them at a low ready position in case they were needed quickly. All except Thomas, who kept the pistol pointed right at Morgan's head. Thomas saw a look in his eyes, a look of pure hatred. He knew he moment he slipped his guard; Morgan would try and exploit the moment.

"My people are standing down and yours are doing the same. You can holster your pistol now," he said through gritted teeth.

"No…no. I think I'm going to keep it right here until we leave. Yeah, that sounds about right. Plus, you are going to walk out of here with me until we are around the bend in the road. Then I will let you go," said Thomas, as softly as he had before.

"But that's over a half a mile from here to there," exclaimed Gable.

"I can use the exercise and probably so can you. I don't trust you one bit, Morgan, so I'm going to keep you as an insurance policy until we are gone," said Thomas.

"You are taking me hostage, you do realize that?" asked Morgan.

"In some eyes you might be a hostage, but in my eyes, the moment I put this pistol away, you will order one of your men to fire. Again, you are insurance. I'm not holding you any longer than I have to," said Thomas.

Over the next twenty minutes, the trucks were loaded and Mike came to get Thomas. "We are ready, you can release him now. Morgan, I'm sorry it had to come to this, but I've got a family to think about. You cannot do the things you have been doing and expect us to stick around."

"You should leave and never come back," said Morgan through gritted teeth.

"Thomas, you can let him go," said Mike.

"No, get in the trucks and get out of here. Pick me up at the first bend in the road outside of the retreat. Morgan and I are going to take a little walk," said Thomas as he started walking behind Morgan, still pointing the pistol at his head.

"Tom, this isn't necessary. He will let us go," said Mike again.

Thomas gave him half a smile without taking his eyes off Morgan. "Maybe, maybe not. He has every reason in the world to hate us right now and I think he might try something foolish if I don't have him escort us outside. Go on ahead, I'll be okay."

Mike started to argue again, but saw the look in Thomas's face. He also knew there was a fifty-fifty chance Thomas would be dead the moment the trucks rolled out the gate. He had trained the guard force and knew they were trained in the hostage rescue. A designated marksman was probably already sighting in their precision rifle and doping the wind. All in all, Mike knew he couldn't talk Thomas out of it. He went to the first truck and climbed on board, signaling the rest of the trucks to roll out.

"Let's walk, shall we?" said Thomas, moving to the rear of Gable and prompting his forward.

The walk out was as long as Thomas remembered walking in his life. Every set of eyes were on him as they walked out. As they passed, Thomas felt the hairs on the back of his neck standing up as he knew everyone in the retreat had a bead on him through iron sights or scopes. He also knew it would be hard to make a shot without hitting Morgan in the process. Eventually, they reached the bend in the road and were out of sight of the retreat. Thomas holstered his pistol and faced Morgan. "You are free to go back."

"You should never have done that, Dayfield. We had a decent enough relationship before, but you wrecked it. If I ever see you up here again, I will kill you where you stand," said Morgan through gritted teeth.

"Ands too, Gable. If I ever see you in my neck of the woods I'll just figure you are coming

around to try and take me out and I'll just start shooting. Better that we don't ever see each other again," said Thomas calmly.

Morgan was trying to think of something to retort with, but couldn't come up with anything. He frowned and turned away, walking back to his retreat.

Thomas got into the rear vehicle, a HMMWV with Mike where he started yelling. "What did you think you were doing?"

"I did what was necessary to get you and your family out of there alive. As soon as he gave the order to disarm us, we were dead men. If I had let him go before getting out of the retreat, we were dead men. I saw it in his eyes. He would have killed us all and never hesitated. So why don't you just say 'thank you' and leave me alone!" replied Thomas in a growl.

Mike looked at Thomas with a scowl and saw Thomas looking back the same way at him. He had also seen that look on Morgan's face and deep down, knew Thomas was right. Maybe Morgan wouldn't have killed himself or his family, but his friends from the Ranch would surely have been murdered. The rest of the drive was spent in silence on the two hour trip to the Ranch.

When they arrived, Ryan had already set up tents near his house for the two families and Ashley. Mark was waiting for them and introduced himself while everyone was helping unload the items into the back covered deck of Ryan's house and into another medium sized tent. George took Thomas off to the side.

"I think that was a bad thing to do, Thomas," he said.

"George, I'm not really in the mood to talk about it. I just want to go home, hug my wife and child and forget the whole thing ever happened," said Thomas.

"But it did happen, Thomas, and it was bad. You might have made enemies up there and for sure, they probably won't ever trade with us again. You could have shut off our access to medicine for certain," said George, pressing the issue.

Had George not been a good friend of Thomas, Thomas might have said something rather rude. He controlled himself and simple stated "George, it's late, I'm tired and I am going home. Let the Duggers know they are welcome at my place for dinner tomorrow and the Carlsons and Ashley the night after that. You and Cynthia are invited too. We can talk about this tomorrow."

Without giving George a chance to respond, Thomas turned, collected his rifle and pack and walked home.

CHAPTER 37 - EMOTIONS

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 1 Month, 5 Days
Date/Time: 25 May/0723 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, Thomas was paid a visit by Mike, Ashley and Scott after breakfast. They knocked on the door and were invited in by Sharon. Scott took one look at her before exclaiming "Yeah, for certain there was something in the water around here."

"Oh? This mess is *his* fault!" Sharon said as she laughed and showed the three into the kitchen where Thomas was getting another pot of coffee ready for them. He motioned for them to sit down as he filled the percolator with water and put it on the stove.

"Thomas, I bet you think you know why we are here," said Mike as a way of a greeting.

"I think you heard about my world famous coffee and wanted a cup," said Thomas with half a grin, knowing full well the three were not there for the coffee.

"No, but we hear it's good. We are here to talk about yesterday," said Mike.

Thomas sat down at the table with the remainder of his cup of coffee. He was in a little better mood from yesterday but still didn't want to discuss the matter. He hadn't even talked with Sharon about it yet. "Go ahead and say what you have to say."

"Okay, how about we start off with thank you," said Mike.

"Thank me? For what?" said Thomas.

"For helping us out yesterday. I saw it on Morgan's face as well and after I got the chance to think about it, you were right. He would have killed us if you hadn't done what you did. You saved our lives and the lives of the people you brought up there. I never got the chance to thank you yesterday and George said it would be best for you to blow off some steam before trying to talk to you. He says when you get moody, even the devil finds a place to hide," said Mike.

"I'm not that bad. At least not as bad as my wife," said Thomas with the half grin again and trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, but she is pregnant, she has an excuse to be moody. Well, she is a woman; we don't need an excuse to be moody," laughed Ashley. "But we are getting off subject here."

"We had to come by and thank you for rescuing us from the retreat. You see, I heard the night before we left Morgan bragging to one of his friends that one of us, either me or Gwenn or Candy, was next on his list. It was going to happen soon, the forced sex, no let's just call it rape.

One of us was going to get raped by that evil man. You came up just in time to get us. I, for one, understand why you did what you did and I'm glad you did it. Morgan wasn't a bad person when I first met him, but I know he changed once we all got there," said Ashley.

Scott continued where she left off. "We all saw the hatred in his face, especially since you were taking the three most valued members of his retreat away. He would have killed you and everyone else for sure if he had the chance to do so. I'm glad you did what you did, even though I didn't understand or agree with it at the time. But I know you saved all our lives yesterday with what you did and we wanted to say thank you."

Thomas sat silently thinking about what had happened the previous day. He couldn't remember everything that happened, just bits and pieces. Random flashes coming into his head without any organization. He didn't know the full story of what happened; just that he had held a gun to a man's head for a very long time. But in seeing the flash pictures, he let out some of the built up emotions from the day before.

"I cannot believe what I did. I took a man hostage to save my own life. I swore I would never do such a thing and I actually did it. Have I changed that much since the Fall that I would stoop to taking another man hostage and threatening his life in order to save my own life? Honestly, I don't even remember there being anyone else in that retreat except him and me. For those twenty minutes, I vaguely remember Scott saying something and Morgan replying, but I couldn't tell you what. I remember him telling his people to stand down, but I never knew if they did. I remember Mike telling me it was time to go, but I don't remember leaving. It was like we both were trapped in another universe, locked eye to eye. He would have killed me in a heartbeat if he had half a chance, but I never gave him that chance. Maybe I should have given him the opportunity to defend himself and it would have been fair. But I didn't. I took the coward's way out by holding him hostage until we got into the vehicles."

The three sat silent before Ashley spoke back up in a serious tone. "Mister Dayfield, not a lot of people know this, even these two don't know, but I was raped in my freshman year of college. It took me a long time to get over it, sometimes I needed antidepressants and sometimes I needed counseling. After it first happened I used to ask myself 'why me?' and asked what I did to provoke that. But after a while I knew I was a victim, a target for someone's perverted views on the world. The most horrible part about it was I had seen a campus cop no more than three minutes before I was abducted and forced into that van. I often wondered what might have happened if he had been three minutes late on his walking patrol. He was the one who interviewed me after it happened and kept on apologizing for not being there for me. He made me a solemn vow never to let anyone ever hurt me again. I know he was lying about the whole thing since he let me almost get hurt again, even encouraged me to get hurt."

"Yesterday, that same cop was there. It was my ex-boyfriend. I started dating him not long after I got over everything and got back to leading a normal life. He encouraged me to have sex with Morgan, even to the point of saying I had to do it. I resisted as much as I could since I was never going to let that happen to me again. I kept replaying the scene of my abduction from three minutes until it happened over and over in my mind. Only this time, the cop wasn't three minutes early, you were right on time."

"You stopped another rape from happening and more of the same psychological trauma from happening to me all over again. Or the psychological trauma from happening to Candy or Gwenn. You stopped three rapes, maybe even five if Morgan had gone after their older daughters, from ever happening. You didn't take the coward's way out. You took an honorable approach to helping those in need. We needed your help right then and there and you did what you had to do to save our lives. Morgan would never have let us just drive out the gate. He would have killed Scott and Mike and saved the women for his perverted pleasure. You saved nine, no, seventeen lives yesterday when you count your group and you should be proud."

Thomas sat silently, lost in his thoughts. Scott got up and poured everyone a cup of coffee before asking Sharon quietly where the creamer and sugar was. Sharon had waddled in after Thomas had finished his speech and before Ashley had started hers. Thomas didn't even realize she was in the room until she put her hand gentle on his shoulder in a reassuring touch. He reached up and grabbed her hand and squeezed it. Mike took this as the couple needing some alone time and prompted the others to leave. He promised he would bring back the coffee mugs later and the three left the house.

Sharon walked around the table, still holding on to his hand, and plopped down in the seat next to him. "Want to share it with me?"

"No…yes, oh, I have no idea what I am doing right now. God, you chose a horrible man for your husband and the father of our children," he said, dropping his head to look at the floor.

"Thomas Brent Dayfield. You are the best man in the world that could ever choose me for a wife and the father of my child. I could never have imagined a better man in the world to take care of me, love me and look after me especially in light of everything that has happened in the world. You have been a wonderful father to Angel and I know you will continue to be a wonderful father to our child when he or she is born. You are a very loving and caring man who has a good heart and soul and genuinely cares about everyone around here but himself. You do things without thinking of yourself, but thinking of others instead. You put yourself in danger just so they will be safe. I love you for placing our safety first since you are the first man I've ever known to do that for me. You are *not* a horrible man, but the best one in the world and I'm glad you are mine, forever and always."

"And let me share something else with you. You, my dearest husband, have been on the go for over a year now and the stress is starting to take its toll. For the past year, except for the rare occasion, you showed no emotion because you thought you couldn't. You have been keeping it all bottled up inside of you like a pressure cooker and now it's overdone. You think you can't show emotions around here because everyone looks up to you. I mean, even when everyone gets their turn at being the community leader, they still defer to you on important decisions. Everyone here knows and respects your opinions on everything. You have the whole world on your shoulders; at least you think you do. You have been on the go for the past year, well, the past five if you count getting this place started and it's eaten away at you. The stress is a killer, I know, and you haven't been able to release it. You've had to buck up and be strong for everyone else around here in their moments of crisis, but have never been able to have one of your own."

"Since last year, you have had to deal with the military and the attacks, getting us to safety and what happened on that highway the night we came here. You had to deal with several attacks and made the no shoot call on Mike and his group not long after we arrived. You had to deal with the terrorist gang near Cañon City and you led that raid. You've had to deal with other raids out here. You kept Amber alive last winter when she almost died, probably kept the other two alive as well since it was you that suggested the shelter. You had to deal with this situation now. Every big decision concerning this place comes to you. You have done an extraordinary job keeping it running and keeping us all together and alive. You've kept us all strong in our weakest moments and I don't know if anyone else could have done it. You literally saved everyone here at some point or another. The stress builds up and you think you can handle it, but you can't alone."

"I know it gets lonely at the top, but I'm here for you to open up to. You aren't alone, darling. You never talk about the stressful situations you have been in with me, probably because you think you are trying to protect me by not telling me. I eventually hear about it from someone else, but not from my own husband. You promised at our wedding to protect me and I feel the same way about you. Let me protect you from destroying yourself by being here for you to talk to, to get some of the stress out of your system by telling me about it. I love you with all of my heart, but this is going to kill you eventually if you don't let it out. You have to let it go and know you cannot save the entire world, just your own little part of it. You don't always have to be strong for everyone. Let us see a weakness every once in a while. You're still human, let us see that. We are all here to help, but I think you believe you have to do everything yourself. Let us help you. Let me help you. Let me be the wife I want to be and help you…" she concluded with tears streaming down her face.

Thomas looked up at his wife with tears in his eyes. He leaned over and put his head on her shoulder, starting to cry. She just held his head in tight against her shoulder and let him cry, tears continuing down her face as well. This was the first time since they had started dating she had ever seen him cry or show any serious kind of emotions. She was right, he needed a release and now was as good a time as any. She decided to sit there as long as she needed to and hold him, be strong for him. This was the man she had dedicated to spending the rest of her life with and she needed him to let go of the pent up stress, pain and aggravation that had been building for a long time. They sat there for nearly twenty minutes before he released her and sat back up, wiping the remainder of the tears from his eyes. She also wiped the tears from her face and gave him a beaming smile followed by a heartfelt "I love you." It immediately uplifted his spirits and he felt new life flowing through his veins. He replied in kind and gave her another hug thankful he had such a wonderful woman to spend his life with.

"I'm sorry, baby, for not letting you in on my life more than I could have. I was trying to protect you as best as I could and I thought if I sheltered you from all the bad things I've seen, it would somehow keep you safe. I was wrong to let it eat away at me like that and I should never have let it go this far. I love you so much I wanted to protect you. I know you aren't a china doll to place on a shelf, but I still want to protect you. I never knew it bothered you for me to keep everything pent up inside. I promise to talk things over with you from now on," he said.

"Just don't keep it pent up. I'm a tough old broad, I can handle is," she said with a smile.

"Have to be to marry me," he said with a smile.

She laughed at his pathetic attempt at a joke. "What are your plans for the day today?"

"Well, I thought we might just sit around the house and talk. I know there isn't much going on today so I thought it might be a good time to just catch up with the two of us," he said.

"Mister Dayfield, that sounds like a wonderful plan that I think I can accommodate as long as I'm not sitting on this hard wooden chair for very much longer," she said as she rubbed her belly.

The couple spent a quiet day in the house by themselves; Angel had been with Heather that day since she had the child care duties. It was the first day the two of them had had good quality time since their honeymoon the previous year and they thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. It was also one of the first times Thomas had felt completely relaxed in a long time. She was right as the stress of everything that had happened for the past few years kept building up without release. She kept his mind occupied on other things throughout the day and eventually the two settled into the kitchen in the afternoon to prepare dinner for that night.

The Dugger family showed up around 5:30 and the Dayfields were introduced to the entire clan, including Nancy and Jill Dugger, the seventeen and thirteen year old daughters of the two. They were reintroduced to Candy, Mike's wife, although they had briefly met when the group had stumbled onto the property last year. The group sat down for dinner and Sharon had exceeded expectations again, making a large ham taken from a boar the last winter. The groups kept the talk simple through dinner, after having been prompted by Sharon when they first arrived. She quietly told them Thomas was actually relaxed and asked for them not to bring up anything that might worry him. Thomas, being Thomas, had questions in his mind, but nothing serious he would need to worry about that night.

"Did you get the chance to meet Mark and Trish or go out to the cabins yet?" he asked.

"Yes, we did. I think Trisha, Gwenn and I kind of hit it off right off the bat and I think Mark, Scott and Mike did the same," said Candy.

"And the cabins were not really what we were expecting. Five years of neglect took their toll on the place. But better than nothing and nothing a little elbow grease can't cure," said Mike.

Nancy made a face. "Well, I wasn't expecting the Hyatt, but I seriously wasn't expecting to find the family of pigeons nesting in my new room. I think that Dad and Mom are going to bring back the old cruel and unusual punishment for children and make Jill and I clean them out while they take care of more 'adult' matters. I actually think there are child labor laws prohibiting that, but I don't have the internet to look them up."

The entire group laughed as Mike confirmed his daughters were going to help clean the place up. "Yes, they are a little, well, not shabby, but definitely need some work. Structurally, they are

intact and in decent shape, but we found a few leaks in the roof that need patching and two windows that need to be replaced. With some repairs, we might be able to keep them in one piece for another twenty years, since they are probably fifty years old as it is. Other than that, how can we complain about it?"

"But Dad! You aren't the one who has to clean up pigeon poop!" exclaimed Nancy.

The group roared with laughter as Mike gave his daughter a look. "Be glad Mister Dayfield doesn't put you on the chicken coop detail first off."

"I think that sounds more like an 'adult' responsibility to me, Dad. You wouldn't want the children to screw that up now would you?" asked Nancy with a giggle.

Mike gave his daughter another look in jest. "No clean coops means no eggs and then we suffer with MREs for breakfast like last winter. You know chickens lay better with clean coops. Besides, you were the one who said you wanted to be a part of the adult things going on."

"Come on, Dad. Everyone knows eggs come from the supermarket and chocolate milk comes from brown cows," said Jill, jumping into the conversation on her sister's side.

"You see what you have to look forward to in a few years? How does one ever survive teenagers?" asked Mike while speaking to Thomas.

The group roared with laughter again and Thomas just shook his head, thinking about how fast Angel was already growing. "Don't worry, Nancy. I'm sure in your father's mind you are still five years old and want a pony for Christmas. Father's are all that way even when you are growing faster than he might like to admit."

"Does this mean we are getting a pony, Dad?" she asked jokingly.

Mike turned and gave Thomas a frown, although he wasn't mad. "Thanks Tom. You see what you just started?"

Nancy was hamming it up for the group. "I get a horsey, a brown and white one with a big tail, and I will name him Clyde. My horsey will live in the room with me and sleep with me in the bed and I will feed him apples and pecan pie every day."

The families laughed so hard they had to stop eating for a moment. When they had settled down, the conversation turned back to more serious topics.

"Speaking of horses, I'm surprised you don't have any around here, or cows for that matter," said Candy.

"An oversight on our part. I was planning to get them before the Fall after I got out of the Air Force, however, the Fall interrupted my plans. We are still looking for both and kind of planned on heading out to the Eastern Plains to look for a rancher or farmer at some point," said Thomas.

"Well, from the looks of it, if that's the only thing you overlooked, that's not a bad thing at all," said Mike. "I know for a fact Morgan's retreat was not this well set up."

"So, it's certain then, you all are moving out to the cabins?" asked Sharon, trying to move the conversation away from points that might bother Thomas.

"Yes, at least the Carlsons and our family are. I think Ashley is trying to avoid the place since it means a lot of cleaning work and is looking for a spot here at the Ranch. We have our families to help out and she is a little too proud to ask for help and it's a big job cleaning out everything. It seems like she is more like my daughter than she realizes," said Mike as he looked at Nancy.

Nancy took the time to look surprised and put on a good innocent face. "But Daddy! I'm still your little girl like Mister Dayfield says and shouldn't have to do the hard work!"

More laughter from around the table as they finished up dinner and Thomas brought out the apple pie Sharon had baked. As they were finishing dessert, a knock came from the door and George and Cynthia were standing in the doorway. "Sorry, but it slipped my mind we were supposed to do dinner until we were halfway through. Tom, you know you should have told Cynthia about that instead of old, forgetful me."

"No kidding. I was almost done cooking dinner when I made mention of the idea we should invite Mike and his family to eat. George got this sheepish look and told me we had been invited to your place," said Cynthia as she went across the room to say hello to the Dugger family.

"Well, I figured a little socializing after dinner would make up for it. I brought you a present," said George, pulling a liquor bottle out of his small backpack.

Mike needed one glance to see what it was. His eyes lit up and before he was able to say anything, Candy jumped in. "No, never and absolutely not, George Taylor! You get that evil devil water away from my husband. Just ask him how many years went by before I finally forgave him for the last outing you two had with that."

George was holding a bottle of Tuaca, an Italian liqueur that Mike dearly loved, but rarely imbibed since Candy had taken years to get over the last time the two of them had gone on a binge and drank three bottles.

"But it's a celebration!" exclaimed George.

"He forgets dinner, but remembers the booze. How can you ever deal with that?" asked Candy with a smile as she gave Cynthia a hug.

"I've learned to deal with it through counseling and selective hearing. If it sounds stupid coming from his mouth, I ignore him until he starts making sense or gives up," laughed Cynthia.

"Oh, is that all I need to do for Thomas as well?" asked Sharon.

The group laughed again as Candy told Mike quietly to go easy on the "celebration" time tonight. Thomas brought out a group of glasses and handed them out to the adults, although not taking one for himself or Sharon. "It's okay honey, you can have a small glass," Sharon told Thomas.

The rest of the evening was spent in conversation and the three families catching up, or in the case of the Dayfields and the Duggers, getting to know each other. Nancy and Jill were sent back to the tent since it would be a long day for everyone tomorrow since they were starting to clean the cabins. Sharon and Thomas took Angel away from "Uncle George" whose lap she had immediately claimed when he came in and put her to bed. Mongo followed them upstairs to sit at his guard post by the side of her bed as usual. He had immediately taken to Mike when he came in and had a good scratching on his head before wandering around the group striving for attention. When the three families came back together, George remarked "Your kids are growing up on you, Mike. I remember when they were Angel's age, or close to it."

"My kids? I remember when Misty wasn't but waist high. Now she is all grown up and looks like her Momma. Good thing she doesn't look like you," said Mike with a mischievous smile.

"Don't I know it? Good thing is, she doesn't have all those boys hanging around the house that I have to chase off," said George, completely oblivious to the fact Misty and Stu had been seeing each other for a few months.

"So, now that the kids are off to bed, we have some other questions to ask you folks," said Mike.

"Go for it," said Thomas, settling down next to his wife on the couch, holding her hand.

"Well, the main thing is, how do we fit in here?" asked Mike.

The group looked a little puzzled. "What do you mean?" asked George.

"I mean, you brought us here and found a place for us to live, but where exactly do we fit into the machine around here? What kind of supplies can we get? What kind of work can we do? What do you need help on? Those sorts of things," said Mike.

"Well, we hadn't really given it much thought beyond getting you all here. As for the supplies, as long as you help out around here, you are welcome to whatever. Since you aren't really part of the Ranch here, we don't have to worry about voting you or your families in. I guess we can talk to the group as a whole at the next meeting to decide where to best put you all on the work details. I know you were the security director at the retreat and we would welcome that continued expertise, but for the moment, Darren is pretty much head of that department. But he can always use another set of eyes on the defensive planning and the training," said George.

"And for the most part over the next week or two, we kind of figure you all will need to attend to personal needs. Also, with myself and Kristy being out of the response force rotation, I think we might need your help filling in the gaps if you wouldn't mind," said Sharon.

"For certain," stated Mike. "We have already briefly discussed that with Mark and even their family wants to help out in that area. I mean, we are all in this together, if something was to happen to the Ranch, how long would we be able to hold out for?"

"How are you all standing on weapons, ammo and food?" asked Thomas.

"We are actually sitting pretty well in those areas. We brought all our individual weapons with us, including the rifles for the kids later. As for ammo, a long time ago Morgan started dividing up the supplies from the retreat into the various cabins and trailers so they could be used as defensive points. We loaded a few thousand rounds of ammo for each of our weapons into the trucks when we left. Food is another story. We were only able to bring out about two weeks worth, maybe less. We won't starve but what we did bring is mainly MREs and long storage stuff," answered Mike.

"We could offer up some rifles for your children of you want. We have quite a few military rifles in storage that we could offer them. M4s or M16s if you prefer it," offered Thomas.

"We will check with them, although I think Jill might be too young for that. Nancy on the other hand has been bugging us for a while to get something like her father has," answered Candy.

George spoke up next. "And as for food, we can help out there. We already have the Williams family set up for that sort of thing and we always store more than we actually use. It won't be a stretch for us to give up a little more. Actually, the Williams were pretty well set with the exception of getting some fresh stuff from us."

And so the conversation continued well into the evening. A hundred little details were worked out and the group found out a little more than they knew at the beginning. Mike and Candy silently wished they had met the Dayfields prior to the attacks so they might have had a place here instead of at the Gable Retreat. They collectively decided to wait until the meeting on Thursday to volunteer for work details and would continue making the cabins habitable until then. Sharon offered cleaning supplies and was taken up on the offer, stating they would be back the next morning to pick them up. They also informed Sharon they would be speaking to Scott the next day about coming by to check on her pregnancy and they would remind them about dinner.

The separate families went their own ways that evening and Thomas and Sharon got ready for bed. Thomas slid in closer to his wife and felt along her growing belly. He suddenly felt a tiny foot or maybe a hand strike out at the confining walls separating and protecting it from the outside world. He smiled at the thought of being a new father and some worries came back into his mind.

As if she read his thoughts, Sharon spoke to him. "You shouldn't worry about anything like that right now. You are going to continue to be a wonderful father and our child will be healthy. Don't worry, I'm keeping myself healthy and our baby is healthy enough right now. Very strong mind you, since he seems to be trying to punch his way out. We never decided on a name yet,

have we?"

"No, we never did. You think it's going to be a boy?" he asked.

"I think so, but there is no way to tell. He's a little more active than Angel was and I've heard that means a boy. Either way, our child will have loving parents and a safe place in this world. As for names, I kind of like Thomas Brent myself. How about you?" she asked.

He thought about it for a moment. "After me? I don't know. I've never been fond of the whole 'junior' moniker. Maybe Thomas Brent Dayfield, the Second. That sounds a bit more distinguished. Better than an old broken down Tech Sergeant like his father was."

"I like the name and I think once he gets to know his father, he would be pleased," said Sharon.

"We could always use my father's name as well. Alan Edward, that's a good name," he offered.

"Yes, it's nice, but I much prefer yours," she said with a smile.

"And what if it does turn out to be a girl? What about then? Sharon Jennifer is a good name," said Thomas.

"Absolutely not! Girls aren't supposed to be named after their mothers! We can find something else," she said.

They spent the next half an hour working on girl's names before finally coming to a decision. Thomas fell asleep that night and got the most rest he had gotten since before April Twentieth of last year. Sharon looked over at his sleeping form with a smile on his face, smiled herself and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 38 – IT'S TIME

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 3 Months, 27 Days
Date/Time: 16 August/1622 Local
Location: The Ranch

The group had taken on the task of fortifying the defensive fighting positions with the armor plating Mark had stated he could make. There was an abundance of scrap metal on the Ranch and the residents had gathered up as much as they could, even going as far as taking the cars apart involved in the attacks on the Daniels the previous year. And after trial and error, they had finally come up with the necessary strength and thickness of the plating. But even as they had quite a bit of scrap on the Ranch used in the production, it still was woefully inadequate for the task they planned. A trip to the salvage yard in Cañon City and bartered for the scrap metals they had at the location. The "owners" of the yard, one time residents of Cañon City had acted in awe of the group and gladly traded with them, allowing them to haul off pretty much whatever they wanted or needed for the sum of four rifles and ammo.

Mark and Johnny Thompson were busy pouring out the molten metal in the oil-sand forms and getting the plating ready to be cooled in the makeshift quencher they had made. Thomas and Michael were taking a break from the work and observing the boundless energy of Johnny as he assisted Mark.

"Did you see the way those folks looked at us when we first walked up to the scrap yard?" asked Michael.

"No, I wasn't paying much attention, why?" asked Thomas.

"It was like James Brown had suddenly risen from the dead and was playing the Forum in L.A. I mean, those people were looking at us like we were celebrities or something," said Michael.

"I honestly didn't notice, but I did notice they went out of their way to help us," thought Thomas.

"I know. It was weird, like they knew who we were and, well, weren't afraid of us, but they treated us differently, like royalty or something like that," said Michael.

"Well, we do know the Ranch is somewhat well known around these parts, maybe those folks figured it out. I mean, we never told them where we were from did we?" asked Thomas.

"No, and they never asked. They just knew, man. Like I said, it was weird," said Michael.

Thomas thought about it for a moment. "Do you think the Minister might have had something to do with that? I mean, like telling them about us?"

"No, I don't think so. First off, he doesn't have a car anymore and depends on others for transportation. Second, I don't recall him every saying he goes into Cañon City. It's just weird. Maybe we should go back and ask," said Michael.

"Nah, why bother? We might not like the answer we get," laughed Thomas.

Little did the two or the rest of the Ranch members know that the local population did hold them in awe. The stories about the various attacks on the Ranch and the raid against the gang near Cañon City, even the first night that Frank and Thomas had escaped and stopped the pursuing Army individuals, were now embedded in local folklore. The one member they had allowed to leave had spread the word about the two rogue Air Force NCOs that were able to withstand his patrol's assault. Everyone had heard the stories, and being told and retold over and over again, the stories took on new "facts" every time someone else told them. It was like the old school trick to start at one end of the classroom and tell a fact and by the end of the class it is totally different. By the time the stories were now told, the entire Ranch was an armed camp of Special Forces and SEALS. Their kill counts numbered in the thousands and they had never lost a member. The residents were ten feet tall and, while not quite bulletproof, they could catch bullets in their teeth and spit them back at you just as fast. Even most of the gangs that worked the areas around Cañon City, and even into Colorado Springs and Pueblo, had heard of the group on the Ranch and most shied away from attempting raids. Those that did send attacks towards the Ranch did so in smaller numbers and found their probes never returned from the missions. For the most part, the gangs marked off the area for ten miles around the Ranch and decided it was best to continue hitting the sporadic houses and smaller retreats in Colorado while attempting to avoid direct confrontation with the residents that were ghosts.

The Ranch had been heard about as far away as Wyoming, Kansas and New Mexico and with each retelling of the tale, their exploits grew more heroic and more astonishing. Even a survival group in Nebraska had heard of them and was curious about the stories and the group behind them. Nobody except the members of the Ranch knew for certain what they had done and they never broadcast what they did. They enjoyed trying to keep a low profile and were happy the stories scared away some of the opposition.

"Sharon's about due any day now isn't she?" asked Michael after they finished thinking about the situation as it stood.

"Lord, I hope so. She's about ready to pop and lets me know it," laughed Thomas.

"Poke her in the stomach," laughed Michael.

"And get punched in the face as a result," laughed Thomas. They continued the work well into the afternoon and headed back to their homes, ending another day at the Ranch.

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 3 Months, 28 Days
Date/Time: 17 August/0309 Local
Location: The Ranch

"Thomas? Thomas? Thomas!" yelled Sharon to her sleeping husband.

"Humph, what's up, baby?" he drawled, still more than half asleep.

"It's time!" she said somewhat in pain.

"Time? It's only three o'clock, we've got another three hours until it's time to get…you said it's time?!" he asked, suddenly awake and realizing what she was talking about.

"Yes!" she said in a groan, holding her stomach.

"As in baby time-time?" he confirmed.

"Yes!" she yelled as the pain of a contraction hit her.

"Oh, my God! We've got to get you to the Conference Center! Are you feeling pain? We've got to get dressed! I've got to get Scott and Janie and Trish! Where are my pants? How far along are you? I'll get Angel to take to the Parson's! Where is your bag? We've got to get you down there! I'll call control and let them know so they can call everyone! Can you walk? We need to get going! Let me get my boots! I can't believe it's time! Are the contractions close?" spoke Thomas rapid fire, jumping out of bed and running this way and that in the bedroom, trying to do a thousand things at once and failing at each of them.

"Thomas, stop and shut up!" yelled Sharon, waking Angel in the next room who thought Mommy and Daddy were fighting. It was a little comical to see Thomas, who was never flustered about much of anything, running around like a chicken with its head cut off. However, Sharon did not care how amusing as it might have been right then, she was in pain and needed him to focus. He stopped and looked at her face. She was obviously in agony and he needed to get her to the Conference Center where it had already been prepped for the expected baby deliveries.

"I will call control and have them get the key players over there. Are you okay to walk?" he asked more calmly as the initial shock wore off, but still a high pitched tone in his voice.

"I think so, but you need to help. Go get Angel while I get my shoes on," she grunted.

Thomas immediately went into Angel's bedroom and gathered her up out of the crib. She was crying since she thought they had been fighting. "Baby, don't cry. Mommy is going to be okay and she is going to have another baby brother or sister for you."

"Is Mommy okay?" asked Angel through her tears.

"Yes, sweetie. She is hurting a little right now because the baby wants out. But don't be afraid. Mommy wants to see you happy and not afraid," said Thomas calmly.

"I want to see Mommy," said Angel.

Thomas took her into the bedroom just as Sharon finished putting on her shoes. "Hi baby, Mommy is fine but you have to stay at Uncle Mike and Aunt Shannon's house for today."

"Mommy, I'm scared," said Angel.

"Baby, don't be scared. Mommy will be okay, you will see tonight," said Sharon through the façade of not being in pain. Angel immediately went over and hugged her Mother's leg. Thomas swept her up and let her hug Mommy around the neck before taking her to the car.

Thomas grabbed the bag Sharon had packed a few weeks before for this event. He took Angel to the Explorer and strapped her into the car seat before returning to help Sharon downstairs. She had trouble walking since the contractions were so sharp. "Are you going to be okay?

"Yes, but they just came on suddenly. I'm a few days early for this, but I guess Junior was more ready than I thought," she said through gritted teeth.

It seemed like an eternity before Thomas got her downstairs, only then remembering he hadn't called control to have them get the medical team going. He was about to go back upstairs and thought it better to go ahead and take her there before making the calls. It looked fairly strange in the compound right then. Lights were coming on all over the place and Thomas thought there might have been another raid spotted coming in. However, everyone was converging towards the Garcia's cabin and Thomas saw Kristy being helped out by Stephen. "It looks like you are going to have company over there today."

"Don't tell me Kristy is going into labor as well?" she asked as they gently stepped off the porch.

"Looks like it…careful now," he said as he gently helped her inside the waiting vehicle.

He ran around the other side and got into the driver's seat, started the car and headed towards the Conference Center. By that time, Kristy was almost fully there and Thomas could hear her yelling all the way into the vehicle. She seemed to have her attention focused on Stephen and how "God, this hurts and it's all your fault!"

"Please don't yell at me like that," asked Thomas.

"Only if you don't get me there like right now!" she emphasized with a growl.

It almost prodded him to drive faster, but he was worried about the bumpy gravel roadway around the compound. It took another minute before he yelled for help when he arrived. Janie came rushing out to help.

"Oh, no! Not both at the same time!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, both of us at the same time," said Sharon a little more calm than she had been. Shannon came running up and whisked Angel away and Sharon let out a good yell when she was out of earshot. "Oh, Thomas, you don't know how much this hurts but I want you to know, it hurts!"

She gasped for air as they got her inside the Conference Center where nearly everyone was inside helping to some extent. It seemed like everyone inside was as anxious as the two expecting fathers and nobody knew what to do, but they were rushing around, making it look like they were doing something. Even George and Cynthia came down the road in their Suburban, throwing gravel as they slammed on the brakes right outside the Center. Scott and Trisha came roaring up in a Gator with Trisha at the wheel. Scott was a little pale after the ride, having almost been thrown out of the vehicle on four separate occasions. When Scott and Trisha entered, they found out why everyone was awake.

"Oh, good Lord. Both of you are going into labor?" asked Scott as his jaw dropped.

Both the ladies screamed "yesssssss!" as one followed by a string of grunts, groans and growls. They immediately got to work, sending out nearly everyone from the Center except for the immediate families and ordering Darren and Janet keep everyone outside. Everyone quickly departed, although anxiously awaiting news of their adopted family's status on the back deck.

"This might get a bit tricky as I've only delivered two babies in my time and certainly not at the same time. Trisha?" asked Scott.

"More than a few, over ten, but honestly, never doubles like this," she answered.

"I was in the maternity ward for six months. I know I can help, but three babies at one time are going to be a challenge," Janie said.

"Well, I take one, Janie you take the other and Trisha, since you probably have the most experience as a midwife, you bounce back and forth," ordered Scott.

The three immediately went to work and sent everyone out for the moment to evaluate the patients. Thomas and Stephen joined the rest of the crown on the porch, waiting there anxiously.

After a half an hour, they were readmitted and asked some questions. How long has she been having contractions? Was there any bleeding for the past twenty-four hours? Was there any other pain besides the contractions? Have they hurt themselves in the past three days? Had they done any heavy lifting over the past few weeks? The questions continued. Thomas and Stephen both answered the questions individually and peeked around to see their wives. They had been moved into separate rooms so there could be a little privacy. After answering everything Trisha asked, they were allowed to see their wives and comfort them. Trisha went to both individually. She went into Thomas and Sharon's room first. "Okay, honey. You are really far along on this and I expect you to pop in the next hour or two. I know it's kind of quick but these things happen sometimes. Nothing to worry about though, it will all be over soon."

"I don't want soon! I want it now!" she yelled as Thomas took her hand. She squeezed it with

the power of a hydraulic press, pulling him in close to her.

"I understand, honey. I will be right back," she said, leaving the two plus Janie in the room.

Over Sharon's grunts and groans, Thomas could hear Trisha telling Kristy the same thing she just told Sharon. The babies were only an hour or less away and it would take some time. She replied much the same as Sharon had and then yelled at the next room. "Sharon, bet you I can deliver faster than you can!" she shouted through her teeth.

"Bet you can't, you little tart! I've done this before!" she said and they both started laughing before another contraction caused them to growl in pain again.

And this went on for the better part of forty-five minutes before Sharon said "Oh, God. It's time! It's going to happen right now!"

Janie called for Trisha only to learn Trish already had the head on one of Kristy's babies crowning and was on its way out. "Couldn't these two have had at least an hour apart?" asked Trisha, her and Scott helping the baby along all the while Stephen saying "push, baby, push, it's almost there!"

Janie was busy telling Sharon not to push and Thomas was wisely not saying a word. He wanted to get it over with since his wife was in pain and he wanted it all to stop. "Don't tell me not to push! It's coming right now!" yelled Sharon.

Trisha had finished delivering Kristy's first child, a healthy baby girl, quickly handed it over to Scott and ran into the next room just as Sharon started to crown. "Okay, honey, now push!"

It didn't take much as Thomas Brent Dayfield, the Second came sliding down the birth canal. Trisha helped along a little, but didn't need to help all that much. A quick spank on the bottom and he started crying. Thomas and Sharon both "ohhhed and ahhhed" at the new baby while Trisha handed him off quickly to Janie and ran to the other room, just as Kristy's second was seconds away from heading into a new world.

Janie helped finish up and cut the umbilical cord after everything was out. She cleaned the crying baby and wrapped him up in a soft towel before handing him over to Sharon. "Your baby boy!" she said with a smile as bright as the sun.

Thomas just looked on with a smile as large as the Grand Canyon. Sharon did the same as the pain from childbirth all but disappeared in that moment of first holding your new child. "We made a baby, Sharon! A beautiful baby!" he exclaimed softly, tears in his eyes from happiness.

"I know, sweetie. This is your Daddy," she said softly to the crying infant, who immediately got quiet and opened his eyes for the first time. He shut them back as his eyes weren't ready for the bright lights of the world yet. For the longest time, Thomas would swear he could hear nothing else in the room except the beating of his child's heart. Sharon passed him over to his father who took him as gently as he would a priceless artifact. He just stopped and stared at the creation of

life he had helped bring into this world. "A beautiful baby!" he repeated over and over, tears forming in his eyes and occasionally escaping to run down his cheeks.

Trisha came back into the room and made another announcement. "Well, a set of identical twins, save one tiny difference. Christopher and Christine Garcia are healthy baby boy and girl. Now let's get him weighed and checked quickly."

"That would be Thomas Brent, but we are going to call him Brent since I get yelled at by Sharon all the time and we don't want to confuse him," he said, with the same huge smile he had since he first held his child.

"Okay, Brent, you are weighing in at…eight pounds and seven ounces. Not bad by either of you. Looks healthy and Sharon, no stitches required. It's always easier on the second or third one," said Trisha with a smile.

"There will be NO third one, Thomas Dayfield, Senior! You hear me?" announced Sharon, still smiling as well.

"You never know, baby. But I won't argue with you right now," he said, not looking at her, but at his newborn child.

Sharon heard the rest of the group members milling around in the large dining room, waiting to hear news. They had all heard the cries of the newborn residents and were just as expectant as the fathers were. "Oh, show off our child like I know you want to!" she said with a smile.

He walked out of the room holding the quiet baby in his arms. It was unusual to see a newborn baby not crying, but Thomas wasn't too concerned right then as he could see his child breathing in and out. "My baby boy! Thomas Brent!"

The room erupted in applause as Stephen appeared holding a baby in each arm. "My son and daughter, Christopher and Christine!" he announced as the applause thundered and hooting and yelling was heard. All three babies started to cry and the room quieted down, two distinct groups forming around the two new fathers, staring at the newborn children, ohhhing and ahhhing. Thomas and Stephen gravitated towards each other, both wanting to see how the other's looked. All of the children were still crying so they decided to go back in with the mothers and seek advice.

As soon as they left the dining room and the noise, Brent stopped crying. He gave back his newborn to Sharon and a strange thing happened. Brent opened his eyes again, looked at his mother, then at his father and smiled. Sharon was amazed and started crying. Thomas did the same. They spent several minutes looking and talking to their newborn, even though they knew he couldn't understand them yet. Polite knocks were heard at the doorway and the families of the Ranch stepped in one at a time to see the new family additions to the Ranch more closely. Angel was brought back to her parents and was curious to know what her new brother looked like. Thomas made it a point to remember to spend a little more time with her in the near future since she might get a little jealous of the new addition to their family. Since Michael and

Shannon were already God Parents to Angel, Rick and Michelle were asked to be Brent's and they gratefully accepted. Brent was now sleeping in his Mother's arms, having fed just a few minutes prior. Thomas went next door to congratulate Kristy and Stephen and found their new children were sleeping as well.

"It's going to be a bit easier for Sharon I think," said Kristy. "She has two boobs and only one mouth to feed. This could get a bit tricky for me."

"Your babies are beautiful! Your eyes and Stephen's complexion," said Thomas smiling at the other newborns from the Ranch.

Stephen had jumped next door to see the new Dayfield on the block. Thomas met him in the hallway outside the rooms. Stephen exclaimed "He's beautiful! I'm surprised since you are an old ugly mug! Congratulations!"

"And your children are beautiful as well! To your children, long life and good health!" exclaimed Thomas, apparently loud enough for everyone in the building to hear.

A resounding "Hear, Hear!" returned from everyone in the Center. Even the recon team had returned for the event, halfway running the three miles between their location when they took the radio call and the Conference Center. They weren't allowed in the individual rooms since they were fairly grimy after being on patrol for four days, but managed to peek in and wave at the parents of the newborns. Frank, Dave, Heather and Misty all peeked inside and ohhhing and ahhhing was heard from each of them.

Even the Minister made an appearance at the Ranch that afternoon and said a prayer for the newborn children with their parents. Stephen asked an unusual request. "Sir, I have a problem that you might be able to help out with."

"I couldn't imagine what. What can I do for you?" asked the Minister.

"Well, sir, I want my children Christened. Would you be able to help with that?" asked Stephen.

"My son, you realize that is a Catholic ceremony and I'm a Baptist?" asked the Minister.

"Yes, I do, but you are the only man of God around these parts and it's tradition. I was hoping you would oblige," said Stephen.

"All of you around here are men and women of God, it comes from the heart. I understand what you are saying, though," said the Minister.

"Yes, but you are more of a direct line to Him. Please sir, I want my children to be properly anointed in God's eyes," said Stephen.

"I'm not going to turn down your request, but the Bible does say all children are born innocent and have to make their choice to accept God and Jesus later in their life," said the Minister.

"Yes, I understand, but it's my religion. I was hoping you could do the ceremony," said Stephen.

The Minister thought about it for a moment before thinking of the military chaplains he had dealt with at one point. They had often performed services far outside of their religion even though they didn't agree with the teachings. "Stephen, your children were born unto God but I understand you have your faith. I would be honored to help in any way I can. Give me time to study up on the ceremony and I will get back to you about the time."

Stephen thanked the Minister and went back to his wife. Everyone went back home after a while, all except Thomas and Stephen. While their wives went to sleep after the ordeal, they both stayed awake, staring at their new infants, afraid they might miss something important. Eventually, they both fell asleep sitting in chairs next to their wives and were checked on by Scott, Trisha or Janie. The babies were doing fine and woke up crying, much like they had come into the world. And the initial cries caused great panic, as parents often did, until they realized it was nothing unusual and the babies were just hungry or just crying as babies sometimes did.

The couples were visited frequently throughout the day by the families. Frank and Julie came by in the afternoon to see both the couples. While in the room with Sharon and Thomas, Julie suddenly took a little sick, holding her stomach.

"Is everything okay, Julie?" asked Sharon.

She looked a little pale. "Probably something I ate, I'll be fine."

Frank didn't believe everything was okay and went to grab one of the medical folks. He came back in with Janie, who led Julie to another room and had her lie down. After taking her blood pressure and listening to her breathing, she told Julie to go urinate in a cup and come back with it. Julie looked strangely at her friend, but did as instructed and came back several minutes later, cup in hand. Janie took it after putting on some latex gloves and went into another room. After several minutes she returned and grabbed Frank along the way. She made them both sit down and looked them in the faces. "Frank, Julie, I have some news for you."

"Okay, the suspense is over. What is it?" asked Julie.

"You're pregnant!" said Janie happily.

"Oh, no!" Julie exclaimed looking at her husband. She had a look of horror on her face and it started moving closely to a look of anger. She and Frank had discussed having a child, but decided to hold off until things were a little more stable in the world. It kind of angered her that it happened, since they both agreed to wait. However, it was nothing it be angry at Frank or her unborn child at. It happened and it was just nature's way of telling them it was time.

Frank was a little concerned at the behavior of his wife and looked at her strangely. She eventually smiled at him and grabbed him in a hug around the neck. "I wasn't expecting this, but I guess we have to go along with it!"

The two hugged each other for a long time and Janie quietly slipped out of the room. After a few minutes Frank and Julie asked her to keep it quiet until the group dinner on Thursday when they would announce it to everyone. As George had put it before, the residents made up their own amusement and this was a byproduct of that amusement. Julie and Frank weren't completely thrilled at the prospect of having another child since they hadn't planned on it, but didn't care as long as they had a healthy baby. Deep down inside, Frank had wanted a child of his own and was secretly glad things had turned out the way they had.

Janie on the other hand was quite glad she and Brian could no longer have children. While she loved her children dearly, three was more than enough for her and she had no great desire for a fourth. However, seeing all those babies this morning had stirred her maternal instincts and a small part of her wanted another baby to hold in her arms right after birth. However, she couldn't have any more children so the thought was dismissed and all she could do was be happy with other people's children for a short time.

CHAPTER 39 – JEREMY

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 5 Months, 15 Days
Date/Time: 5 October/1345 Local
Location: The Ranch

The field phone at the Dayfield's clattered and both Sharon and Thomas went to answer it from different parts of the house. Sharon beat Thomas to it by three steps and answered with a simple "Hello." She heard several more voices come on the line and realized it was an all call for everyone at the Ranch. Once all the households had come on the line, she heard George.

"You aren't going to believe this, but it must be our lucky day. A herd of buffalo just came out of the woods and into the field across from the house. There are at least forty adults I counted with more coming out of the woods. Is anyone up for some buffalo steaks?"

A chorus of "Oh Yeahs!" sounded off into the receiver as Sharon handed the phone set to Thomas and explained quickly what the call was about. He put the receiver up to his ear and heard George continue. "Okay, here's the deal then. The first two people to my house with a rifle in the proper caliber get a shot. Oh, and no driving up. Let's see who really wants it that bad. Come to my house on foot and we will see just who is eager. I get one as a 'finder's fee' and I figure two more from the herd would supply us really nice. One thing though, don't bother showing up with anything less than .338 caliber as it would probably just annoy the buffs. With them, the larger, the better. Come and get 'em!" concluded George with a laugh.

Thomas knew luck would be in his favor if he could move fast to beat the other Ranch members. Over the past year, the bears had started coming out of the mountain more and a grizzly had stumbled across the property. It had noticed the children playing and started to attack before the residents had reacted and cured its hunger problems. Although there weren't supposed to be grizzlies in Colorado, the carcass of the bear currently decomposing in a hole was positive proof animals were ranging far out of their traditional zones since the Fall. And since the threat of large animals was around, Thomas had kept a bear capable rifle in the gun safe outside of the vault in the basement. He ran down the staircase and turned on the battery powered lantern and quickly spun the dial to open the safe. Reaching in, he found an AR-15 with a .458 SOCOM upper receiver and two magazines of the large ammunition. After the attack, he had mounted a low power scout scope on the front rail and zeroed it at one hundred meters. He also grabbed a .44 Magnum revolver along with the leather ammo belt and holster.

Thomas ran back upstairs, grabbed a BDU top and gave Sharon a quick kiss before darting out the door for the run to the Taylor's house. He saw Rick running around the roadway; about fifty yards behind him but nobody else had emerged yet. Thomas jogged slower than the pace so Rick could catch up. He had brought his .375 H&H with extra rounds in a slip on stock holder and a revolver in .454 Casul. As Rick caught up, Thomas teased "You think you brought enough of a caliber?"

"I'm surprised you didn't bring your Barrett, but I figure you couldn't carry it that far anyway," said Rick, teasing back. "What's with the little AR popgun anyway?"

"It's a .458 caliber and it probably just as effective as yours is. Bet on it," replied Thomas.

Rick laughed as he was breathing heavily from running. "Did I just hear a challenge? Maybe a friendly bet?"

"How about this? One shot and the first that drops gets both hides. No second shot unless it looks like it might get away wounded. Deal?" asked Thomas.

Rick paused for thought while running before agreeing. "Okay, you have a deal. One shot and the first to go down and not get back up get's to keep both hides, but the other person has to tan them. Still want to make the deal?"

Now Thomas was the one to pause for thought. He knew the .458 had good knockdown power, but could it go toe to toe with the nearly century old, proven .375 H&H? However, Thomas wasn't one to back down from a challenge and he knew no matter who won or lost both the individuals would help the other with the curing of the hide. "Okay, you're on," he answered.

"No cheating with your auto and no making two shots accidentally," said Rick with a laugh.

The two continued jogging the distance towards the Taylors when they heard footsteps behind them coming up fast. It was Stephen with his lever action rifle. His sudden appearance spurred both Thomas and Rick on faster and the trio almost broke out sprinting towards the house. At two hundred yards away from the Taylors, Stephen's gas gave out and he slowed to a trot. Thomas and Rick finished side by side and found a grinning George waiting for them. Behind him, the two could see the herd of now sixty buffalo gently grazing in the field across the road. George was ready to go with an old Winchester Model 70 in .35 Whelen and a Ruger Redhawk in .44 Magnum.

George looked over the two of them before stopping his gaze on Thomas's AR. "I thought I told everyone nothing less than a .338 caliber?"

Thomas again explained it was a .45 caliber weapon and would perform equally or better than the rifles the other two had. He popped the magazine out of the rifle to show George the large rounds seated in the magazine. Just then, both Darren and Stephen showed up.

"I guess we're too late," said Darren dejectedly. He was armed with a custom made Griffin & Howe Magnum Mauser in .416 Rigby. The others looked at the rifle and the large rounds he was feeding into the magazine. He looked at everyone else looking at the rifle and explained. "It's a family heirloom and it took me a few minutes to locate the ammo for it. It's not too big is it?"

"Not at all," said Rick who looked at the rifle longingly. Everyone knew Rick loved unique firearms like that and the bigger the caliber, the better.

George looked over the rifle as well before answering. "And you aren't really too late. We will need you guys for backup in case the herd decides to stampede towards us. Now I know I need to be at two hundred yards or less for optimum penetration from my .35 and I know the .375 is good for that far. How far out can you shoot that whiz bang rifle of yours?" asked George.

"I have it zeroed at one hundred yards and I've never put rounds out of it past that point. One hundred yards give or take since I'm not sure about ballistics past that point," answered Thomas.

George contemplated the distance and figured it would be the minimum safe distance they could shoot without being in immediate danger of a stampede. "Okay, we all take our shots at one hundred yards. Be ready to move out in two minutes."

The small group pulled on the various camouflage jackets and made sure their rifles were loaded and chambered. "Not that I don't trust your rifle, Thomas, but I would feel more comfortable with a more proven caliber backing you up. Darren, you back up Thomas. Stephen, you will back up Rick and me. Go ahead and pick out which buff you want to take before we get going."

Thomas picked out a large bull near the outside of the herd and the other two did the same. They approached from the downwind side, which also was on their left flank. When they reached a point two hundred yards away, the group split up and started walking slower in the tall grass towards their intended targets. When they reached the one hundred yard point, everyone stopped and took aim at the herd. Thomas looked through the sight and found "his" buffalo grazing gently and ignoring the humans so close by. He took a knee and brought the rifle into his shoulder, looking over the buffalo through the low power scope. Thomas didn't know anything about the anatomy of the animal he was currently tracking so he made an educated guess on where the midpoint of the shoulder should be. His right thumb flipped the safety lever to fire gently as not to make too much noise. His finger gently pressed on the trigger, but did not engage it yet. He was preparing to fire when he heard the bark of Rick's .375. He steadied his arms as he heard the report of George's .35 and squeezed the trigger.

The rifle bucked against his shoulder and sent a 350 grain projectile into a point a quarter inch above the point of aim. The shell wrecked the left shoulder of the buffalo before continuing on to the heart and lungs of the large beast. The animal tried to stay up on the wrecked leg before collapsing. Thomas took a quick look and saw George had placed his shot in the same spot with the same results, but Rick was reloading since his buffalo was getting ready to run.

Thomas turned back to his kill and found the buffalo was still trying to stand up to get away. He quickly took aim at the chest area and sent another round into the animal to end its suffering more quickly. The buffalo fell down on its side and stopped struggling to get up. He heard Rick make his second shot and saw the large beast had now gone down for good. Thomas also noticed the entire herd had started running perpendicular away from the hunters. He heard a yell from Stephen and noticed two buffalos had broken off and were angling towards George. Rick had finished off his kill and was rapidly reloading to assist George. Both Thomas and Darren took aim at the nearest buffalo that was charging and fired. George, Rick and Stephen fired at the second one. All five rifles fired but only three rounds connected. One was hit and fell down while the other continued to charge, changing directions towards Rick. The group rapidly

reloaded while Rick pulled out his pistol and engaged the charging animal. The group fired again and hit the animal which fell and came to a rest ten feet in front of Rick. By the time this all happened, the rest of the herd had moved far enough away and weren't a threat anymore.

Thomas and Darren ran towards the rest of their crew to make sure everything was okay. Rick was breathing heavily as if he had just run a marathon. George was grinning like the cat that just ate the canary. Darren was busy rubbing his shoulder as he was not used to the sharp recoil of the large rounds. It was Stephen who broke the silence. "Well, George, if we knew we were going to shoot five anyway, why did we go through the trouble of running to your house?"

The five were silent for a moment before bursting out in laughter since the stress of the moment was now gone. They went over to check their kills finding two of them required pistol shots to complete the job. After it was all done, the group gathered and discussed the skinning of the animals and getting the hides ready to preserve.

"I hope you boys are ready to get messy. Why don't we meet back here in a half an hour to get going," stated George as a suggestion rather than a question.

The group broke off, with four heading back to the Ranch to change clothes and gather what skinning equipment they needed. On the walk back, each told the tale in a different way and teased Rick about his close encounter with the charging beast. Rick changed the conversation to the rifle Darren was carrying and asked about its history.

"It's a family heirloom from my grandfather. He bought it when he still planned to go to Africa on a safari. He gave it to me on my eighteenth birthday, but, honestly, I've only fired it once until today. I only have a limited amount of rounds for it, fifteen to be precise now and I doubt I'll be firing it any time too soon," Darren concluded while rubbing his shoulder again.

"I didn't know you needed rounds for a .416," stated Thomas. "I know for a fact I've got a few boxes in storage. You all know me, I horded rounds and I think I ordered them for the Trading Post, even though I didn't have any rifles chambered in that caliber. You are more than welcome to them if you run low."

"What would I use this huge rifle for out here?" asked Darren.

"Besides buffalo? It would make a good bear gun, at least for the larger ones. It might be a tad large for deer and elk, but I guarantee it would make a one shot stop on them," laughed Stephen.

"And besides, if you don't want it or think you are man enough for that large caliber, I will take it off your hands," added Rick.

Thomas was just as quick. "Speaking of taking things off your hands, just how long do you think it's going to be before you get *both* my buffalo blankets done?"

"Come on now, you aren't going to hold me to that. Besides, did you actually make a one shot stop?" asked Rick.

Darren came to his aid. "He sure did. One shot through the shoulder of the one which counted as a mobility kill. The second shot was to put it out of its misery."

"So you *did* need two shots?" asked Rick.

"No, only one to get him down," stated Thomas. "Two to end the suffering. I think it would be cruel to just let it sit there trying to get up while it was bleeding out. The second shot was just to speed the process up. Don't worry, I saw yours trying to run away. So much for the one shot stop of the vaunted .375 H&H."

"I tried for a heart shot on the first shot figuring it would put it down easier than I expected. A mistake on my part. You aren't really going to hold me to that bet are you?" asked Rick.

"You darn right I am! Do you know how nice it's going to feel curled up in front of the fireplace in my new buffalo blanket when it's all over?" asked Thomas with a laugh, knowing he would never actually take it off Rick's hands.

The hunters arrived back at the Ranch and quickly gathered their skinning items and met back up at the roadway leading into the woods before going back up. They talked and were in high spirits knowing they had taken enough fresh meat to last the Ranch for some time into the future. As they arrived at the Taylor's house, each rolled up their sleeves for what would undoubtedly be a long afternoon ahead of them. But they had help as others from the Ranch came up to assist in the large job. George was the unofficial leader of the work party as he was reading from a book on the best way of skinning the large beasts and being able to keep the hide. They ended up tearing one, but the remaining for came off easy enough.

Several trips had been made by the group to the smokehouse and everyone in the Ranch planned on having buffalo steaks for dinner that night. The carcasses were just about light enough to move at this point and they started to load the smaller ones into the bed of the truck while the larger ones continued to be cut on. Several hours later, the remaining buffalo were loaded into the vehicle and the group returned to the Ranch. The story was told many times over by the group of hunters and the stress of the day wore off eventually. All those involved in the butchering took long showers trying to get the blood and gore off their skin. It wasn't all coming off as only time helps remove blood from the skin after it is stained. The remaining buffalo were put on ice to preserve until the next day so the butchering could continue. It would take forever and a day to get everything ready for preserving, but they knew for the first part of the winter they would have plenty of meat in their diet.

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 5 Months, 16 Days
Date/Time: 6 October/0837 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next day continued the butchering and preserving of the animals taken the day before. The

smokehouse was put into operation preserving some of the steaks and others were cut to manageable size to put into the various freezers. Nothing was wasted from the carcasses including the bones which would make good soups and stews for the members of the groups. During this time, the LP/OP called in a contact, one individual wearing faded and worn MARPAT camouflage and carrying a rifle. The rifle was slung and the individual was just standing in the middle of the killing field the hunters had been in the previous day. The reaction team was called out and took up a position near the Taylor's house in case of trouble. George and Dave met at his house and decided to talk to the individual, who had been standing in the field of the better part of two hours now.

"I wonder if he is alone?" asked George.

"Two hours is a long time and gangs seldom show that kind of patience. Either way, his clothing is Marine as well as his pack, web gear and his rifle looks like an M-16A4. Standard USMC issue all around. If it's a former military gang, like the one we've heard about, we're screwed since this could be a diversion. Otherwise, all our defenses are manned and ready," said Dave.

"Just you and me then, kid. Let's see what he is about," said George, slinging his M1A.

Dave kept his M1A on the three point sling in front of his body, his right hand on the pistol grip. They walked into the field where the young black man was waiting patiently, his rifle slung across his back by a three point sling. A Glock pistol was kept in a coyote brown drop holster on his right side. His hands were kept well away from all his weapons, including the issue M-9 bayonet on his side. It almost appeared he was standing at parade rest waiting for the group to make contact.

"Good afternoon, friend. How can we help you?" asked Dave.

"Good afternoon to you, sir. I would like to trade for some food," said the young man in response, moving his hands in front of him to show the two he was had nothing to hurt them with and was not trying to conceal anything.

"What makes you think we have food to trade?" asked Dave.

The unknown individual smiled. "Because I saw you slaughtering those buffalo yesterday."

"What buffalo?" asked George.

"I watched you do it. I've been observing your ranch now for the better part of three days. You all seem like decent enough people and I just want to trade, sir," said the man with the same smile he had before.

Both George and Dave got chills down their spines when they heard the announcement that they had been observed that long. Neither was sure how to respond, so the man did it for them. "I know you are worried right now, about being watched that long. I'm harmless, I promise, sir."

Again, words did not form in either man's mouth for a moment after the next statement. George finally spoke. "Son, why have you have been watching us that long? Were you planning to steal if we didn't trade?"

"Normally, I might think that was a racist statement, but I know for a fact you have black folks living with you here, so I know that can't be the case. No, I wouldn't steal it, sir. My momma and the Corps taught me better than that," said the man.

"Okay, so you want some food. How much and what do you have for trade?" asked Dave.

The young man paused before answering, almost as if he were contemplating his answer. "As for how much, just for me. As for how long, well that depends on how far my goods to trade will go. As for what to trade, I offer my services, sir."

"We don't know you from Adam, why would we want to invite you to work here?" asked Dave.

"I'm not saying you would, sir. I have a lot of things going for me that can help you all out. But, if you don't want to consider it, I can pay with silver and leave you all alone," he answered. "Also, since you don't know me, I might as well introduce myself. My name is Jeremy Baines."

"Okay, Jeremy. So are you a former Marine?" asked George.

"Hoorah! Dyed in the wool true devil dog, sir. Engineer by trade and on my second enlistment when the attacks happened," answered Jeremy with pride.

"Well, I will tell you something you don't know about me, Jeremy. I like stories and you should tell me your story," ordered George in the form of a request.

"Starting where, sir?" asked Jeremy.

"From the attacks. Why don't we start there and go to the point where I said 'hello.' Let's try that one," said George.

"Sounds good, sir. When the attacks happened, I was on leave out here visiting my sister and brother-in-law in Denver. I immediately tried to report back to Miramar, but with the aircraft being grounded and all, I was told to report to the nearest military base. The nearest one I could find was at Buckley AFB. Basically, orders came down telling Marines on leave to report to the nearest military base and eventually make their way back to their home station when they could. I told my command I was out there and they told me to stick around since there was a detachment being sent to Denver to assist with local law enforcement and setting up FEMA camps. Eventually, I hooked back up with my unit and was helping police Denver."

"With everything going bad, my brother-in-law and sister had a retreat they were going to go to. They had friends they worked with that had a place up in the mountains where they were going to sit it out until things calmed down. I wanted to go, but I wouldn't because it would mean abandoning my unit. Eventually, we started taking more and more casualties until the unit was at

around fifty percent. We were in the really bad part of town and got hit just about daily trying to protect convoys of food and fuel. Anyway, we got tasked to start confiscations in door to door searches. From there, it got really ugly. Half my unit either walked out or was taken out over a three day period since we took major casualties going door to door. People were just not willing to give up their stuff and decided to go out fighting."

"Eventually, my Company Commander started refusing the missions since we were mainly combat-ineffective. We were a company in name, but in reality only about three squads of effectives. We were about to be reinforced and conglomerated with an Army unit, but my Captain and my Lieutenant Colonel, the Battalion Commander, basically told us to tend to our families and released us from further duties. I mean, by that time, the Battalion only had maybe a company and a half of men available including the HHC. Most of everyone was kind of at a loss at what to do, but started heading to whatever they called home."

"My best friend and I were able to scrape together some supplies, grabbed a vehicle and headed for the retreat where my sister was. They welcomed us in with open arms and immediately put us on security duty. Every Marine is taught to stand a guard post from day one and we didn't argue with the assignment. Everything went well for a while and we were raising crops and had enough food to get us by. I mean, sure there were problems, but who didn't have problems right after the Fall? Anyway, things were doing okay and we were able to beat back the attacks by gangs against the retreat. Things seemed to be starting to return to normal when the retreat was approached by a gang that offered to pull security in exchange for food. The owner of the retreat turned them down, but offered to barter and trade for food otherwise. The gang was pretty mad about that and left in a storm."

"Things were pretty tense for a week after that, since we half expected an attack. We doubled the guard force and even did some short range patrolling. When it looked like they weren't coming back, the guard force was reduced back to normal and folks started the work details again. The gang hit us at nine o'clock in the morning when we weren't expecting it. A lot of the people were away from the retreat and didn't have all their weapons or ammo with them. The gang was able to take the houses and trailers and dug in, waiting for a fight."

"We took too long range sniping at them and it seemed to work for the first hour. They sent everyone except a few guards after us. Some of the residents were able to flee, but most couldn't get away quick enough were shot down in the back as they ran. My friend and I were lucky since we still had our field packs from getting ready to go out on a three day patrol. We had enough food to last us for a while, so that wasn't a problem. However, we were trying to cover the retreat members as they ran away. The gang used vehicles to cut them off and slaughtered them. We tried to run the other way, but they were encircling us. My friend and I were at one of the flanks trying to take as many out to create a hole if possible. Eventually he got hit in both the legs and couldn't move. I tried to carry him, but he pushed me away and told me to run since he would cover me and take a few more of those bastards with him before they got him. I heard him firing for another five minutes before they finally got him."

"After they finished their slaughter of the unarmed people, they took the women back to the retreat and, well, you can probably figure out what happened. I managed to sneak back within

sight of the retreat and get into some of the supply buildings and my old room. I got as much food, ammo and clothing as I could possibly carry and even took another bag and left it in a hidden place outside the retreat. After which, I started observing the retreat, hoping to rescue my sister, who I saw being slapped around. The next morning, they brought her out as well as the other females living there. They put my sister in the middle of the group and beat her and raped her in front of everyone. Eventually, she died when they cut her throat as an example to the rest of the women. From that point on, anger burned in my brain as I could hear the rest of the women being abused and raped by the gang. I starting sniping at them, trying to take down their numbers so I could, well, I really didn't have a plan after that. It was probably too early for that sort of thing and they came after me with a vengeance. I managed to evade their patrols and left the retreat, going south looking for somewhere else to go."

"I heard stories of a ranch somewhere near here where the residents were good people and looked after their neighbors. I hoped to find this place and try to join since, from what I've heard, they take care of their own and don't bother anyone unless they have it coming to them. I had also heard they help their neighbors when they have problems with gangs or other troublemakers. I met a preacher somewhat close to here and he said the group existed, but wouldn't elaborate further. He didn't tell me a location or anything else, but I figured I would eventually find them. I started looking around and guessed the ranch was somewhat close to him since it was within both walking and driving distance. I also had a gut feeling that it would have its own running water source, probably the creek I had seen at one point, or at least that's what I would have if I set up a retreat. I played the hunch, traded for some food with him and set off. I followed the creek nearby and found a small group of cabins near a marsh. I followed one of the residents to the main ranch here and saw the buildings and farm fields. I eventually followed one person and found the location of your LP/OP. I observed the area for a few days to see if you went out to stage raids or anything. I saw your recon patrols setting off once and they almost got me on the southeast side of your place here. They were good, very good and very quiet. Other than that, I never saw anything even remotely hostile, so I figured this had to be the group I'd heard so much about."

"Yesterday, I saw you hunting the buffalos and butchering them afterwards. I figured it would be the best time to make contact, so I decided to wait until today to make myself known and figured I would stand in full view of the LP/OP," concluded Jeremy.

"That's some story, Marine. It actually leaves a few more questions than it does answers. What did you do before the Fall and joining the Corps?" asked George.

"Honestly, sir, I was heading down the wrong path when my father made the choice for me. I started getting into gangs a little and he took me to the recruiter's office the first time I showed up at home wearing gang colors. Told me it would straighten me out and give me a better life than the one I was choosing. My old man was a Marine back in his day, so I guess it was kind of normal for him to think that. I didn't argue since before I left for Basic, one of my friends was killed in a drive by. It sobered me up and I started Basic focusing my life entirely on becoming the best Marine I could. They gave me another life and I wasn't going to waste any of it" answered Jeremy.

“What did you do for the Corps?” asked Dave.

“I wanted to be infantry, but I guess the Corps had other plans for me. I was an engineer, I built things. I had cross trained into just about every area I could in my first enlistment. Structures, roads, plumbing, electric, heavy equipment, you name it, I can do it. I still wanted to be on the cutting edge and had just passed my test and been accepted to Force Recon when the attacks happened,” answered Jeremy.

“And your parents? Why not go back home?” asked George.

Jeremy’s eyes got cold for a moment. “Sir, my parents were in Philadelphia when it was hit. They died in the blast. I don’t have a home anymore. I had a home for a while at the retreat, but now that’s gone too.”

“What did your parents do for a living?” asked George.

“My father was a general handyman and mechanic, all sorts of construction and things. There wasn’t anything on the planet he couldn’t build or fix. He worked two jobs, construction and auto mechanic. My mother worked part time at a child care center,” answered Jeremy.

Dave and George shared a look before each mutually deciding to discuss the matter in private. The Ranch residents over the past year had become so close they could just about read each other’s minds from facial expressions. “Jeremy, you can come to my house and have a good meal while we discuss your request.”

“Sir, I’ve got food with me and I wouldn’t want to be a burden. If it’s just the same to you, I can go to that tree line and have myself something there instead,” said Jeremy.

“It isn't just the same to me; I’m offering you a warm seat and a hot meal. Come with us and let me feed you,” said George.

Jeremy knew better to argue with the older man in front of him. He nodded his assent and handed over his weapons without being asked. Dave took the rifle and web gear from him and slung them over his back. The rifle was fairly used, but well maintained. The pistol was in a little better shape. One thing they immediately noticed was while everything Jeremy owned might have looked well worn, it was properly maintained. His uniform had sewing patches where he had damaged it at some point and fixed it himself. It seemed the Marines had enforced the attention to detail in this young man during his term of service. George put on some leftover elk stew and warmed up some bread for Jeremy. The three ate lunch, mainly passing the time with small talk about little things that were in no, way, shape or form about the Ranch. He and Dave decided to enjoy the warm day on the porch while they discussed the situation and Jeremy could use the study to relax in. George had an alternative motive in mind, but didn’t tell Dave or Jeremy that.

“So what do you think?” asked George.

Dave paused to think about his response. “Honestly, living space is at a premium right now. But it wouldn’t hurt to have another hand for security around here, after group approval of course.”

“And his story?” asked George.

“Definitely brings up a lot of questions about certain things. Especially about this gang. He didn’t give us a timeline of how long he’s been on his own, or total numbers in that gang. We definitely should get more information out of him on that point,” answered Dave.

“I was thinking the same thing. He seems like a decent kid and being a Marine is good on anyone’s resume. He could be lying about the whole thing, but I doubt it. The responses weren’t canned enough. I could probe further into his story, but I know for a fact there were Marine units in Denver during the Fall. At the very least we need to have him stick around for a few days for a debriefing about that gang and whatever else he knows,” said George.

“Where would we put him up at? Like I said, living space it at a premium,” inquired Dave.

“I think with Ryan, he won’t mind. He will probably be glad to have someone new to talk to. The poor kid will probably run away after a few hours of Ryan’s stories,” George laughed.

Dave laughed in return while George picked up the M-16A4 to inspect it. The ACOG on the top rail was battered and the aluminum shined in several spots, but was functional otherwise. He broke open the weapon on the front pivot point and pulled the bolt carrier group and charging handle. Looking down the barrel, it was as shiny as the day it had left the factory. The bolt carrier was properly oiled and showed no traces of carbon build up. While the exterior was looking a little worn, George knew the interior mechanisms were in perfect working order. He put the rifle back together and set it back down. The ammunition in the web gear was a mix of military and some commercial loads. All the magazines seemed in working order as well.

Dave had taken the liberty of taking apart the Glock pistol. While the outside showed a little wear, the insides were much like the rifle, clean and properly oiled. Dave pulled out the bayonet and took a look, finding the knife had a razor edge. He and George discussed this matter a little.

“Well, he knows how to maintain his weapons,” said Dave.

“Another lesson probably enforced from the Corps. How many gang members do you know of that take the time to do a proper cleaning job on their weapons?” asked George.

“True and it’s almost a point of pride with him. I bet he was a recruiting poster Marine in his time,” stated Dave.

“Probably so, but we can’t be so sure until we talk further. On the outside, he would be a good addition to our group. It’s the inside that bothers me,” said George.

“What do you mean?” asked Dave.

“Nothing really, I mean, we should be careful either way. I guess I’m naturally suspicious by nature and try and look at every angle. There probably isn’t anything there, just me being me,” said George.

“Hairs on the back of your neck standing up?” asked Dave.

“Only since the twentieth of April last year,” said George with a chuckle. “I tell you what we could do. We can pay our minister friend a social call and get his take on this. He’s probably a better judge of character than all of us put together.”

“That sounds like a plan. What do you want to do with him in the meantime?” asked Dave.

“Let him go help with the butchering. If he wants to be a part of the group so bad, let him get a little messy and see what happens then,” said George with an evil smile.

As they returned into the house, they saw Jeremy wide eyed looking at the various citations and awards on George’s “I love me” wall. Jeremy turned at looked at George almost like he had just seen a Superhero. “Sir, you were in the Special Forces?”

“I was when I was active duty,” said George. “10th Group ODAs and Group Staff.”

“Sir, may I shake your hand? You guys, along with Force Recon and the SEALS, are the best of the best. It’s my privilege sir!” said Jeremy in awe. George shook the young man’s hand and informed him of going to work on the Ranch that day.

“Does this mean I can join your group?” asked Jeremy.

“It’s not that simple. We have to check on you first and have a trial period. Then our group votes you in if we think you are good enough. But first things first, you have to prove you are willing to do anything we ask,” said Dave.

“Sir, whatever I have to do, I’ll do it,” said Jeremy with determination.

Dave and George smiled at the comment and wondered if he would be feeling the same way around five o’clock. They called for the alert team to escort him to the main Ranch area with instructions to put him to work in the smokehouse and butcher shed. They wanted to see how the young man reacted to the bloody work before putting him into a job that would require his talents. After dropping him off, Dave and George took a ride over to the Minister’s house. They found him working in his yard, attacking some tall weeds with an old sickle. He smiled as the truck pulled up to the house and parked next to his own vehicle that didn’t run anymore.

“I figured you all would be by soon to pay me a social call. How are my friends doing?” asked the Minister.

“Pretty fair, and how about yourself?” asked George.

"Ahhh, you know. I'm too old for this sort of hard work, but it helps to pass the time," answered the Minister.

George and Dave shook the man's hand as they went to the porch to sit for a spell. They caught up with each other until George brought up the point of why they were there. George wasn't surprised when the Minister stated he knew who the individual was.

"You already know him?" asked George.

"Sure sounds like him. Black kid, about six foot or so, strong as an ox, smart, smiles a lot?" asked the Minister.

"That sounds like it would be the one," said Dave.

"Really nice kid. Spent about a week here with me, doing odd jobs. Wouldn't let me work at all, you know? He said if I was here feeding him, the least he could do was tend to things around the place. Tilled the garden under, cut the weeds, cleaned the coops, did about a thousand little jobs around here. Some stuff I asked for, others he took upon himself. I spent a lot of time talking with him and found him to be of good morals and a proper upbringing," said the Minister.

"You know our group pretty well, do you think he would fit in there?" asked George.

"He seems like the kind of person you all would actively seek for your group. I got to know him pretty well and helped him a little through the loss of his sister. I will tell you this though, there is a fire burning inside of him that cannot be dealt with easily. He harbors a lot of anger and hatred for gangs and the like. However, you can be sure of one thing, he is not a gang member himself," said the Minister.

"How can you know for sure?" asked Dave.

The Minister smiled at him before responding. "I've been around the block a few times, young man, I can tell."

Dave laughed at his own question. "I'm sorry to doubt you, sir. Won't happen again."

"Another thing is certain though; he was very interested in your group. Kept asking me about it the first few days he was here. I told him you all existed and that it wasn't just tall tales created by the neighbors, but not where you all were at or anything else. After a week, he said he was going to look for you in hopes of joining your group," said the Minister.

"He was smart enough to find us and observe us for a few days. We have him helping with the slaughter of our buffalo now. Speaking of which, when we get it all ready, we will bring you some," said George.

"Was it that herd that moved through here a few days ago?" asked the Minister.

"Probably was. We took five of them," said George.

"That should hold you over for a while. Now I can't make decisions for your group, but you are obviously here to get my opinion," said the Minster. "And in my opinion, the least you can do is offer this young man a place to call home. He's been through a lot and having him in your group can help both of you. Deep down inside, all he wants is a family and a place to call home. He has neither right now and is looking for guidance."

Before George or Dave could respond, the Minister continued. "Do you know the Japanese Samurai called Ronin? You know, the Samurai that have lost their master and will do anything to seek out another. They often become fanatical in their devotion to whoever takes them in, doing anything requested, even evil things just to please their new master. He is little different than those warriors. He is looking for guidance and a place in the world. Most of all, he is looking for someone to serve and call a family. Your group is a fairly large family, although not biological, but that doesn't matter in this case. You and your group have high morals and are overall outstanding examples of good character. Adopt him or whatever you need to do before the hatred gets him killed. You can show him a pathway to peace and a place to call his own. He has a good heart; I will put my reputation on it," concluded the Minster.

"Your endorsement goes a long way with us, especially in light of the help you have given our group and the help you did with Julie and Amy after they came to the Ranch. I think we will look very favorably on his request to join," said George.

"I think this young man had something very special inside of him to offer the world. You know I don't often bring religion into our talks, but God has something planned for that young man. I don't know what or why I even know that, but it's a feeling I get," said the Minister.

"Who knows? Again, I think we will put him up for the thirty day trial period. We will have him stay with Ryan. He's a pretty good judge of character too," said George.

"That or the poor young man's ear will fall off from being talked to. Ryan could talk a corpse back to life," laughed the Minister.

The small group laughed before moving on to other subjects. After an hour of talking, they politely dismissed themselves and promised to return with some of the buffalo meat they were butchering. On the drive back, George and Dave talked further on the subject and found they would talk to the community leader, currently Janet, about the situation and advise her of the Minister's endorsement.

After they arrived they made contact with the group finishing the butchering of the buffalo and preparing it for storage. The smoke house was fully operational and Dave and George could smell the green wood fire as soon as they stepped out of the truck. Jeremy was outside, looking a little green around the gills. His ever constant smile was gone and he gave the two a strange look as they passed by. They entered the butcher area and found Thomas and Janet inside finishing packing some of the steaks.

"George, you are a dirty, lowdown, horrid old man, you know that?" said Janet as a greeting.

He looked surprised. "What did I do?"

"Filling that poor young man up on some of your stew before sending him to the slaughter house. You should have known better," she said with a frown.

George had remembered Jeremy had eaten quite a bit for lunch, but never gave it much thought before sending him to help out. "It was an honest mistake, I promise! I forgot he had just eaten," said George, trying not to laugh.

"Yeah, right. Anyway, if you are here to tell me how the meeting went, I'm all ears, just as soon as you mop this up," she said as she handed him over a mop and bucket. Several piles of vomit were on the floor, and from the looks of it, it was leftover elk stew.

George chuckled again and grabbed the mop, going to work immediately. Dave pitched in to help since he was present during lunch and had offered the young man seconds. "Anyway, I can work and talk at the same time. Are you curious?"

"I don't know about Janet, but I am. I think she is a little miffed at you for the moment George," said Thomas with a smile.

"Miffed? Is that a polite way of saying I'm pissed that you would send a potential new member to do one of the worst details we have on his first day?" asked Janet.

"Okay, Janet. We get the point. George and I made a mistake and we will apologize for it. Let it go," said Dave with a tone.

She partially relented by going outside to check on Jeremy again. While she was gone, Dave gave the gist of the conversation with the Minister. "Long story short, the Minister thinks he is a pretty good kid and says we need to take him in to control his anger. He says he is a hard worker and has good morals."

"Well, that's a good thing to hear, but what about the anger part?" asked Thomas.

Dave and George told the story about his parents in Philadelphia, his sister at the retreat and about how the Minister knew the anger still burned inside of him. "Basically, in a nutshell, he needs guidance, positive role models in his life, a family and a place to live. I know it kind of sounds like a sob story, but he is exactly the kind of person who we can help. At one point I was worried about the comment about us being racist since it was almost like a chip on his shoulder," said Dave.

"You think he is worth the risk?" asked Thomas.

"I do, and I think we should give him a shot. I mean seriously, how much more could this young man take before he snaps? I've seen it before, and it's not a pretty sight. Those kinds of people

get violent and become a threat to almost everyone," said George. "I mean, for one, we are fairly secure here and we promote a family environment. Thomas, even your daughter calls me Uncle George and him Uncle Dave. How much more of a family environment can we be? This is a perfect place for him to be around a 'family' for lack of a better term. We have to help this young man."

"I never disagreed with you, George. I just asked if you considered him to be a possible risk," said Thomas in an even voice, surprised George was so passionate about the subject.

"No, it's not you and I'm sorry if I was about to rant. I just remember a young man much like him in the Balkans. Nice young kid, probably not much older than he is. He suffered serious losses in his family, much like Jeremy. Sisters and little brother were killed in a bombing raid, parents killed off in the ethnic violence. Hometown destroyed and all his friends killed. Almost verbatim the same story, except this kid snapped before we could help him. He became a sniper for the resistance, but the problem was, he got buck fever any time anyone got in his rifle scope. Anyone with a weapon was automatically a target for him. I won't even try to imagine his mental state, but there was rage in his soul."

"Anyway, he started targeting the IFOR troops and my team got the mission to 'take care of the problem' as my commander told us. We tracked him down for several days before finally being able to get his location confirmed and stage a raid. We wanted to take him alive, but he didn't give us the opportunity. As my team made entry, he pointed his rifle at the point man and I took the shot. I still have nightmares about what I did since I initially found him alone in the village to start with and took him under my wing. It was my team that provided him training in sniper tactics and survival methods. We had to pull the support for him in compliance with the Dayton Accords and that's when he went rogue. I mean, we taught him everything he knew and then just cut him loose. He had nobody in the world left and even his American friends had pulled the rug out from underneath him as well. He was alone, scared and was going to seek revenge on anyone he ever thought had done him wrong."

"I see a lot of that young Bosnian in Jeremy. This is my chance to make it right. I will make his case in front of the group if I have to and I can give him a spare bedroom if I need to. We can't let Jeremy back into the world without helping him vent some of his anger first," George said.

George was one of your typical veterans that had seen the elephant. He had experienced combat first hand and lived to tell the tale. However, unlike a lot of wannabe military types, he never bragged about it and almost never brought it up. Often he would tell funny stories about the men he served with or the places he had been, but never about the combat he had experienced. George never talked about the killing that he had partaken in on the battlefields and never before had mentioned taking another person's life. For him to bring it up now meant this was a very passionate subject for him.

Both Thomas and Dave were silent at the long speech given by George. He continued to mop in silence after he was done, practically ignoring the two others in the slaughter house. Dave and Thomas went outside to find Janet and Jeremy. He was looking a little better now that he had an empty stomach and fresh air. Dave immediately moved to apologize to him. "Jeremy, I'm sorry

for what we did on your first day. We didn't even think about what we were doing until after it happened. Please accept my apology."

Jeremy looked up at Dave and gave a half smile. "It's okay, sir. I was never exposed to that sort of thing before. At the retreat, others did the butchering. I managed to avoid that duty while I was there."

"Well, for the first time, you didn't do bad. You lasted an hour longer than I did," said Thomas.

"But sir, I was only in there an hour and fifteen minutes," said Jeremy.

"Exactly," said Thomas with a laugh.

Everyone laughed at the attempt to lighten the mood and Dave took Janet off to the side to discuss the issue with her. He explained the situation with the Minister and how passionate George was about the subject. She explained although he had thrown up, he still refused to take a break until Thomas ordered him out. "He was about to refuse, but knew that he needed to set the example he can take orders from us if needed."

Janet decided on the spot to take Jeremy in and provide him with shelter until they could discuss it at the Thursday meeting. She left to talk to Ryan about him moving into one of the empty bedrooms for the time being. The group hadn't really taken any people into the Ranch with the exception of Greg, Julie and her child and of course the additions right after the attacks. Maybe there was a problem of the group setting their standards too high. But the other problem was space. Either way, the group knew they could get building materials from the storage complex near the distribution center. But again, another problem was transporting them from there to here. While the group had several trucks for transportation, they did not have the large scale means to move the items needed. Honestly, they had never really tried, feeling more comfortable being with friends than with unknowns.

Jeremy was moved in that afternoon with Ryan, who immediately took the young man under his wing. He had some of his own clothing, but was taken down to the supply sheds to gather some new items and toiletries. He enjoyed his first shower that evening in a long time and was invited to dinner with the Lawsons. He was quiet throughout dinner, just asking simple questions here and there about the Ranch and its residents. They were guarded with their responses, since this person was new and didn't need to know every detail so quickly about them. After dinner, the Lawsons were joined by the Parsons who had come by for a prearranged social call. They all sat on the front porch of the rapidly cooling air to take in the nice weather before moving into the living room. During the conversation, Jeremy politely excused himself to use the bathroom.

"Well, what do you two think?" asked Dave.

Michael paused before answering. "On the surface, he seems pretty harmless. I don't know about the rest of you, but since the Fall, I guess I've become distrustful of just about everyone except those around me. But from what I've heard so far, it seems like he will be okay."

“He seems to be okay in my book,” said Shannon. “I’m also kind of distrustful of anyone we don’t know, but I think we can start opening our arms a little.”

“One thing had me worried that you folks can help out with,” said Dave.

“Sure, what do you need?” asked Michael.

“He almost called George and me racist after we first met him since we asked if he would steal from us if we didn’t trade to him. He took major offense since he thought we were talking about him being black. It wasn’t that, but we know everyone has been tempted to steal from us if they are hungry,” explained Dave.

“Kind of like wearing it as a chip on his shoulder?” asked Michael.

“It seemed that way, but I’m thinking you could help in the department of convincing him we aren’t the least bit racist,” said Dave.

“Yeah, you folks surely are racist and all. Making a poor black man and his family slave away in the fields before the harvest and only giving us a little in return. And giving us this little shanty to live in only compounded matters. If it wasn’t for poor Shannon slogging water from nearby, I think we would die of thirst,” said Michael with a laugh, referring to the time their cabin had been without water for a few days due to a failure in the pressure pump and they had been forced to rely on jugged water from Frank and Julie next door until the problem was fixed.

“So you will help?” asked Renee.

“Oh, certainly. Give me a few days and I will teach him the error of his thinking,” said Michael.

The entire group moved back inside the cabin where they continued to talk into the evening. Finally, the Lawson children started getting sleepy, especially after being doted on by Michael and Shannon. Jeremy was a little standoffish with the children and this worried Dave and Renee. Towards the end of the evening, Dave casually mentioned this and was rewarded with an explanation.

“Sir, honestly, I’m kind of a stranger around here. Most folks don’t take too kindly to strangers playing with their kids. I love children and God willing, want some of my own one day. I would be having the time of my life rolling around on the floor with them, but I wasn’t sure how you would take it,” he said.

“Jeremy, one of the things that will help us trust you more is if you start to feel more comfortable around us. Trust me, we will let you know if there are lines you shouldn’t cross,” said Renee.

Jeremy made a mental note and reminded himself for the thousandth time these people were not like the members of his former retreat. While he and his sister’s family were welcomed, they were never fully trusted due to their race. Jeremy could scarcely blame them since quite a few raids had come from the former gangs of Denver and a lot of them had been minorities.

However, quite a few of the raids had also come from white people and he had attempted to fit in as best as he could. The last group he had stayed with had welcomed the minorities, but had made them feel, well, different, apart and not fully integrated into their group. He figured these people here were little different since they only had one black family and one Hispanic working for them. However, they didn't seem to treat them any different. Jeremy promised he would act more like himself in the future and asked about the daily duties he would need to perform in the morning. They informed him it was Thursday, the day for families to get caught up around the house and suggested he help out Ryan with whatever housekeeping chores he did normally. If Ryan had no further duties, he was free to help out wherever or see the Ranch with a guide.

Everyone said their goodbyes and departed, Jeremy walking with Shannon and Michael. "So, what do you think?" asked Shannon.

"This place is pretty amazing. I heard about it a long time ago at my last retreat and they had plans for making contact with you, but gasoline and transportation was an issue. So far, the stories are right," he said.

"What stories?" asked Michael.

"That this group is a pretty fair bunch but very guarded. They tend to turn away most people and were only looking for a doctor and some other skills. For the most part, they weren't looking for any more security since they were mostly former military. I decided to take the chance on trying to join up since I didn't really have anywhere else to go," he replied.

"Well, we are guarded, but very fair. We've given out countless amounts of food and water to passing groups and have aided several families in the past. But one of the biggest reasons we haven't been taking people in is because we just don't have the living space," said Shannon.

"I could help with that of course since I did construction in the Corps. However, finding building materials might be a problem. Either way, we could set up concrete pads for trailers if we had enough concrete," said Jeremy.

"That can be brought up at the group meeting tomorrow night after the dinner. One other thing though…" said Michael as his voice trailed off.

"Yes, sir?" asked Jeremy.

"George thought you might have a racial chip on your shoulder since you almost accused us of being racist after you first met us," said Michael.

"Sir, I was being a little guarded. I can't blame people for being slightly racist these days, especially since a lot of the gangs are roaming around looking to loot, kill and steal everything in sight. Here I am, a black face that nobody knows showing up at your doorstep with his hand out. I wanted to see their reactions," said Jeremy.

"That was a poor decision then, Jeremy. These people around here aren't the slightly bit racist.

We were chosen for the group, not because they wanted a token black family, but because Michael and I were smart enough to prepare for emergencies. We are both hard workers and we have been rewarded by having a place to live, food to eat and safety for us both. These people around here are color blind as far as we are concerned," said Shannon.

Michael immediately continued. "I haven't been a house boy since I've been here either. And for sure, it hasn't been 'yessuh, masstuh, I go see to da fields, masstuh' for either of us. And neither of us has become an Aunt or Uncle Tom since we've been here. Both Shannon and I have taken our turn at being the community leader and our opinions have been respected the whole time we've been here. I mean, we are the God Parents for the Dayfield's daughter for crying out loud. We both remember we are proud black folks and keep our heritage, but neither have we forgotten that we have to work together to get through this, no matter what race."

Jeremy was silent, thinking he had misjudged the people living here. "I figured that, but I wasn't sure after Mister Taylor accused me of wanting to steal from his house."

"That was a fairly bad choice, Jeremy. George has had to chase plenty of white folks off as well from the property, actually more white people than anything else. Also, from what I hear, George didn't accuse you of wanting to steal, but simply asked if you were planning on it if he didn't want to trade," said Shannon.

"I suppose I jumped the gun a little. One other question, how do the folks around here explain to their kids about you?" asked Jeremy.

"Nobody's kids have even made the slightest mention about us being black beyond the normal children's curiosity that we don't look like the others. Mostly, the parents take care of the curiosity by saying 'they aren't different in any way,' period. Since Michael and I can't have children, we have kind of adopted the other's kids. We love them all and I think they see it as a treat to come to Uncle Michael and Aunt Shannon's house to stay. One thing for sure, we have never heard the word 'nigger' used by anyone around here," said Shannon.

"I guess I kind of came here thinking it wasn't going to be different," said Jeremy as he briefly explained the situation at his last retreat. "So you can see how I might think this place was any different since I only saw one Hispanic face and one black family."

"No, I don't see that at all. Stephen, the Hispanic guy, and his wife were chosen because they worked with the others before the Fall. The group looked for hard workers, brains and those they knew would have their backs when the crap hit the fan. Actually, they didn't even know I was into the preparedness thing until after they talked to me. They only knew I was smart, hard working and loyal. They know I have their back when it comes down to it," said Michael.

"Maybe I made a mistake in prejudging these folks before I got to know them," said Jeremy.

"Not these folks, Jeremy, you should have said 'you folks,' meaning all of us. When it comes down to it, we won't take your side automatically just because you are a black man. If you are wrong, you are wrong, no matter what race. I've been called out because I've been wrong, but

never because of my race. We will never polarize along racial lines here. Many people have done that for several decades and it only serves the purpose to keep us apart. We've managed to survive up here by banding together to get through this crisis. If I was to take a Jackson approach, we would have failed a long time ago and been sent out. But since we helped each other through the Fall, we've been able to stay and still be proud and black. Oh, from time to time I make the occasional black man comment, but everyone here knows it's meant in jest and nothing more. And never, and I mean *never* has it been said back to me," said Michael.

Jeremy was silent as he thought about the revelation that had been given to him by people of his same race. He felt more fortunate now to have been somewhat accepted into the group and vowed to do whatever he needed to do to become a full time member of the group here. The Parsons dropped him off at Ryan's house and made their way back home, briefly discussing the young man and whether or not he would fit in at the Ranch. They decided to keep an open mind to the idea and help him along the way. The next day, Jeremy helped out Ryan and was given a tour of the Ranch. He looked bug eyed at the setup and commented constantly on how well off they residents were. At the meeting that night, Janet made her case for Jeremy with occasional injects from George. As expected, the issue of living space came up.

"I know we are running short on it, where is he going to be put up at?" asked Darren.

Ryan spoke up. "In my place for now, but a larger problem. We have plenty of land that would be good for new homes and have been turning away people because we don't have the space. I think we've been too picky in sending people away. We all know farming by now and security as well. However, I think it would be wise to start thinking of building new structures to house additional people and start having them get into set jobs. Farming full time or security full time or whatever their specialty is. Each time we take one person away for one duty, the other suffers. We can support additional people out here very easily, why don't we give it a try?"

"Let's talk about that in a moment after we vote on Jeremy. It's decided then, he can stay with you if he passes the vote," said Janet.

The vote came to a head and the overwhelming majority voted to have him stay for the thirty day trial period. The entire group realized they had been fairly picky about who stayed and who went and realized sometimes it was better to have people set in one job rather than trying to wear several hats. So they decided to take a slight chance on Jeremy and assign him to security duties after his thirty day evaluation was up. He was brought back in and informed of the fact. He thanked the group as a whole and went around the room shaking everyone's hands in grateful appreciation. The issue of space came up again and Jeremy spoke up.

"I learned a lot from the Corps in the engineering department and can help build anything you want out here. Materials are the issue as well as some equipment, but if we can locate them, we will be good to go," he said.

"Materials aren't the issue, it's the labor that's the problem," said Sharon as she explained it to Jeremy before speaking to the group. "It takes time to get everything built. We might have to go see our 'friend' to see what he might be able to come up with."

Everyone except Jeremy knew Sharon was talking about Smoke. They wanted to conceal his location and identity until Jeremy became a full member of the group, not because they didn't trust him, but due to the fact keeping Smoke on a low profile kept him safe from all. Jeremy might let it slip at some point about the existence of Smoke and inadvertently put him in danger. In time, they would brief him about the man who had helped the Ranch on numerous occasions and had more to offer to them than they did to him.

They agreed to a trip to see Smoke soon and gather some additional supplies for the Ranch. For sure, Sharon would go out with them to evaluate what was in the construction yard. It was her first trip to the yard and she was excited about not only going to see what was available, she had not been off the Ranch since the last trip to her house to gather her personal items.

"So, now that we have decided to start building more housing units, how are we going to go about getting more people?" asked Renee.

The group thought about it for a moment before Dave answered from his wife's side. "Well, we came up with criteria a long time ago about people we would like to see join. I'm sure the notes are around here somewhere. Why don't we look for those same people and just expand to the additional skills we might need. I.E. farmers, mechanics, full time security, carpenters, electricians, so on and so forth."

Everyone decided to give the matter some thought, especially the issue of how they might decide to determine if someone was worthy of living on the Ranch. They agreed to bring their suggestions to the next meeting.

George made the next surprise announcement. "I think most of you already know my daughter and Stuart have been seeing each other on a somewhat regular basis. Somehow it escaped me, but they have been dating for some time now. Stuart visited me a couple of nights ago and got my permission to ask my daughter to marry him. I had an attack of good will and gave my permission for him to ask my baby to marry him. He was a bit nervous, especially since I was cleaning my pistol at the time, but finally bucked up and asked. After several hours of begging and pleading, she finally agreed. We have another wedding to plan out and we *have* to get more cabins built since newlyweds in my house might cause a little trouble."

The entire group congratulated Misty and an embarrassed Stu. When asked if they had set a date, they stated they hadn't and were waiting to determine when new housing could be built. They moved on to other business and settled some other old business before breaking for the night. All in all, it was s short meeting and the group didn't have much to discuss. The life around the Ranch had become somewhat normal, even in the fact there weren't as many raids as there had been in the past six months. It seemed everyone was slipping into a pattern of normalcy and things were on the up all around.

Over the next two weeks, Jeremy performed better than everyone's expectations, catching on very quickly on his duties and starting to outperform even the most experienced Ranch member. One thing they quickly learned he was a fitness buff and even gave Michael a run for his money

in physical performance. It was almost every day the two were seen silently competing while running the large oval road around the cabins and houses. More often than not, it was a tie, but each man strove to outdo the other in a friendly way. Michael and George had officially taken Jeremy under their wings and attempted to promote the best environment they could for him.

Jeremy was becoming more and more comfortable with the Ranch residents and the way they lived. He started to see the residents had become a large family and that nobody treated him any different because of his skin color. He saw Michael and Shannon were equals in the group and attempted to pattern himself after their conduct. He refocused himself on learning to adapt to the family here and gaining their approval all while slowly adopting the various residents as his family. He had to put up with the "dumb Marine" jokes from time to time to which he responded with the inter-service rivalry of the "Air Force high society pukes." And although Marines often looked down on the Air Force as being an inferior service, he had seen Darren and Thomas and their respective teams operating in training and found they were in a higher state of preparedness than any Marine unit he had ever seen. He was quickly becoming attached to the Ranch and the promise of a new life here.

CHAPTER 40 – MIDNIGHT RUN

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 6 Months, 7 Days
Date/Time: 27 October/0021 Local
Location: The Ranch

The chatter of the field phones ringing in everyone's residences woke the residents. Ashley, who was "on loan" to learn the communications setup, spoke to the group as they all answered. "Status check on all homes starting with Thomas and ending with Ryan. Sound off."

Thomas spoke in, followed by the remaining cabins and ending the clockwise circle around the Ranch with Ryan. "Stand by for SITREP", she spoke as she prepared to relay the information.

"SITREP as follows…Recon Patrol Skywalker picked up a large group of individuals, numbering thirty to forty preparing to attack location Death Star. They are in a position near Checkpoint Four and continuing to observe. Time for the attack is unknown, but probably within the next hour. Prepare to implement Defensive Plan Delta and evacuation plan Alpha at 0045 local. Defensive forces will gather at location Jedi Temple. Message ends."

The residents were immediately up and gathering clothing, BOBs and weapons. Sleeping children were woken and told they needed to move. Families made their way to the Conference Center except for the on call team who immediately set off for a point in between the group and the Ranch. The Taylor family was immediately moving from their house to the Ranch on foot on a little known pathway through the woods and would rendezvous with the group at Fallback Point One in accordance with Plan Alpha. Mike, Scott, Mark and their families were responding to the point as well, although it would take them longer due to the distance. It was better to have everyone in one place and fight a unified defense than for the two groups to try at it alone.

Thomas and Sharon grabbed Angel and Brent and ran to the Conference Center where families were gathering. The children and a small security force would be loaded up in the panel van and taken to the fallback point and the remaining adults would form a defensive line already established by the reaction team. As soon as everyone on the Ranch was gathered and accounted for, the children were put in the vehicle and transported to the shelter of the fallback point.

Ashley was heard over the radio giving another report. "Update to SITREP…Yoda identified two vehicles on the roadway at point Chewbacca. One identified as a large bus the other possibly armored. Stand by for further."

Yoda was the current call sign for the LP/OP, manned by Amber. Before the group left off, several of the government acquired anti-tank rockets were handed out. Although never fired by many the residents, all had been shown how to operate the anti-tank rockets and were familiar with them. The defensive forces split up, one team placing themselves with the reaction team along the projected path of the main force and another team watching the main roadway into the Ranch waiting for the vehicles.

And they waited…and waited. There was no activity going on and the Recon Team and LP/OP continued to give status updates. Mike, Candy, Scott, Mark, Trisha and Gwenn all made contact with Michelle and were placed in one of the three groups. George and Misty also joined with them, leaving Cynthia behind at the Fallback Point to help defend the children. Both forces were waiting for something, but they didn't know what. "Maybe we should take the fight to them," offered Frank.

"No, I think it's better to wait for them here and give them a bloody nose when they come at us," stated Michelle, the community leader. And although she was leader, she would defer to another opinion on the defensive works. But in this case, she decided to wait the attackers out.

Frank nodded his agreement at her in the green light of the NODs and turned back to observe the woods to his front. Still they waited and waited. At nearly 0500, another report was heard over the radio from Ashley. "Contact, both groups moving. Bus and tank up the main hardball and the personnel along the same path as before."

The groups tightened rifles and machine guns into their shoulders and the other team had LAWs opened and ready to fire. The LP/OP requested and was given permission to disengage from the current position, although told to keep the force under observation for the time being. Amber relayed she would continue to observe and make contact with the second team along the roadway as she was withdrawing.

Time slowed down again as the Recon Team continued to relay reports, staying on the right flank of the attackers to provide a cross fire when needed. Amber continued to relay the reports stating the vehicles were traveling slowly up the road and the "tank" had a gun on top. She could not identify the vehicle since she was using the night vision sights and had not been properly trained in vehicle recognition. The group of personnel came into view of the first defensive line, training weapons towards the Ranch. They had spread out in a line and were sweeping ahead of them, moving slowly looking for defenders. They were trained a little, but lacked the controlled discipline of a military unit. Their weapons ranged from military style rifles to hunting rifles and shotguns. One thing about it, everyone was armed and looked to have plenty of extra ammo available.

Suddenly, a shot rang out in the direction of the defenders. It wasn't an aimed shot, but rather someone inadvertently squeezing the trigger after they had tripped on a root. The entire group of attackers let loose a volley of fire across their front. The Ranch residents, in fairly good defensive positions, did not fire as they had not been given the order to. Several shots were close to the defenders, but none were hit. Eventually the leader of the attackers got his group under control, ceased fire and radioed to the other group about the problems they now faced.

Michelle figured now was the best time to initiate her ambush since the enemy was probably a bit confused and shouted "open fire!" to her group. Well aimed rifle shots rang out from the Ranch side of the line at the attackers. The M-60 and M-249 did not open fire at the enemy forces since Michelle wanted to keep those in reserve and hopefully catch the members while they were advancing. Several of the attackers were hit and fell dead, but many of them were able

to find cover in the trees to their flanks. They immediately started moving forward, bounding by threes and fours as the remaining force covered them with fire. Nicole Thompson took a round to the leg and was evaced to the rear of the line by Janie. It was her first time out with the group since she had recently turned fourteen years old and had stopped having the permanent job of watching the children during evacuations. The remaining defenders attempted to fire at the advancing parties, but were starting to be covered by fire from the attackers. More of the attackers were hit as Michelle called for a withdrawal across the line. The two machine guns now opened up, causing the attackers to go to ground and seek cover. The remaining teams disengaged by pairs and were covered by the others as they fell back to the next positions where they, in turn, would cover the remaining forces.

The team by the roadway made contact with Amber and shortly stated they had a visual on the bus and now identified M2 Bradley armored vehicle. They faced a problem since they could only engage the front vehicle and not the more menacing Bradley with the LAWs. Michelle told them to engage the bus and attempt to engage the armored vehicle from the flank.

A LAW, an M72A2, was trained on the engine compartment of the bus and the trigger depressed. The pop and "whoosh" were heard as the rocket traveled the one hundred fifty meters to the vehicle. A large explosion was seen, ruining the night vision of those who were not wearing NODs and effectively wrecking the engine of the vehicle. More people were seen abandoning the vehicle from the rear exit, some on fire. The ambush team took aim at the other group of attackers and fired at the running figures. One thing was certain, they couldn't get to the flanks now without fighting their way through the now alerted force.

The second team decided to fall back down the road and cover a larger area than they had been concentrating on before. Dave, in charge of the second group, gave the fallback order and the team disengaged much like the other team, bounding backwards while maintaining fire on the attackers. The attackers were still in shock over the rocket attack on their vehicle and the fire at the retreating defenders was sporadic at best. Dave managed to get a count on the group before he fell back, counting twenty-five remaining members.

Michelle, less than six hundred yards away was doing much the same thing and counted twenty-five remaining attackers as well. The group now showed a more disciplined approach than they had previously and a leader was directing their efforts. She attempted to place him under fire, but he was wary of exposing himself and remained behind effective cover. Her team continued to place fire on the individuals as they retreated to the next line established for defense. They were now within four hundred yards of Ryan's house and six hundred yards of the Conference Center. She ordered the use of the one M-203 they brought with them and Stuart let one of the grenades fly. She waited until the explosion was seen and backlit the entire group. Although it was beginning to get light out, she still needed to see more. Stu sent a white star parachute flare skyward slightly behind their position so they would be in the light well and the attackers would be in full view.

The group that Dave and his team were firing on had gotten over the initial shock of having their vehicle destroyed and now were advancing towards the group of defenders. Dave made a radio call to Michelle suggesting they continue to keep fire on the attackers and attempt to draw the

two groups together so they could consolidate their defenses in one spot. Michelle thought this was a good idea and instructed Dave to attempt to move toward a spot one hundred meters from Ryan's house where they would link up. Dave ordered his teams to throw some of the grenades at the attackers to drive them into cover before displacing and moving. The grenades had a psychological effect as well as taking down and wounding several. The attackers had never before been up against such firepower and they were awed at the defensive weaponry.

The two groups continued to fire at the attackers, taking several more of them down. Between the two groups, they both were at twenty apiece. Michelle and Dave's groups met at the line and saw the attackers meeting up as well. Harassing fire from the attackers kept the defenders in place as the elusive leader of the attackers briefed his group on what actions he wanted. A group of ten disengaged from the main body and started heading towards the left flank of the defenders. They were soon engaged by the recon team, silent until this point. The recon team, led by Michael, was soon under heavy fire from the detached group and started withdrawing in the direction of the Ranch in order to link up with the defenders.

It seemed to Michelle they were being overwhelmed by the tactics of the attacking force since this was the first time they had encountered a group that was somewhat tactically prepared for an engagement. More often than not, the groups yelled and ran straight at them, making it easy to pick them off. This was also the first time they had faced such superior numbers as well. Over fifty attackers were heading towards the Ranch and they had armor.

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Her count was a little off since there were originally thirty-five in the first group and thirty in the second, plus the ten individuals crammed in the Bradley Fighting Vehicle. The leader of the gang was a twenty-five year veteran of the US Army, spending his time mostly in Infantry units. He had planned a good raid against the seemingly soft target with his forces and attempted to train them in infantry tactics. His second in command, another gang leader he had combined forces with, was much too eager to rush into the fight. "Come on, man, they are running away! Let's chase them down and get this over with!"

"No, that's precisely what they want us to do! We rush into the muzzles of their weapons and they pick us off because we become easy targets. This is a chess game, it takes time! When the time is right, I will order them run down. Now go and see to your people," ordered the leader.

The second in command, a younger man, gave the leader a hateful look and turned away. He saw his people were still taking well aimed fire from the defenders and saw the old man was right. However, anything was better than sitting around getting shot at. The old man had tried to train him in Troop Leading Procedures, but the younger man didn't really pay attention since he was hungry, both food wise and eager for action. He figured the old man was just full of it and trying to make himself sound more important. Before the Fall, the second in command had been a computer programmer with a passion for the military, especially the Special Forces of the world. And like many wannabe military types, he thought it would be easy to take the target

down. He often dreamed of leading an assault like they were currently engaged and had even taken to wearing a green beret on raids since it made him feel more military like.

He tolerated the old man being in charge of the attack since he had a larger force to begin with, but didn't much like it. His own gang had taken down a few houses before and he thought it was fairly easy. However, little did he know the group they now faced had been together and trained over the same ground they were defending for almost a year and a half. He thought it was going to be easy pickings at the ranch which seemed to be getting along normally after the Fall. Most of his information had come from web sites and books prior to the Fall and he did not have the hard earned experience in combat and training his current leader had.

He saw the group of defenders starting to pull back again and saw the additional forces from the roadway starting to come his way. The old man ordered his people forward by bounds and attempt to keep pressure on the enemy. He was down twenty-five people now and would have a hard time taking the ranch in its entirety with his decreased numbers. He warned everyone to watch their cover and concealment and went forward himself.

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Michelle and Dave linked up as planned in the woods behind Ryan's house. "Decision time. Do we attempt to defend the structures or continue to fight a running battle?"

"I think we need to continue to fight the running battle until we are inside the Ranch proper. When they come out of the woods and into the open; that will be the time to hit them. Especially since they won't have any cover except his house," said Dave.

Michelle thought for a moment before responding. "That sounds good, we let them get past Ryan's place then open up on them. Prepare to bound again back to his house then I will designate another spot."

The teams prepared to move and the orders were relayed to Michael over the radio. He would sweep around and make his way to the Conference Center and make contact with Ashley. When Michelle gave the orders, the teams were in motion, a well rehearsed plan that had been performed by the residents for over a year, but never actually done in a live situation until now.

Michelle also had another idea in mind. She had left Frank and Darren behind to place two Claymore mines and set them off before the next advance. They had quickly placed the mines with a radio detonator placed in the port. It seemed to be a perfectly good waste of the irreplaceable detonator, but the alternative was to loosing the Ranch. Instead of facing the fronts towards the enemy, they placed them facing rearward in order to catch the defenders behind cover. Each man finished placing the mine and ran rearward, covered by the remaining fire team. Then they waited for the next charge.

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The leader saw the troops about to disengage again and decided not to follow them. He guessed they were attempting to draw his forces out into the open near the ranch and slaughter them when they emerged from the tree line. He gave orders to the team from the bus "Move to the right of them and past the roadway. Keep circling around to the supply building on this side of the stream near the chicken coops and catch them from their flank."

He looked back up and saw his second in command doing exactly what he had warned him not to do. A group of fifteen people were rising up, yelling and chasing the defensive group. Their charge did not last long as the Claymore mines were detonated, shredding the attacking force from the rear while the defenders were safely behind thick trees. Two-thirds of their numbers were immediately hit and the other five immediately sought cover. The leader screamed for them to stop and take cover wherever possible. He halted the second group and took ten bodies from there, leaving fifteen to perform the sweeping maneuver to catch the defenders from the flank. The leader cursed the second in command, who had not taken part in the charge, and was still in place, reminding him who was in charge and if they were to succeed, who needed to make the calls. He refocused his attention on the front and found the other five that had survived the detonation of the mines were now dead from well aimed rifle fire.

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Michelle ordered Thomas and his team to do the same technique in the current location, place two M18A1 mines and prepare to fire on the next charge. However, this time they faced them forward, hoping to catch the attackers in their run. While Thomas was setting his mine in position, Brian was completing the same task at a spot fifteen yards away. Hopefully, the fan shaped pattern of the detonation would overlap and take more of the defenders behind trees if possible. Instead of the radio detonators, they used the conventional wire detonators and rolled out the wire behind them.

The group prepared to move again, this time falling behind to Ryan's house. Michelle sent half the force to the Conference Center, however, stopped when the Bradley emerged from the tree line to their flank. She immediately stopped and called for a retreat towards Fallback Point Three. From there, they would continue on a pathway through the woods to Fallback Point One. She left Thomas and his team behind to both cover their retreat and to detonate the mines before pulling back. She ordered the evacuation of the Conference Center and told Ashley to move to the Fallback Point with the families. After giving her orders and ensuring everyone knew the plan, she gave the orders to withdraw; completely forgetting Janie and Nicole didn't have a radio with them.

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The leader saw the group disengaging and moving across the open towards the parking area and firing range. During his recon of the ranch, he had come across two places that appeared to be fallback positions. He had originally planned to have forces in place to ambush the defenders, but time and training did not permit him to do so. He saw the remainder of his separate force emerging from the woods behind the Bradley, taking shots from the hip at the retreating defenders. Their fire did little more than harass the retreating individuals and make them run faster. He ordered his forces forward to the edge of the woods in order to attempt to engage the retreating forces before they disappeared into the woods on the far side of the Ranch. There were only one hundred fifty meters between them and the open space and if they hurried, they might be able to catch a few of the slower ones.

He watched the remaining forces rise up and start forward, taking shots through the breaks in the trees. Again, it did little but annoy the retreating figures, the first of which were already to the far tree line. As his forces moved forward, two more mines detonated, killing another ten outright and wounding another five. Several grenades were thrown into the mix as well, the detonations thundering across the wooded area they were in. Yellow and red smoke grenades popped off concealing the retreating defenders. He knew exactly what was going on and knew the defenders had left a few people behind the cover for the main body so they could escape to safety. He also knew he was now down to thirty total bodies including himself and his ace in the hole, the ten troops inside the Bradley. He watched the turret traverse and fire off several bursts at the retreating figures. The leader screamed into the radio to cease fire since the Bradley crew only had a limited amount of ammunition for the 25mm Bushmaster Cannon. The timid reply over the radio stated they had used the ammunition up for the cannon, but still had plenty for the co-axel machine gun. The machine gun sputtered a few bursts, none of which were close to the retreating group.

By the time they had reached the clearing, none of the defenders remained in the clearing and were probably heading full speed to their prepared defenses. "They are heading towards the fallback point I told you about and we are not, I repeat NOT, going to charge into there. There are prepared positions which will take forever to dig them out of. If those idiots in the Bradley had not been so trigger happy, it could have been done easier, but not now. We will wait and see what happens.

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In the confusion following the detonation of the Claymore mines, Thomas and his team were able to move to the left flank of the attackers undetected. He radioed Michelle and informed her he was sweeping around to attempt to hit the Bradley in the rear and take it out of action. She gave his plan a simple "Go for it" over the radio and then informed him they were well into the forest and on their way to the fallback point with the rest of the group.

Their team still had the two anti-tank rockets they had brought out before going to the line, one M72A2 and one M136. Thomas was unsure of how well armored the Bradley was and decided

to hit the vehicle with both rockets. He knew the M136 would probably be able to punch through the armor, but was unsure of the penetration capabilities of the older M72A2 with the modern Bradley.

The fire team got to a point about two hundred meters to the left of the armored beast. From there, Greg and Thomas took out the rockets and were covered by Amber and Brian. Brian had taken over the M-249 from Greg and was now aiming it at the attackers near the Bradley. Greg and Thomas prepared the rockets for firing and emerged ten feet from the woods. They both checked their back blast area to ensure their partners were not behind them and took aim. Thomas fired almost a full second before Greg and watched the rocket's path intersect with the vehicle. His rocket hit at the top of the tracks, wrecking two of the road wheels and Greg's hit square on the body below the turret.

The vehicle sat immobile for several seconds while Thomas and Greg reentered the woods. Suddenly, the hatches on the vehicle opened revealing the fire inside. Bodies fell out of the vehicle on fire and the fire team engaged them both to end their suffering and since they could still pose a threat. They also engaged the remaining foot soldiers that had been behind the Bradley attempting to engage the retreating Ranch members. Before long, the entire group was dead and not moving. After finishing and waiting a minute to make sure nobody else would emerge, Thomas and his team silently moved around the woods towards the Trading Post and beyond to hook back up with the rest of the defenders.

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The leader was hopping mad now. His armor was gone and he was down to twenty people. He could not see any more of the defenders and knew he needed to get his remaining force into cover quickly. He gave the hand and arm signal to rally up at the Conference Center and headed that way himself. The remaining forces ran at full charge towards the large building, getting there without getting shot at for their troubles.

After catching their breath, the leader designated five people to occupy the cabin immediately to their front, better known to the Ranch as Cabin Five, the one currently occupied by Janie and Nicole. The two did not know Michelle had ordered a general retreat and was enroute to the fallback point.

The second in command took four of his most loyal people with him and headed across the short distance to the cabin. When they entered, they were lackadaisical in opening the door and strolling on through. Janie saw them coming in and immediately grabbed the Hi-Power pistol at her waist. She managed to fire off three shots at the attackers and hit one before she was hit in the head and knocked unconscious by the wooden stock of a hunting rifle. Nicole was frozen in fear as another man pointed a very mean looking sawed off shotgun at her face.

"Look what we got here, two women all alone," said one man to the second in command.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we get ourselves a little reward after all," said the man looking over the two women in the bedroom. He leered at Nicole while speaking. "You look a bit young honey, but you are cute enough to do until she wakes up. And look! You already have your pants down. How convenient!"

Nicole looked at the man in horror as he grabbed his crotch and started across the room towards her. She screamed and passed out, both from lack of blood and fear, before he even touched her.

"Great, now they are both passed out. I guess we will have to wait until they wake up and follow the old man's directions for now. Carl, you and Mike keep a look out the back window. John, you and me will throw Matt out the front door," said the second in command.

"Come on man, Matt is dead. Let's at least take him to that place across the road," argued John.

"You're too sentimental. Okay, let's take him over there," said the second in command.

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The entire group of residents met up at the fallback point and started taking accountability of the families. During the roll call, Brian kept looking for Janie, not finding her. Darren was doing the same for his daughter. They both yelled at about the same time informing Michelle they were missing. The missing ladies hit Michelle like a ton of bricks. "Oh, my God! I forgot they were in Cabin Five tending to Nicole's wound! They don't have a radio!"

"Okay folks; let's get ready to go get them. We just went from retreat to rescue party," said George calmly.

"Forget that George! I'm going right now to get my daughter!" said Darren as he checked his ammo and was quickly joined by Brian.

"Now you two wait a minute! We have no idea how many of them are there and rushing in will only get you killed. Let's have at least a few minutes for planning before we rush into a hornet's nest. Stand down, right now!" said George forcefully, pointing his finger at the two men. It wasn't often George was forceful with anyone and everyone knew he was about to unload. The stress of the attack had worn at them all and abandoning the positions on the Ranch made them a bit fearful at what else could happen. But they knew they had bloodied the attackers and could reclaim the Ranch as they had practiced it. And they weren't giving up without a fight.

George calmed Darren and Brian somewhat and the group immediately set in motion plans to take the defenders down. Michael's team had stayed in a position to observe and would sweep back around to keep the defenders pinned at the Conference Center. They relayed the only defenders were at the Conference Center and Cabin Five. Frank, Darren, George and Amy would provide cover fire with their long range precision weapons while Thomas, Greg, Brian and Amber would take Cabin Five. Flash bang grenades were handed out and everyone

replenished their ammunition. A second team, consisting of Rick, Sharon, Renee and Mark would go to the front of the retreat to stop any attempt to leave by the gang. Mike, Heather, Ashley and Mark all prepared to force an assault on the cabin and conference center in case Thomas's team became incapacitated.

The teams prepared to move out in less than ten minutes after they had met up. The remaining defenders placed themselves in the defensive positions and waited on word of what was going on. Since he wasn't assigned to a team and still not a fully vetted member of the Ranch, Jeremy was placed on a makeshift LP/OP to their front near the old logging road.

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"What happened to him?!" shouted the leader at the second in command.

"Idiot got hit coming through the door by two women left behind. We took care of them though and they're gonna regret killing him," said the second in command.

"What do you mean 'gonna regret,' mister?" asked the leader.

"Trust me, after we get done with them, they won't be worrying about much of anything except wanting a jar of Vaseline and aspirin," said the second in command while giving an evil laugh.

The leader turned stern. "Not a chance of that happening! We aren't animals and they are better as hostages for barter than for raping! Forget about it and bring them over here!" he said as he turned away from his second in command focusing on ensuring the defenses were properly prepared for the expected attack.

The second in command had about as much of the old man as he wanted. He pulled the Smith and Wesson Model 29 from his holster and pulled the trigger. The .44 Magnum hollowpoint bullet entered into the leader's back in the middle, immediately severing his spinal column and rendering him paralyzed from the waist down. He fell to the floor in a heap on his face.

The second in command, now in charge, rolled him over with his foot and looked into his eyes. "I've had about enough of you, old man! It's been far too long since I agreed to let you lead this assault. Now that we have the ranch, your services are no longer needed. I can only hope you live long enough to see what we are gonna do to those 'ladies' and with your dying breath know I'm in charge now."

He turned to another member of his group. "Gather up everyone outside and carry this piece of garbage outside too so everyone can see his useless corpse. After I'm done with my little leadership speech, bring me the young one. I've been wanting something fresh for months."

The group had just watched their new leader murder their old one in cold blood before their very eyes. Not a one of them were ready to challenge him for leadership and went away, carrying out

his orders. They just made a colossal mistake and none of the gang realized it. The former leader knew to stay behind cover, but in his current state, couldn't do anything to stop the group from leaving the place of safety.

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Everyone was in place quickly for the expected assault when they heard the shot come from the Conference Center. Thomas was told to stand by on his forced assault through the back door since everyone seemed to be gathering outside the building. Each team took up a position where they could observe the group gathering on the gravel roadway by the center. There were seventeen accounted for now, with number eighteen lying face up on the roadway, several people looking at him.

The teams were in an outstanding position; there were twelve of them watching seventeen targets. George coordinated over the radio telling Thomas and his team to take the six closest to Cabin Five, Mike and his group to take the six nearest Cabin Six and his team would take the other five. However, if any were missed in the first and second volleys, it was game on for everyone. A small snag in their plans developed as Nicole was brought out screaming by the other two members of the gang. Thomas and his team had the best angle on the shots and were ordered to hit the two people holding her first and then the other two. The remainder of the targets were to be shot as planned. George counted down softly over the radio, before finally giving the "Fire in three seconds" command in the earpieces of the radios. Those with radios relayed it to their partners and prepared to fire.

Suddenly, twelve rifles barked and sent death in the form of lead, steel and copper towards the group. The twelve targets initially fired at were hit in either center mass or head shots. Thomas had taken the time to carefully aim at the man to the right of Nicole and Brian to the left since they were within one hundred and fifty yards and the shots were more than possible. Both men went down immediately from their head exploding, not moving. Another round of shots was fired but three of the group managed to escape, heading toward the woods and Fallback Point One.

They were quickly out of view of Thomas's and Mike's teams. George's team had a bead on them and fired twice, but their shots missed since they were further away and not leading enough for the fast moving figures. He radioed the contact report to the rest of the group at the fallback point and started moving that way himself. The other two teams were preparing to move, but George told them to clear the buildings at the Ranch first. Thomas's team prepared to dynamically enter Cabin Five while Mike's team stood overwatch.

They entered the rear door, scanning the room before moving towards the master bedroom on the first floor. Greg and Brian took the upper bedrooms, covering them with their weapons until Thomas pronounced the bottom floor clear. Thomas and Amber entered the bedroom in the same manner they had entered the cabin and found Janie unconscious on the floor. Instead of rushing to her aid immediately, they finished clearing the room including the closet. As they

finished, both announced “clear!” to Greg and Brian who then cleared the upper level.

When the declared the area to be safe, Thomas radioed the results to Mike and George and immediately requested Scott be sent to help Janie. Brian rushed in to his wife, thinking she was dead. By the time he had reached her, Thomas had already taken her vitals and found a strong pulse and breathing. Besides the obvious knot on her head and her being unconscious, she appeared to be in good shape. Nicole had been retrieved by Mike and Ashley and they entered the front door of the house after announcing themselves.

Gwenn and Mark stayed behind as the six individuals prepared to force an assault on the Conference Center. They observed for several minutes and found the seventeen attackers had either been killed outright or had expired soon after being shot. The other three were last seen heading into the woods in the direction of the fallback position. They divided up the Center into zones and prepared to move across the space to enter from the side door.

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From the outside, the former leader of the group watched as six individuals left the house in tactical formation and entered the large center with the precision of a well trained team. *Why couldn’t I have had troops like these? With men and women like this, I could have taken over this retreat in no time and been enjoying breakfast right now. I hate to die like this, without honor. I’ve shamed myself and what I used to stand for. Please God, forgive me for the things I’ve done and let me go out with what is left of my pride. I never used to be this way, but the only recourse I had left was to dishonor myself and stoop to murder and stealing. There is only one honorable way out for me now,* he thought as he flexed his fingers. Looking to his side, he saw one of the former members of his group lying dead. His pistol was just within reach. With great effort, he unsnapped the retaining strap and pulled the revolver out. With another effort, he placed the weapon in his mouth, cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger, hoping he might find honor in another life.

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The report of the shot stunned the team clearing the Conference Center. Immediately, they looked out a window and saw the man they thought was dead with a pistol lying nearby, the recoil throwing it away from his lifeless hand. His brains were splattered across the gravel and onto the members lying next to him. The team decided to check on the members as soon as they completed clearing the building, of which the upstairs was left. They continued the methodical search of the facility for any remaining members of the group that briefly controlled the Ranch.

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The report of the shot also stunned the three that had escaped. The leader stopped and looked back towards the ranch, seeing nobody following them. He turned to the other two with him and stated "We need to keep moving. They will be after us soon and we need to get back to the car at the crossroads."

He didn't know he would not make it another three feet, much less the three miles to the waiting car.

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Jeremy was silent in his concealed position as he watched the three individuals draw closer. He wanted to catch all three in the open without a chance to make it to cover. He had selected his killing ground very carefully since the nearest effective cover was thirty feet in any direction. They had stopped just short of his intended "line of death" and one spoke to the other two. Once the small party started to move again, he took aim through the ACOG and flipped the safety lever to the "SEMI" position. Training took over as he pulled the trigger to the rear and sent the round eighty meters to his point of aim, right between the eyes of the former second in command of a group of almost eighty people, now leader of three. Death was instantaneous as his body hit the ground. The other two froze in place, looking at the now dead leader.

Jeremy used their pause to send another round downrange with the same result. The third individual quickly started moving to cover as Jeremy flipped the selector lever to "BURST" and sent a group of three towards the fleeing target. Two of the three caught her in her side, knocking her to the ground. She fell face first on the ground and screamed, grasping at her side in agony. Jeremy quickly put an end to her pain as a final hollowpoint round smashed through the dense bone of her head and the hydrostatic shock of the bullet scrambled her brains before exiting in a hole over twice the original size of the shell.

Jeremy peered through the scope at the three individuals lying to his front. None of them were moving and he had seen the impacts of each of the rounds. He wanted to be sure, though and stood up, pulling his pistol as he did. He checked each for a pulse and, after finding none, pulled the radio from his web gear and made contact with the rest of the group. His face never showed emotion the whole time, but on the inside, he was glad he did not have to face the world alone again and thanked God he was in the company of warriors who knew how to defend their homes.

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Jeremy contacted the group and relayed the report the last three individuals had been taken down. This should have accounted for everyone in the attacking group, but Michelle sent two teams to sweep the area around the Ranch just in case. Scott arrived at Cabin Five and started treating his patients. He briefly checked on Janie and found her to be okay, just unconscious for

the moment. If she didn't wake in the next few minutes on her own, he would use a stimulus to get her awake. He then moved to treat the leg wound on Nicole initially being treated by Janie. He started an IV and prepped the wound for further treatment. The round had just nicked the bone on its journey through the leg, but otherwise it was a simple procedure. He wished he had Janie there to assist him since he would be performing a delicate procedure. Misty joined him and assisted as best as she could. Again, much of her knowledge was gained from books and from the gunshot wound she had helped treat soon after everyone had arrived at the Ranch.

Thomas and his team had rechecked the former attackers on the outside of the Conference Center and found all of them dead. They did not understand why the one chose to commit suicide instead of trying to take out one of them before dying. They continued clearing all the structures in the Ranch prior to making the all clear call and allowing the rest of the residents to return. The two other teams continued to sweep the tree line nearest the main Ranch. Eventually they came onto the results of the Claymore mines and found they had been very effective at the job of killing people. But no other attackers were found and even those wounded in the early stages of the battle had expired due to lack of medical care. The weapons training and proficiency firing had paid for the group as most of the shots had been effective. They continued on a large sweep, just in case there were hidden groups waiting to take advantage of the decreased alert.

The residents came down and all gathered at the Conference Center, still prepared to leave again in case the sweep teams found anything out of the ordinary. Cynthia and Renee volunteered to cook and the group ate for the first time since the previous evening with the two ladies continuing to cook for everyone. Eventually the sweep teams declared the area safe and returned themselves. The entire group continued to be on guard throughout the day since the attack had been a complete shock to everyone. They all knew how close they had come to death and it ate at everyone. Friends and families grabbed each other in hugs and wept, both in happiness to be safe and in sheer terror at having come that close to the abyss.

Eventually Janie regained consciousness and was treated by Scott. Besides the huge knot on her head, she had a possible concussion and was told to take it easy for the next few weeks. Nicole was patched up and given the same instructions. Her father had remained by her side the whole time, holding her hand throughout the entire operation. When Scott and Misty finished, Darren and his daughter were alone. "Guess this means I don't get to go out again, huh Dad?" she said groggily from the pain killer she had been given.

"Baby, you get better and we will talk about it. But for now, you need to rest and not worry about things like that," he said with tears forming in his eyes. His baby had been hurt and he had not been there to protect her. He also remembered Janet telling him two weeks before she was growing up and he needed to remember she wasn't a little girl anymore. But he saw the look of horror on Janet's face upon learning their baby had been injured and knew she no longer felt the same way.

"Sure, Dad, for the time being, I suppose I can watch the kids. But after that, I want to go on the recon patrols," she said with a smile.

"If I ever let you out of the house again, maybe," he replied with half a smile himself, wiping a

tear from his face.

They sat there for several minutes, holding each other's hands. Nothing could be said until Nicole said the only thing that needed to be said.

"I love you, Daddy," she said as she started to cry herself.

"Oh God, I love you too, Nicole," he replied through tears as leaned over and took his daughter into a huge hug.

And the same scene replayed itself throughout the Ranch over that day. The Bradley continued to burn and the ammunition continued to cook off. George and Ryan quietly visited each home and advised them they would need to begin clean up the next day, barring any unforeseen circumstances. The remainder of the day was to be spent with the families and reflect on just how lucky they had been.

CHAPTER 41 – THE SAME OLD NEW THREAT

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 6 Months, 8 Days
Date/Time: 28 October/1002 Local
Location: The Ranch

As planned, the group started cleaning up the bodies from the various locations on the Ranch for burial in a common grave in the field adjacent to Ryan's house. The backhoe was brought out and dug a pit for the bodies to be placed in before covering them up with dirt. While each resident had seen dead bodies before, most had not seen the horrible disfigurement of the burned corpses. Many of them lost their breakfast during the detail and even the most hardened members felt a little queasy. They finished well after lunch and had the Minister come over to say a few words and ask God to forgive the people who attacked the Ranch. Through the remainder of the day, most of the residents took multiple showers and attempted to wash the stench off their hands. Michelle informed the group as a whole they needed to take more time for their families that evening, but needed to have the weekly meeting the next night instead of tonight. Everyone agreed this was a wise course of action and spent the remainder of the day in quiet solitude at their various homes.

The next day was uneventful, even though the residents kept their guarded condition. It seemed as if the entire Ranch was on edge and the smallest out of the ordinary thing provoked a reaction. Dave accidentally dropped a can on the floor and was drawn down on by Renee. Tim did the same and had Tracy go into a fit of crying. Kristy touched Stephen on the shoulder only to have him jump up and assume a defensive stance. Heather unloaded an entire magazine from her M-4 at a rabbit that had jumped out in front of her, causing the alarm to go out across the Ranch and newfound fears of another attack to rise again. They had arrived to find her holding the dead rabbit and crying uncontrollably. The group voiced their concerns at the meeting that night as families were worried about the long term effects of what had happened.

"It's not that much different from people that used to get back from Iraq," said Scott thoughtfully. "I remember those that used to jump at even the slightest out of place sound since they thought it was another incoming mortar or rocket. It even happened to me after I got back the first time. It will just take some time to get over, but we all can pull though this as long as we stick together."

Those who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan remembered the indirect fire attacks and how they had been upon return to the United States. They knew it would take some time for them to get over it, but for the families, this was the first time they had been exposed to the shock of coming that close to the edge. The military called it Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome and the entire Ranch was suffering slightly from it. The Minister, who had come back that night at the request of Michelle, offered a bit of advice.

"While I was not here when this happened, I was once a young man in combat. I remember the absolute horror of combat and coming close to death. While it does take some time to get over,

years in some cases, know that your group is here together. We all should take strength from those closest to us and remember that together you are strong, but separate; you will only come to dread the coming future. Knowing you have close friends and family will strengthen your soul and provide relief to your worst fears. Everyone here is alive because their friends and family were at their side during the battle. Everyone should be stronger now since your friends and family continue to be at your sides and are now welded there for all eternity."

"I've seen a lot of families and friends in my time, but your group is probably the closest I've ever seen in my lifetime. Were it not for such a strong tie that binds, I fear you all would now be dead. I know you all will recover from this and God willing, in short order. Your group, no, your family here is an extremely important part of the community. Much of the surrounding community looks to you for guidance and leadership. They know you are strong and they draw strength from you as well. You are a cornerstone of the new civilization we are forming in the aftermath of an unspeakable evil. While the rest of the world might be coming down, your family here is strong enough to make it through with pure intentions in your hearts."

"Your family here can and will overcome the evil that has attempted to destroy you and continue the pathway of righteousness in the coming future. I know in my heart everyone here can overcome the tragedy, but only by staying together and helping each other will you overcome the thoughts of dread that currently weigh heavy on your mind. Of course, I will always be here for you to talk to if you need me, but I think your family can help you more."

The entire group was silent after the advice. Several members had tears streaming down their faces and others still looked ahead with thousand yard stares. One strange thing was apparent, everyone in the families were holding hands. Even the single folks had taken a hand beside them. The only person who did not seem that fazed by the situation was Jeremy. He was only a little more stable since he had already gone through the same situation before. His case was different since he had not been able to go back to where he started. He was happy in the turn of events and was even happier the gang had been defeated. While he never said anything, he was happy he had killed the remaining members of the gang that attempted to take over the Ranch. It wasn't every day he felt happy about killing someone, but he knew in his heart he had done the right thing in destroying the evil that entered their lives.

Michelle asked the group if anyone had anything to add. Nobody spoke and the meeting broke up on mutual silent agreement. Several members stayed behind to talk with the Minister, but most went home to spend more time with their families in reflection of what had happened.

The next day, everyone seemed to be in a better mood. Details were worked on and while some members still had problems, for the most part they were working out okay. The Minister continued his individual counseling of the Ranch members, although keeping it private. He had set up shop at Ryan's house and more than a few members had to be turned away because he was in session at that time. A lot of latitude was given to the individuals who had problems and the group as a whole attempted to help them out if they could. With any given situation, they were strong when they were together, but individually, they would fall apart. Heather was given the most latitude since she seemed to be hit harder than most. Daily sessions with the Minister seemed to be helping her out and her spirits started to come back up. Other members of the

Ranch helped her out along the way, including Thomas. He knew she looked up to him and knew that if anyone at the Ranch could talk to her on an even level it was him. She was assigned to him for the foreseeable future on whatever detail they happened to be working on. Like the father figure he had become, she clung to the strength she saw in him and drew from it.

Over the next week, all the residents helped each other in some way. It seemed like the Minister's word took effect since they drew strength from each other even in the face of not feeling comfortable themselves. The group knew they needed to be strong when others were down and it quickly caught on with everyone. Those with problems quickly found others in the group highly supportive even though they had problems themselves. Life started becoming normal again and the "on edge" attitude of the group started to dissipate.

Nicole was doing well, even though the bullet had nicked her bone. There hadn't been enough damage to the bone for any serious permanent disability to affect her for a lifetime. The muscle damage was another matter entirely. She had been hit by a larger caliber hunting round and it had made a mess of things. Even with catching it so early, she might still have degradation in the use of her left leg. Scott had done what he could with the wound and managed to stitch together the tissue, but an infection had set in and was barely being kept under control by the antibiotics they were currently giving her. Janie was coming along nicely with the exception of the occasional headache. The swelling had subsided over the course of two days and it seemed like she would make a complete recovery. She was getting out and about more now and one of her first stops was to thank the members of the rescue team that had forced an entry into the house and secured her. She also brought another problem to the group.

"Nicole is going to be okay if we can keep the infections down. But, as Scott stated when he first arrived, antibiotics go quickly when you are using them and the penicillin we are using is just barely keeping it at bay. We need stronger drugs and more of them," she said.

"I know where we can get them from," said Scott. "But it's at Morgan's retreat. I'm not sure just how happy he might be to see us show up holding out our hands."

"I don't know if that's even possible considering what happened the last time. He didn't seem like he liked us very much," said Thomas with a smirk.

"No, he probably doesn't. I'm thinking Mike and I go up and work out the deal. He likes us probably less, but we have the ability to deal with him on even ground. A lot of the medicine up there came from me before the Fall and he knows he would be up a creek without a paddle without us. We can make the trade, we have to make the trade," said Scott. They discussed the matter with the community leader and were given a hesitant "Go" since they were unsure of what demands Gable would make on the Ranch for the trade. Mike and Scott volunteered to go in two days after planning the trip.

Mike and Scott set off on time, making the two hour journey to their former retreat and former home. They were apprehensive about the meeting and figured Morgan would not be too happy to see the former members of his retreat. However, they knew Morgan was a realist and if they had items he needed, he would put aside his personal differences and make the trade. Scott had a

listing of medicines he would need as well as others to further expand the stocks of the Ranch. Now, what Morgan would want in return was another matter entirely. Prior to coming into view of the LP/OP the Gable Retreat had near the roadway, Scott got out and tied two strips of cloth to the radio antenna of the truck they were driving, one blue and one white. After placing the identification on the vehicle, they moved forward slowly and cautiously around the bend into view of the retreat and the LP/OP.

As they drew closer, they saw an unidentified man working the gate, lounged back against an old concrete freeway divider Morgan had used to partially block the entrance of the compound. Suddenly, the man jolted from his position, grabbed the rifle leaning against the barrier and sent several shots their way. Mike immediately hit the brakes and swerved the vehicle to the left and right as he was coming to a halt to throw the gunner's aim off. He put the truck in reverse, slammed on the gas and executed a perfect J turn before going around the bend and out of sight of the retreat.

"I didn't think Morgan would be *that* unhappy to see us," said Scott.

"Was that person one of our members before we left?" asked Mike.

Scott briefly searched his memory. "No, I didn't recognize him. We didn't have any minorities before we left."

The two continued down the road for another half mile before pulling off onto an old jeep trail that led into the National Forest. They pulled off the road about two hundred yards in and searched briefly for a place to conceal the vehicle. "I think we need to take a closer look at the retreat, but on foot. We can get in undetected using some of those goat trails that lead in and out," said Mike.

"I agree," said Scott. "Those definitely weren't the same people we left up here when we left."

"Let's get everything ready and see if we can throw some natural stuff over the truck," said Mike as he withdrew his rifle and pack from the vehicle. Scott did the same and each man checked each over thoroughly in a pre-combat inspection. When they were complete, each located downed limbs and cut new foliage to cover the vehicle. The shouldered their packs and began the slow walk towards the retreat. They knew they would have to go over a ridge to get there and could make good time this side of it. They also knew once getting closer to the top they would have to slow down, since they had identified the weakness to Morgan while they were still members of his group. While Morgan Gable had been a bit of an egotist, he was smart enough to defer to the security recommendations of the members of his group. He had immediately implemented the suggestions of combat patrols around the retreat in case they were being watched.

It took Mike and Scott a little over an hour and a half to reach the top of the ridge that had direct view of the retreat. They moved around until they found a suitable break in the trees to peer into their former home. Mike adjusted the scope mounted on his rifle and started relaying information to Scott.

"Looks to be twenty to thirty outside, no regulars present…wearing mixed civilian and camouflage…plenty of weapons evident…nobody I recognize…structures seem intact although none of the people nearby are the ones that are supposed to be there…looks like gang colors to me. Your turn," said Mike as he handed the rifle over to Scott.

Scott peered through the scope for several minutes before confirming the report Mike had given him. "Let's make our way to that field above the retreat to the north. It's pretty close, but I think we can stay in the woods and remain concealed. I think we should start taking a count for numbers in anticipation of a strike."

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Mike.

"Yep," was Scott's reply as they prepared to move again. They moved much more cautiously now since they were in closer proximity to the retreat. In a little over an hour, they had arrived at the next observation point, a clearing which held a commanding view of the entire retreat. Mike again went to work.

"Numbers now at twenty-eight visible…no wait! I see Holly Meredith. She is being taken by one of the unknowns, slapped around and pushed. He is taking her into Morgan's cabin. Count now at thirty. Red shirts, red bandannas, typical gang colors. Weapons are a mix of military style rifles, good quality, but some are rusting. Security looks lax. I can see two of our DFPs that are manned, but neither looks very alert. No machine guns evident. Vehicle approaching, civilian car. Convertible Mustang type. Two occupants, wearing civilian attire. Greeted by the gate guard. Letting them pass into the retreat. They are pulling up to Morgan's cabin. Parking their car and going into the cabin. Lost sight of them."

"What is going on?" asked Scott.

"I don't know, but I have a theory," said Mike.

"I am probably thinking the same thing, but tell me anyway," said Scott.

"After we left, Morgan went completely bonkers and hired out a bunch of thugs to pull security. He promoted himself to king and has the women of the retreat at his beck and call," said Mike.

"I was thinking the same thing, but with a slight difference. A gang took over the retreat while we were away and kept Morgan around since he knows where everything is at, including the hardware buried up in the hills," said Scott.

"Or a combination of both," said Mike, wondering if there was any other plausible explanation.

"Let's continue to observe for a while. We are in a pretty good spot here and we need to do a recon to see just what is up," said Scott.

The remainder of the day was spent swapping the rifle back and forth between the two, making

an accurate count on the gang members, their weapons and tactics. Most importantly, they never saw any sign of any of the former members of the retreat, except Holly Meredith. Several more vehicles were identified as not being a part of the group's vehicles. The security was fairly lax, except for one gang member that went around slapping the guards when they fell asleep. In the afternoon, they completed the count of thirty-two people that weren't part of the retreat, plus the one known member that seemed to be held hostage. They made their way back to the vehicle and radioed the Ranch with a status update. They sent the code for possible trouble as well as their desire to remain overnight and did not request backup. They gave a very basic description of the trouble although being cryptic. The Ranch copied their transmission and informed them they were putting two teams on alert in case of trouble.

Mike and Scott settled in for the long night both knew they would have since there was only two of them and one had to be awake at all times. During the evening, they heard the Mustang leave the retreat, loud bass music pumping which could be heard clearly even through several hundred yards of forest. The night was long, but uneventful. In the early morning, they decided to do another recon of the area and finalize their numbers to take back to the Ranch. They made their way back to the observation area at the clearing and started tallying numbers again. During the morning, they talked over a possible course of action.

"I think we are going to have to hit this place," said Mike.

"I agree," said Scott nodding his head. "However, not as an act of vengeance, but because of the items Morgan had stashed away."

"Yeah, no kidding. That can cause a problem for everyone," said Mike.

At around two o'clock, they finalized the tally sheet only today, they only saw thirty-one people. They figured some were asleep and totaled the number at thirty-five to be on the safe side. They identified all the emplacements they could see and the location of the vehicles and where the unknowns lived or at least spent the majority of their time. Holly Meredith was not seen that day and the two assumed she was still in the cabin where she had disappeared to the night before. The Mustang didn't return either and they figured it was someone paying a social call. The march back to their vehicle was spent in quiet thoughts about what had happened to their former home and the best way to convince the Ranch the place was a threat for everyone. It needed to be hit and hit fast.

CHAPTER 42 – LONG DISTANCE RIVALRY

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 6 Months, 16 Days
Date/Time: 5 November/0800 Local
Location: The Ranch

Mike and Scott returned from their former retreat with some bad news. "Apparently, sometime in the past few months, Morgan and the rest were overpowered by some gang that took over the retreat. Or Morgan went out and got him some extra help. There is a serious problem there."

"How could you tell it was some gang?" asked Darren.

"We were heading towards the gate area when we were fired on. We thought Morgan had gone off the deep end more so than he already had, but after a foot recon, we saw over thirty people that didn't belong there. We didn't see any of the previous retreat members, save one, Holly Meredith. She apparently was being held as a prisoner since the group beat her from what we could tell. I know enough from the news about gangs to know these folks were wearing your typical colors."

"Them taking over the retreat is not the problem," continued Mike. "While that is a bad thing and I hate to think of my friends getting killed, there is a bigger problem there."

"Do tell," said Thomas.

Mike pulled in a deep breath before continuing. "We knew about this gang for some time and it always was a threat. We figured they wouldn't be able to take us out while our families were there. But with us leaving, the defenses were down and I guess the retreat was easy pickings. Again, a problem that our former friends are dead, but a much bigger issue is at hand."

"This group is very dangerous and always looking for new places to take over, especially ones that are fairly well supplied. They coordinate actions with other gangs and either share the supplies or give them the property. The group you all dealt with near Cañon City was probably an offshoot of one of those gangs. We never mentioned it because they were working the north Colorado, Denver and the Front Range. We never thought they would come in this far."

"Well, obviously they did! You should have at least warned us about it, Mike!" stated George a little angry over the secret.

"Yes, and I'm sorry. I should have at least let you all know about the gang but, again, I never thought they would make it this far into the mountains," replied Dugger.

"Well, a little late, but there is something else isn't there?" asked Thomas.

Mike paused before continuing. The group took his silence to mean he wasn't comfortable with

the subject. George helped prompt him into action. "Mike, you had best tell us everything you know. The safety of this place depends on it."

Mike took another breath in before starting the explanation. "Morgan Gable was planning this retreat out for years. He had bought quite a few supplies up there on his own and the families contributed more. He was a lot like you, Thomas, in the fact he stashed away goods not thinking of just himself. Of course, you haven't gotten the God complex like he did, so that's a good thing, but I digress."

"Some of the supplies were buried up there prior to the attacks and the confiscations. Morgan had been packing away guns and ammo for years, buying them, preserving them and packing it away. He buried some of the excess ordnance and kept out enough for just the retreat members and some spare. There is more stuff buried with it up in the hills, but the weapons and ordnance are the major items. After we got shot at, we did a foot recon around the area and specifically checked the areas where the stuff is buried. The sites haven't been disturbed yet and I doubt if the gang knows they are there. There isn't anything written that I know if, or a map of any sort, but there might be. Plus, we don't know for a fact if the retreat members are all dead. We saw one, but I don't think she knew much about the stash."

"How much of a stash are we talking about?" asked Darren.

"I don't know precisely the amount of ammunition he has stashed away up there, but as for firearms, well over a hundred and fifty if he wasn't lying. There are also pistols and shotguns buried, although I have no clue just what kind or caliber they are. He also buried ammo for most of them, along with magazines, stripper clips, cleaning and repair kits and whatnot. Morgan had some shady dealings from time to time and I figure some of them are full auto," concluded Mike.

"How much ammo are we talking about?" asked Darren.

"I asked and even Morgan said he didn't know for sure. He only told me it was a 'mountain' of ammo," said Scott.

The group fell silent again as they contemplated what was buried in the retreat. The weapons described by Mike could outfit the hostile group with good enough firepower to take on most any adversary, or even outfit another gang. The gangs could take over the Ranch with little effort with that kind of firepower, no matter how well they were trained. One thing was for certain, the ordnance there was a problem not only for the former retreat members, but for everyone in the Colorado area.

"How much food and supplies are stored away there?" asked Thomas.

"An inventory was being conducted when we got there. By the time they finished, they figured we had enough food for thirty people for nine months. That was just dry goods and not counting what we were taking from crops we were raising. Water is provided by a solar powered well and had a wind backup. Fuel, we had two or three thousand gallons, maybe more, each of diesel and gasoline. They were five thousand gallon tanks, but they weren't full. We did have plenty

enough for the generator use and vehicles when we needed them," answered Scott.

"So, let me sum this up. Gable stashed enough ordnance and weapons away to outfit a gang of at least one hundred or more with shoulder weapons along with enough ammo to cause a serious problem. There is also enough food and water there so this gang will be well fed for the time being. Am I to assume this gang goes out looking for trouble and for more places to overrun to increase their stocks?" asked Darren.

"From what we knew, the last place they were at had a pretty good supply of food, weapons and water. There wasn't really any reason for them to attack the retreat," answered Mike.

"But they did anyway?" asked George.

Both Scott and Mike shared a look. "Apparently so."

"Well, what are we going to do about this?" asked Thomas.

Mike offered a course of action. "If we are to be secure here and this is the same gang that we heard about, we need to take the fight to them. Personal feelings aside here, we are looking at a huge problem if they are randomly taking over retreats. This one might be next on the list."

"If that's the case, what kind of opposition are we dealing with?" asked George.

"We counted over thirty people. If it's the same gang we knew about, it had fifty or so members at one point. Now, we could be wrong and it is a different group entirely or it's the same group and their numbers were just diminished. Either way, a group with that much firepower at their disposal would be a problem for everyone," said Mike.

"But are they just going to sit tight or will they go out looking for more trouble?" asked Thomas.

"It doesn't matter. If they are like most of the gangs out there, they have little to no use for farming unless someone else is doing it for them. We've already seen that," stated George.

"True, but should we take the fight to them or wait for them to come here? I mean, we are in a fairly decent defensive position here," he replied.

The group thought on that moment before Scott replied. "Well, we thought we were until recently. However, we can mount a good defense here, as long as we know where the threat is coming from and can get our folks into a defensive position in time. Otherwise, it might not turn out the way we want it to."

Thomas conceded the point. "True, so we are in agreement this group poses a hostile threat to our security and the security of the neighbors? If so, we need to call a meeting and have the group discuss it as a whole before making any plans for an attack. Also, we really need to think about putting in some set defensive works around the Ranch. We did okay in our last encounter, but would have been better if we had some dug in positions." Everyone agreed and made plans

to have an emergency meeting that night for the residents.

"And plus, we need the drugs for Nicole. We can always overdose the penicillin we are giving her and hope that works. But it would be nice to have access to the stronger antibiotics I know they have there," said Scott.

That evening, Mike and Scott made their case and explained the situation they faced if they let the gang control the Gable Retreat. "With what is buried up there, they could cause serious problems with almost everyone in Colorado. I propose we take back the retreat with an attack and at least secure those weapons so they cannot be used against anyone else."

Quiet murmurs of agreement were heard from the group. A voice of opposition was heard from a surprising source. "While this may be a problem for everyone, why should we risk our necks to help secure those weapons unless it proven to be a threat to us?" asked Ryan.

"Honestly, we've made our home here and want to keep this home safe. As far as that goes, I honestly think this is a major problem for us all if those weapons find themselves in the hands of another one of the gangs that tried to attack here. I mean, the residents of the Dayfield Ranch have been protecting the neighborhood for a while now and in order to keep doing so, the playing field has to be tipped in our favor. Say for instance, that gang we just took out was better armed or had better training and supplies. How much more trouble would they have caused? Over half of them had bolt actions rifles. What would have happened if they had access to full auto weapons? We have become part of your community and want to help defend it as best as possible. Those weapons pose a threat to us all and in order to properly defend this area, we need to ensure the opposition doesn't have the resources to level the playing field," stated Mike.

More agreement was heard around the group and no further opposition was heard. Even Ryan admitted Mike had made a good case. The issue was put to a vote and an overwhelming majority approved of an attack on the retreat to secure the weapons and supplies there. The last battle had shaken the Ranch out of its isolationist standpoint and even the most passive member agreed the threats needed to be met in other places than their front yard. The issue of the supplies was brought up and what to do with them. "So we take out the retreat, what is to become of the supplies up there?" asked Trisha.

"The only former retreat member we noticed was a woman named Holly Meredith. Since we left the retreat, we kind of forfeited our chance to make a determination of the supplies. If she or any other members are still alive when we make our strike, they can make the determination. If not, it kind of falls on us to decide what happens," said Scott. This course of action went over well with the group and Mike, George, Scott, Darren and Thomas were chosen to plan the strike against the retreat. They agreed to meet the following morning and start planning the raid.

The next morning, the five met at the Conference Center after breakfast and were going over a map of the area. Mike and Scott showed the residents the prime spots for an attack and observation. The closest spot for good observation was five hundred yards away and got progressively longer from there. If the group wanted to take long range shots to reduce the number of defenders, these locations would be best. It was decided to whittle down the defenses

prior to any large scale assault. Frank with his long range sniping experience was brought in to consult. Although not looking from the ground standpoint, he looked over the topographical maps and told the group what he thought.

"You say this first area is fairly devoid of trees and vegetation, so it would be hard to get in unobserved to make the shot. I mean, it is possible, but with it being the closest area, it would be the first to be looked at. You are going to look at long range sniping to take down the numbers? I would go from here," he said as he pointed at an area about one kilometer from the retreat. "From there with the right rifle, it has good cover and concealment and a direct line of sight into the retreat. That's where I would make my shots from."

"You are talking at least one thousand meters, maybe eleven to twelve hundred for good cover. That's a pretty good distance," said Mike. "Plus, the other areas we have to deal with are that distance or between eight and nine hundred meters."

Frank pondered the thought for a moment. "Yeah, it would be hard to do with my M-24 as we are looking at a vertical drop of more than two hundred feet between there and the retreat. Adding in the distance, shifting winds through the valley, humidity factor at both target elevation and shooting location, drag factors increasing from going from the thinner air to the thicker air at the targets location and the fact the 7.62 won't have the best knockdown power at the distance. Probably a larger round, a .300 Win Mag, .338 Lapua or even a .50 would be preferable. The .300 might even be marginal at that distance with the winds and all, although with heavy enough rounds, the ballistic coefficient will probably keep it stable."

Mike and Scott were amazed at Frank since they thought he was an amateur at firing extended distances. They were impressed by the shooting knowledge of the sniper and said so.

"Well, I've not fired extended distance in some time, but I've taken Elizabeth out to that distance before. Ten-fifty was the longest range I've shot at and made a first round score. The problem is the 7.62 is not really reliable when you go beyond one thousand for sniping applications. Sure, a good enough shooter can take it further, but adding in those factors I already mentioned, it's harder to do except in a controlled environment and with lots of practice," he stated.

Mike thought for a moment before responding. "Do you think you could get in closer?"

"Sure, but it's not as safe. It only takes two or three shots for someone to zero in on your location from five hundred meters or less. That's with trained adversaries, which you say these may or may not be. For every one hundred meters after that, the chances of being detected go down by about half," Frank replied. What a lot of people didn't realize was that a one thousand meter shot meant one would have to look at over three square kilometers of ground for the shooter. A five hundred meter shot meant the shot could have come anywhere within a one and a half square kilometer area, a much easier area to look at.

"We are looking at thirty-five people at the retreat. To get the numbers to a manageable level for an assault would mean picking off between ten and fifteen of them. Plus covering fire from at least two locations during an assault would be good. Do we think we can get that number

whittled down before an assault?" asked Scott.

"I could get them all taken out with the right amount of time," stated Frank. "However, we are looking fifteen or more days if I make one, maybe two shots from each location and relocate. It takes time to move between hides undetected. I would be looking at maybe two to four shots a day. Here is the problem; I need to have similar conditions to practice on before I can reliably say I can take out that many targets. Also, they will eventually wise up and not come outdoors making a shot through glass at those ranges is an iffy proposition at best."

"With your M-24?" asked George.

"No, probably my.338 Lapua," he replied. "Also, it would be nice to have a spotter and someone else to back up my shots. Ideally, two teams; two shooters and two spotters would be best."

"I didn't know you had a .338," stated Thomas.

Frank chuckled before he responded. "Yeah, bought it on a whim after a trip to the Middle East and I had some mad money. I've shot it at a thousand meters and it's plenty enough accurate for what I would need. I have almost two hundred rounds so I probably have enough ammo for it as well. Enough to practice and enough for an extended engagement."

"We have plenty of spots around here we can practice on for the range and elevation changes. We might have to prep them by cutting down some trees, but it can be done. What kind of time limits would be looking at?" asked Thomas.

Mike and Scott thought for a moment before Scott replied. "Well, it's only a matter of time before they discover the ordnance and weapons that's buried up there. I think we need to go within the week or no longer than two."

George brought up the next point. "Okay, we have Frank with his precision rifles, who else can shoot that distance? I've got out to a thousand and well as Mike. Who else?"

"I've shot that distance, although never practiced that often," said Thomas. "Rick probably has about the same experience as I do. I don't know about Mark Williams or if we should bring him in since it really isn't his problem to deal with. He would probably go along though. I know for a fact Dave never has since he told me he has only shot to five hundred on our range here."

"It probably comes down to George, Mike, Scott, Rick or Thomas as the second shooter. I wouldn't feel comfortable at that distance although I've shot out that far once. I figure I could hit the broadside of a barn at that distance, but little else," said Darren.

"Okay, so two shooters, two spotters who can back up the shooters, I also don't feel that comfortable at that distance," said Scott. "I've also shot out that far, but I'm a medic and was doing it for fun more than anything."

"Same goes for me," said Mike. "But I can spot for someone."

"Now the problem comes to rifles. I have a .338 and I figure Thomas has something in that caliber or probably bigger. Shoot, he probably has a howitzer in his basement. Rick probably has the same arsenal since he is a gun nut like Thomas. What about you George?" asked Frank.

George thought for a second. "I have a .300, but it's a hunting rifle. I also have a 7mm Remington Ultra Magnum with a heavy target barrel that will probably take your head off at a thousand meters. I agree though, a .300 Win Mag might be better at the ranges we discussed and the 7mm would probably be marginal since the shells aren't as heavy and might not have the knockdown power at those ranges."

"I have several precision built rifles in .300, .338 and .50 cal. If anyone shoots better than I do at that distance, they are more than welcome to borrow what they want. My Barrett might be a tad large to do a creep with, but it will get the job done at that distance," said Thomas.

Rick was called and came over to consult as well. "I have that Remington PSS in .300 Win Mag and an Accuracy International in .300 Win Mag, but nothing larger. Thomas has the market cornered on large calibers. I've fired at one thousand, but never that often and just for fun. It would take a little practice for me. Lucky enough though, I have the ballistic tables for just about every caliber, including the .338 Lapua and .50 BMG. I also have the reloading dies for both, although I've never loaded them."

"So it comes down to Thomas, George or Rick. Are we going to have a shoot-off?" asked Frank.

"I think I will go ahead and concede to the younger members of our group right now," stated George. "But I am more than willing to do spotter duties."

"Your old bones won't do us any good out there as a spotter! You would creak more than creep," said Mike with a laugh.

George laughed and said two words punctuated by his middle finger in response before continuing. "I'm not too old, but you are somewhat correct. This is a young man's game and having to ex-fil on foot might cause a team to be slower since I can't keep up as well as the younger folks here. It will come down to Rick or Thomas."

"Hey, what about Jeremy or Amy? Do you think they might be good for this?" asked Frank.

"Amy is fairly amazing with shooting, especially long range. I bet she could just about outshoot you, Frank," said Thomas with a chuckle.

Frank responded with painful retort and a grin. "You are right though, she is just about as good as anyone up here at long ranges. She even outshot Michelle at the five hundred yard match we had a couple of months ago." The competition he was referring to was an impromptu affair which started innocently enough with "Bet you can't hit that" and was replied to with "Wanna bet?" The residents all tried their hands at the five hundred yard marker after running home to

get whatever precision rifles they owned. Amy had come out on top of the women with her SER by having a quarter inch smaller group than Michelle who was shooting her Ed Brown. Amy was good at the five hundred yard point, but her smallest group was a quarter inch larger than Frank's largest. However, Frank grudgingly admitted Amy had serious skills with the custom built rifle. Frank continued "What about Jeremy?"

The group thought about it for a minute before George answered. "Jeremy is still on probationary period up here. Do we necessarily trust him for something so important?"

"We trust him enough to carry around a firearm and protect our family. Who knows, he might be a good spotter or even a shooter. Besides, he is at the end of his probationary period and we were going to vote on it at the next meeting. Do you think we are going to throw him out, especially after the attack we just had?" asked Darren.

"I think he is going to be voted in with no problem. We could at least ask him," answered Rick.

"Sorry, boys, just my natural suspicion showing off again. I know he is good to go and might be able to do the spotting and all. I just find it hard to trust anyone that hasn't been living here since we all moved here. I'm an old fart who can't change quickly enough," said George.

"You got the old fart part right, but you do change quickly enough," said Darren with a laugh.

The rest of the small planning group laughed as George again stated his displeasure with colorful words. George got made fun of for his age a lot lately, especially since Kaitlyn Jones had called him "Grandpa George" at the dinner two weeks before. They continued razzing each other for several minutes before focusing back on the problem at hand. They called around before finding Amy and asking her to return to the Conference Center. After arriving, they asked about her shooting experience and explained the possible mission at hand.

She seemed interested in going along, but had never shot to that distance before. After being briefed on the distances involved, she voluntarily pulled herself out. "I don't want to risk such an important mission on something I don't feel totally comfortable with. It's not that job that makes me feel uncomfortable, but the long range shooting. If we were at five hundred meters with my baby, I would say yes in a heartbeat, but at one thousand or more, I'm not so sure. I wouldn't want to put the mission at risk because I was uncomfortable with shooting at long ranges. I'm flattered you considered me, but I have to say no." Nobody held the decision not to compete against her and all thanked her for even considering the task.

Next the group called around and found Jeremy. He was requested to return and then asked about his long range shooting experience.

"I've never shot out beyond five hundred meters and that was only in basic. I've also never shot anything larger than an AK or M-16. Why do you ask?" asked Jeremy.

The group fell silent before George answered. "We are looking at taking on a gang that took over the retreat where Mike and Scott came from and killed most of the residents. There will be

some long range shooting involved."

"Well, I've never backed away from anything in my life, but for this, I wouldn't feel comfortable being a sniper. I just don't know enough about it. I am willing to help out any way I can though," stated Jeremy with resolve.

"Why is that?" asked Mike.

"Honestly, a gang chased me away from the original place I lived at and killed off the residents there. I was perfectly happy there until they attacked and I want to make sure it never happens again, anywhere. If Mike and Scott are your friends and want to get rid of this group that attacked their home, I'm willing to help out," said Jeremy.

The group didn't tell him it wasn't because Mike and Scott had been attacked, but rather the supplies and ordnance at the location. In due time, they would inform him of the actual situation since he was still relatively new to the Ranch and needed more time before being totally trusted. It was decided Thomas and Rick were the top two choices for the second shooter. Thomas and Rick, both competitive about shooting with each other, agreed to have a small shooting competition to determine who would make the long range shots.

Mike and George would go out that afternoon and look for spots to practice from. Darren, Jeremy and Mike agreed to spot for the three shooters, Darren volunteering to go with Frank since the two already worked together. Jeremy volunteered to spot for Thomas and Mike to spot for Rick. Mike agreed to take Jeremy with him and George so both could give him some quick training on being a spotter for a long range shooter. The group broke apart and Thomas told Rick he was going to the range to practice and offered the opportunity for him to go along as well.

For the competition and the actual job, Thomas chose two high end rifles in .300 Win and.338 Lapua along with the best match ammunition he had. Thomas agreed to lend Rick the TRG-42 in .338 Lapua for the shoot off as long as he helped reload the brass afterwards. Both studied the ballistic tables for the two different rounds focusing in on drop factors at the extended ranges. They both established a longer zero for the .300 Win Mag rifles at five hundred meters at the firing range and cleaned the rifles immediately afterwards. Both had equivalent pieces of glass on top of their rifles and the rifles were accurate enough. So it ended up coming down to the shooter.

"I always thought to ask; where did you get that fancy scope for your rifle?" asked Thomas.

"Long story short, provided by the US Government. Do you remember a while back when that idiot spent a quarter million dollars of fall out money on the tactical gear? He bought just about everything, not because it was the best, but because it cost the most. Anyway, even though we didn't have a rifle to mount it on at that time, he still bought four scopes for a designated marksman. That large of a scope was kind of overkill, but it worked. Anyway, they never showed on any supply list and kind of got forgotten, but I never did," said Rick with a smile.

Rick fired the TRG-42 with a more powerful scope and gathered the zero data on the clicks off Thomas's zero at five hundred meters. They found their eyes were very close since the zero was only a few minor changes in windage at five hundred meters. Frank and Darren showed up while Thomas and Rick were cleaning their rifles to practice a little as well. Frank had both his M-24 and the AR-30. He verified the zero of the M-24 at two hundred meters and fired out to five hundred with it. He then completed a zero of the AR-30 at five hundred meters and shot at various targets with ten additional rounds. The recoil pad and the large muzzle brake on the rifle made it a little more pleasant to shoot for extended periods of time. "How come you didn't bring out your fifty cal?" asked Darren.

"Well, it's built for accuracy and all, but you really can't beat the .338 or .300 for long range accuracy. The fifty cal would be better for hard target penetration at the distances we are looking at, but the others have it beat in accuracy," stated Thomas.

"Do we just have the one fifty cal? Or are there more in the inventory?" asked Frank.

"We have one more in storage, a bolt action bullpup. I don't think it's ever been fired, has it?" Rick asked Thomas.

"No, not that I know of," answered Thomas.

"Do you think we could use it in case we need the target penetration at long range?" asked Frank.

"Absolutely, however, I don't know how many match rounds we have available," answered Thomas.

"Don't forget, George and Ryan got that case of M33 ball ammo. I figure it will be about as accurate as we need," answered Rick.

The foursome left the range and went back to the Ranch where they gathered the two large caliber rifles and a can of .50 caliber ammunition. They fired twenty from each weapons platform and kept the brass separate since it would have formed to the individual chamber of the weapons platform. Rick promised to start the next day on reloading the large rounds with the match bullets they had found at the sporting goods warehouse. All four agreed they would help out with the loading since they would be the end user for the product.

The Barrett Model 95 was above expectations scoring first round hits on targets out to five hundred meters. Frank liked the rifle and agreed to clean it and was offered its use if they needed the large caliber for the retreat

"You know, having a five hundred meter range is all well and good, but it can't take advantage of the full range of a lot of our weapons. We have that backhoe and the Bobcats, why don't we extend the berm out to a thousand meters or even further?" he asked.

The entire group agreed it was an outstanding idea and would bring up the idea to the community

leader for implementation. They left the range to brief in the leader and Dave and Renee offered to operate the equipment to move the berm back. The foursome left to their respective ways to clean their individual weapons and prepare for tomorrow. They agreed to meet after dinner at 7:00 PM to find out what George, Mike and Jeremy had found about practice ranges. Thomas was joined by Sharon in the study where he cleaned the Barrett. She helped out with the cleaning and just smiled and shook her head at the huge rifle sitting in parts on the table in his study. He explained the job they would be doing and asked for her permission to go.

"Honey, you know you don't need my permission to go. Again, I don't like you playing hero and all especially since it really doesn't affect us," she replied.

"Sharon, these kinds of people could affect us in the future since they attack and overwhelm retreats much like ours. If they aren't stopped now, they could grow larger in the future and attack us. They need to be dealt with now and not when they have grown so large they can't be controlled," he explained.

"And the other reason is the fact you are good at what you do," she smiled.

He paused before continuing. "No, honestly, there is enough ordnance and weapons at their old retreat to be a problem for everyone. Most of it is buried, but it's only a matter of time before they figure out where it is. When that happens, they will be twice as dangerous as before. Right now they only have a hodgepodge of weapons. With finding the additional weapons, they can outfit fifty to a hundred more people with some serious firepower."

She smiled again and repeated. "And the other reason is you are good at what you do."

"Well, yeah," he answered.

"Yes, honey, you have my permission. And I guess that being a thousand yards away from them is safer than doing close in recon like you did before. Either way, I'm going to worry while you are away, but then again, I worry any time you are away for more than five minutes," she said.

"Nah, nothing to worry about. I can keep them at bay with this large puppy," he said as he gave her a quick kiss. He finished cleaning and they returned to the kitchen for supper. After dinner, as planned, the group met at the Conference Center where they discussed the plans for tomorrow.

"We found a site that is almost an exact match for the shooting spot Frank picked out. The elevation is only off by ten feet and we will only have to cut down one tree. The target area opens up into a large field just like the retreat," stated Mike. "There is also another area a lot like another one at eight hundred meters, but the elevation is off by almost fifty feet. It still would be good to practice on, but factoring in the additional elevation."

"There is also the six hundred meter spot we found, it's an exact match for everything right down to the lack of vegetation. However, we have to cut down more trees to get at it," said George.

They discussed the competition in which Rick and Thomas would get ten shots out of their .300

Win Mag rifles after ranging on human sized targets at one thousand meters. They would then get another ten shots out of the .338 Lapua after getting the ranges as well. Darren would be spotting for Frank and Mike and Jeremy would both spot for Thomas, so Jeremy could get some practical experience in what he had learned that day. Shannon and Tracy were contacted and asked if they could make additional ghillie suits for Mike and Jeremy and they stated they would begin immediately the next day. They came over and quickly sized the two men up and immediately got to work on the suits. During the meeting, the entire group started reloading the .50 caliber brass with Rick guiding the efforts. They managed to get ten rounds apiece loaded for each of the weapons before the meeting broke and the group went to their homes. As they were leaving, Mike cornered Thomas.

"I've never seen such a quick study in my life. Jeremy picked up on everything I told him the first time I mentioned it. We will have to wait to see tomorrow on how he performs, but I think he will be fine," stated Mike.

"Yeah, he has been that way since he arrived here. We only have to show him things one time before he picks it up. Again, the hinging factor is trust," said Thomas.

"True, but he railed on and on about how bad those gangs were while we were out looking for the ranges. It's almost personal with him," stated Mike.

"I hope personal doesn't get involved in the mission," said Thomas.

The next day, the group met at the Conference Center with their weapons and got into the various Rangers, Gators and ATVs for the trek to the range. George and Scott brought out chainsaws to attack the trees at the sites while Mike, Thomas, Jeremy, Frank, Rick and Darren went to the one thousand meter range picked out. The targets were set up with Mike calling them over the radio, ranging them with the laser rangefinder from the shooting spots they had selected. Each of the military style "Ernie" pistol targets were man sized and had a twelve inch circle drawn in pencil at the center. Each person was given five targets to shoot at with two rounds apiece.

After making sure the targets were standing on their own, the group returned to the firing point and contacted George and Scott over the radio to ensure they were not in the line of fire. After making sure the range was clear, Thomas and Rick flipped a coin to see who would shoot first. To make it fair, each would fire ten rounds as practice, then five more in the first string and the final five with the scoring being done by George and Scott. George and Scott were called back from their duties to help adjust the fire and to place another two targets up, these with the white chalk circle showing for the two to practice on. After the additional targets were set up, Thomas won the coin toss and told Rick to go first. He figured by Rick firing first, he could better determine the winds and how much effect they would have on the round's flight.

Rick wasn't happy, but figured with ten rounds practice, he would be able to get the rifle on target. He fired the rounds one at a time, making slight corrections after each and George and Scott called in the impact. Mike and Jeremy were off to the side of him calling the shots in as well. After five rounds, Jeremy had figured out the ballistics of the rounds and was calling the

shots dead on. Thomas took his practice with the same results. After ranging and watching Rick's rounds, he made a first round hit on the target and only had to correct for elevation twelve inches. The other four rounds were right on target and the competition was ready to get underway.

Rick fired his first string at the targets and cleared out his rifle. Thomas came next and fired his five. The ranges were being called alternatively by Mike and Jeremy. After all firing was complete; George and Scott went to the targets to score each and called the group when they were finished. Thomas and Rick had to sit with their backs to the targets while they were being scored. The next five rounds fired by Rick didn't go so well. On his second and third shots, a sudden gust of wind affected the trajectory of the round and blew one entirely off target and the other nicking the edge. Thomas came back to the firing line and almost had the same thing happen on his fourth shot, but had managed to compensate since he saw the wind coming from the trees in the distance.

Scott and George scored the targets again while Rick and Thomas sat facing the other way. The next rounds fired would be from the .338 Lapua rifle with Thomas being first at bat this time. After the five rounds of practice, he had the scope adjusted for the distance and was ready to fire. Since the scope would have to be readjusted for Rick, it was decided to fire all ten shots at one time and then hand the rifle over. Thomas agreed to this although it would take longer since the shots would take longer in order for the barrel to cool.

Thomas fired his first string of five shots and the group waited for ten minutes to let the barrel cool down from the first string. The next five rounds were fired and Scott and George made the final scoring marks on the targets. The barrel was again allowed to cool down and Rick made his zero shots and fired the ten shots of the competition. When they finished, they packed up the weapons and empty brass and drove down to the targets.

When they arrived, George made a bit to-do about the announcements to the two and announced it much like a sportscast. "Okay campers, here are the results. Rick with his Remington PSS in .300 Winchester Magnum caliber made ten shots of which eight were on target and six in the circle. This is counting the nick on the edge of the one blown off the target by the winds. Of the other two, one went wide by close to two feet and the other under by about five feet. We saw the impact of both the rounds."

"Thomas with his whiz-bang Accuracy International in .300 Winchester Magnum caliber, a foreign rifle that really has no business out here, made ten shots of which nine were on target with eight in the circle. One missed the target wide by about a foot with elevation right on target. We saw the impact of that one," he concluded.

Scott moved on to the .338 Lapua rifle competition. "Thomas firing first made hits on ten of the ten targets, with nine being in the circle. Rick, next up, made hits on nine of the ten targets with eight of the nine within the circle. The other shot went right by about five feet. So here we have it folks, the winner of the competition is Thomas!"

The shooters congratulated each other and Rick was razzed about the "horrid" shooting by the others. However, to have made the shots from a kilometer out and hit seventeen of twenty times was impressive. It was decided Rick would be on the backup team when they went out and would continue to hone his skills on the range as much as possible. However, the ammunition priority went to Frank and Thomas for the moment. Mike voluntarily withdrew from the main spotter position and gave it to Jeremy, who immediately accepted and was informed about the overall mission at the retreat.

The bolt and autoloader Barretts were brought out and fired at the one thousand meter distance as well. While their accuracy wasn't as good as the other rifles at that distance due to the standard ammunition used, the rounds hit the target sixty percent of the time. Each person knew no matter where they hit a target with the large rounds, serious damage would occur. The rounds for the individual weapons would all be loaded over the next few days and test fired in the controlled environment. Other loads would be tried and if the accuracy was off by even just a little, the rounds would be replaced. Rick had loading data for the rounds involved and even had a few loads for the .338 Lapua.

It was decided the spotter would not carry a precision rifle but would serve in the traditional role of nothing more than spotting and providing close in security for the snipers. Darren would pull his M-4 out of semi-retirement since it had a burst feature which might prove useful in covering fire situations and Jeremy would retain his M-16A4. Both Frank and Thomas agreed they might need a secondary firearm besides a pistol and agreed to take a smaller weapon. Frank chose one of the MP5Ks brought out by the group and Thomas the MP5A3 he collected from the soldiers on the night of his firefight. Rick grabbed his Olympic Arms Carbine in .45 ACP. He took the time to modify the weapon with the fire control group from an M-16 giving it a burst feature.

It was also decided to take another fire team as a support element and base camp security. The group wasn't happy with taking eight members of the security force for the planned week long excursion, but figured the additional support might be needed in case of a counterattack. Mike and Rick automatically volunteered and were joined by Scott. The fourth member would be a volunteer from the group and they would ask at the next meeting. Having a base camp would also allow the shooters to carry a variety of different weapons to the location for different targets and have security on them while they were on missions to shoot. It also meant they would not need to carry their full gear to the target areas which might slow them down or otherwise hamper an egress from the shooting hides.

The group returned to the Ranch and started making plans for the mission, backwards planning it from the moment of insertion like they had during the recon of the gang's house near Cañon City. While they were discussing the training schedule, Ashley Scott entered the Conference Center, and being curious, came to the group to see what they were doing. After informing her of the mission, but not the particulars, she immediately volunteered to help out. The planning group had an informal discussion on the spot and decided to include her in the support element. They now had the full team established and could begin training full time. They would begin work the next morning at 0700.

The next day the shooters and the support element working on movement of the full team to the

base camp and establishing security of the area. They also worked on actions on contact, danger crossings, traveling formations and emergency disengagement. It was also agreed on to carry an M-203 and a light machine gun. Ashley volunteered to carry the M-249 and Mike to carry the M-203. The group was rather leery about Ashley carrying the machine gun since she was slender and petite. What they didn't know was she ran five miles every day with her pack and rifle and worked out on the Universal gym set in the Conference Center four times a week. While she was small, she was in great shape and would be able to manhandle the machine gun if needed. Since Mike had been trained in the weapons use, he did not need any formal instruction on the M-203. However, Ashley had never before fired the M-249 and was taken by Rick to learn how to properly operate the light machine gun. Over lunch, the entire group conducted a map reconnaissance of the area and established locations for the drop off point, objective rally point and pick up points. After lunch, they continued the tactics training minus Ashley and Rick who were still working on the machine gun.

By day two, Ashley was becoming more proficient on the M-249 and was becoming used to the weight of the gun. The teams were coming together quickly and learning to anticipate each other's moves. Reaction drills went well and by afternoon, the four two-person teams were operating like a well oiled machine in groups of two, four, six and eight. The afternoon was dedicated to the two sniper teams performing their creeps into firing hides with the support team watching to detect any of their positions. By the evening, the group gathered back together and broke for the day.

On the third day, they continued practicing their battle drills and after lunch, broke off for firing practice. Ashley had been a quick learner on the machine gun as she took less than one hundred rounds to start putting steel on target with her first burst out to five hundred meters. The snipers returned to the area of the competition and the other two areas identified and engaged targets at long range, scoring first round hits ninety percent of the time. The rounds cooked up by Rick for the .300 Win Mag rifle worked exceptionally well as did the rounds for the .338 Lapua. The .50 BMG still needed some work and he promised to put together a different load that night for them to try the next day.

The fourth day of training consisted much like the previous had done with the exception of night operations. The group trained for movement at night, establishing a hasty and prepared ambush and to defend a position. Night vision devices were passed out to the group and each person trained with them on. More shooting was tried and night firing was accomplished from each of the weapons, including the precision rifles.

The fifth day consisted of nothing but firing for the team, along with the snipers and spotters firing their protective weapons. Thomas found he loved the prolific sub machine gun and wondered why he had never fired it before. Frank also found he thoroughly enjoyed his shorter model and the two fired five magazines at targets varying from ten meters out to one hundred fifty. Although rated at a two hundred meter effective range, the rounds were iffy at best. Rick, Thomas and Frank all fired plenty of rounds from their precision rifles for targets one thousand meters all the way out to fourteen hundred meters. As predicted, the extreme long range shooting wasn't that accurate, but hits were scored forty percent of the time at the long range. The .338 Lapua did much better at the long range, scoring hits on targets sixty percent of the

time. They quickly learned to anticipate the affect the winds would have on the rounds at long range and their accuracy improved steadily. By the time they finished training, each sniper had fired in excess of three hundred rounds through the individual weapons and hand loaded each replacement round themselves.

The afternoon consisted of administrative planning and going over again the steps to occupying the base camp. Movement routes were planned on the map with a four leg course getting them to the Objective Rally Point. The routes were copied down and last minute checks were made on the equipment, radios and weapons they would carry. Radio frequencies were programmed by Ryan into the radios and two spares would be carried by the support element. The team all agreed to slip their departure by one day in order for the teams to spend some time with their families before they left. They would meet at 0600 the day after tomorrow to take the truck ride to the drop off point and spend the first day getting into position at the ORP and establishing the base camp. The next day was spent with the families as planned and Thomas spent as much time as he could with Sharon and Angel. The single members did what they did normally with time off and enjoyed each other's company.

The next morning, Sharon rose with Thomas and cooked him breakfast before he left. As he grabbed his pack, field gear and sub machine gun to leave (his rifles had been packed and staged at the Conference Center the night before) she made him promise once again to be careful as she did not need any more gray hair. He informed her once again she didn't have gray hair and promised he would be more than careful and would come home to her in one piece.

CHAPTER 43 - STRIKE FIRST, STRIKE HARD, NO MERCY

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 6 Months, 24 Days
Date/Time: 13 November/0648 Local
Location: The Ranch

The group met and boarded the truck for the journey to the drop off point off a county road east of the retreat. The drive was spent in silence as the eight members of the teams each thought about the mission ahead of them. *I'm going to do it again. I'm going to condemn a bunch of people to death without a trial for being stupid. People should know better than to act up like this, but I guess hunger and starvation is seriously hampering everyone's thinking. However, from what Mike tells us, this group wasn't exactly starving. They just feel it is okay to kill someone else for the food they have. But I do know if we don't stop them, we might be next on their list of places to take over. And I darn well know we aren't going to talk them out of it by asking pretty please. We have to do this…again* thought Thomas on the drive.

They arrived at the drop off point, dismounted the truck and quickly moved the supplies into the nearby woods so the truck could leave without being spotted. After establishing a base camp, the group mounted their packs and various weapons and moved off. Thomas was fairly well heavy since he was carrying not only his pack and sub machine gun, but also the monster Barrett broken down in a soft sided case strapped to his pack. The remainder of the rifles were split evenly among the rest of the group and were switched off when they called a security halt. They moved quickly, although silently until they reached the ORP in the early afternoon. Mike and Rick dropped off their gear and went ahead to scout the area while the rest of the group set up a 360 degree defense of the immediate area while they were waiting. The two returned shortly and the rest of the group moved into a position that offered good natural defensive positions. They established local security and began setting up the makeshift natural shelters they would be using during the planned weeklong stay.

Since there was still some daylight left, Mike agreed to lead the two sniper teams to the first clearing to check out the retreat area. They donned their ghillie suits and the snipers grabbed a precision rifle, a spotting scope and binoculars apiece. They walked silently to the area and stopped just short of the clearing. Jeremy had thoughtfully brought along the laser rangefinder he was assigned. The two teams crept silently to the edge of the trees, but didn't go further than the woods. The retreat was below them, almost exactly as it had been in the makeshift range set up at the Ranch. They saw the individual cabins and trailers sitting around and saw several people walking around doing various things.

Jeremy immediately set to ranging the various buildings and marking down the ranges in a small notepad he was carrying. Darren moved along side of him and started copying the information as well. Frank and Thomas flipped up the covers on their scopes and peered through them, looking at the various people at the retreat. They could see several guard posts below, but none seriously camouflaged. A guard sat near the gate and looked bored with his duties. Of the posts, Thomas and Frank could see three of the five were asleep and the other two not paying attention.

A door to one of the trailers flew open and a girl in her late twenties wearing only panties was shoved out onto the ground. She was followed by two males and a female who laughed at her. The girl would have been attractive had she not had a black eye, bruises on her body and a look of horror on her face. Although the two could not hear the laughter, they could see the three making fun of the half naked woman. She picked herself up to her knees and turned her back on the laughing threesome. The snipers saw she was crying and put her hands up to wipe the tears away from her face as one of the three went over and kicked her to the ground. After several more minutes of shouting, laughing and pointing at her, the three left her alone outside. The girl eventually rose and went to another cabin where she entered not to be seen again that night. The scene angered all who were watching and also made a small dent in their plans. They had planned on everyone at the retreat being hostile and there only being one non-combatant concern. They would have to rethink their plans now before an attack could be made. They continued observing for another half hour before going back to the base camp.

"So, what does this do to our rules of engagement?" asked Frank.

"Easy, we take another day to observe and find out who is carrying firearms and who isn't. I guarantee those we don't see carrying firearms are the ones who are probably prisoners. After that, we only shoot those that we saw armed the first day. How many people down there were armed?" asked Thomas.

"We planned on thirty-two people at the retreat. I counted nineteen, two of which were prisoners, or were being treated like animals. In addition to the five we saw on security duty, so twenty-two armed individuals. That leaves ten unaccounted for," answered Jeremy.

"Might have been sleeping or something," stated Darren.

"A good bet." answered Frank. "So we observe for another day and try to pick out everyone. Plus, it gives us an exact amount for the guard force and how many prisoners they might have."

The idea was discussed with the group and met with general approval. Ashley was a little upset at what was happening and asked if she might go along to observe the next day to see if any of the prisoners might have been retreat members. They told her she could come along, but would have to remain in the trees and not fire, no matter what she saw going on. She wasn't happy with the decision, but saw the big picture and surprise in store for the group when the shooting began. The group made contact with the Ranch over the ham radio using code and informed them they were in position and would observe the next day. They signed off with the Ranch and established security for the night.

The next day went on as planned with the two sniper teams moving down to the clearing and creeping into position to watch the retreat. They found good hides and firing positions and knew this was where they would make their first shots from the next day. Ranges were established again by Jeremy and Darren from the two different positions and targets were identified. In the afternoon, a group of four left out in a vehicle and headed on the roadway towards the town.

Ashley was brought to the clearing and couldn't identify any of the prisoners as being former retreat members, except Holly Meredith.

Close to dark, the vehicle returned along with another prisoner for the group. Another woman, this time in her late teens, was pulled from the vehicle and carried into the nearest cabin. Both Thomas and Frank could see her screaming through the magnified scopes and wanted to pull the trigger at that instant to prevent what would probably happen to the woman that night. The problem was there was not enough light to make the shots and they would be deviating from the plan. Thomas and Frank separately made the decision to target the individuals they saw getting out of the truck one of the first targets in the morning if they became available. The group spent the evening comparing notes again and establishing the priorities of fire in the morning. Between the notes Jeremy made and the ones Darren had made, they found the amount of gang members at the retreat had grown to thirty-nine, at least that was the amount of armed personnel they saw during their observation that day. Of this group, six were women and had abused the hostages as well or had been armed. They also saw six prisoners, five women and one man who were abused to some degree or another.

It was decided to make two quick shots in the morning and creep away to another position. They established a target line in which the retreat was divided in half. Thomas would be free to engaged targets on his side of the line and Frank on his. This way, neither shooter would be attempting to engage the same targets. In the afternoon, they would make two more quick shots if possible from the second location, the clearing at eight hundred meters. The first range he would be shooting from would be one thousand-fifty meters, give or take two meters. Frank's position was slightly further out at eleven hundred meters. Each shooter consulted the ballistics tables to verify the drop of the cartridges at the ranges they would be shooting at and ensured their rifles were clean. Both agreed to take one guard post apiece and one of the men from the truck if they were visible.

The next morning, the teams crept into position again, this time they started before the sun was rising and were in position just as it began to rise. The clearing they were using was to the east of the retreat and the sun at their backs would hopefully blind anyone looking for them. Frank and Thomas had synchronized their watches before setting off that morning, planning on making their first shots at 0700 sharp. The seconds ticked away as the burlap on Thomas' rifle fluttered in the wind. Jeremy began feeding him shooting data at five minutes prior to the firing time.

"Winds from left to right, four miles an hour…range one thousand and forty-eight meters…temperature fifty-four degrees…humidity light…four minutes…winds now five miles an hour, left click one…temperature steady…three minutes…winds still constant…two minutes…winds variable, four to five miles an hour left to right…no change…target is guard on duty at gate…one minute…winds now five miles an hour…guard is not moving…second target spotted…range one thousand ninety-four meters by cabin one…thirty seconds…winds steady…ten seconds…fire when ready."

Thomas adjusted the rifle slightly and locked in on the guard sitting at the gate, looking like he was going to fall asleep at any moment. He aligned the scope on the center mass of the individual and then provided the correct amount of elevation for the rifle. He was pulling back

on the trigger when he heard the report of Frank's rifle a fraction of a second before his own trigger broke. The match hollowpoint bullet arrived just as Thomas brought the scope back onto the target. He saw the impact of the bullet and saw the target go down. He cycled the action of the rifle, smoothly, but not quickly, catching the spent brass with his left hand before it fell to the ground. Closing the bolt, he peered back into the scope and saw the second target, now alerted near the porch of the first cabin.

"Winds still left to right, but decreasing, right click one, target not moving. Fire when ready," stated Jeremy.

Thomas again aligned the rifle with the target and prepared to fire again. Frank was letting his second shot go at another target as Thomas provided the right amount of elevation again and pulled the trigger. Again he saw the impact of the round and saw a grimace on the man's face as he fell to the ground. *That's what you deserve for raping that poor woman, you piece of garbage*, thought Thomas as he watched the man fall to the ground screaming from the wound that penetrated his heart. The screaming didn't last long as the wound made him bleed out fairly quickly. He rechecked the guard at the gate and found he lasted about as long, but had tried to crawl back to safety of the buildings before dying.

A flurry of activity happened after the shots. Doors were flying open and armed men were running all over the place. A few opened fire down the road towards the gate area, but nowhere near the two snipers. Targets of opportunity were popping up like mad and complete and utter chaos was happening at the retreat.

"I think we can go for another shot, how about you?" asked Frank.

"I can get at least one, maybe two more shots. Let's stick to the target line we created last night and go from there," answered Thomas.

"Okay, in two minutes, pick a target and fire. At 0704, make your shot. We will either stay in position and observe or make one more shot. Two minutes," ordered Frank.

Thomas scanned the area looking for one more of the men from the truck from last night. He couldn't find one and instead focused on an individual with an M-16A2 still firing bursts down the road. "Target, male shooting the rifle down the road. Range," he said quietly to Jeremy.

"Distance to target, ten-sixty-three…winds constant five miles an hour left to right…left click one…temperature still constant…no change in winds…ten seconds…fire when ready."

Both he and Frank fired at the exact same instant, both their shots finding targets. A sudden gust of wind at the last moment moved both their shots slightly off target and the man Thomas had been targeting now had a perforated lung and was screaming loud enough they could faintly hear him in the position. The man Frank had targeted had moved slightly and with the shell being pushed slightly to the right, it had entered his chest at an angle. They had taken out six of the retreat defenders in less than five minutes, bringing their numbers down to thirty-three. Thomas observed the area again attempting to see if anyone had their position fixed or not. It didn't seem

anyone had noticed where the fire was coming from and the retreat defenders again fired randomly at different areas outside of the retreat.

"I think we can take one more shot. They haven't zeroed us yet," stated Thomas over the radio.

"I agree, but that's it. We need to move after this one. Fire at 0708, choice target," stated Frank.

Thomas cycled the action again and caught the brass which he handed over to Jeremy. He finally found one of the men from the night before attempting to hide behind a woodpile. *You think being behind that woodpile will protect you, but I can still see you since I am higher than you are. Bad choice my friend.* "Target, man behind woodpile next to trailer one."

"Target…ten-ninety-one…winds left to right, five miles per hour…no change to scope…temperature now fifty seven degrees…no change to tables…fire when ready."

Thomas knew his target area was quite small since he only had less than a foot of space to work with on the man for a center mass shot. He added a slight amount of elevation and fired his next shot, followed a half second later by Frank. Thomas got back on target just as the man's head jerked back from the impact of the round. He had put too much elevation into the setting and hit the man just below the left eye socket where the nose begins to curve outward. He went down immediately, falling onto the ground in a heap. Frank had hit his target center mass, another one of the individuals firing at random targets.

Eight targets down and I bet the rest are going to lie low for a while. We might even pack it up for the day and come back tomorrow morning, thought Thomas as he and Jeremy began the slow crawl back to the tree line behind them.

Rick and Mike had returned to the tree line to overwatch the two sniper teams as they slowly crawled back to the cover and concealment provided by the large Aspen trees. It took almost two hours to make it to the relative safety of the trees and also crawling another twenty meters inside to remain undetected while they stood up. Frank and Darren joined up with Jeremy and Thomas with huge smiles on their face. "Not bad guys, we are down to thirty-one targets now," said Frank, who was annotating the kills in his logbook.

"Not bad? Thomas made a head shot from eleven hundred meters!" exclaimed Jeremy.

"I actually got lucky on that shot. I was aiming for the top of his chest and applied too much elevation," explained Thomas.

"Whatever! It was still a nice freakin' shot!" said Jeremy.

"You don't have a logbook?" asked Frank.

"No, I didn't even think to bring one," answered Thomas.

"Don't worry, I annotated all the data for you," stated Jeremy.

Thomas took out a small notepad and copied down the information on a page he wasn't using. He used Frank's book as a guideline on what information to write up. After copying down the information, he handed the notepad back to Jeremy when they were joined by Rick and Mike.

"You ought to see the mass chaos down there! They are running around like chickens with their heads cut off. Nobody seems to be in charge and I bet one of you took out a leader or something. There is no rhyme or reason to anything going on," stated Mike.

"Probably Frank's shot. I only took out a guard at the gate, two of the rapists from last night and another one firing off into the great beyond," answered Thomas.

"Could be mine. I took the shot on someone who looked like he was directing others into defensive positions," answered Frank.

"Good shot. It'll be better since it might take longer for a new leader to emerge," said Mike.

The six individuals went back to the ORP and had a quick lunch. Frank and Thomas both ran a Boresnake up the barrel and cleaned the bolt of their rifle while eating. They discussed a new game plan on their firing and decided to wait until late afternoon to give the residents a false sense of security. Hopefully it would bring them out of their cover more and more as time went on and not being shot at. They briefly discussed not shooting at all that day and decided to make the decision after they got into position and observed the area for a while.

They reached the new firing position, a cleared spot almost nine hundred meters away from the retreat. Again, the four crawled until they found a good firing point and took up position. Jeremy immediately started ranging targets and Thomas immediately took to peering through the scope for targets. The retreat below them was still somewhat active with people running here and there. *Maybe it isn't a bad choice not to fire again today,* thought Thomas as he continued to look for individual targets.

For an hour they observed the retreat and the different people running around. "I think we should wait for tomorrow," said Frank over the radio.

"I agree, they think we're still out there. We shouldn't fire, but we should remain in position until sunset before trying to move," stated Thomas.

"Sounds like a plan. No shooting unless there is a threat to us, the other team or one of the prisoners," replied Frank.

The two sniper teams observed the retreat for the remainder of the afternoon, not moving from their current position. The activity on the ground seemed to diminish as the day went on until people were no longer running this way and that when moving between buildings. Eventually sunset came and the two teams crawled back towards the tree line and safety. As with before, Rick and Mike came out to overwatch the team as they left the area.

When they reached the woods and were able to stand up, Frank made the exclamation "I could have gotten another of the rapists from the other night!"

"Man, that sucks. I almost wish you would have taken the shot," said Thomas.

Frank sighed before continuing. "I was tempted, but I knew we had better put these guys more at ease before taking another shot. I expect tomorrow they might be sending a party out looking for us or rather where we were at."

"And we can give them a big surprise. While we were up in our perch, I noticed the other two areas are in visible view of our last hide. I mean it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out we need a line of sight into the retreat and I hope these guys do send someone to that clearing six hundred meters away from the retreat. It's a pretty decent shot, about nine hundred meters from the clearing we were at to the other one, almost the same as the retreat," said Thomas.

"We could have you taking those guys while I keep them occupied in the retreat. I figure two or three shots, maybe four again, but these guys are going to wise up eventually and figure out our spots. We can only hope to take a lot more of them out before that happens," said Frank.

"We can also hope they are lazy and check the closest spots first instead of the longer range ones; that would help," offered Darren.

They made their way back to the ORP again and made their plans for the next day. Again, they contacted the Ranch via the radio and relayed the status report and received some news back. A small raiding party had been discovered and dealt with by the recon team. The party, totaling seven people, apparently had been observing the Ranch for two days before getting ready to begin a raid. The recon team initiated a long range ambush and was able to take out six of the seven people in the first ten seconds. The seventh person did not surrender as the team expected and was able to evade on foot for several hours before expiring due to the wounds received in the ambush. The recon team found him lying dead against a tree almost off the property near the stream. The sniper teams considered asking for an immediate pickup but were told in code to finish the mission at the end of the transmission.

The night passed in peace and each member of the team took his or her turn on fire watch. In the early morning, the snipers and spotters were woken again and made the trek to the established firing zone. As with the previous morning, they made it into position just as the sun was coming up to their backs. Frank and Thomas agreed before starting out to hold off on any shots prior to at least 10:00 to see what the retreat residents would do. They observed the retreat at length and found the members were more lackadaisical than they had been yesterday afternoon. The clock crept closer to the time and the two snipers picked targets in the retreat. Thomas had identified one member who appeared to be directing the other gang members and another who seemed to be some form of leader. He made these his first and second targets since they were stationary, sitting on one of the cabin porches.

At 0940, a small group of eight gathered in the middle of the retreat, wearing web gear and carrying assault rifles. One of the leaders came off the porch and addressed the group. After

five minutes of talking and pointing towards the six hundred meter clearing, the group meandered away towards the hillside. It was as Thomas and Frank had predicted. The group was going to go check out the local area to see who was around. Frank called him over the radio.

"Looks like we were right and should hold off on our shots. Let's wait until these guys get into the clearing. I will take the clearing and you take the compound. Do you already have targets established?" he asked over the radio.

"Yes, two targets, they appear to be leadership of some sort," replied Thomas.

There was a momentary pause as Frank contemplated the request. "Pick one more. We will go for three shots this time. One per minute starting on the countdown established when these idiots come out of the tree line in the clearing."

"Roger that. Three shots, no target line for my shots," replied Thomas over the radio.

It took almost a half an hour for the group to start to emerge from the forest by the clearing. The gang members were apparently out of shape for slogging it up the mountain trails. When the group of eight was in the clearing, he heard Frank begin the countdown. "Fire at 10:27, one shot, then two more shots, one at 10:28 and again at 10:29."

Jeremy began feeding him targeting data on the first of the two leaders sitting on the porch, the one who had briefed the disorganized patrol who had left. He briefly swung the rifle back to the clearing to check on those targets. The group moved with no purpose and not in a tactical formation. Thomas moved back to his original target as he made the necessary adjustments to the rifle and prepared to fire.

10:27 came and both Frank and Thomas fired at the same instant. Frank's shot hit one of the gang members who had taken the time to sit on a rock to rest directly in the heart and Thomas hit the leader in the upper chest, going through the man and nicking the top of his heart. He would need to readjust the elevation for the next shot. The other member of the leadership sitting on the porch had disappeared from view so Thomas had to select another target. He noticed the gate guard crouched down behind the barrier at the roadway and decided to make it his next target. The man was firing his rifle around the side of the barrier down the road at nothing. "Target, gate guard behind the barrier."

Jeremy shifted slightly to see the new target. "Target, man in red shirt by barrier…range eleven-seventeen…winds eight miles per hour left to right…three clicks left…temperature sixty three degrees…no change to tables…fifteen seconds….fire when ready." Thomas pulled the trigger once again sending the heavy match grade projectile towards the target. He saw the round hit the man in the left shoulder and exit through his right side. The target dropped and didn't move.

Frank had chosen another member who had been cowering behind a rock looking completely the wrong way. As luck would have it, ballistics were with him and the round entered the base of the man's neck and almost took his head off. Frank had given the target a little more elevation than he planned, much like Thomas had done the previous day.

Thomas immediately scanned for more targets and found another of the rapists from two nights before. Thomas could see through the scope he was peering in the general direction of their hide. At that moment, Frank called over the radio. "I think we might have a problem. Two of my group might have us bracketed."

"I have the same problem, although I only have one," replied Thomas.

"We should take them all three out. You get the one shot and I will take another two. Fire at the established time," replied Frank.

Thomas had a problem though; his target was very small since he was hiding behind cover looking their way. The only part of the man visible was his shoulders and head. He would attempt the shot anyway. "Target, man in red shirt behind the brick wall by trailer three."

"Target, man in red shirt behind brick wall by trailer three…range nine-sixty-seven…winds constant eight miles per hour, no change…temperature, no change…twenty seconds…fire when ready," replied Jeremy in a monotone voice.

Thomas again engaged the trigger and sent the round downrange. He underestimated the elevation and winds decreased during the bullets flight. It struck the brick wall in front and to the left of the man. Even at that distance, the heavy round broke the bricks and created a spall of pieces on the other side. Thomas immediately cycled the weapon and prepared for another shot. He heard the report of Frank's rifle to his left and knew Frank would begin to ex-fil soon. The man was attempting to crawl away from the wall on his stomach. Thomas knew he didn't hit him with the first shot. "Preparing to fire, same target."

"Range now nine-sixty-nine and growing…all other data the same, fire when ready."

Thomas applied the correct amount of lead he figured for the slow moving target and pulled the trigger for the final time in this engagement. The round struck home this time in the lower back of the man, splitting his spinal cord before ricocheting off into his stomach and exiting through his right lung. The man didn't move after the shot, but Thomas could see him screaming. He and Jeremy began their slow crawl towards the safety of the forest two hundred fifty meters to their rear. When they were within fifty meters of the tree line, they heard firing from the retreat and heard the impact of the rounds to their rear. An overwhelming urge to run to the trees came over Thomas, but he stayed in place. He could see Mike in the trees ahead giving him thumbs up. He and Jeremy continued their crawl towards the safety of the woods when they heard more firing from the retreat. This time there were no impacts heard behind them. More firing was heard and again, no impacts were heard. When they reached the safety of the trees, they stood up and were greeted by the other four. "What's the deal with the firing?"

"I think they are just randomly sweeping the clearings here. We might have worn out our welcome around here," stated Mike.

The group had another seven kills, bringing the total number of gang members down to twenty-

four. With another day of firing, they would be able to bring that number under twenty and more manageable for a strike force to take the retreat back. They would discuss it when they returned to the base camp. Mike and Rick told the two they were going to stay behind for another hour to see what happened with the gang members this time since another of their leaders were killed. The two sniper teams quietly marched back to the ORP where they were challenged then admitted by Ashley.

"Do you think we can get another day in?" asked Frank.

"I was wondering the same thing. These guys are getting fairly wise to our tricks and hitting the shooting zones was pretty smart of them although they probably wouldn't have hit anything. I think maybe one more day, three or four shots apiece would be nice especially if we are going to take this place on," replied Thomas.

The two discussed the merits for another five minutes before Mike was heard over the radio. "We might have a problem. It seems everyone is gathering up, getting ready to head for the hills. They are all heading for one of the larger cabins carrying rifles and beaucoup ammo. Give me a minute and I can get you a SALUTE."

The group immediately replaced what ammo they had shot off and got ready to go back to the clearing. After replenishing their stores, Mike called over the radio. "Stand by for SALUTE. Size, twenty-eight individuals; Activity, gathering at Cabin Two; Location, Cabin Two; Uniform, mixed civilian and camouflage; Time, current; Equipment, rifles and pistols."

"So there were more than the previous thirty-two," stated Frank.

Mike again was heard over the radio. "They are dispersing from the rear of the cabin and heading into the woods, looks to be in the direction of firing point one. I definitely think we have worn out our welcome."

"We have a problem though. Even if we called the Ranch right now, it's going to take at least three hours to get to the pickup point, probably four since they aren't ready for us," said Scott. "We might have to hold these guys off for that long."

"We don't have any other choice," stated Mike. "Call it in to the Ranch and let them know our situation. Other than that, I think we should set up the teams to delay them as much as possible."

Thomas and Frank agreed and got their weapons ready. The two sniper teams made sure they had plenty of ammo for both the rifles and their secondary weapons and headed towards the clearing designated as firing point one. Frank had replaced his AR-30 with his M-24 since the ranges they would be firing from would be significantly shorter than they had been doing. They took up positions apart from one another where they might be able to catch the group in a crossfire. Scott and Ashley remained behind to contact the Ranch and request help, but would move up to the teams if they needed support. Rick and Mike would remain in position at firing point two observing the group until they were called on. They sent regular reports until they could not see the attackers any longer. "We counted twenty-two of them leaving the cabin and

they all are headed for firing point one. We are going to wait for contact to move and then catch them in a crossfire."

The time seemed to move at a snail's pace as the teams waited for contact. The clearing they were in was six hundred meters long and afforded good defensive cover to the defenders, but little to the attackers. Thomas and Jeremy kept an eye not only on the clearing, but on the woods as well. After the long wait, they heard shouting in the woods near the base of the clearing. It was faint and they couldn't understand what was being said, but the sound of human voices was unmistakable. They continued to wait until Frank called in his contact report.

"Contact, bandits in the trees near the edge of the clearing. Those red shirts really stick out don't they? I can only see five so far, but some actually are wearing camouflage. No wait, three more, total now eight. The rest of the group seems to be moving up slowly" stated Frank.

Thomas scanned the far tree line and saw the figures in the woods, stopping just short of the tree line. Frank continued to call in the reports stating the group was getting online, possibly preparing for an attack. Mike and Rick were moving their position and coming back since the majority of the action would be here.

"I count twenty total individuals, but I might have missed two in the mass confusion there. Firing lines, I will go left to right, you go right to left. I will call if I need support over here," stated Frank in his "business as usual" voice.

"Agreed, I will go right to left," replied Thomas.

"I got through to the Ranch and they are sending two teams to help out. They will be here in two hours barring any unforeseen circumstances," said Scott.

The team waited until they heard yelling from the woods below them. At once, the entire assault group of twenty-two individuals came running out of the woods firing from the hip and screaming. The attack had the intended psychological impact since it caused both Frank and Thomas to pause before firing. After two seconds, they began to mark targets and fire. With the massed attack, Thomas wished for his PTR for the first time since they had been here since it was far more capable of making follow up shots quicker than the bolt action. Frank in his position was thinking the same thing as he continued to load and fire at the targets. Ashley was called to move forward and provide some suppressive fire from the light machine gun and she immediately headed that way.

After five of their assault group had been hit, the group started making use of the available cover and concealment. Not only were they using the sparse rocks as cover, they used them to rest since the majority of the group was out of shape and they were moving uphill. This actually helped the defenders since hitting a moving target is a difficult task under most circumstances. Frank and Thomas continued to engage targets and made hits, bringing the total number down to fourteen before long.

Darren and Jeremy were able to open up at three hundred meters and the other weapons gave the

attackers a moment to pause. *Maybe there were more than the two snipers we think we are dealing with,* thought a few of their members. *But if we go back empty handed, Bad B will kill us for sure,* they continued thinking. The group continued to run from cover to cover and their number continued to fall. They were down to eight by the time they were within two hundred meters of the sniper positions. Four each went for the separate hides. Both Frank and Thomas fired one final shot from their precision rifles and picked up the yet unused sub machine guns. Thomas quickly chambered a round and fired at the approaching individuals and scored hits as well as Jeremy. The last attacker was within fifty meters when he was finally hit by both men's weapons. The silence of the ending battle was overpowering and the two sniper teams heard the soft moans of wounded men on the battlefield before them.

"We need to go check them out," stated Frank.

"Jeremy and I will go, you cover us from your position," stated Thomas.

Mike, Ashley and Rick arrived at the clearing and took over the overwatch duties so Frank and Darren could check their fields of fire. As they were walking through, Jeremy pulled his Glock pistol out and shot one of the attackers between the eyes.

"What are you doing?!" shouted Thomas.

Jeremy looked at Thomas with a surprise on his face. "I'm taking care of this garbage. Just because they are wounded doesn't mean they won't heal and be a threat in the future."

Thomas looked at his partner and the dark mood that had come over him. "We should try to give them medical attention at least. This is outright murder!"

"Would they give us medical attention?" he asked.

"Probably not, but that's what separates them from us!" shouted Thomas.

At that point, one of the wounded members fired his rifle in the direction of the two. Thomas immediately turned and placed two bursts into the man who dropped his rifle, dead on the spot.

"Okay, we need to be more careful from now on," stated Thomas as he turned to Jeremy. He saw him lying on the ground, clutching his chest. Thomas screamed over the radio for Scott to come up and render aid to the wounded man as he pulled Jeremy behind a rock to his left.

The bullet had entered the Jeremy's chest through the left lung and Thomas could see it was a sucking chest wound. He rolled him over and found the exit wound and covered it in a piece of plastic from a bandage and taped it over the exit. He also placed the dressing over the wound and rolled him back over. He looked through his aid kit for another dressing when Scott appeared. "What is it?"

"Sucking chest wound, through and through. Back side is plugged already," stated Thomas.

Scott took over the treatment for Jeremy who looked at Thomas and stated "I told you so."

"Save your breath, you're going to pull through," said Thomas.

Scott continued to work on Jeremy and Thomas went back out to the field, this time dispatching those individuals who even remotely looked like they were capable of resisting. He saw Frank and Darren doing much the same thing on the other side of the clearing since they had heard both the shot and the scream for help over the radio. In the coming weeks, each man on the field that day would have to face the decision each had made concerning the cold dispatch of the wounded attackers. Each man went through a personal grief over the decision to end a wounded man's life made in anger. Although they never spoke of it, they each carried the burden around for many years after the incident.

After they finished clearing the field, they returned to Scott and the wounded Jeremy. Scott had started an IV and finished cleaning the wound. "We have to get him someplace besides here. I know for a fact we have everything I need to treat him at the retreat."

"One small problem, Doc. They still control the retreat," stated Frank.

"So go take it! There aren't more than six of them remaining down there. You guys are trained in this. Get rid of them and free those hostages as well," replied Scott.

Frank, Darren and Thomas briefly discussed a game plan and were joined by Mike. It was decided to leave Rick and Ashley on support while the four cleared the buildings around the retreat. Mike and Thomas teamed up as they had when training and prepared to move to the retreat. They knew most of the gang members were at cabin two and they might be able to negotiate them out. What they would do with them afterwards was still unknown, but they would give it a chance. Thomas and Frank handed over their precision rifles to Scott and prepared to move to the retreat.

The six moved tactically through the forest to the retreat and started clearing the outer buildings one at a time. Although they had not trained specifically for this mission, Frank, Thomas, Darren and Mike worked fluidly in the dynamic entry of the facilities and cleared the rooms with precision. They finished most of the buildings in a little over an hour and were shot at sporadically from the individuals holed up in cabin two. Rick would call occasionally he saw the defenders, but never got a clear shot at them.

Taking cabin two would not be an easy task since it had at least six defenders and six hostages. Chances were, at least one of the team would be hit on entry. "Let's give them a chance to surrender," stated Darren.

"I doubt these guys will surrender, but yes, we can give them that chance," stated Mike.

The four moved towards the front of the cabin, still under cover. When they arrived in position, Mike sent Frank and Darren to the side in case they had to move in suddenly to protect the hostages. When they arrived at a location, Mike yelled at the cabin. "Hello in there! We are

here to discuss the terms of your surrender!"

"We ain't comin out!" came the reply from inside.

"You know by now it's pointless to resist. We can take you out when we want to. We are giving you the chance to give up," replied Mike in a calm voice.

"You kill us if we come out!" said the voice from inside.

"You have my word, we will not kill you. Why don't you come outside and we can discuss it," stated Mike.

"Whatever! You kill me when I come out!" came the reply.

"It's not going to happen, you have my word," said Mike in the same calm voice.

"We gots hostages we gonna kill if you don't leave!" stated the nameless voice.

"You and I both know you can't do that. Eventually you will run out of hostages and then you won't have that bargaining chip. What then?" Mike asked.

"I'm comin out an' bringin a hostage wit me! Any funny business dis woman get it in da head! You get outa my way cause I'm leavin," said the voice.

At that point, the door to the cabin flew open and the leader came onto the porch, holding a snub nosed revolver to the head of a woman they had identified as a hostage. She was crying and the man was pushing her forward onto the porch. "Anybody move an I kill dis woman!"

"We aren't going to stop you, but let me take her place as your hostage. Let her go. She had nothing to do with the problems between you and me," requested Mike.

"Whatever! Your sniper kill me when I let her go!" said the leader.

"No, that's not going to happen, we are all here. There were only two snipers and you can see there are four of us out here. Let me be your hostage," requested Mike.

The man thought about it for a moment before deciding this man might be a better hostage than the woman. He would also kill the man when he got away for causing so much trouble and killing most of his gang. "Okay! You be my hostage!" yelled the leader again.

Mike prepared to take the place of the woman. Thomas, Frank and Darren collectively held their breath as he took off his tactical vest and weapon and laid them on the ground. He started taking steps towards the two looking at the woman in her eyes. The leader kept glancing around the retreat looking for signs of the rest of his gang.

Mike motioned to his left to the woman with his head and clicked his eyelids three times. She

briefly nodded as he blinked long once, then twice and the third time. At the end of the third time, she broke away from the grasp of the leader and dove to the left, Mike hit the ground and all four members of the team screamed "Now!"

All of the sudden, the leader grew a third eye just before the back of his head disappeared in a fine red mist. The report of the shot registered in their brains as Mike got up and grabbed the woman and was taking her to the cover to the front of the porch. Yelling from inside the cabin was heard and nothing happened for several seconds. Another of the gang members came to the door and was wielding an AK-47, pointing it in the general direction of Mike and the woman, still retreating from the porch. Another shot was heard and the man's head suffered the same fate as his leader. Their hidden ace in the hole, Rick, finally got to put something in his logbook.

"Dey kill bad b an' blue!" shouted another voice from inside.

Mike kept the woman pinned to the ground as Frank and Darren prepared to force an assault on the cabin. They were getting ready to move into position when the voice was heard again.

"Okay you win! We sendin da hostages out!" said the voice. The other hostages started coming out the door where they were motioned by Frank and Darren. They all were crying and walked towards the two men who pulled them behind the brick wall by the next cabin and told them to get on the ground. Now it was time for the rest of them to come out.

"Now the rest of you. You no longer have hostages. You can surrender now. We will not harm you," stated Mike.

"How we know you tellin da truth?" asked another voice.

"You don't, but what choice do you have?" asked Mike.

A brief discussion was heard from the inside of the cabin. Apparently two of the remaining four wanted to surrender and the other two figured they were going to get shot the moment they stepped outside. The argument came to a head when two of the four came to the door with their hands raised and walked onto the porch. Another gunman came from behind them and pulled the trigger on a long burst from an AK-47, killing the two that surrendered. This time, not only Rick, but Thomas, Frank and Darren engaged the man simultaneously and he was dead before he hit the porch floor.

They were about to call the final member of the gang out when they heard Ashley report over the radio. "One popped out a back window, heading off into the woods, he's mine."

Mike called her back over the radio and told her to wait for backup, but she ignored him. She intersected his path and waited for him behind a tree. When she heard his footsteps close enough, she moved from behind the tree and pointed her Glock 19 at him. "Going somewhere?"

He stopped at looked at the slender woman standing in front of him. He figured he could close the distance quickly enough for her not to get a shot off; after all, she was just a woman.

"Your skinny butt is mine!" shouted the man as he began to run at her again.

Time seemed to slow down for her. She recognized the man at the fourth member of the group that brought the woman back to the retreat to rape the other night. Time slowed even further as she aligned the sights of the pistol and picked a point of aim. She covered the point with the front sight, aligned it with the rear sight and focused again on the front sight as she began pulling the trigger. The striker engaged as the trigger completed travel to the rear of the frame. The pistol's recoil pushed the pistol upwards in her hands, but she brought it back down and repeated the procedure once again, firing a second shot at the same point.

Time began to run normally again for her after her second shot. Actual time elapsed had only been one and a half seconds, but it seemed like an eternity to her. She saw the impact of both the rounds in the body of the man who had continued forward and fell near her feet. He curled up and grabbed at his stomach, screaming bloody murder. Just then, Thomas arrived holding his MP5 at a low ready and saw her looking at the man, her face totally without emotion. Her eyes were not focused on the man, but a thousand miles away. She kept the pistol pointed at him in a Weaver Stance even though he was dying quickly. The man was crying and whimpering now like a child would after a bike accident.

Thomas rolled the man over with his foot, keeping the MP5 at the ready and saw both the shots had gone into the man's liver and was spurting dark blood over his hands and he ground. They both watched the death of the rapist without emotion as he slipped into unconsciousness, tears still streaming down his face. For a minute after the man expired, neither did anything. The radio brought Thomas and Ashley back to the present hearing Mike yelling for a status update.

"The last one is down and dead. We are returning to your location," stated Thomas simply.

He gently placed his hand on Ashley's hands. She jumped at the sudden touch. "It's okay; we need to get back to the group," said Thomas in a calm voice.

She nodded her head quickly as they turned to walk the distance back to the retreat. When they arrived, they found Mike and Frank helping the former hostages, giving them food and water. They hostages sat there, just staring at the ground in front of them. One, the woman from the porch thanked Mike for his efforts in rescuing her. Darren had grabbed a litter and was heading back to the clearing to help Scott get Jeremy back down to the retreat. Mike detailed Ashley and Thomas to go back to the pickup point and lead the vehicles back to the retreat and inform the Ranch via radio of the actions over the last three hours.

They set off on a straight line walk towards both the ORP and the pickup point. They met Scott and Darren as they were coming down and offered their help in carrying Jeremy to the retreat.

"No, we are good to go. Go ahead and alert the others as to what happened," said Scott, adjusting the IV bag so it would continue to feed the vital fluids to Jeremy.

Thomas and Ashley eventually made their way to the base camp. Ashley got on the radio and

called the Ranch, informing them of the situation and how the retreat had been retaken by the recon party. The Ranch Controller told them he didn't have any contact with the fire teams that were enroute and they would be there in the next half an hour if they were on schedule. Ashley signed off and the two departed the ORP carrying their packs in a straight line distance to the pickup point. They were continuing when they got within a quarter mile and were challenged by Tim Daniels. They replied the correct password and were brought into the perimeter.

"What's going on up there?" asked Tim.

"Everything is secure," stated Thomas. "We took out the threat."

The two fire teams gathered at the center of the secured area and were briefed by Thomas on the situation and what had happened over the past three hours. They quickly collected their gear and boarded the trucks for the drive to the retreat. Ashley and Thomas found seating in the back of the flatbed truck and quickly went to sleep for the drive to the retreat.

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While Thomas and Ashley were walking to the pickup site, Scott and Darren had arrived at the retreat and were treating Jeremy the best they could.

"I can only do so much here, he needs a doctor. I've treated these things before, but he needs to get a qualified surgeon to work on him," stated Scott.

"Do you know of any around here?" asked Darren.

Scott was silent before answering. "No, I can't think of any of them. I can keep him stable for the moment, but we are going to have to find a hospital or a doctor."

Mike, Rick and Frank were outside helping with the former hostages, trying to get some information as to where they were from and if they needed a ride home. Of the six, three were totally catatonic from the experiences, including the former retreat member, Holly Meredith and the other three weren't much better. The most coherent one was the woman so recently arrived. She provided the most information.

"I was kidnapped the day before yesterday. Those thugs broke into our house and took me at gunpoint and threatened to kill my mother if anyone resisted. My little brother tried to get me, but they shot him in the arm. They drug me out and brought me here where they…"

Her voice trailed off and the three knew what had happened. They managed to get the others to drink some water and eat a little food, but talking was still a ways off. They all took a break themselves and ate while waiting for the response force to arrive. Scott continued his work on Jeremy and Darren informed the other three of the situation requiring a qualified surgeon.

“I know a surgeon,” said a voice from behind them.

The four turned around and saw the most recent arrival looking at them. They prompted her to continue. “My father is a surgeon.”

Darren and Frank immediately walked towards her both asking how far away he was.

“In Buena Vista. Take me home and I will ask him to help,” she replied.

Darren immediately started looking over the various vehicles around the retreat while Frank got the woman a jacket and better pants to put on. Darren finally located a vehicle, an older model Jeep Cherokee, with the keys in the ignition. It started up with no problems and he checked the fuel gauge. It was half full and Darren knew they might need some additional fuel to make it to her house. Mike told him where the fuel was stored and how to operate the hand pump. Darren pulled the vehicle to the fuel point and quickly filled the tank with as much as he could. He pulled back around and picked up Frank and the young lady before leaving the retreat and making his way to the highway to Buena Vista. They drove the distance in silence except to ask the girl her name.

“Cindy, Cindy Matheson,” she replied.

Darren and Frank introduced themselves formally and continued to ask her directions. It took a little over a half an hour to reach the Matheson residence. Darren pulled the jeep into the driveway only to be met by an individual coming onto the front porch from the front door carrying an over and under shotgun.

“You’ve got ten seconds to get out of here before I shoot!” yelled the man.

Cindy jumped from the rear seat while screaming “Daddy!” and running towards the house. The man dropped the shotgun on the porch and ran to his daughter, picking her up off the ground in a hug. Darren and Frank started to get out of the jeep when they were stopped by the man.

“That’s far enough. I cannot thank you enough for bringing my daughter back to me, but now I have to ask you to leave,” stated the man.

“Sir, our friend is badly hurt and you are a doctor. We need your help,” stated Darren.

“I’m not a doctor anymore and haven't been since the Fall. Bringing my daughter back is something I cannot repay you for, so please don’t ask for any favors,” stated the man.

“Daddy, they rescued me, you have to help. I promised them!” said Cindy.

“Honey, that a promise you know I can’t keep. You know nothing of these people,” stated the man with resolve as he turned to take her into the house.

Cindy broke away from his grasp and looked at him with pain on her face. “Sir, we’re asking

you for help. One of the men responsible for rescuing your daughter was wounded and will die if he doesn't get help. Please come with us and save his life," said Frank reasonably.

"I already asked you not to make any requests of me. Now please leave," stated the man as he began to turn and grab his daughter to go back inside the house.

Frank, still a little shaken by the events of that day, pulled his pistol out and pointed it at the man's head. The man stopped as Frank punctuated his words carefully and slowly. "Sir, I am not asking you, I am telling you. Get whatever you need to perform surgery and get in the jeep."

Darren knew he would never reach Frank in time to stop the cold blooded murder, but started moving that way anyway.

"You won't kill me; nobody can help your friend then!" said the man defiantly.

Frank grasped the slide of the pistol and racked it back, actually ejecting the round already present in the chamber. "Sir, I have killed more people today than in my entire life. One more will not make it any worse for me. And killing you would mean my friend will not get any help, but you are not willing to help anyway. What do I have to lose?"

The man eyeballed Frank for a second and saw the finger tightening on the trigger. He saw the look in Frank's eyes before deciding it would be better to help than to continue to stall. "What kind of injury does he have?"

"Sucking chest wound. Through and through, collapsed lung possibly," answered Frank calmly, who still did not remove the pistol.

"I do this and we are even for my daughter. But after that, you and I are going to rumble, understand me?" the man stated.

"If you save my friend, you can do anything you please," answered Frank.

"Let me get my things," said the man as he turned to go back into the house. Cindy did not go inside and instead waited for her father to return. Darren quietly approached Frank and told him to reholster the pistol. Frank picked up the ejected round and replaced it in the magazine. He slid the pistol back into the holster slowly. In less than five minutes, the doctor came back out carrying a medical bag and an NATO emergency surgery kit.

"Don't look surprised, I was in the Army once. Let's get moving," stated the doctor.

The drive back to the retreat was quiet. Frank could feel the doctor's eyes boring holes in his head the entire journey back. When they arrived, they found the others from the Ranch had arrived and had set up security and were tending to the other hostages. They were treated for shock and the group would have the doctor tend to them once he was done with Jeremy. The doctor was shown the trailer where Jeremy was being tended to by Scott.

“Are you a doctor?” asked Scott.

“Trauma surgeon, thoracic to be exact. What’s the condition?” asked the doctor.

“Chest wound and the left lung collapsed. I managed to re-inflate, but it’s probably going to go again here soon. We’ve been keeping suction in the chest cavity and been able to keep up with the seepage. He’s had a bag of saline, two units of O Positive, and currently is drawing a bag of Ringers. The bleeding has subsided for now,” said Scott as he continued to rattle off the vital stats of Jeremy.

“Are you a doctor?” asked the doctor.

“Special Forces medic, or was,” answered Scott.

“Then you probably have as much experience with gunshot wounds as I do. You will assist. And I’ve seen cleaner pig sties than what we have here. Let’s get this cleaned up and sterile before I operate,” ordered the doctor.

Everyone except for Scott and the doctor were ushered out of the trailer. The rest of the group began to get everything set up for the overnight stay they would be doing since it would be getting dark soon. Mike helped everyone find lodging for the night and set a guard roster. Greg, Tim, Stephen and Johnny all returned from the ORP with the additional gear from the sniper teams. The former hostages were given private quarters and sedatives from the retreats stocks. The doctor and Scott continued to work on Jeremy for almost five hours before finally ending the surgery and pronouncing him stable although in critical condition. Other members of the group were asked to give up a pint of blood for Jeremy in addition to the ones already given by Renee and Mike. Three others had the necessary blood type and gave up a pint apiece. The group settled in for the night, setting out their security and their LP/OP and waited to see what would happen the next day.

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From a distance in the trees, a man watched the security being set out at the retreat and the different people walking around. He had heard the gunfire earlier and decided it would be better to approach the retreat on foot instead of in his vehicle. He had arrived just in time to see the former gang leader get his head blown off. He also saw none of these people were the ones he was supposed to meet here. *Looks like Bad B bit off more than he could chew. Too bad for him and too bad for us. He told me he had enough guns for my gang, or at least that’s what that little weasel who owned the place told him before he died. We needed those guns to take out that hunting lodge near Cañon City. I guess we will have to find another source for weapons now, but we still might be able to take this place on,* thought the man as he slowly began the trek back to his vehicle, disappointed in the turn of events.

CHAPTER 44 – SPOILS OF WAR

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 6 Months, 28 Days
Date/Time: 17 November/0754 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning, Rick formed a detail to gather the weapons in the clearing where the fight had taken place and to gather the remaining firearms from around the retreat. Thomas and Darren checked on Jeremy who was still in critical condition, but doing well for the moment. The doctor was still asleep, but Scott was still tending to Jeremy. He wouldn't be able to be moved for several days at least, if not a week, they were informed by Scott. They left to make contact with Mike and find out where the hidden stashes of weapons were. They found him eating an MRE for breakfast after sleeping in a bit since he had one of the night guard shifts. He requested to finish eating before they went their way to find the "buried treasure" as they were calling it.

Twenty minutes later, the three men were joined by Tim and gathered shovels to find the stashes. "If memory serves, Morgan told me they would be marked by four stones around the edge of where he buried the stuff. Here is one he pointed out," Mike said as he led them towards the edge of the forest, inside the tree line about fifty feet. They looked around until they found a rock sticking up out of the ground, looking a little out of place. Tim stood by the stone while the other three located the other stones. They finally located another two and were able to verify the former location of the fourth one by a small depression in the ground.

"This can't be right, these stones are at least twenty feet apart!" exclaimed Thomas.

"Remember, I told you he had a bunch of stuff buried up here. These are the firearms, or at least I think they are," said Mike.

The four started digging near the center of the square laid out by the markers. After two feet of digging, Tim hit something solid. "I've got something that isn't a rock."

They continued to uncover the object, which turned out to be a wooden crate wrapped in a large plastic bag. They managed to locate the edges of the box and pulled it out, finding another one just below it and more to the sides. It was fairly heavy and didn't rattle around. They pulled the box away from the hole and slit open the outer bag. Inside taped to the crate was a computer printed label with "K-31, 7.5MM – 10" in large two inch letters.

"Okay, Mike, I give. What's up with his codes?" asked Darren.

"It's a box of ten Swiss K-31 rifles in 7.5mm caliber," Thomas answered.

"Correct," confirmed Mike. "Although, I didn't know he had those. Let's pull some more out."

Tim and Darren continued to dig at the other boxes while Thomas and Mike pulled the next box

out from underneath. Wheelbarrows were brought in to transport the dirt away from the area so it wouldn't pile up on top of the boxes still in the ground. The next box was a repeat of the first box with ten more K-31 rifles. The next two boxes contained ten SKS rifles and ten CETME rifles, all stored in waterproof bags and sealed like the first two boxes.

"Do you know what we have here?" asked Thomas.

"Besides the obvious gold mine? Enough weapons where we won't need to worry about protecting ourselves and to give out to the reliable neighbors if we wanted to," said Darren.

More of the group showed up and helped uncover the weapons crates. It took the majority of the morning, but every box was finally brought out. Mike and Thomas started an inventory of the weapons while everyone else broke for lunch. Before starting, Mike showed them the other two areas where he thought items were buried. It took nearly an hour and they didn't open all the crates, but rather relied on the inventory list taped to the outside of the boxes. At the end, they tallied up the total amount. Thomas's eyes got big and Mike let out a long whistle.

"If there are more, this seriously is a big find," said Thomas.

"Don't forget the pistols and ammo if they are in the other sites. Holy crap, that's a lot of guns!" exclaimed Mike.

They gathered everyone together and Mike and Thomas went over the list.

"Okay folks, this is why we are here. From initial count, and we didn't go through all the boxes so there might be more or less, we have over five hundred rifles. Actually over six hundred," said Thomas.

"And that's just the rifles, let's keep going to see what else is down there," said Mike.

After everyone was out of earshot, Thomas finally asked the question. "Okay, that's a lot of guns. Why did he have so many and where did he get the money for them all?"

"First question. Morgan was a bit of a conspiracy theory type, you know, the New World Order, the UN taking over America and all that, and figured eventually guns would become banned. He had these up here for the 'resistance' movement, his words, not mine, to take up arms against the government. We thought he was a little crazy but nowhere near this crazy," answered Mike.

"Okay, second question. I was a gun store owner and never had this many guns lying around. Where did they come from?" asked Thomas.

"Okay, I will tell you what I know and what I think. I know for a fact several years ago there were some large thefts at some bonded and secured warehouses around the country and an unspecified amount of firearms were stolen along with ammo and whatnot. Trucks were also hijacked along the way, with most of them carrying ammo or weapons. They never caught who did it and never got any leads since the guns never came out on the market anywhere, not in a

crime, never in a trade, never at a gun show, nothing. Truck parts showed up from time to time at different chop shops around the country, but nobody ever knew anything more about where they came from."

"Morgan used to live on the East Coast until he suddenly upped and moved out here some years ago, around the same time as the thefts and the hijackings. I honestly think it was him or people he had hired breaking into the warehouses. Was it him? Probably, now that we found this, but we will never know for sure. He might have done the robbery and then killed the rest of his crew that helped him. This is much too large a job for one person," answered Mike.

"How did you know about those break-ins?" asked Thomas.

"Well, long story short, the ATF and FBI had been looking at Morgan for quite some time in conjunction with the break-ins, but weren't sure it was him, with his identity change and all. I was in the military when Morgan and I first met so those agencies came to visit me, tracked me down from the Internet I suppose. My security clearance was at stake during the questioning, so I told them everything I knew, which didn't amount to much. They asked their usual battery of questions and told me about the break-ins. They asked me to be an informant, but I never caught him doing anything even mildly illegal. I was going to be a part of his group anyway, so I guessed it kind of coincided with my main goal. Anyway, I never got a straight answer from him about the weapons and never saw any of them until today. The first time Morgan ever mentioned it was after George brought us up here from your place. Since the government started disintegrating, it wasn't a big deal anyway since there wasn't anyone to come and arrest him. Since he gave my family and me another life on his property, I felt we owed it to him not to say anything," said Mike.

"And the money for starting this place? This retreat?" asked Thomas.

"That I can't answer either. Possibly drugs. The FBI was pretty certain a man named Craig Redmond was dealing in both heroin and cocaine and was also thought to be responsible for the thefts. This man supposedly was dealing then got out of it, just dropped off the map, changed names, new identity and got out of the game entirely. This was about the same time Morgan moved out here and started this retreat. Coincidence? I can't tell you for certain, but I think that is what happened. The Hoover Boys seemed to think Morgan Gable and Craig Redmond were one in the same. However, there were differences in the two when it came to appearance. They seemed to think he went to one of those clinics in Cuba and got plastic surgery. Remember a lot of this is rumor and guessing. We will never know for sure," stated Mike.

Thomas fell silent before asking the next question. "If you knew all of this beforehand, why did you even become part of his group?"

"As I told you before, my security clearance was on the line. It's hard to be Special Forces without a clearance. Also, at that time, it seemed like a legit setup. Remember, without Morgan, my family would be living out of a FEMA camp right now or worse," answered Mike.

"I'm not passing judgment, Mike," stated Thomas. "Just wondering why."

"You know the FBI, ATF and all those types of agencies were always looking for type of people like Morgan. You know? The survivalist types with a lot of guns and antipathy towards the government. Morgan used to rant on and on about the government and how it was destroying this country. To me, not knowing his past, it seemed as he was as patriotic as they come, just seriously right wing, like tips of the feathers right wing. However, they weren't after him because they thought he was a threat to the government, but because of theft and drug dealing. Knowing his past, if that indeed was him, makes it kind of an enigma now," said Mike.

Thomas again was silent as he digested the information given to him by Mike. "Has anyone seen him or any of the other retreat members?"

"No, except for Holly and she isn't really talking right now," answered Mike.

"Which one was she?" asked Thomas.

"The pretty brunette with blue eyes. She barely even registered my presence when I talked to her before," said Mike.

"We should probably try and get her to talk, just so we can find out what happened here and how the gang came to take over," said Thomas.

"You can try; maybe the shock of what happened has worn off now. She is safe and you might want to stress that fact," advised Mike.

The two parted ways, Thomas with many more questions in his head than before about the former retreat owner and the weapons stocks. Mike went away feeling better since he was able to finally tell the truth about the weapons stocks and his secret mission to infiltrate the retreat. Thomas went to the cabin where the only former retreat member was staying. He knocked on the door and was told to enter by the inhabitant. Mike was correct, Holly was an attractive woman; however, she had the remains of a bruise on the side of her face, a black eye and several cuts and bruises on her arms and legs. Other than the obvious physical markings, the doctor had performed a quick physical and pronounced her in good shape. The mental scaring was another matter, one which would take years to recover from. Thomas walked across the room and stood next to her while she sat on the couch, looking out the window at the Ranch members going this way and that, doing their duties. She finally acknowledged his presence by turning her head slowly and looking in his eyes.

"Hello, I'm Tom Dayfield. I'm the owner of the place where Mike, Scott, Ashley and their families are now living," he said in a pleasant voice.

She continued to look in his eyes, almost as if she was searching for something. It was beginning to make Thomas feel a little uncomfortable when she finally spoke. "My name is Holly Meredith."

He reached out with his hand to shake hers without thinking. She cringed at the sudden

movement pulling back into the couch with a look of fear on her face.

“I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to startle you. I was only trying to shake hands,” said Thomas in a compassionate voice.

She looked back at him and the look of fear left her face. A small smile came to her lips as she said “No, I should be sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s okay; you’ve had a rough time. Do you feel up to answering some questions?” he asked.

“What kind of questions?” she asked guardedly.

Thomas knew he would need his best game and remembered interviewing victims when he was a cop. He would try this approach with her and attempt to get some information about the gang and Gable. “Just some simple questions about the past few weeks. If you don’t feel comfortable about it, I can wait until you are ready.”

She paused and looked out the window again at the retreat compound. Thomas took this as her silent way of telling him she didn’t want to answer anything right now. He stood there for another half a minute before getting ready to leave. When he reached the door, she called for him. “Please stop. I will try to answer the questions.”

“If it is going to cause you any pain or suffering, it can wait. I can always come back when you are ready,” he said in his friendly voice again.

“No, I think I can do it. Please, just nothing personal,” she said.

Thomas was curious about the treatment of the former retreat members, but knew he couldn’t ask those questions. “Nothing personal, just some facts about the gang, Morgan Gable and how they came to be here.”

“I will answer what I can,” said Holly.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” asked Thomas. She motioned him to a chair and he sat down, laying his MP5 next to it on the floor. “When did the gang attack and take over here?”

“They didn’t attack here,” she answered.

“What do you mean they didn’t attack?” asked Thomas.

“They came in about four weeks ago at Morgan’s request. Since Mike, Scott and their families left, we needed some help around here for security. Morgan went out scouting and found this group. He invited them in to help with security and paid them with food,” replied Holly.

“Is Morgan Gable still alive?” asked Thomas.

A look of horror swept across her face and tears came to her eyes. Thomas knew he had hit a soft spot and wouldn't press the question if she didn't answer. After a pause, she told the story.

"One night about three weeks ago, the gang leader and Morgan had a dispute about the food rations. Then, the gang members barged into our homes and forced us out into the center of the retreat. They beat Morgan for almost ten minutes and then told us they were in charge." Tears ran down her face now. "They pulled Jason Blythe out of the crowd and executed him in front of us, 'to teach us a lesson' and told us not to resist. The rest of the gang members went into our houses and took all of our guns away and locked them up in their own cabins and trailers. By this time, they had taken Morgan into his cabin where we heard them continue to beat on him. We were never told not to leave and we just stood there. We could hear them abusing him for almost an hour before one person actually left our group to go back home. We all followed his lead and went home that night."

"The next day, more gang members showed up and started taking our homes for theirs. They started demanding sex from the residents. My husband tried to keep them out of our home, but they killed him and came after me." More tears streamed down her face as she continued the story. "Some of the retreat women tried to resist, but were beaten into submission. They cut one woman's throat and left her out in the center of the retreat as an 'example.' Most of the men were killed in the first few days since they were not going to let us be raped by those pigs."

"Afterwards, the gang leader, Bad B, basically made the rest of us his personal harem and passed us out to his gang members for good work. A little over a week ago, we were called into the center of the retreat again. They brought out Morgan, who had been beaten quite severely, and made a long announcement about how he had held back information that would help everyone. Two other gang leaders were there and had their deputies with them. They beheaded Morgan with an axe in front of everyone there and left his body out for several days."

"I overheard the other gang leaders and Bad B talking one night about the 'loot' buried near the retreat that Morgan had told them about when he was beaten. Bad B was going to pass out the weapons to the other gang leaders so they could take out other retreats and pay back his tribute. They all worked for him, more or less, and took orders about places to hit. The only gang leader I knew of that Bad B didn't talk to was one that had over a hundred members. Bad B was trying to increase his numbers to match so he could take over this part of state if he could. He also knew about your group and was fairly afraid of you since he heard about the attacks being driven off from your ranch. He didn't think you all would come this far to come after them since you never went out looking for trouble."

"Then, the other day, you all showed up. When you first started shooting into the retreat, you managed to take out his chief of security, Ranger, and another person who had a clue about securing this place. With them gone, there wasn't a person here who knew how to defend this place. That night, Bad B was so mad he beat down his second in command and replaced him with another person. They figured it was the rival gang he was so afraid of. He had heard they were military trained and figured they were coming in soon to take over. They thought there were only two of you and figured if they could kill those two; the rest might back off."

"The next day, yesterday, they planned to go out to the clearings where snipers could shoot at the retreat and find you all. Bad B sent almost the entire group out to get you all. I can only guess you all managed to get rid of all of them before coming here to free us. I have to say this, every time you fired a shot, each of us here cheered inside for you. We knew it was just one less person who would be coming after us that night. When we were finally freed yesterday afternoon, it was as if angels had come to rescue us," she said as she completed the lengthy tale.

"Mike said you didn't really say anything yesterday after we rescued you," said Thomas.

"We all kind of blame Mike, Scott and Ashley for what happened here. I mean, with them and their families gone, our defenses were down that much further. That's why Morgan had to get those thugs to pull security here. I am still mad at all of them for leaving," she answered.

"What about Morgan and the prophet thing? And him saying the women here had to have sex with him?" asked Thomas.

"That stopped right after you came and took Mike, Scott and their families away," she answered.

"He stopped doing it all together?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, it was strange. After the others left, he clammed up and started drinking a lot. He rarely went outside and never mentioned it again," she replied.

Thomas was silent for a moment as her stories answered some questions, but brought up more in his mind. Questions she probably could not or would not answer. He asked her where the bodies of the retreat members were buried so he could bring the Minister up to do a formal funeral for those that had died here. The gang members would be buried into the same plot the weapons had come out of except those in the clearing as they would be buried in place. The next subject would be a little harder for her since he knew it was probably not something she had thought about before. "Holly, besides here, do you have any place to go?"

She thought about the question for a moment before answering. "No, I lived in Denver before the Fall and all my family is out in California in San Francisco. They were dead set on not leaving San Fran afterwards and I never heard from them again. Is there someplace you could take me? Could I go with you?" she asked, almost excitedly.

"I don't know yet. Give me a chance to talk to our group and we will see what we can come up with. But we can find a spare bedroom at least until you decide where to go," he answered.

She sat in her chair a little higher when given the hope of moving someplace else safe. Thomas decided to ask her the final question. "Since you are the sole surviving member of the retreat here, what do you want done with the supplies and weapons?"

"Can you properly secure the weapons at your retreat?" she asked.

"Yes, I believe we can," replied Thomas.

"Then take them with you. Enough people have been killed over them and if you can secure them better than here, take them with you. As for the supplies, either I give them to you or we use them to help refugee parties," she said.

Thomas agreed and told her they could move the supplies to the Ranch as well since they were moving anyway. He also told her the group would look favorably on her request to move in. He stood to leave and reminded her if she needed anything not to hesitate to ask one of the Ranch members. She gave him half a smile in reply as he walked out the door, looking for the rest of the group.

The next visit for Thomas was to see the doctor. Darren had explained that morning about the troubles between him and Frank. Thomas still wanted to talk with him and find out the possibility of him moving to the Ranch full time or at least the possibility of continued contacts for medical issues. He found the doctor in the cabin tending to Jeremy. The doctor acknowledged his presence and held up a finger while he was taking blood pressure on Jeremy's left arm. After completing the task, he motioned Thomas outside.

"First off, Doctor, I would like to thank you for coming out to treat my man," said Thomas.

"Coming out? You mean abducted at gunpoint! Your men forced me to come out here to treat him," stated the doctor in a loud voice.

Thomas was silent for a moment before continuing. "Doctor, I am sorry for their methods in bringing you here, but you haven't been abducted. You may leave at any point with your daughter if you so desire. We will provide a driver and escort to wherever you want to go."

"That won't be necessary right now. I do have a patient to treat, no matter how I came here. It just took me a little while to remember my Hippocratic Oath," said the doctor.

Thomas offered his hand. "Thomas Dayfield."

"Doug Matheson," the doctor replied.

"Well, again, I want to thank you for saving Jeremy's life. It's a debt I doubt we can ever repay," said Thomas.

"Actually, the debt has already been paid, you returned my daughter to me. I would say we are even," said the doctor.

"Doctor, I doubt this is the best time, but I have an offer for you," said Thomas.

"Please, Mister Dayfield, call me Doug. I don't really go by Doctor anymore," said Doug.

"As long as you call me Thomas or Tom. I'm going to start looking for my father if you call me Mister Dayfield again," said Thomas with a grin.

"It's a deal, Tom. Now, what kind of proposition do you have for me besides the ride home?" asked Doug.

Again, Thomas paused before continuing, not knowing what exactly to tell the doctor before they got to know him really well. "Well, Doug, I am the owner of a ranch retreat much like this one that has several families. Everyone here is a resident of that property or are residents from nearby. We have Scott, whom you have already met, and a Registered Nurse which can provide a lot of our medical needs. What we do not have or have not been able to locate is a full time doctor. We are a peaceful group with no intentions of hurting anyone unless they pose a threat to us. We haven't had a serious medical problem yet we couldn't handle, but it's only a matter of time before we might need the particular talent of a surgeon."

"You mean besides now?" asked Doug.

"Obviously now is a case we hadn't planned on. We've gotten luck so far and been able to beat back the attacks on us with very little injuries. I suppose we all started thinking we were ten foot tall and bulletproof. This will give us pause for thought now. Anyway, I'm going to extend the invitation for continued contacts between your family and our group. I can also extend a temporary invitation for you to possibly move to our retreat," said Thomas.

"Why would we want to move away from our home?" asked Doug.

"Well, I don't know how secure you are, or how your food situation is, but we are fairly set for security, food and water at our location. Plus, you would be a valuable member of our group with your medical expertise. With the supplies gathered here and what we already have on hand at the Ranch, you would be well set to continue your practice as a doctor," said Thomas.

"We are getting by on food as we managed to raise enough to last us the winter and into spring. Water is somewhat more of a problem since we have to bring it in from a nearby creek and boil it before drinking. As for security, I didn't think we had a problem until now. I didn't think the gang problems or looting would be getting this bad out here in the mountains. I can see that was a mistake," said Doug, contemplating the offer.

"I don't expect you to make a decision right now. Please, take some time to think about it and let me know. You say Jeremy can't be moved for at least a week and we have to get these supplies moved back to the Ranch. We have some time for you to think about it," stated Thomas.

Doug looked away in silence before responding. "It's not an easy decision to make and I would have to consult with my family before answering."

"I wouldn't expect anything less. Again, we can arrange transportation to most anywhere you might like to go," offered Thomas.

"Would you be able to take me home today to let my wife and know where I am at? They will be worried about me," asked the doctor.

"Absolutely, let me find two people and gather up your daughter. They can be underway in less than an hour," replied Thomas.

"I think Cindy wants to stick around and help out here. Too much of her old man rubbed off on her I suppose," he said.

"You should probably ask her yourself. I mean, your family would know for sure we weren't holding her hostage waiting for you if she went with you," said Thomas sensibly.

Doug silently thought how much he liked the man standing in front of him already, although only knowing him for less than fifteen minutes. It was an appealing offer to move to a place where there was guaranteed food, water and security. He made the snap judgment on the spot to convince his family to move to the new location, especially in light of recent events. He departed to gather his things while Thomas gathered Ashley and Tim and asked if they would be willing to drive the doctor home. They both agreed and left to find the vehicle used by Darren the previous night.

Thomas then went over to where the group was starting to dig at the second location. He ran into Darren who presented a different idea. "Why don't we go ahead and start loading what we have already dug up into the trucks and make a run back to the Ranch first thing in the morning? I don't know about you, but I'm a little nervous having that much firepower just sitting out in the open at a place we aren't completely secure at."

"Yeah, it would make sense to get them out of here soonest. I'll grab the truck and bring it on over. We need to talk to Mike and Scott as well to find out what needs to be done with everything up here," answered Thomas.

While they were loading the trucks, Mark came over to the group and made a surprise announcement. "I think everyone should come take a look at this."

The group moved away with Mark towards two large Quonset hut type garages. Mike remembered the huts being somewhat empty when they were residents so he was wondering what it was all about. When they entered, it was definitely not like he remembered. Crates upon crates of munitions were stacked inside along with several more weapons. Literally thousands of rounds of various calibers were stacked haphazardly around the large shed. Many of them bore markings of "Property of US Government" on the sides. Plenty of open ammo cans were lying at the edges which also bore the marks of several different calibers. An M2 HB machine gun mounted on a tripod sat idle at one corner, the feed cover raised. A Mk 19 grenade launcher sat next to it, also on a tripod. Several different types of commercial ammo sat among the various crates. Several more crates contained high explosives, dynamite of varying grades, claymore mines and hand grenades. The group as a whole just looked and said "Whoa!" Mixed in were various other supplies like hundreds of propane fuel bottles, military style uniforms of various sizes and color patterns and closed plastic containers which contents were concealed for the moment. Both structures contained enough equipment, munitions and clothing to completely outfit a huge gang for a long fight.

"Okay, this was never here while we were here and I know for a fact Morgan did not have anything like this," said Mike.

"Could it have been the gangs?" asked Frank.

Mike pondered the thought for a moment. "Could have been. However, I'm not going to be surprised in the least if it was Morgan's stuff. He might have gone out looting after we left earlier this year. With everything we have found up here, who knows for sure."

"Well, for sure we need to secure this stuff along with everything else. Good Lord! This is going to take us forever to move!" exclaimed Renee.

Thomas had a silly grin on his face, much like the kid in the candy store. "I don't know about you all, but I think Christmas came early for us! I claim the Mk 19 and the Fifty!"

"Tom, you know Rick is going to go crazy if you end up with both the heavies. At least give him one or the other," said Frank with a smile.

"Okay, he can have one of the .22s we dug up, but nothing else," said a giddy Thomas.

"Seriously now. We need more transportation than what we have already. Like a semi with a trailer or two. I can drive one, but where can we find one?" asked Greg.

"Probably in Denver, Colorado Springs or maybe Pueblo. You are right, if we are going to move everything, we need larger transportation assets," said Mike.

"We did agree to scavenge what we needed, but a truck?" asked Thomas.

"You want to take the chance of leaving this stuff up here while it takes us a few weeks to move it?" asked Mike.

Thomas smiled as he replied. "I wasn't saying leave the stuff, Mike. I was just thinking about trying to find a deserted truck somewhere besides the cities. I'm not opposed to taking an abandoned truck, but I wanted to avoid the urban areas if at all possible."

"Yeah, you have a good point but I doubt we will able to find one just anywhere. The cities might offer us a better chance to find what we need in the shortest time possible. And we don't just need a cargo truck, but a tanker truck as well, to move the fuel," Mike added.

They group agreed that one or two trucks with trailers would be best for moving the entire contents of the Gable Retreat back to the Ranch. Plus, after some interviews, two of the individuals came from homes in the Colorado Springs area. The group agreed to take them back to where they called home and to look for trucks along the way. The group also found some rather unusual weapons at the retreat when they looked around. Several different M249 SAWs, M240 machine guns and other military issue weapons had been stored in the various cabins and

trailers. What they didn't know was the gang had looted the 10th Special Forces Group compound as well as other units supply points at Fort Carson, Peterson AFB, the Air Force Academy and Buckley AFB and had come away with the majority of the weapons, uniforms and gear they could get at. Their former security leader, Ranger, had been a soldier at one time at Fort Carson and remembered the SF Group having the best toys and neatest equipment the rest of the soldiers normally stared longingly at. As he had been a supply there, he also knew the other various warehouses and bunkers where more items were stored at. The gang had been making several trips to the abandoned base per month getting more and more supplies before a rival gang took them. While they had also broken into some various bunkers and facilities and taken more munitions and equipment, the majority of the gang did not have the technical know-how to operate the systems. Ranger had been trying to train them in the use of some of the weapons and equipment, but had only just started when he had met his untimely demise.

Thomas and Greg volunteered to start early the next morning and drive the two back home and look for a useable truck. Another six would take the deuce and initial run of supplies back to the Ranch, leaving eight at the Retreat to look after things. The weapons, ammunition and explosives would be moved first, and then the rest of the items. The group didn't feel comfortable leaving the Ranch with so little defenders and made a decision to only leave eight at any time at the Retreat to secure it. In case of attack and if the defenders had to withdraw, Mike had wired some of the explosives to five gallon gasoline cans in the Quonset hut so they might attempt to destroy the stockpiles before retreating. The remainder of the afternoon was spent filling the other two trucks and one from the Gable Retreat. One additional item that was thrown in was the needed antibiotics for Nicole. While the double dose of penicillin was helping, the synthetic antibiotics put in by Scott would have everything cleared up in no time at all.

The next morning, Thomas grabbed one of the AK-47s that had been one of the gang member's. He made sure he had plenty of magazines and web gear before putting them into the SUV he and Greg planned to take into the city. The former hostages were all given one of the rifles and plenty of ammunition, food, water and other supplies they might need until they got back on their feet. Thomas, Greg and the two got into the SUV and headed east until they got to Highway 24. From there, they kept a close eye out on the winding road, especially the roadway between Woodland Park and Colorado Springs.

The drive was made without incident and the two were dropped off with no problems at their former houses. Families were reunited and many thanks were given to Thomas and Greg. Families offered food and water to the rescuers, but they politely turned them down, stating they had enough already and wanted the families to keep what they had since there would obviously be some shortages until summer crops could be brought in. The two continued their journey through Colorado Springs, coming to the area near Garden of the Gods. As they drove down I-25, Greg exclaimed "Hey now! That's what I'm talking about!"

Thomas looked to his right and saw five large International Trucks sitting close together in the back yard of a house, along with several trailers from twenty foot up to forty foot. They took the next exit and followed the surface roads to the area and found the yard was fenced off. A hand painted sign which bore the markings "TRESPASSERS, GANGS AND LOOTERS WILL BE SHOT UNTIL DEAD" hung loosely off the gate. Thomas brought the vehicle to a slow stop by

the gate and got out of the driver's seat, leaving his rifle in the vehicle.

"You have about ten seconds to get out of here before I start shooting!" yelled a voice.

Thomas remained calm and yelled back. "We are here to trade. We noticed you have trucks in and want to trade for them!"

"Maybe I don't want to trade my trucks!" yelled the voice in return.

"We can make it worth your while!" yelled Thomas.

"How so?" the voice asked.

"Why don't we talk about this like normal people? I'm tired of yelling!" answered Thomas.

"Just you and unarmed. Move to the south side of the house along the fence," answered the voice after thinking over the idea.

Thomas didn't like the fact he would be unarmed, but would stop at a point where he could be covered by Greg from the SUV. He slowly pulled off his web gear and set it in the rear seat of the vehicle and made his way around the house. He moved to a point where he could still see the vehicle and knew Greg could still cover him if the need arose.

A scruffy looking man emerged from the back of the house and made his way towards Thomas holding a sawed off autoloading shotgun in his hands. Thomas could see the gun was a larger caliber, probably a 10 gauge, and could make a mess of him if anything went seriously wrong. He waited until the man was closer until speaking. "Good morning sir. My name is Thomas Dayfield and I would like to discuss a trade for one or two of your trucks."

"My name is Alan. And what makes you think I want to trade my trucks?" the man answered.

"I don't know if you want to, but I would at least like the opportunity to talk about it," offered Thomas. "We have good trading material and could probably make it worth your while."

"What kind of good trading material would you offer?" asked Alan.

Thomas thought for a moment before answering. "I don't know, what do you need? I'm sure we can find something you need."

"We need lots of stuff, but my trucks are valuable and the trading could get steep," answered Alan with greedy eyes.

"Your trucks aren't that valuable since you don't have any diesel for them, or at least they look as if they haven't been driven in some time. We might be able to remedy that," said Thomas.

At the mention of fuel, Alan's eyes lit up. "Is it stabilized fuel?"

“Sure is and still good. We run our vehicles off it all the time with no problems,” said Thomas.

“We might make a deal if you are telling the truth. Why do you need my trucks anyway?” Alan responded after a pause.

“How about we just leave it at ‘we need two of your trucks and trailers’ and not worry about the why,” answered Thomas. “Besides diesel, what else might you be thinking of bartering for?”

“Weapons and lots of ammunition. At least twenty automatic rifles and two thousand rounds apiece,” he said.

“For two trucks?” asked Thomas.

“For the rental of one truck and add two hundred gallons of fuel to that as well,” answered Alan.

“Twenty automatic rifles and forty thousand rounds for a rental on your truck? And what would we need to buy them outright?” asked Thomas, not seriously contemplating the offer.

“At least a pound of gold in coins or measurable weight or ten pounds of silver as well as the rifles, ammunition and five hundred gallons of diesel per truck,” said Alan, again with greed in his eyes since he thought Thomas was serious.

“You can’t be serious, friend. Sorry to have wasted your time,” said Thomas as he turned to go.

“Wait! I can go for less! How about a half pound of gold or seven of silver and three hundred gallons of fuel per truck?” asked Alan, getting desperate since he really needed the fuel.

“How about a five dollars face of silver per truck, two hundred gallons of diesel and five automatic rifles and ten bolt actions. Rounds will vary depending on type,” answered Thomas.

“I can’t go that low! Ten dollars face of silver per truck. Do you know what those trucks are worth?” asked Alan.

“A lot less than they would be worth with fuel in the tanks. I can find trucks elsewhere, maybe even abandoned where I wouldn’t have to bargain for them,” said Thomas.

“Maybe you could, but I know for a fact these trucks have been kept up since the Fall. I’ve performed the maintenance on them myself and kept the fluids good and the batteries charged. We just don’t have much diesel left for them,” said Alan tipping his hand.

“So you really need our fuel more than we need your trucks. We have a bunch of mechanics that can fix an abandoned truck or two and we wouldn’t have to trade for anything,” said Thomas.

Alan gave it a moment’s contemplation. “Yes, perhaps I was a bit hasty. Five automatic rifles and ten bolt actions? Along with the proper rounds for each?”

"Yes and I guarantee they will all work," said Thomas.

"I can agree to that. Ten bucks face of silver per truck, two hundred gallons of fuel and the weapons. What kind of trailers are you looking for?" asked Alan.

"Ten dollars face of silver total and not a bit more. Five dollars apiece for the trucks, the rifles and the fuel," said Thomas.

Alan contemplated the deal and nodded his approval. "What kind of trailers do you need?"

"Cargo box types, at least thirty-two footer, but we would prefer forty footers. Maybe a flatbed in the future if you would deal with us again at a later date," said Thomas.

"I have every type you want. Anything else?" asked Alan.

"Maybe, can you find me a tanker trailer that I can transport gasoline and diesel? You do that and we throw in the five hundred gallons of diesel you originally requested. Another two dollars of silver for the tanker ought to do it. If you can't find a tanker trailer, we go down to two hundred gallons of diesel," offered Thomas.

"How do I know you will keep up your end of the bargain?" asked Alan.

"You don't, all you have is my word on it. I tell you what, as a token of our deal; I'll leave you a rifle with three hundred rounds right now. We take a truck today and tomorrow we bring you back your end in exchange for the other truck and trailer. You have three days after to find me a tanker. The diesel will complete the transaction when we bring back the tanker," said Thomas.

Alan thought for a moment and knew exactly where to find a tanker truck. The only problem was it was still half full and needed to be stabilized. He informed Thomas of that problem.

"No problem, we can stabilize it for you provided we have enough on hand to meet our needs in the future. And as another token of good will, we will take half of it and let you keep the remainder. If it's not five hundred gallons, we'll top it off. Deal?" asked Thomas.

"What kind of rifles would we be looking at?" asked Alan.

"For the autos, I don't know yet. For the bolt actions, probably Mosin-Nagants. Do we have a deal?" asked Thomas.

"Do you have anything else? Like a Springfield or Mauser?" asked Alan.

"Maybe, we will have to check," answered Thomas.

Alan stuck his hand through a hole in the fence to seal the deal. Thomas took it and shook before turning back to the vehicle. After arriving, he pulled the AK and web gear and handed it

through the gate to Alan. "Now, which truck and trailer?" he asked.

"Come on back, I will give you the worst one I've got just in case this deal doesn't work out for me. If you return with what you promised, I will trade it out for a better one," said Alan.

Greg came from around the SUV and handed over his rifle to Thomas. Several minutes later, Greg came driving around the house in the truck pulling a forty foot trailer. He was taking it easy, trying to remember the gears and double clutching the large truck. Thomas moved the SUV out of the way and spoke briefly to Greg.

"It's sitting on about a quarter of a tank, so we probably have enough to get to the Retreat. The gears suck in this thing and it will take some time to get there," said Greg.

Thomas handed back his rifle and took the MP5 he had stashed before they left. He prepared to follow Greg but spoke one last time to Alan. "We will be back by noon tomorrow with your goods. Will you be here?"

"Probably so, either me, my sons or my wife can take the goods from you. Like I said, bring the truck back and I'll give you a better one if you hold up your end of the bargain," he stated.

Thomas returned to the vehicle and started it up, driving to the rear of the semi. He honked the horn and Greg started out slowly, heading back to the Interstate. Almost two hours later, they arrived back at the retreat and found the group was working on digging up the next patch of ground, which seemed to be ammunition for the various firearms they had found the day before. The truck was parked between the Quonset hut and the current dig site so either group could load the goods into the trailer. Greg and Thomas went about looking for the weapons promised in the trade and managed to find the crates which contained the imported Steyr AUGs recently unburied from the retreat and enough magazines for ten per rifle. Lucky for them, the plastic bags also contained the magazines, ten per rifle. The bolt actions were a mix of 8mm German and Yugo Mausers. They managed to gather enough ammunition together for eight hundred rounds per rifle from the stores that had been dug up.

The rifles and ammunition were loaded into the sleeper area of the truck along with the silver that had been the property of the Gable Retreat. The rest of the day was spent loading the additional materials into the trailer and digging the remainder of the ammo out of the next site. The ammunition stores which had been buried had been extensive and the group now had enough rounds to not have to worry about reloading for a long time. Not only was there rounds stored for the unique firearms like the 7.5mm Swiss rifles and 7.62x25mm pistols, but also the standard caliber rounds of 5.56, 7.62x51mm and 7.62x39mm. With the addition of the ammo "liberated" from the Quonset hut, the stores of the Ranch would be massive and the inventory would take Kristy a long time to complete.

Early the next morning, Greg led a procession of two vehicles back to the Ranch. It took a while to get there, but eventually, they pulled off the paved road and, after checking in with George whose eyes nearly exploded at the sight of the cargo, drove down to the Ranch to be unloaded. Thomas had been in the chase vehicle and was reunited with Sharon, Angel and Brent. He spent

some time before leaving again with Greg and now Mike and Dave to follow up on the trade for the other truck. Mike was being brought along since he learned a long time before how to drive a semi but could quickly relearn along the way. Thomas said his tearful goodbyes again to Sharon and promised her he would be returning the next day for an extended visit. They made their way along Highway 123 towards the Springs, not running into any trouble along the way. They arrived back at the house and transferred the goods to Alan and his family before trading in the old truck for a newer one along with another semi, this one with a thirty-two foot trailer. Also, Alan had located the tanker he had promised. It was a green military style tanker used to refuel aircraft which bore the markings "JP-8." However, it also had conventional points for regular nozzles for filling vehicle tanks and jerry cans.

"Okay, slight problem here. This isn't DF-2 like I thought it would be, but the good news is, my trucks can burn JP-8 as well as diesel or bio. There really isn't much of a difference in the three since JP-8 is just high grade kerosene which in turn is really high grade diesel. You will have to change out the fuel filters a little more often, but it makes the engine run the same. You can also throw some normal two stroke oil in to help with the lubricity since the natural lubricants are removed. Either way, it can be stabilized, so far as the manual says, and should still be good. Most military vehicles made after a certain date which run on diesel can run JP-8, bio diesel or regular diesel or even combinations in the tanks. So for your military vehicles, just check the gas cap or the tech manual, it should be on the list of approved alternate fuels," stated Alan.

Thomas was silent for a moment. "So we don't have diesel then?"

"Honestly, it's probably just the same or better than regular diesel, more efficient probably since it's a higher refining process. I know for a fact it won't hurt your engines. I've modified my engines to run on it and it's worked before," Alan responded.

"How much is in the tanker?" asked Thomas.

"Better than half if the gauge is correct," he replied.

"Do we have enough stabilizer for three thousand gallons?" Thomas asked Mike.

Mike thought for a moment. "I think we just might without having to dip into our 'secondary' stock. That was one thing we had a lot of up there. I will have to check the mix ratio for that particular fuel before I can tell you for sure."

"Pri-D should work the same, but I'm not sure. Like I said, jet fuel is just really high grade diesel. I doubt it will hurt it," said Alan.

"Okay Alan, I think we have a deal for now. In three days we'll pick up the tanker and bring the stabilizer with us. Do you want to renegotiate for the tanker?" asked Thomas.

"No, I think we can be set on the half pound of silver I agreed to. I am a man of my word and don't ever back out on a deal I made, even a handshake deal," said Alan.

"Your goods are in the back of the truck we swapped out," said Thomas.

The foursome went to the rear of the house and looked through the trading goods. "I'm glad you found the rifles I specified."

"Call it a finder's fee for getting the tanker so quick. We probably don't want to know where you got it," Thomas replied.

"And I probably don't want to know where you got military vehicles. After I mentioned it, you never even objected or showed surprise. I know of quite a few hostile gangs that use military vehicles but you don't really fit the profile. Honestly, I can't say if you are or not peaceful, but so far, you are playing the game correctly. I think I know who you all are, but I'm not certain. If you are who I think you are, I don't have any worries in the world. If you aren't, I only ask we remain trading partners, but also, if you ever need maintenance on those trucks, just let me know. Continued maintenance will be a barter affair. Deal?" asked Alan.

Thomas his head in agreement. "Where did you find that tanker anyway?"

"I have my sources," answered Alan. "Honestly, there is more fuel as well, but no way of getting it without power."

"We might be able to help with that problem. We have access to generators," said Mike.

"Maybe so, but these pumps take a lot of power. Most generators won't work since they can't put out the necessary power to run the equipment," answered Alan.

"If we can find the power source, can you show us the fuel?" asked Thomas.

Alan thought for a moment about the deal. "Maybe, that information and location of an alternate power source would be valuable. Okay, call it a deal then. You provide the power, I provide the location and we split the fuel down the middle fifty-fifty. I only know of the JP8, though, but it will run in diesels as we have already discussed."

He and Thomas shook hands on the new deal and they finished inventorying the goods. Mike climbed into the cab and refreshed his memory of the driving controls and got ready to get under way. Mike and Thomas would be traveling back to the retreat and Dave and Greg to the Ranch to pick up the empty trailer to take back to the retreat.

When Mike and Thomas arrived at the retreat, they found the crates had been prepositioned and ready for loading. Mike eventually backed the truck up to the piles of items, although it took him several tries since he was not experienced with backing up a large trailer. Eventually he got through and the group began to load the items. With a smaller trailer, the load time was significantly less and they were finished well before Greg and Dave returned. They still had enough daylight left to make it back to the Ranch, but decided not to take the chance of being on the roads after dark in case it took longer. They settled down into another night of sleeping in another location broken up with the occasional fire watch.

Mike and Thomas had back to back firewatch shifts and discussed the power problems with the new fuel source. "I know for a fact there were several large towed generators down on Peterson that would probably power the pumps. Plus, we still have access to the one at the construction yard with Smoke. It's only a problem with getting good fuel into them and getting them adapted to run the pumps. I think Renee might be able to help out with modifying the connectors."

"I'm wondering just how much fuel we are talking about. And plus, getting enough stabilizer to fix it all," wondered Mike.

"Well, little secret is we have enough stabilizer to pretty much bring anything back to life. George went a little crazy when he ordered it and we have a lot in storage" answered Thomas.

Mike thought for the moment about the deal. "Well, we know all of our military vehicles will run off it and the new trucks we bought. What about the diesel ATVs and the Gators?"

"I will have to check the owner's manuals or we can ask Alan when we go back. Even so, we can use the JP8 to run our trucks and save the diesel for the other equipment," answered Thomas.

The next morning before Thomas and Mike left with the truck, the doctor came back from his house in Buena Vista with his wife and son. They had some neighbors watching over his house and made a request to see the Ranch before making a final determination to move there for good. Thomas agreed to the request knowing he would have to talk to the community leader immediately when he got back and let him know the request for both the doctor and for Holly Meredith. Before they departed, Greg, Johnny and Dave came rolling in with Johnny driving the truck. Greg was showing him how to drive and he had made the entire trip from the Ranch to the retreat. Thomas took the time to inform Dave of the two requests and offered to introduce the doctor and Holly. The entire family emerged and Dave spent the better part of an hour talking to them. By the time he was finished, Thomas had Holly in tow and introduced her as well and told Dave they needed to get started so the truck would be back by that evening.

Mike and Thomas left the retreat with the Mathesons following them to the Ranch. When they arrived, they were given the grand tour by Ryan while Thomas went to his house for a hard earned shower and some quality time with his family.

CHAPTER 45 – FAVORS RETURNED

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 7 Months, 11 Days
Date/Time: 1 December/0949 Local
Location: The Ranch

The four days had flown by and Thomas knew it was his turn to return to the Gable Retreat to assist in moving the remainder of the supplies. The entire stash of firearms and ordnance had been moved to the Ranch and was currently being accounted for by Kristy and Jeff Holmes. The Mathesons, with the exception of Doug who only spent one night, had taken the four days to look over the Ranch and found it to their liking. They agreed to move to the Ranch under one condition, they be allowed to build their own cabin. They stated they didn't want to impose on anyone in the Ranch by moving into their living space. For the time being, Ryan agreed to put them up under his roof until a new cabin could be built. They agreed to this and made plans to move their personal possessions to the Ranch and place them in storage until a cabin could be built. Kristy was somewhat relieved since she found Laura Matheson had at one time been an accountant and was pretty handy with the numbers. She immediately volunteered to assist the group with the supply situation and jumped in headfirst to helping out.

Jeremy would be moving in with the Parsons when he had recovered enough to do so, but would be under the close supervision of the Doctor, Janie and Scott for the time being. With the new synthetic antibiotics given to Nicole, the infections she had as a result of the gunshot wound cleared up entirely over the course of two days. After being seen by the doctor, he pronounced her in no danger and might only lose ten percent of the use of her leg. She was already itching to get up and around and the doctor ordered her to stay put or it would make it worse.

Plans were made to pay Smoke a visit and pick up the supplies for the pre-fabricated log cabins. Since they were heading that way, Mark made the request to move down to the Ranch with the permission of Thomas. The Carlsons, Duggers and Ashley also expressed their interest to move closer to the Ranch since logistically it would be easier on everyone and the creature comforts of a new cabin were in the minds of everyone. Plans were made for fifteen new cabins which would be occupied by the new Ranch members as well as giving Greg, Holly, Amy, Heather, Jeremy, Amber and Cindy their own living space. Since Stu and Misty were now engaged and would be wedded soon, they would be sharing one of the new cabins and would have first priority with the Doctor and family being second. The remaining three cabins would be put up in case they were to add anyone new to the community. It was briefly discussed of inviting the Minister to live with them and a trip was planned to see him and extend the invitation.

It would be one of the largest undertakings the Ranch members had made since the beginning, but they knew the space was desperately needed. They would have to plan out more septic systems, communications and water lines as well as the electric lines. The more the group discussed it, the more problems came up. They finally decided to complete one cabin at a time and move to the next instead of trying to put them all up at once. They would have to wait until the contents of the Gable retreat were moved to the Ranch to begin starting on the new ideas.

Thomas left that morning with Mike again and drove the distance to the retreat. They stowed their weapons in the sleeper cabin of the truck, Mike carrying both his rifle and a Saiga-12 shotgun with a mean looking rotary drum magazine. "It helps to have mister thunder maker at your side from time to time. Plus it just looks mean," said Mike with an evil grin. Thomas agreed and looked over the menacing shotgun and deciding it would not do to be on the receiving end of the muzzle.

While they were driving, they struck up the conversation about the buried weapons again. "Did you know they uncovered over five hundred pistols as well? Mostly old surplus imports, but some quality ones as well?" asked Thomas

"Yeah, I think he probably hit a J&G Sales warehouse or something. Not only that, but there are enough magazines for at least twenty per rifle, probably more. Kristy is going nuts trying to inventory it all. And don't forget the two hundred shotguns," Mike added.

"And the ammunition. He wasn't lying when he said he had a mountain of ammunition. We are going to be well set for most anything around here, especially we now have Ma Deuce at our backs," laughed Thomas.

The M2 HB had been inspected by Rick and George and pronounced in good working order. They ensured the headspace and timing were performing correctly and even test fired the machine gun at the range. The ammunition stores added considerably to the amount already on hand and the group now had enough live rounds to where they would not need to reload quite so often. They still would as a matter of course, but if they missed a few thousand rounds, it wouldn't hurt them at all. They had enough to provide their neighbors with arms and enough ammunition to keep an attacker at bay until the residents could arrive to deal with the problem.

The rest of the drive was spent talking about the various other items which had been collected and were in the process of being moved to the Ranch. Holly Meredith was in the process of moving her items down to the cabins to the north-west, content for the moment to share the space with Ashley. She seemed to be bouncing back from her experiences, but still cringed when someone made a sudden move towards her. The Minister would be able to help with those problems and Thomas made sure he would inform Dave when he arrived he needed to make a trip to see him and request help.

While they were driving up, the passed the other truck on its way to the Ranch to drop off the supplies. They were averaging two or three truckloads a day, depending on what was being loaded. It had been slower with the ammunition and weapons, but had speeded up in recent days since they were mainly moving foods and dry goods to the Ranch. The JP-8 procured from Alan seemed to be working well in the trucks after being stabilized and the members of the group were using it almost exclusively for the trip. After they returned, they would put as much as possible into the jerry cans since they didn't want to mix the fuel with the diesel in the storage tanks. Alan had gotten his share loaded into a hand cranked tank and reminded the residents of the maintenance deal on the trucks. They also promised to return to Alan and have a go at getting the additional fuel out of the tanks when everything slowed down.

Mike and Thomas arrived at the retreat and found the others stacking goods near the loading area. Rick was currently manning the LP/OP at the entrance to the retreat. Doug and Janie were in treating Jeremy and they figured it would be another two days before he could be transported to the Ranch. All in all, Doug pronounced him to be recovering well from his gunshot wound and would probably make a full recovery, provided nothing else happened. Jeremy had regained consciousness the previous day and had been in and out ever since. Thomas made it a point to visit him first before helping with the work details. He stepped through the door and was told to wash up by Janie, ever the strict nurse. She told him he couldn't stay for long, but Jeremy had been requesting his presence since he had woken up. Thomas did as instructed and walked to where Jeremy was resting comfortably in a bed. "Hey man, you know it's not time for sleeping."

Jeremy gave Thomas a small smile and replied very weakly. "Yeah, you know a black man gets lazy any time there is work to be done."

Thomas gave him a smile back. "How are you feeling?"

"Like someone attacked my chest with a chainsaw. But the pain means I'm alive," said Jeremy.

"I know man, but the Doc says you are going to make a full recovery. We need you back out there soon," said Thomas.

"Why is that?" asked Jeremy.

"Because, we are putting in some new cabins and need your construction expertise. Come on now, do you think we are going to build your cabin for you?" asked Thomas with another smile.

"That's nice," said Jeremy. "Does this mean I'm going to be a member of your group?"

"I think we can safely assume our group will vote you in with no problems now. I mean, you got shot for crying out loud! How much more would you have to do?" asked Thomas.

Jeremy grinned again at the comment. "I want to thank you."

"For what?" asked Thomas.

"For giving me this opportunity. I never told you, but some of those people here were the same gang that attacked my other retreat. That's why I shot him in the head. I knew him from before and he was one of the ones that raped my sister. I didn't want to tell you before since I thought you would pull me from this mission. I wanted the chance to get even" said Jeremy.

"We would never have pulled you from the mission. You were too valuable to us," said Thomas.

"What did you do with the survivors?" asked Jeremy.

"What survivors?" asked Thomas coldly.

"I knew you would see it my way eventually," said Jeremy with a brief smile.

While Thomas knew he wanted to continue the conversation, he also knew Jeremy needed rest more than anything. "Anything we can get for you in the meantime?"

"A can of chicken noodle soup," said Jeremy with another grin, thankful some of the demons had been excised from his soul.

Thomas said his goodbyes and checked in on the Doctor and Janet, relaying the request of the chicken noodle soup. "It might be a tad early for those kinds of food, but I don't think it will hurt. What about you, Nurse Holmes?"

"Doctor, if you call me Nurse Holmes again, I'm going to give you a worse beat down than you already got. And yes, I think the softer foods could be arranged since chicken noodle is not that hard on the system," stated Janie crossing her arms.

"Hard habit to break, *Janie*. Please call me Doug as well," answered the Doctor.

She nodded at the half hearted apology. "Tom, do you think you could find a can around here?"

Thomas was unclear about the comments made by Janie about the "beat down" and looked at the doctor's face. He had the remains of a black eye and his nose looked a little out of place. His hands were also bruised from hitting something. He hadn't noticed before since the light was a little dim in the cabin. "Yes, we are loading food stores today and if I remember correctly, there were several cases to be loaded. We can spare a can or two. Want to come and check with me?"

"Doug, is that okay?" asked Janie.

"Sure, go for it. A patient often recovers better if they are on food they like since they are happy. With the vitamins we have been shoving into his system, he won't be missing anything nutritional. Can you bring back an extra can for me too? It kind of sounds good for my lunch," stated Doug as he went back to the bedroom to check on Jeremy again.

Janie and Thomas walked the distance to the gathered stores and started looking through the pile of canned goods. They found a case of chicken noodle soup, still well within the expiration date and gathered a dozen to take back to the cabin. "Okay, what's the deal with the beat down?"

"Long story short, Doug and Frank got into it. They talked one night about the issue they had when he first got here and decided to take matters into the woods behind the cabins. Apparently it was a draw since I had to treat both of them. However, they are like inseparable brothers now. I guess it was something they needed to get out of their system" said Janie as they found a box to put the soup and other food in.

"Nothing major medical wise?" asked Thomas.

"Other than Frank having bruised ribs and two black eyes and the Doctor with the same and an almost broken nose, nothing major. They were sore for a couple of days. Apparently, the good Doctor was a bit of an amateur boxer in his time and Frank has been learning that kung-fu stuff from Kristy and Amy. It's a wonder they didn't kill each other," said Janie.

"As long as it won't cause a problem," said Thomas.

"Nah, when I found them, they were lying on the ground out of breath from laughing like loons. They will be okay, I think," Janie said with a smile.

Thomas figured he would let the matter lie, since obviously it was settled now. As long as it wouldn't cause long term problems, Thomas didn't care. "What about the Doctor? How well is he fitting in?"

"He's different…he's a fine doctor, but kind of has a…an abrasive personality" she answered.

"Nothing that will cause a problem I hope?" asked Thomas.

"No, not at all. He is extremely knowledgeable and up on all current medical and treatment procedures. He apparently he did a stint in the Army after graduating Suma Cum Laude from Harvard Medical and then worked for Johns Hopkins for a while. He worked out there for at least ten years before coming out to Colorado Springs to work in Penrose Hospital. Since I worked in Memorial, I never knew him, but I think I remember hearing his name. Anyway, just imagine the bedside manner of Doctor House along with the technical expertise of Hawkeye and ego of Winchester off MASH," she said.

"Johns Hopkins and Harvard Medical are the big leagues; they won't allow just anyone there. Is he that good?" asked Thomas.

"Better I think. Of course, this is just what he has told me. After working as a Professor at Johns Hopkins, he decided to call it quits and focus his time on treating patients, while still doing a little teaching for interns on the side. Ask Scott for a second opinion, but the surgery he performed on Jeremy leaves no doubt in my mind as to his competence. He will make a full recovery, even in these crude conditions. He just needs to learn not to be so pushy," she stated.

"Pushy? In a bad way or a good way?" asked Thomas.

"I don't think it's a bad way. I've worked for pushy doctors in my time, some good and some bad. It's not as bad when the doctor knows his stuff and pushes the nurse on treatment and post operation care. However, we locked horns when I first got here and he now knows his place. He questioned my care of Jeremy until he saw I knew what I was doing. He backed off after I gave him an earful," she said with a smile.

Thomas chuckled at the comment knowing full well Janie was also pushy when it came to patient care. He had heard the stories from Brian and saw the treatment given by her to Stephen after his accident and the care given to the pregnant ladies after child birth. She was not to be

fooled with during treatment of a patient. Apparently, Doug had found out the hard way Nurse Janie Holmes was not the kind of nurse that could be buffaloed by a pushy doctor.

They said their goodbyes and Thomas immediately jumped in helping load the trucks. Someone had thoughtfully brought along the Chevy flatbed truck to be loaded with additional items. They were planning on sending back the Chevy first so it was being loaded with the stores and tarps were being pulled over the items in the bed. Just as Gwenn and Stephen were about to leave, a shot rang out from the direction of the LP/OP. The group immediately sought cover wherever they could find it and faced outward to the danger. Another shot was heard, this one the report of a pistol, but with no corresponding impact near the LP/OP. Rick at the LP/OP called in the report. "One shot, I think they were trying to snipe me but missed by a mile. The other was a pistol shot that wasn't aimed my way. We have hostiles out there."

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The leader of the gang put the smoking Smith and Wesson automatic back into the holster after shooting one of his men in the head. *The fool, tipping our hand before the truck started to move and the force was in place to attack,* he thought. He looked at the retreat and decided it was a waste of time now to wait until everyone got into position. He yelled at his men to open fire and take out the defenders.

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More shots rang out, focusing attention on the LP/OP and the nearest cabin. The group quickly made their way in the direction of the incoming fire, bounding between cover, while leaving Stephen and Gwenn to watch their six. Thomas could see several different points where muzzle flashes were coming from the thick undergrowth. He took aim at one and let loose three shots from his PTR. Still there was more fire coming. Rick had abandoned the LP/OP since it didn't provide much cover and was making his way back to the group. Suddenly, the report of an machine gun was heard and a line of tracers lanced out towards Rick, who narrowly missed the incoming death by jumping behind a tree.

Gwenn immediately radioed the Ranch with the contact report and requested immediate back up. The Ranch replied and stated they would be sending two teams to help out almost immediately. After completing the radio call for help, her carbine went to work, firing at the muzzle flashes in the nearby tree line. Suddenly, thirty individuals came out of the woods screaming in a charge towards the retreat. They carried a mix of weapons from pump shotguns to bolt action hunting rifles to military style rifles. The defenders immediately opened up on them, picking their targets with care. Doug and Janie came running out of the medical cabin, carrying Jeremy on a stretcher towards the rear of the retreat. They attempted to stay out of the line of fire, but still exposed themselves. The attackers changed their direction of fire on the medical personnel while in turn the defenders attempted to cover them as best as possible. Gwenn raced forward to

another position to draw fire away from the medical people and was successful in drawing attention away from the escaping doctor and nurse. After getting into position, she fired at the targets across her front before she was forced to displace. The group did their best to cover her and Michael opened up with his M249, firing long bursts into the tree line to try and suppress the automatic gunfire from the concealed position. Before he displaced, Mike helped cover the front by sending twenty 12 gauge shells downrange from his shotgun. While the attackers were out of range, the shotgun barking out the OO buck as rapidly as it did made quite a few seek cover.

The attackers came from two different directions and the defenders were having a hard time splitting their forces between the two groups. The defenders called for a retreat and started heading back into the retreat for more defensible cover. Doug and Janie had been able to get Jeremy almost completely to the rear of the retreat by that time and the rest of the group was hot on their heels, providing mutual cover to each other as they moved. It was a battle drill they had practiced at the Ranch many times called the Australian Peel. Each defender would fire a series of shots in the direction of the enemy while the others stacked up behind them. After exhausting a magazine, the point man would "peel" off and the next defender would do the same. Michael with the light machine gun was the last person and the anchor. He would fire a continuous stream in the direction of the enemy while the rest of the group set up at the next position.

The technique worked for the moment, but more attackers came out of the wood line. Several were unarmed and picked up the dropped weapons of those who had been hit in the initial exchange. It seemed that there was an endless supply of manpower to the group of attackers. The defenders reached a point near the rear of the retreat where there was more defensible ground and got ready to make a stand. By this time, Johnny, Gwenn and Thomas had been hit by gunfire in the extremities, although nothing life threatening for the moment. Thomas and Gwenn had been hit in the arm and Johnny had taken a round to his shin. Janie provided immediate medical care after returning from the hide they had found for Doug and Jeremy.

The defenders started taking their time and provided aimed, disciplined fire on the attackers. More fell but were soon replaced by more unarmed people coming from the tree line. They were within a hundred and fifty yards when Thomas called for a fall back again. Michael provided a hundred round burst from the machine gun and Mike fired another drum from the shotgun, sweeping their entire front with the evil looking line of tracers and .33 caliber projectiles. The machine gun ran dry of ammo and Michael prepared to load another belt as the rest of the defenders prepared to make their way back to the next fall back point. Mike was down to the last drum of 12 gauge shells for the shotgun and switched back over to his rifle for the time being.

Then, something surprised the group. Concentrated fire came from the left flank of the attackers. Several machine guns and automatic rifles opened up on the attackers from unknown forces hiding in the tree line to the south of the retreat. The attackers were caught off guard and half their number was immediately hit. They shifted their focus to the unknown group and immediately tried to engage. Thomas and the rest of his group immediately stayed in their current position and started firing at the attackers who were scrambling to find cover from the fire which was now coming from two directions. It seemed like there was nowhere to go and half their group again was hit. The attackers were caught in a picture perfect L shaped ambush, although Thomas and his group had never planned it that way. They had unwillingly suckered

the attackers into the kill zone made by the unknown ambushers. The remainder of the group started retreating to the north of the retreat, still receiving fire from the unknown force.

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Everything was going as planned for the attackers and they would be through the retreat in no time. While he wasn't sure if the weapons were still at the retreat, there would be enough food to supply his gang for some time. As he saw the small force of defenders reach the rear of the retreat, he planned on moving his force closer in and get rid of them before they could disappear into the forest. His head snapped to the left as he heard massed gunfire from the left flank. Lines of tracers reached out and hit his gang members full force. Half were hit as they dropped to the ground or attempted to find cover. "No, no, no, no!" he screamed as his well laid plans for taking the retreat were quickly unraveling.

His attention turned back to his attacking force as he ordered his machine gunner to engage the various hidden positions of the machine guns in the ambush. The gunner was shifting his weapon to the side when his head exploded from a well aimed rifle round. The rest of the leadership of the gang suffered the same fate in the next five seconds as another ambush team fired on the six remaining individuals. The leader was hit by seven rounds in the chest as he stood up, pulled his pistol and took aim at the attackers. He fell to the ground, grasping his chest as he felt his life slipping away. *How close we came to actually pulling it off, screw this life*, thought the gang leader as he slipped into eternal darkness.

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As Thomas was still firing, he kept a close eye on the southern flank. He hit several more of the attackers when he saw a well disciplined force rise up and sweep through the ambush zone. He immediately called for a shifting of fire and then a cease fire as the attackers were out of sight. It was a textbook example of an ambush and attack through as the members swept through the ambush zone, firing shots into everyone as they swept to the north. The ambushers were all dressed in military pattern camouflage and armed with AR type systems, both M-16 and M-4 styles. The machine guns were all M-249 or M-240 types. An armored HMMWV with an M-2 mounted in the turret rolled into the entrance of the retreat, spraying the area where the original machine gun had been located in a long continuous burst. The gunfire continued to their north as the would-be attackers turned to attempt to mount a defense. Soon all that was heard was sporadic gunfire at the ambushers found small pockets of the gang members and took them out.

"What just happened?" asked Rick while assisting Janie with a bandage for Gwenn. She had suffered a broken arm from the gunshot and would be needing quite a bit of time for recovery after being worked on by Doug.

The entire group fell silent as the sporadic gunfire continued to the north and east of the retreat.

“I have no clue. They aren’t ours since they all were wearing the same camouflage and had common weapons. Loyalist forces?” asked Thomas.

“I doubt it; they haven’t been out here in over a year and a half. Seriously, what is going on?” asked Rick again.

The Ranch members made no attempt to move from their defensive position and instead waited for the unknown force to come to them. The wound received by Thomas was not life threatening and would be looked at in time by Doug. He was assisted in placing a compression bandage over it with the bandages being tied off to the side of the dressing. After fifteen minutes of waiting, no more gunfire was heard and two figures emerged from the northern tree line and made their way towards them with their rifles slung over their shoulders. As they were getting closer, Thomas and Rick thought they recognized the figures, but couldn’t be sure.

As they got closer, the defenders trained their weapons on them, although not in an aggressive manner. Michael, Rick and Thomas looked again and then, as one voice, gasped as they recognized the leaders of the assault force that had saved them from certain death.

The two figures walking towards them were Captain Johansson and Major Starkes. “Boy, you guys hang out in strange places,” said the Captain with a smile as they drew closer.

The group was still too astounded to even move as these folks were the last people they ever expected to see, much less come to their rescue. Eventually, proper courtesy took over and the entire group stood up and walked to their former officers.

“I’m not going to ask what you two are doing here, but I’m glad to see you!” exclaimed Thomas as he shook the hands of both the men.

Handshakes were given around the group as the adrenaline and stress of the battle was coming down. Doug came forward from Jeremy, having turned over his care to Misty and asked the two if they had wounded.

“A few, but the gang members are all dead. Sorry, we don’t take prisoners,” said Major Starkes.

“Bring them down here and I can treat them. Meet me over by that second cabin in the retreat. Janie, prepare for emergency triage,” ordered the Doctor as he jogged towards the cabin to get ready to receive wounded.

“No offense, Captain, but I think an explanation is in order,” said Thomas.

“Please, don’t call me Captain anymore. You called me Troy before you left and I think that’s good enough,” said Captain Johansson.

“And call me Craig,” said Major Starkes.

“Craig, Troy. Explanation time,” said Rick.

"Where to start…okay. First off, it's good to see you guys. We didn't know what happened after you all left, but we figured you all were doing okay. Anyway, we have been tracking this group for almost three months trying to find them and finally caught up with them here. They have been terrorizing northern Colorado, Southern Wyoming, parts of Kansas and Nebraska since the Fall. We finally caught up with them near Castle Rock and tracked them to here. From what we heard, they were looking for weapons and this retreat was well stocked."

"By the way, we've had a recon team watching this place for a while now and they saw what you did with the other gang. Very nice work on your part. The only reason we had it under surveillance was because the leader of this gang made several trips up here negotiating for weapons. Anyway, we saw them getting into position for an attack and never had the chance to warn you. We got set up into an ambush in time for them to start sweeping the compound. While they had more manpower than we did, you helped cut the numbers down to a manageable level. Not bad for only eight of you," said Craig.

"Yeah, thanks. Now where did you all come from?" asked Thomas.

"Well, I told you my wife had a cousin on a farm out in Nebraska. We have been living there ever since we bugged out the same night as the rest of your folks. Pretty soon we had some issues with looters, gangs and other troublemakers. We went out and recruited some additional security from trusted sources. You know how many military folks were out in that area due to F.E Warren and all those missile sites. It wasn't hard to make contact with a bunch of them since we were both flight commanders out there at one point or another during our careers. Our numbers kind of grew since we were one of the best producing farms in the area and getting weapons was not hard since the base was right there as well. The folks we have working for us are almost all ex-military and work for food in exchange for working the farm and providing security. Trust me, over the past year, we haven't had any trouble since word got out we were not to be trifled with," said Troy.

"And this group?" asked Michael.

"Like I said, we've known about them for about six months now. They staged large raids against a number of farms and ranches, but never against us. We decided to take the fight to them and started actively looking for them three months ago. We were hot on their trail when we found out they were observing this place for an attack. We also knew they were looking into hitting a ranch south of here near Cañon City. We knew if we could catch them here, we could take their entire group out in one shot," said Craig.

"That ranch near Cañon City…that would be my Ranch. I guess we are doubly in your debt for helping us here," said Thomas.

"We kind of thought it was you guys since the gang knew it was a bunch of former military guys there. We've been hearing stories for the past year about a survival group in the mountains that has done some serious damage to the opposition. We figured it might be you all, but since nobody, and I mean nobody, except for your group knew or talked about the exact location of

your ranch, we could never make contact to warn you or verify it was you," said Troy.

Suddenly, a realization hit Thomas like a bowling ball to the head. This was the large "gang" the other gangs were so afraid of. They weren't a gang at all, just a group of people trying to find some normalcy in life and survive. Much like the Dayfield Ranch, they didn't take the fight to the enemy unless provoked. The small group continued to talk for several minutes before moving back to the makeshift aid station. Michael called the Ranch again and relayed the status, asking instead of reinforcements to send Scott and medical supplies. The request was relayed and the convoy was stopped just as they were getting ready to leave the Ranch. Thomas, Gwenn and Johnny were treated as their turn came up since there were more seriously injured people ahead of them. The Ranch members continued to talk to Craig and Troy when a grizzled older man came up to talk to them.

"Gentlemen, I have our DIM report and SITREP," he announced in a booming voice.

"Go ahead, Chief," said Troy.

"Roger that. Dead – three individuals, Injured – nine individuals, eight are here and the other is making his way back as we speak, Missing – none. Out of the enemy, we have a preliminary count," stated the man.

"Please," said Craig as he waved his hand in a motion to continue.

"We estimated one hundred and forty members of this group. Of those, we counted one hundred and ten dead here with another fifteen or so in the north forest, totaling one hundred-twenty-five. We think maybe fifteen got away, but these aren't accurate. We still have a patrol chasing what appears to be at least five, maybe as many of eight. At least two are wounded in that group since they are following the blood trail. This leaves maybe ten unaccounted for," said the man.

"Very well, Chief. I'd like to introduce you to the guys who were defending this place before we started our ambush. Thomas, Rick, meet former Chief Master Sergeant Dale Savage, our security manager. Chief, meet former Technical and Staff Sergeant Thomas Dayfield and Rick Jones," said Troy.

"Please call me Chief, I don't stand on the military rank any longer, but everyone still calls me that," said Chief Savage as he shook their hands. "You folks did pretty good here until we started our ambush. I think you managed to take out at least thirty or forty before we started. Not bad with your small group."

"Thanks, Chief and call me Rick, please," said Rick.

"Thomas, and it was our pleasure to get rid of some garbage for you," said Thomas with a smile.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me, I have to check in on that patrol giving pursuit," he said as he turned away. Rick and Thomas half expected him to give the two former officers a salute before departing, but they were wrong.

“Interesting fellow and not a cop by trade. A former comm guy if you would believe it. But he adapted well and runs the security department with an iron fist. He is good, trust me,” said Troy.

“Not a man I would prefer to meet in a dark alley,” said Thomas as they looked at the retreating fellow. He was six-three and a midsection that looked like a beer keg and arms and legs like tree trunks. With his shaved head and goatee, he looked more like he should be riding on a Harley or in a segregation cell at Marion, Illinois rather than performing duties as the leader of a security team. Thomas told the two officers this and they started laughing.

“Yeah, when we get some rough looking customers coming around the farm, we send him out. Just the sight of him alone normally deters most people. Trust me; Savage is a perfect name for him when it comes to defending the farm. A good man to have on our side,” said Craig.

The foursome continued to talk until Thomas was seen by the doctor. Luckily enough the round had barely gone through his arm and only a little muscle damage was done. His recovery wouldn’t be long and Doug told him to take it easy for a couple of weeks. Another round of gunfire was heard in the distance and they found out the patrol had caught up with the escaping group and taken another nine of the gang members out. After Doug finished stitching him up, he found Rick still talking to Craig and Troy.

“Gentlemen, I would like to extend the invitation to come to our Ranch for a celebration dinner. You two as well as the Chief would be welcome and any others you see fit to bring,” said Rick.

“I think we would be most honored to accept your invitation. When would be a good time for you?” asked Craig.

“Whenever is good for you. We are fairly flexible this time of year since the crops aren’t out. However, to get everyone there, we still need to finish clearing this place out. Maybe another three days or so,” said Thomas.

“It might be easier if we come from here to there since it’s a long drive back to our farm. We can send all but a small security force back to the farm and come to your place. We might need some fuel along the way and can barter for it,” said Troy.

“Bartering will not be necessary, Troy. You saved our bacon here and it’s the least we can do to show our gratitude,” said Rick.

“We will have to contact the farm and check, but I think that is doable. Us, the Chief and another three would be coming. Do you have room for us or do we need to bring our own shelter?” asked Craig.

“We will find the room for you; you will not be sleeping in a tent while you are our guests. Also, we will need to check, but I think you might be able to help yourself to the supplies here. For now, if your folks are hungry, please take what you need,” stated Thomas.

"We will and thanks. But another question. There is supposed to be a major supply of weapons and ordnance up here, possibly buried. Do you know if that is true?" asked Troy.

Both Rick and Thomas shared a look before replying. "Yes, the rumor was true and yes it was buried up here. And no, it's not here any longer. It's being secured," said Rick.

"Well, that's a load off my mind. As long as it isn't here for anyone to grab, that's a good thing," said Craig.

"Do you want what is left up here for your group? I mean the weapons just lying around up here?" asked Thomas.

Both men pondered the question before replying. "Most of it is garbage, but we will pick our way through it. I'm sure it might come in handy. Now what about graves?" asked Craig.

"We already have the spots dug out where the weapons were stored. They go down about four or five feet deep and would work well. Can we get your guys to help with putting them in?" asked Thomas.

"Absolutely. Once everyone is fed, we can put them on that immediately. Better sooner rather than later," replied Troy.

The small group broke apart to do their various details while Rick and Thomas checked on the vehicles. As miracles never cease, neither the semi nor the Chevy had any engine damage or flat tires. They had plenty of bullet holes in the body and windshield, but nothing major was done to the engines or fuel tanks. Both started without hesitation and they shut them off to conserve fuel. Apparently, the Chief and the two officers had been busy as a gang of men came over and started loading up the trucks. Eventually the Chief appeared to overwatch the operation. Rick, Michael and Thomas gravitated towards him. Michael was introduced and the question was asked.

"My folks are going to help you all secure the supplies here. This place is prime for another raid and the quicker we can get everything out, the quicker we can all go home. Craig and Troy insisted. We are gathering up our trucks as well to put in additional loads and take some manpower to your ranch to help unload. We are only keeping a small portion back to feed the troops here and taking the rest to your place," answered the Chief.

As if on command, four trucks drove into the supply area, two five ton trucks, a deuce and a commercial flatbed like the one already there. The troops assigned to help load the supplies quickly started loading up the additional vehicles. Two more armored HMMWVs rolled into the retreat, one with an M-240B mounted and the other with an M2. They took up opposing positions in the retreat and faced their turrets outward. More vehicles rolled in to the compound, some cargo, other personnel carriers and several more HMMWVs. The Ranch residents were highly impressed and said so.

"My people are well trained and disciplined. If they don't toe the line, they are out on their butt. Oh, sure, we give them a shotgun and some ammo and enough food for a week, but nothing else.

There have been examples made and everyone knows the procedures now. No sleeping on guard duty and no fooling around on post. After the first three incidents, they started policing their own," said the Chief.

"Speaking of which, how many troops did you bring with you?" asked Michael.

"Come on now, OPSEC. But I will tell you in the range of seventy or so. I have fifteen here helping you, several fire teams on patrol and another squad setting up LP/OPs around this retreat. The heavy weapons teams are getting the Fifty and Mk 19 set up right now. Don't worry, you are safe and don't worry about pulling security," answered the Chief.

Again, they were impressed by the display of raw manpower and how quickly everyone worked. Over the next hour, they saw every truck was loaded and getting ready to head to the Ranch. The Chief performed a pre-combat inspection on every member of the convoy and gave out assignments. The troops mounted their vehicles and prepared to roll, marshaling their vehicles near the gate. Thomas, Gwenn and Johnny were being driven to the Ranch by Misty while the rest of the group would stay behind and continue to gather the supplies. The convoy rolled on schedule and the group made it to the Ranch in record time, with the residents arriving five minutes ahead of the convoy to warn the Ranch of its arrival.

They lead the procession into the main Ranch area where Kristy was still taking inventory on the items. She was flabbergasted when she saw the additional vehicles and amount of supplies on board. Immediately she went to work organizing work parties to stash the supplies in the sheds and barns. Thomas was reunited with Sharon and the children, with her starting to cry when she saw his arm in a sling. Darren and Janet Thompson did much the same thing when they noticed Johnny on crutches. He would need further surgery which Doug would perform at the Ranch when everyone came back down.

CHAPTER 46 – NEW DEAL

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 7 Months, 14 days
Date/Time: 4 December/0819 Local
Location: The Ranch, Colorado

Over the next three days, everything was moved from the retreat to the Ranch, including the furniture and all the useable items in the retreat cabins and trailers. The group rotated vehicles through the retreat and Ranch all day starting at 0600 and continuing until nothing of value was left at the retreat. Eventually, Kristy was so overwhelmed she starting piling the goods wherever the trucks stopped and covered it with tarps for inventory at a later time. A small group of their new friends had taken the wounded and dead and convoyed back to the farm in Nebraska that morning.

Finally, just as dark was coming on, everyone including the security force from the retreat came to the Ranch. Thomas had set up accommodations for Craig, the Chief, Troy and the three security force members the previous day so each could enjoy a shower and a warm bed that night. He was unprepared for the fifty additional personnel that showed up. They attempted to accommodate the visitors, but the Chief already had them setting up their tents and initiating a firewatch. They made a small request to gather some firewood for their portable stoves and were granted permission by Thomas. A small group took a truck to the nearby woods to gather dead wood for fires in their tents. A half an hour later, they returned with enough for each of the tents and heaters and immediately set to sawing it up with bow saws and cutting it with axes in the dim light of the truck headlights. Thomas again remarked about the discipline of the young members of the security force to the Chief. The Chief smiled at the scene and reminded Thomas a well disciplined force was a force that stayed alive.

The security group, with the exception of the six staying, would leave in the morning at 0700 and convoy back to the farm in Nebraska. The remaining six would stay at the Ranch and be welcomed guests until the next evening when they planned to have a celebration feast for the assistance rendered. The fifty security force members were allowed by the Chief to rotate into the showers in the Conference Center and the cabins which had been offered for that purpose. It put a strain on the water supply, but the tank didn't run dry. The troops were eternally grateful and thanked the residents for their small token of appreciation.

The next morning, the convoy rolled as scheduled and Troy, the Chief and Craig were served breakfast at the Dayfield's where they had stayed the night. Dave showed up immediately after breakfast and the small group had another cup of coffee and chatted before taking a guided tour of the property and adjacent areas. They were driven in the various vehicles by Ranch members and were shown the logs of what had happened since their arrival. The Ranch residents answered the questions of the visitors for the most part and the visitors did not ask any questions which might be seen as controversial. Much of the afternoon was spent comparing the two retreats and each provided valuable suggestions on different ways of doing things. The Chief was seriously impressed with the defensive and communications arrangements of the Ranch and

took back several ideas for implementation at the farm.

“You have a good set up here, but it seems like there is a lack of living space,” offered Troy.

“Yes, it is a problem and we actually have a solution. We know a place where we can get housing and we plan of getting it set up now that the retreat is cleared out,” said Thomas.

“Not stealing I hope,” laughed Craig.

“Not at all. We know the caretaker and have bartered with him plenty in the past. We are more than welcome to take what we need from there,” said Dave. Craig and Troy shared a look and turned back to Dave and Thomas.

“That’s our biggest problem as well, living space. We actually have some people hot bunking right now. Is there enough supplies there for us to barter with this guy as well?” asked Troy.

Thomas thought for a moment about the building supply yard and the materials it contained. “There probably is, but I’m not the expert in such things. Our construction experts, my wife and Jeremy, have yet to look things over out there. But probably so.”

“Will this man trade with us? I mean, what does he need or want? I know people really don’t have much of anything unless they are fortunate enough to be prepared like we are. We believe in charity for those less fortunate to have the goods we have. We can help this man get back on his feet and ease his suffering,” said the Chief with concern in his voice.

Dave and Thomas looked at each other and broke out in hysterical laughter. “I’m sorry, but that was funny. Honestly, he isn’t in any kind of suffering at all. As a matter of fact, he lives better than most of the residents of the former United States. He lives in a central distribution warehouse for Wal-Mart and has another distribution center for Sportsman’s Warehouse nearby,” said Thomas after catching his breath.

The three visitors were a little angry at being laughed at by the two men until they heard the explanation. They thought for a moment about the Chief’s comments about suffering and broke out in hysterical laughter themselves. “Okay, so he isn’t really suffering. Can we bargain with him?” asked the Chief.

“Probably so. I honestly couldn’t tell you what he needs for the moment since it’s been a few months since we’ve seen him. But trust me, he will probably think of something,” said Thomas.

“May we speak in private for a few moments?” asked Craig.

“By all means. We’ll be in the Conference Center when you get done,” said Dave.

The trio spoke amongst themselves for a few minutes before returning to the Conference Center main room. “Okay, we have a three way barter we would like to propose to you,” offered Troy.

"Let's hear it," said Dave.

"You are going to be putting up more housing here soon, but only have a limited amount of manpower and transportation assets. We have the transportation assets and manpower to get them moved and the expertise to help in construction. You know the man who owns the goods we both need and he knows you. We don't know him and would be forced to start from square one with him, while you are already known and are probably a good trading partner of his."

"Here is the barter I propose. You arrange for us to barter with this man on an even playing field and we provide the transportation and manpower for your new homes to be delivered here. Fuel isn't a concern, but security at the warehouse would be. We provide the trucks and drivers as well as the manpower to move them, you provide security here and at the warehouse."

"Now, for us to provide assistance in getting them put up, we need some weapons. We have plenty of M-16s and M-4s to go around, actually a surplus, but not nearly enough 7.62 battle rifles we would like to have. If, and a plenty big if, you had, say about forty of them with at least ten magazines apiece to trade we could convince our guys to come here. Autoloaders are preferable, but we can take bolt actions if you don't have enough to spare. Or even a mix of both," said Troy in conclusion.

Dave and Thomas thought for a moment about the captured weaponry from the retreat and how much of each they had. "How much ammo would you need?" asked Thomas.

"Not too much since we are fairly well set for that. But if you cannot give us those numbers, you could offset it with ammo," said Troy.

"How about thirty, all autoloaders but maybe a mix of models?" asked Dave.

"That might work, but we would have to inspect them first," said Troy

"That could be arranged. What kind of labor could you offer?" asked Thomas.

"You name it and we probably have them at the farm or nearby. Everything from electrical specialists to concrete workers to plumbers to carpenters. We can probably find whatever you need as well as raw muscle to move things around. We have a bunch of new guys the Chief has wanted to break in with some hard labor, so this would be a good time," said Troy.

"Give us some time to contemplate your offer and discuss it with our group. We both have something each other needs and I think we can agree to the terms," said Dave.

"Makes sense. We can wait until we leave on your decision, but we can't wait more than a couple of months since we start plowing around early March," said Craig.

The group made the decision to retire for a quick nap before the evening. Thomas was still feeling a little under the weather since his injury and was fussed over by Sharon when he came home. He laid down with her for a quick nap while his children did the same. That evening, the

residents prepared one of the largest feasts they had done since moving to the Ranch. Every family made multiple dishes and fresh vegetables were brought out of the greenhouses to be served. Meats ranging from chicken to buffalo to turkey and venison adorned the table as well as enough side dishes that nobody would go hungry that night except by choice.

The generators were started up and full lighting was provided in the Conference Center, the first time in a long time. Soft mood music played in the background during dinner which made the scene seem all the more normal. Grace was said by the Minister and a hearty "amen" was said by all at the end. For the evening meal, the entire population of the Ranch was brought in, including the recon patrol. They made it in just in time for grace and left their packs on the porch so they could back out when they were done eating. They looked scruffy and dirty, having already been out for three days, but nobody cared. Even Jeremy was pronounced well enough to attend by Doug, although he was closely watched by him and Janie. The Matheson family also attended, staying the night at Ryan's house. The Minister also agreed stay the night at the Taylor's residence before going home the next day. The last of the champagne was brought out for everyone including the teenagers and several toasts to both the rescue and to the new friendship between the two groups were made. At the conclusion of dinner, the tables were cleared but the chairs left behind and everyone stayed behind to talk about the remarkable events over the past several weeks. The music was turned up a little and couples started dancing after Darren and Janet prodded them into doing so by leading the way. Eventually everyone had taken a spin around the dance floor, even the Minister. He invited and danced with Shannon, Heather, Amy and Kristy who were flattered and completely enjoyed the formal dances. They all found the Minister charming and a graceful dancer for a man in his sixties.

After dinner, the Chief gravitated to Ryan and talked shop about the communications set up including a list of frequencies the two groups could use to communicate. Troy met privately with Dave and a handshake agreement was made to mutually support each other even though they were separated by a great distance. George, Craig and Thomas were called in to witness the informal contract between the two and each commented it was a good alliance for the two groups. One of the single security force members, Heath Bates, immediately became enchanted with Amber. It appeared the feelings were mutual since the two spent the evening talking and dancing with each other, almost completely ignoring everyone else. The looks in their eyes were all that were needed for everyone to see the attraction already growing between the two. The other single security member singled out Ashley. She remained friendly, but guarded, with him and he finally gave up flirting with her and decided just to carry on a decent conversation with an attractive lady for the first time in ages. She relaxed somewhat and enjoyed the conversation with him as well. He later moved on to Cindy, Amy and Heather and decided not to continue flirting since these single ladies didn't seem to be in the mood for it. They continued talking throughout the evening and dancing with each other. The other member of the security force, a married man, made his rounds of the room, socializing and even danced a few times with some of the ladies of the Ranch. Cynthia extended the invitation to live at the Ranch to the Minister, who stated he would consider the offer and found the idea favorable.

Around ten o'clock, the party started to break up and the residents went to their homes. George, ever the worried father, gave a concerned look at his eldest daughter who continued to talk to Heath Bates, even though everyone was going home. He was pulled from the room by Cynthia

and led home, a "dejected father" look on his face all the way.

The next morning, there was snow on the ground, almost six inches worth. It had started snowing sometime during the night and continued lightly that morning. Since the visitors had military HMMWVs, driving was not a concern. However, they planned on going to the warehouse to deal with Smoke that day. Dave had checked with Kristy and found they could support the thirty rifles along with thirty thousand rounds to be traded for services rendered in constructing the new homes. They offered them to Craig and Troy, who, in turn, looked over the rifles and found them to be acceptable. Kristy promised to dig out the magazines for them as soon as the snow cleared. The group made plans to go to the warehouse the next day, provided the snow cleared by the next morning, as it looked like it would. One member of the security force would be left behind with the Chief and two would go with Craig, Troy, Thomas, Sharon, George and Kristy to the warehouse to meet with Smoke. As soon as Amber found out Heath was going to be escorting the two, she immediately demanded to be included on the small convoy. Her excuse was that Thomas was wounded and they needed another gun in case of trouble. Her reasoning was fairly transparent since she had locked eyes with Heath the entire time she was providing her explanation. Her father initially was adamant in saying no, but eventually relented after he was talked to by Cynthia. Since there was room for five in the HMMWV they would be taking, he would "chaperone" the two. Cynthia reminded him at one point in time her own father had stopped "chaperoning" them any time they were out of his sight and they turned out all right.

"But Cynthia, she's our *baby*!" exclaimed George.

"Horse puckey, dear. She is always going to be the little four year old girl to you that has you wrapped around her little finger. She has already been married once and she's old enough to knows what she is getting into. Give it a rest," said Cynthia with a frown and a tone.

A dejected George did as instructed by his wife, and gave another depressed look and a sigh at his daughter locked in conversation with Heath, both totally oblivious of anything going on around them. Thomas smiled at the scene and remembered that he and Sharon had been the same way when they first met, and they still did the same thing on occasion. He also wondered if he was going to be the same way as George with Angel someday.

The rest of the day was spent relaxing and assisting Kristy inventory items that were out of the cold. There was massive amounts of supplies to be accounted for and Kristy projected it would take at least two weeks to get everything done, even with help. Dave assigned her four bodies to help and told her he would put more on the detail if she needed it. At some point during the day, Amber and Heath disappeared, but were seen again at dinner time that evening. He had been invited to dinner by the Thompsons and suspiciously enough, Amber was invited as well. George knew about Amber going to dinner at the Thompsons and didn't have a problem with it as it was normal for families to host other families for dinner. However, Janet had "accidentally" forgotten to mention Heath would be at the dinner as well. Janet and Darren had seen the sparks flying between the two the previous night and throughout the day and wanted to help things along if possible.

After dinner, the Dayfields were paid a social call by Amber on her way back home. The three made their way to the living room where a fire was burning nicely in the fireplace. Craig, Troy and the Chief had already called it a night and had gone to bed, still somewhat exhausted since they had been on the go for several weeks chasing down the gang. Angel immediately bounded up to "Auntie Amber" and demanded to sit on her lap. Amber spent a few minutes with her and gave her a big hug before Angel got comfortable in her lap, her eyes starting to flutter indicating it was close to bed time. Amber seemed apprehensive about something and Sharon asked her what was bothering her.

"It's just…well, I'm a little confused here and honestly I don't know who to talk to. Imagine that, a confused blond," laughed Amber, making light of her situation.

"I know the feeling; I get that way myself. Is there something wrong?" asked Sharon.

Amber shifted in her chair. "It's kind of complicated…can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure, sweetie. I mean you are almost like family and can surely ask me a personal question. Do you want to be alone? We can have girl time if you want," said Sharon.

Amber laughed at the attempt to break the ice. "No, honestly, it's kind of for the both of you. I value his opinion as well, as a good friend."

Thomas adjusted the weight of Brent sleeping in his arm. "Please, ask away."

"Well, as both of you know, I was married before and, more or less since the Fall, been single since my husband ran out on me. I got married young, probably way to young for my own good, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. Anyway, since then, I've matured a lot; at least I think I've matured a lot. I realize now, I never really loved Tom, my ex-husband. I mean, I loved him, but was never *in* love with him. Do you know what I mean?" asked Amber.

"Sure, I understand," said Sharon followed by Thomas in agreement.

"Well…I met one of the guys who came here with that group that rescued you guys, Heath Bates. I think he is a totally awesome guy and…" she said as her voice trailed off.

"You think you're in love?" asked Thomas.

Amber paused before looking back at them. "I used to think the idea of love at first sight was a joke. Do you believe in it?"

Thomas fell silent as Sharon answered the question. "Honestly, yes I do. I mean, I fell in love with Thomas immediately, but made the mistake of not going after him sooner. I suppose I didn't realize I was in love with Thomas, so I got married to the wrong man to start with. I guess I was not in love with Thomas, but with the promise of a man like him. I figured out I was in love with him after I got divorced and had been for a very long time. I knew it all along, but never gave it much thought since I was younger myself at the time. By the time I was divorced, I

had matured quite a bit as well and it finally hit me when I saw him after the divorce. I knew that was who I had been in love with all that time and went after him."

"And you?" asked Amber as she looked at Thomas.

"Honestly? It took until the second date. The first date I thought, 'man, what a cool woman' but on the second date, it hit me like a two by four in the head and I figured out I was already head over heels in love," he replied.

"It wasn't a two by four, dear, it was an empty liquor bottle. See, when we first met, I was bartending on a day shift at a local pub. Thomas had come to pick me up so we could go to dinner and I was cleaning up the place. And being the gentleman that he is, he was attempting to help me out. Well, long story short, he walked into the path of an empty Jim Beam bottle I was tossing in the dumpster and got knocked silly. And sure enough after that, he fell in love with me," said Sharon, enjoying the thousandth telling of the story again.

Amber laughed since she had never heard the story. "So what you are saying is, I need to find an empty liquor bottle to hit him in the head with and then he will know?"

"It worked on me, but some men are different. I have a good baseball bat you could try instead. Some men take a little more convincing than others do," laughed Thomas.

"No, honestly, I think the first time we looked at each other, we both fell in love. It sounds kind of mushy, but the first time we touched, it was electric," she said.

"It's not mushy, it's really sweet. You think it's mutual? What's the problem?" asked Sharon.

"I don't know if it's real or not…" she said as her voice trailed off.

"What does your heart tell you?" asked Thomas.

Amber laughed as she replied. "My heart tells me he is the 'one' but my brain tells me to hit him in the head with something to see what happens."

Thomas and Sharon laughed at the comment. "Amber, like I told you so long ago, some day you will meet a man who will love you like you deserve to be loved. Maybe Heath is that guy. Who knows? One thing is certain, you will spend the rest of your life wondering what might have been if you don't do anything about it. On the other hand, you can spend the rest of your life knowing the truth if you actually do something about it. Follow your heart and you cannot go wrong," said Thomas thoughtfully.

"Sharon, as I told you before, you are the luckiest woman in the world to have a smart man like him," said Amber before turning to Thomas. "I think you just answered my question. I know exactly what to do now."

Amber said her goodbyes and Sharon picked up the sleeping Angel off her lap. Thomas saw her

to the door and told her to be careful. After they put the children to bed, Sharon asked Thomas "Do you ever wonder what your life might have been like if you have been with her instead of me?"

Thomas looked at her in the eyes. "No, I don't ever want to imagine my life without you."

Sharon came across the room and gave him a long kiss. "I knew after I hit you with that bottle it would knock some sense into you."

"You did say on our second date you knew to be more forceful with me. Remember though, it *worked already*, you don't have to hit me in the head again," said Thomas with a smile. They got ready for bed and, in lieu of their visitors, did not display their love for each other in a physical way. There was plenty of time for that later.

By nighttime, all the snow had melted off the roadways and they were drying off in the dry Colorado wind. The sky had cleared and by the morning, they figured it would be dry enough to drive to the warehouse complex. A list made by Kristy detailed the general supplies they knew they would need from the warehouse. The goods didn't amount to much and would fit in the back of the HMMWV they were taking to the warehouse. If they needed additional room, Craig offered the use of the cargo area of their HMMWV.

CHAPTER 47 – FATHER'S REVENGE

Time since attacks: 1 Year, 7 Months, 27 Days
Date/Time: 7 December/0809 Local
Location: The Ranch

The next morning after breakfast the group gathered their bug out bags and personal weapons and made their way to the vehicles. It was cold out that morning and in light of this, the turret on the HMMWVs were not manned, but someone was sitting on the pedestal under the turret. This opened a seat in one of the HMMWV which was immediately claimed by Amber. Her father reminded her she was only along since Thomas was wounded and they needed another rifle. She dejectedly returned to her seat in the front HMMWV and sat down. The seat was then called by Julie, who wanted to see Smoke and how he was doing. She had missed the last trip to the warehouse and wanted to catch up with the man who had literally saved her life. She hurriedly grabbed her gear and joined the convoy.

The ride to the warehouse was uneventful except for the icy patch the vehicles slid on halfway there. The drivers managed to maintain control of the vehicles and brought them back onto the roadway safely. From that point on, they slowed their speed until they reached the warehouse. Stopping at the gate, they saw no signs of recent activity in the area, but they never did. Smoke could be invisible when he wanted to, much like now. Troy became a little nervous since their host had not appeared as planned and started to put out security. He called this to Thomas over the radio and was told to stand by.

"He is just wondering who we are for the moment. If you do that, he'll go on guard and we won't be able to see him for a while or he will start taking pot shots at us. Let me handle this," said Thomas as he opened the heavy door and grabbed the MP-5 since it was easier to fire one handed and still had a respectable punch. He managed to open the door without too much effort and stepped out, waving at the warehouse complex. He saw Smoke emerge from a hidden area and wave back. A few minutes passed by and he appeared at the gate and let the vehicles in and immediately relocked the gate, following them down the roadway at his normal nonchalant pace.

Before he arrived, Thomas warned Craig and Troy. "Don't be alarmed, but he's a little…off. Nice guy and everything, just a little spacey, kind of like a genius. And another thing, he knows things, a lot of things, so don't be surprised."

Before Thomas had the chance to explain, they were joined by Smoke. "Morning folks, long time, no see," said Smoke by way of a greeting as he looked over Troy, Craig and the two other security personnel. He completely bypassed them as they held out their hands to introduce themselves and grabbed Julie in a bear hug. "How are you and that little angel doing?"

"Great! She is growing like a weed and asks about you all the time!" replied Julie.

"You really need to bring her out here to see me sometime. I've got a truckload of toys for her

and the other kids at your place," Smoke said with a smile.

He turned back to the others, who looked mildly offended. "Sorry, boys, but pleasure before business. What can I do you for?"

They had been warned by Thomas already about Smoke so they took the bypass in stride. Troy answered for the group. "Mister Smoke, my name is Troy Johansson. We are friends of Thomas Dayfield and came here to barter."

"Friends of Thomas, huh? Well, in that case, I guess I can't charge you the normal cover fee for entering in the gate. Barter, huh? For what exactly?" asked Smoke.

Troy was a little put off by the actions of this man, but managed to keep his face straight. "Building materials from the construction yard. Thomas told us you were a man who could deal with us straight with no Mickey Mouse BS."

"He told you that did he? Well, what are you looking for exactly?" asked Smoke.

"Enough building materials to build structures to house at least one hundred people. Some will be houses for married people, others like ranch hand bunks. Single room dormitory like. Is that available?" asked Troy.

Smoke "Hmmed" to himself before turning to Thomas and Kristy. "And you folks?"

"Same thing, only we want those pre-fab cabins, at least fifteen and the materials to wire and plumb them for batteries, the solar panels and septic system," answered Thomas.

"Hmmmm, well you are in luck as those are already wired and plumbed. They are made to operate off the grid and snap together. Each set already comes with the wiring. It's kind of like putting together Linkin Logs. Nothing too it. Now for you, Mister Troy, you are doubly in luck. Yes, we have the materials here you need, but I know of a place much closer to your farm that has them too. Owned by an old buddy of mine. Just a hop, skip and a jump from your farm and he can give you the same deal. It's near Scottsbluff, just outside of the town. From what I hear, that place it not too bad so security shouldn't be a problem. I will write you a letter to take to him and I guarantee he will barter just the same as I will," said Smoke with a smile.

"I think you have us confused with someone else. We live near the Ranch," objected Craig.

"Mister…never caught your name. You all are that group from Nebraska that scares and stomps all those gangs in northern Colorado, west Nebraska and Wyoming. You have a farm up there, but not enough living space. I can put two and two together," said Smoke with the same smile.

Craig started to object again, but was cut short by Smoke. "Mister, I don't care who you are or where you are from. You are friends of Mister Dayfield here, and friends of his are friends of mine. We can wheel and deal here, but I figure it would make it a lot easier if you cut your trip down to a hundred miles or so instead of driving back and forth from here to there, especially

when you can get the same materials so close to home."

"I think there is some confusion going on here," said Troy, genuinely confused the man knew who they were. He immediately suspected Thomas had contacted him prior to the trip.

"Mister Troy, your group is just about as well known in these parts as his is. Trust me, the stories alone keep the gangs out of West Nebraska, except maybe the dumb ones. People love to talk since the Fall and they gossip just as much or more than before. I know it's you, so why argue?" asked Smoke with a shrug of his shoulders.

Thomas had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. The look of surprise on the faces of Troy and Craig were priceless to say the least. They both turned to him with accusing looks on their faces. They were interrupted again by Smoke.

"No, he didn't tell me anything I didn't know already. Trust me, all the information is correct except for you all being ten feet tall. I figured your two groups would meet up eventually and I figured he would introduce you to me. It's just how business is conducted. Speaking of business, give me your list, Miss Kristy," Smoke said, effectively ending any further debate.

Kristy handed over the list as Smoke put on a pair of reading glasses and looked it over. After several "Hmmms" he gave the list back and told her the warehouses it was being kept in and sent her on her way alone. He looked at Heath and gave him the order "follow me."

Heath looked a little confused, as did the rest of the individuals. Craig had a puzzled look on his face, shook his head side to side and shrugged his shoulders indicating he didn't know what it was about before motioning with his hand for him to follow Smoke into another portion of the warehouse complex. After they were out of earshot, Craig accused Thomas of setting them up.

"Honestly, no I did not. That man knows more about what is going on between Texas and North Dakota than anyone else in the world. We can't figure it out either. Trust me, he knows more about our group than we care for him to know about. Either way, we've also heard of your group, so it's no surprise he knows it too," said Thomas.

"Are you being honest?" asked Troy.

Thomas didn't appreciate the attack on his integrity and said so. "Yes, for certain and I am not lying to you. Both of you should know from before the Fall I'm a straight shooter and my integrity speaks for itself. We never told him anything about you, period, end of story."

They both remembered Tech Sergeant Dayfield from before the Fall and also remembered his integrity was never an issue when under their command. "Okay, we believe you. Now what?"

"Now we wait to see what he is doing with Heath and go to the construction yard," said Thomas.

Five minutes later, the two returned and Heath had a disturbed look on his face. Troy asked him if anything was wrong and he shook his head quickly and said everything was fine. Smoke took

out a spiral notepad and started writing a letter to his friend in the Nebraska supply yard. When he finished, he tore the sheet out and handed it over to Troy. "Go ahead and read it if you want to." It was written in capital letters the whole way down and signed by Smoke at the end.

DEAR CRACKHEAD

THESE PEOPLE THAT HAVE THIS LETTER ARE FRIENDS OF MINE. DON'T MESS WITH THEM AND GIVE THEM A GOOD DEAL OR I WILL COME UP THERE AND STOMP YOUR GUTS OUT.

YOUR FRIEND

SMOKE

"I guarantee he will know it is from me and not someone else. Trust me, he will deal with you fair now that you have the golden certificate," said Smoke with a smile on his face. "Now let's head on down to the construction yard."

He left the confused group and jumped into the front HMMWV where Kristy would have sat and the others followed him and got in as well. They drove the short distance to the yard and he opened the gate for them and locked it behind as usual. At some point since their last trip to the construction yard, Smoke had gotten bolt cutters and removed all the locks on the various sheds and buildings around the complex. He pointed them to a building and Sharon turned towards it. They came to a stop outside and dismounted the vehicles.

"Mrs. Dayfield, would you care to accompany me so you can inspect the cabins?" asked Smoke.

Sharon was somewhat amazed since she had not been introduced to Smoke yet and he wondered how he knew she and Thomas were married. She decided not to ask and followed him inside the building. As the rest of the group prepared to follow them, Heath stopped Thomas. "Mister Dayfield, can I ask you a question?"

"As long as you don't call me Mister Dayfield again. Call me Tom," he answered.

"Okay, Tom. How well do you know that dude?" asked Heath.

"Honestly, not that well, but we've been trading with him since just after the Fall and he's always been a fair guy. He knows a lot more about us than we know about him. Why do you ask?" inquired Thomas.

Heath blushed as he reached into his pocket. "He gave me this in the warehouse. The dude never looked at me once or spoke to me, but handed me this and told me I would need it soon."

Thomas took the small box and opened it up finding an engagement ring and two gold wedding

bands. He closed the box back up and handed it back with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Come on, man! I mean Amber and I just met the day before yesterday! How would he know I think she might be the 'one' already? I haven't told *anyone*!" asked Heath, blushing again.

Thomas let out a good laugh. "The same reason he knows Sharon is my wife even though he's never laid eyes on her before in his life. The same reason he knows Sharon is one of our building experts although I've never mentioned it either. The same reason he knows so much about your group and where you are at. It's a little freaky, I know, but I warned you all about it."

"Umm, sir? You won't mention what I said to Amber will you?" Heath asked, silently pleading with his eyes.

"Of course I won't! I'll just relay the message to her via her father instead," said Thomas with seriousness in his voice.

Heath's eyes got as large as saucers at the mention of the elder Taylor who gave him the evil eye any time he was around. Thomas gave him a grin. "I'm kidding, Heath. Your secret is safe with me as long as you don't hurt her. If you do, even God won't be able to stop George Taylor from hunting you to the Earth's end. But I will say this; Amber is a good woman who thinks you are a pretty good guy as well. And I mean thinks you are a *very* nice man, like the kind she could be happy with for a long time. You might want to quickly evaluate the situation since you are leaving in the near future. We *are* putting up new cabins for families you know…"

Thomas let his words trail off and hoped Heath would understand where he was going with the conversation. Heath looked a little confused until he realized what Thomas was hinting at. He drew in a breath and muttered an "Oh" as Thomas gave him a grin, closed his eyes and shook his head slightly as he discovered the young man was probably slightly backwards about women. The two entered the building unnoticed where Smoke was explaining the cabins to Sharon and pointing out the various connections for the wiring and plumbing. "See, you could have them up in no time at all as long as you have a foundation. Even a pier and beam on level ground would work, but I suggest concrete since it will make it completely stable. There are even modifications built into the pre-fabed sections that allow for a basement if you want, although a basement is harder work and adds almost a week onto construction time per cabin. They have the extra sections with every kit to put in the basement or just make it without."

"And the solar panels and the batteries?" asked Sharon.

"Umm, in another warehouse; two down from here if I remember correctly. Now, if you want to build a ranch hand dormitory style house like these folks here for more single members, those are somewhat pre-fabricated in another overhang. There is more to them and they don't come with the wiring or plumbing. However, the yard has plenty of extra solar kits around here and batteries. I know it sounds crazy that all those batteries are just lying out here, but this company spent quiet a fortune in making off the grid housing since it was getting to be the rage. These cabins have the hookups for both the solar panels and the generator inverters. They also have commercial power connections if we ever get ourselves out of this mess. The dormitory style

structures like these folks will be building are pretty straightforward, but labor intensive. There are blueprints over in the office for them," said Smoke.

"I know we are talking about fifteen cabins. How many are there available?" asked Sharon.

"I need to check the records, but at least twenty-five. Maybe more, but that many at least according to the manifest. The problem with their records here is nobody was keeping an accurate count on what came in after the attacks. I know for a fact nothing went out, but God only knows what came in," answered Smoke.

"When can we pick them up?" asked Sharon.

"Anytime you want, but with winter still here, I would wait until spring. Not as soggy on the ground and makes it easier to put up. Plus the concrete factor of drying quicker in the spring, so on and so forth. Plus, the septic tanks are going to be concrete as well, aren't they? Again, more time for it to cure and better to wait for spring. But, I understand you all are eager to get things underway. I know a good concrete dude that can help out if you need him. Fair price, works for food and ammunition and is about the best in the business," volunteered Smoke.

"Would he be willing to travel? We could use another good concrete worker around when we start our construction," asked Troy.

"I certainly hope so, since it's probably the same one from your neck of the woods you plan on using. I plan on him traveling down here for Mister Thomas and his folks. It's a guy on the Colorado side of the Nebraska state line right? Art Geering?" Troy's mouth hit the floor as he nodded. "I'll write another letter and get him down here for the Dayfield Ranch and then you can have him back, or you can have him first, I don't care. Work that out with Mister Thomas," said Smoke with that same smile he always had.

Thomas couldn't help but laugh. "Smoke, is there anyone in North America you don't know?"

"Only that President witch in Washington since she comes from another planet," said Smoke.

The entire group laughed and continued their "guided" tour of the complex with Smoke showing them the other materials they might need for the rest of the construction of the cabins and the new dormitory. Sharon also made plans in her head for a new cannery, food storage, a mini warehouse and the reloading room they never completed. She peeked around for the necessary materials. She found most of what she was looking for in eyesight and made an annotation in her notepad to lay down some plans for those future projects.

Troy and his group were also eyeballing the various items within the compound, getting an idea for their construction project. "Mister Smoke, is the guy you recommend in Scottsbluff going to have most of this stuff as well?"

"Probably so, since it's the same construction company and all. If not, just make a list of what he doesn't have and come back down here. I will honor his end of the bargain as long as I have

it in stock," said Smoke.

"Payment the same no matter how low he goes?" asked Troy.

"Absolutely. He is an old friend and I figure if he gives you a good deal, I can't argue with it," answered Smoke.

"Can I safely say we have an agreement to barter in the future?" asked Troy.

"I thought we already established that. Friends of Thomas are friends of mine" said Smoke.

"I take that as a yes. What else do you have to offer?" asked Craig.

"I suppose it depends on what you need. Anything pop into your mind right off?" asked Smoke.

The pair thought for a moment before answering. "How about kitchenware? I know some families need some cooking utensils, pots, pans and such. Have much of that?"

Smoke chuckled at the request. "What brand? Teflon, aluminum or stainless steel? Any preference on color? Cheap imported crap from China or good American made stuff?"

"Whatever you've got available…could you show us before we leave?" asked Troy.

"Sure, no problems. Actually, I will give you five sets of cooking gear on the house. Call it a freebie for future business since I know you folks will eventually be back," said Smoke.

"We can't take it from you. We have to have something you want," said Craig.

"Mister Craig, sometimes I do things from the decency of my heart. It's not doing me any good gathering dust on those shelves up there. If someone else can use it, I might as well let them have it. You know what I mean, son?" he asked Heath with a wink.

Heath blushed up again and stammered out a "Umm, y-y-yes s-sir!" as he felt George's eyes drilling a hole in his head as if he knew what was in his pants pocket.

"You seem a little nervous, Heath. Are you okay?" asked Troy.

Heath blushed up again. "I'm fine sir, just a little hot in this jacket."

"Okay," said Troy in a disbelieving tone while giving him a strange look.

They returned to the warehouse complex and found Kristy had gotten all the supplies needed set out to be loaded into the HMMWV. Smoke took Troy and Craig on a quick tour of the complex and showed them the mountains of wares he had for barter. They were not technically "his" but possession was ninety percent of the law. They vowed to come back as they were leaving to pick up the cookware sets and to return in the future for further bartering. When asked what he

might need, Smoke shrugged his shoulders and stated "Whatever you want to bring me."

By the time they were finished loading the HMMWV, the two groups said their goodbyes to Smoke and got ready to return to the Ranch. Troy and his group planned on leaving early the next morning in order to make use of all the daylight possible on their journey back to the farm. Sharon would be busy laying out the plans for the additional buildings and surveying the grounds to determine the locations for the new cabins. Heath wanted to spend more time at the Ranch, but knew he needed to leave with his group since he had been charged with protecting Craig and Troy by the Chief. He had two important questions to ask before he left and knew time would be short that evening. He had already been invited to dinner at the Taylor's house by Cynthia and knew he needed to be on his best game. By the time they returned home, Kristy had divided out the requested items in the rear of the HMMWV to the various families into individual boxes so it would be easy to sort out when they got to the Ranch. They arrived at the Ranch with no incidents and made stops at the individual houses to drop off the goods before parking in the parking lot and returning home themselves.

That evening, after getting a shower and a shave and wearing Stephen's borrowed clothing, Heath made his way to the Taylor's in the brisk evening air. He was nervous since this was unlike anything he had ever done in his life before. When he arrived at the house, he knocked on the back door and was met by George, who had his typical sour look when dealing with a young man interested in his daughter. The anxiety kept building in him as he stepped through the door and saw Amber walking through the house. Their eyes met for the briefest moment and the nervousness all faded away in that split second of time that lasted an eternity in her smile.

All attempts at conversation with George prior to dinner failed miserably and even the radiance of Amber at the table didn't cause the butterflies to go away. She had gone all out having her sister help her with makeup and picking out a nice outfit to wear. After dinner, Heath politely excused himself and went to the living room where George was stoking up the fire.

"Mister Taylor, may we talk for a moment?" asked Heath in a quivering voice.

"What do you want?" asked George, knowing full well what was coming.

"Just the chance to talk to you, sir. Man to man," answered Heath with more resolve in his voice than in his mind.

"I'm all ears, young man. What's on your mind?" said George as he turned to face Heath.

"Mister Taylor, I want to ask your daughter to marry me," he said simply.

"I'm sorry son; my daughter is already spoken for. She is going to get married to Stu Donaldson pretty soon," George said, knowing full well Heath wasn't meaning Misty.

"No, sir. That's not-" he said shaking his head.

"What do you mean, 'no sir?' I know for a fact Stu proposed to her," said George.

"I didn't mean he didn't propose to her, sir. I guess he asked her to marry him, but I don't know about that," said Heath, not finding words that couldn't be twisted.

George turned stern and put on his best "mad NCO" look for Heath. "You don't know about that? You think Stu isn't good enough for my daughter? What makes you think you are better?"

"I'm not, sir, I mean, it's nothing against him or her. I'm not saying I'm better than he is, or any worse. I guess she is a good woman and all, but she's not the woman for me," Heath stammered.

"What do you mean, son? You guess my daughter is a good woman but you think she's not worth marrying?" asked George, enjoying the torture he was putting on this youngster.

"No! She is a good woman and worth marrying, just not to me!" stammered Heath.

"So she is worth marrying then? Boy, are you confused or something?" asked George.

"I think you might sort of be con…sir, I was asking something completely different," said Heath, trying to calm down.

"So what exactly are you asking? Come on, son, spit it out!" ordered George.

Heath took a breath before continuing. "I meant to Amber, sir. I want to propose to your other daughter, Amber."

"You have known her for maybe five minutes. Why are you already proposing? Oh, God! You aren't one of those stalker types are you? You're going to be hanging around here night and day sniffing her underwear, aren't you? Am I going to have to chase you out of here now?" asked George, with a serious look on his face.

"No! No sir!" answered Heath, getting flustered again.

"You aren't going to leave when I tell you?" asked George with squinted eyes.

"Yes sir! I will leave when you tell me to. You won't have to chase me out. I was saying no about the stalker thing and the five minute thing," said Heath, suddenly afraid this was not going the way he intended it to and could end up very wrong.

"Is it no, you haven't known her for five minutes or no you aren't a stalker?" inquired George.

"Yes, I've known her for more than five minutes and no sir, I'm not a stalke,r" answered Heath, not realizing just how hard this was going to be before starting.

"Okay, so you met two days ago. How did two days translate into loving my daughter for the rest of your life and proposing marriage?" asked George quietly.

Heath attempted to gather his bearings before responding. In his mind, the best defense was a good offense. Also, honesty would be a good policy as well. "Sir, have you ever looked into someone's eyes for the first time and known you loved them? Did you look into your wife's eyes the first time and know you were going to marry her that instant?"

George got quiet. This was just a younger version of himself twenty-five years before when another father had tormented him the same way. *And yes son, when I looked into Cynthia's eyes for the first time I knew I would marry her*. He relented somewhat. "Son, what makes you think my daughter will marry you?"

"Sir, I've seen it in her eyes as well. I'm positive there is love as well. Give me a chance to prove it," he answered with determination, thankful the conversation was back on track.

"Do you think now is the best time for any young couple to get married? With all the troubles in this world?" asked George.

"Sir, I think it's the best time for someone to get married. Two people facing the problems of the world together is better than one person facing them alone," responded Heath.

George got silent again. He had just learned a valuable lesson from someone half his age. *How can I argue with that kind of logic?* "Son, if you truly love my daughter, then yes you may ask her to marry you, under some conditions, though. You will protect her, no matter what, even if it means giving your life. You will love her completely, totally and without reservation, not until she dies, but until the day you die. And you will be faithful to her, never abandon her, never leave her to fend for herself, always be there for her and never harm her. If you ever harm a hair on her head or break her heart, there isn't anyone on Earth that will stop me from finding you and skinning you alive as slowly as I possibly can. Now if you can't support these conditions, I suggest you leave my house right now."

"Sir, I've never walked away from anything in my life and I will not start with your daughter. And this is the first time in my life I've ever felt, I mean, really felt true love for a person just by their touch. The first time she touched me I felt the love. I will love her until the day I die," said Heath with resolve.

"You have my blessing to ask her to marry you. Get it over with before you get all sentimental and start crying in front of my daughter!" stated George, pointing at the kitchen where Amber was cleaning up. Heath knew he shouldn't wait and departed the living room quickly. George picked another piece of firewood up from the pile and added it to the fireplace. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Cynthia standing over him. "You could have just given him a simple yes instead of putting him through all that."

"If he can deal with that without breaking down, he can deal with asking my first born daughter in marriage without any problems. I think he is going to work out just fine for our daughter, but I had to be sure first. It's a father thing, darling. It's not meant to be understood by the mother," as he stood and kissed his wife of twenty-seven years.

Suddenly, they heard a loud "Yes! I will!" from the kitchen followed by laughing and crying from their eldest daughter. "We might as well go get the news from our new son-in-law to be and our daughter before the rest of the Ranch finds out," said George with a depressed look, knowing both his daughters had finally grown up on him and would be moving away from their home, even though they were well past the age they normally would have been considered "grownups." George had become more protective of his family since the Fall and his "little girls" had always been and would continue to be at the center of his heart.

And now the Taylors had two weddings to prepare for. Both their daughters were married a week apart after the New Year and Heath moved to the Ranch as soon as their cabin was available. The new cabins went up quickly and, as Smoke promised, his friend came from northeast Colorado to help with the concrete work. It was a startling sight as both he and Smoke rode up to the Ranch on black Harley motorcycles with full chrome parts and loud exhaust. It was a little surprising since they had never told Smoke exactly where the Ranch was, but not that surprising since it was Smoke. They both were dressed in black leather riding gear, but Art Geering looked like something from a Mad Max movie and was armed to the teeth. His gray ZZ Top beard hung low to his chest and his hair, which hadn't been trimmed in a long time, was pulled back in a pony tail. He had the look of a man who wasn't to be quarreled with, but was very pleasant and friendly when introduced to the Ranch members. He was armed to the teeth, carrying at least four pistols, his main rifle and a shotgun in a scabbard on his bike. Knives of all sorts were evident on his simple web gear or in his pockets. The group wondered what other weapons he might have been concealing, but wisely decided not to ask. Smoke was simply armed with the M-16 they had given him as well as the M-9 pistol.

The motorcycle trailer hitched to Smoke's bike was opened and he had gifts for the children of the Ranch in the form of more stuffed animals and board games. The children were brought out and presented the gifts from the two men. After the initial uncomfortable feelings of being in the presence of the two strangers, the children, being children, immediately took to the two after seeing their parents being at ease. Art and Smoke took a little time playing with the children and clowned around for their amusement, and indirectly to the amusement of the adults, before getting down to business. Art and Smoke were showed the area which the cabins were going to be put up at and told the entire group was at their disposal to help in the concrete work. They both silently looked over the area before saying they would begin work the following day. Accommodations were made in the Parson's cabin and the two men immediately felt at home.

They began the next day as planned and worked almost continuously for several weeks getting the new concrete ready for the cabins, but they were finally done. The group made several trips gathering the necessary supplies for the construction and concrete work. Instead of the planned fifteen cabins, the Ranch decided more was better and had twenty five structures laid for the cabins along with another large structure for a school and a church. Instead of making it easy, they decided to go the hard route and put basements in each. The additional storage space and safe area in case of storms and had met with acceptance from the collective group.

Another two wells were planned since the new cabins might put a strain on the water supply. Art was informed of this and came up with another friend who could do the work. He left one morning and returned the next day with another friend on his own motorcycle, armed much like

Geering. The group found the necessary equipment at the construction yard to dig another well and the man, Brandon Foley, went to work immediately on the new well and pump. Since they were so far into the mountains, it took quite a long time to get to the depth of the aquifer, but they finally finished. The group used the solar pump gathered from the Gable retreat and its battery banks. Battery operated pressure tanks were added to the cabins and a new water storage tank was installed. They Ranch was taking on the semblance of a small town and everything was planned out to the smallest detail. Foley was paid off in silver, gold, ammunition and gasoline and went away happy when he finished up his work.

When he finished, they paid off Art Geering with his promised ammunition and food and even replaced some of the standard parts on his Springfield with some custom work. Smoke returned to his warehouse with a new rifle, one of the military M-14s, and continued to live his solitary lifestyle, but the Ranch residents still checked up on him from time to time.

Troy, as agreed on, sent the Chief and a work party to help put the new cabins up on the Ranch. The groups ended up cross training each other as the Chief had brought an electrical specialist, who was immediately joined forces with Renee and Amy. Everyone learned a trick or two from each other and trained more people in the work of getting the electric systems up to speed. Other members learned from each other as Stu and Jeremy, now well enough to supervise and teach but not work very much, taught them the valuable lessons of construction. The plumbing expert laid in the sewer lines and septic system for the new cabins, a long and hard task. The work gangs caught on quick and after the first week, work progressed very quickly. During the work, they found out the farm residents were short on pistols. For additional payment, the Ranch sent one hundred pistols from the Gable retreat with eight magazines apiece and two hundred thousand rounds of ammunition as an additional token of friendship and payment for their workers.

The new housing took almost three months to finally finish and there were a few setbacks, but it finally got done. The new residents moved in assisted greatly by the furniture gathered from the warehouse complex. The Duggers, Carlsons, Williams and the single residents moved away from the cabins they had been inhabiting. The old cabins were left up, but remained unoccupied for a long time.

Apparently, Smoke's letter caused a great stir with his longtime friend as Troy and Craig received half the housing units for free and got a great trading deal on the rest of the materials. Art Geering and Brandon Foley were recruited and went to the farm to help there after completion of the Ranch facilities. The Ranch also sent two teams up for a month to assist in the construction of the new housing. During that time, Troy, Craig, Troy's cousin and the Chief were presented with top of the line 1911 style pistols from Thomas' stocks in the Trading Post. The four were speechless after the presentation and each was seen carrying them around daily afterwards on the various work details. The Ranch wished they could have personalized them somewhat, but the gifts as they were, were good enough. The residents of both locations formed a close bond between their groups during that time not easily broken. When the Ranch residents returned, they brought along fifteen cattle and two bulls given to them by Troy's cousin as payment for their help in both putting up the structures and for their assistance in getting an outstanding deal on the materials. This caused a great celebration in the Ranch and the need for more work since they would have to build a new barn and stockpile hay for the next winter.

Additionally, several members of the farm wanted to move to the Ranch. The group discussed it in the weekly meeting and determined having the additional personnel for security far outweighed the cost it would take them in food. Being vouched and vetted by Craig and Troy also went along way with the Ranch residents. Either way, they had enough surplus food to supply another seventy to eighty people in they needed to. Four families and seven single individuals, three males and four females, were interviewed and accepted as members of the Ranch. They moved into vacant cabins and helped build a new dormitory style facility for further expansion in the future if needed. They had been fully trained by the Chief prior to showing up and kept the same razor sharp edge gained during his training.

It seemed everything was getting to be normal. Even the attacks and raids had slacked off considerably since the "First and Second Battle of Gable Retreat" and the "Battle for Dayfield Ranch" as the locals had taken to calling them. There were new sheriffs in both Northern and Southern Colorado and they were not to be trifled with. The gangs somewhat made peace with each other and decided to attempt to settle down and live a normal life. There were still problems, but they were dealt with swiftly and without mercy by the Ranch or Troy's group.

One strange thing didn't happen in that time. There was never any attempt to form a new government in the former State of Colorado. It seemed like nobody cared enough to form a government like Texas or the AFNAS or to even remove themselves from the United States. For the most part, people were content to live their lives day to day, trying to survive the best way possible. The AFNAS, Texas, Pacifica and the former United States fell deeper into gang related warfare and little headway was made in their new countries. The governments existed more on paper than having any real power. However, there did seem to be a slight upward trend as the gangs, criminals and terrorists were dealt with or moved into the Midwest states where they were further dealt with. Some normalcy returned to parts of the new nations, while others still coped with the crisis as best as they could. The infrequent news broadcasts from the countries put a happy face on everything that was going on, but the truth was the new fledgling nations were still in trouble and attempting to consolidate their new nations under law and order. Mexico, for the most part, was not as bad off as some might have imagined. After the initial Fall, there had been gang warfare in the nation, but had quieted down after the first year.

Little did the residents know there was a storm brewing in the east which would affect them all.

CHAPTER 48 – THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Time since attacks: 2 Years, 3 Months, 26 Days
Date/Time: 15 August/1739 Local
Location: Cairo, The Islamic Union

"So the status is going well?" asked the President of the Islamic Union.

"Better than expected, Mister President," answered the Chief of the General Staff of the Unified Armed Forces of Islam.

The President was looking for a more clarified answer and asked the question again. "Marshal, exactly what is the status? Give me the raw data, not the cleaned up version the Council wants."

The Marshal, formerly the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, thought briefly before continuing. "Mister President, to lie to you would be madness. I have spoken the truth."

"In our government, the truth is often the greater madness. How are the preparations going? In detail please," requested the President again.

The professional soldier carefully weighed the response he would give. He also knew the President would track down his answers through his own intelligence sources. "Mister President, while our victory in Turkey is complete, there are still major bands of partisans and terrorists roaming the countryside, attacking targets of opportunity. These Turks are nothing if not persistent. However, for the most part, our lines of communication are secure. The buildup of supplies is going well and within the next month, we will have enough prepositioned for a crossing of the Bosporus Strait and to begin an extended campaign into Europe."

"As I proposed, given another three months, we will be more than ready. Winter will be on us and while our troops are not used to fighting in cold weather, the terrain we will be crossing will be frozen over for the most part, allowing our armor to go off road if needed. The cold weather works both ways since most of the survivors in Europe will be at home sitting by a warm fire and not expecting our armies to roll through. By the time spring is on us, we will have secured a large part of Europe. The extra time also serves a double purpose of getting more supplies into the hands of our Islamic Freedom Fighters across Europe. They can assist our army of liberation by securing vital areas prior to our shock army's arrival and defeating bands of terrorists. I propose to let the Europeans bleed themselves out another three months before we invade."

"Our intelligence estimates, if they are accurate, show no significant signs of a standing army in any of the European nations, save one, but only gangs of criminals, terrorists and militias in the rest. These groups are not coordinated in any way, so defeating them piecemeal will be a trivial task for our Army. We will probably end up fighting a guerrilla war much like we are fighting in Turkey right now. The good news is, our troops are learning how to combat this kind of warfare. The training of the front line shock troops is progressing well and the rear area security, those

most likely to deal with these kinds of problems, are getting advanced training tracking down bands of terrorists, both in Turkey, Armenia and also the Kurdish regions of our new nation. I feel that Europe is ripe for the picking, but we must choose the right time and the place for that picking," he concluded.

"And the assimilation of the additional armies and air forces of the new nations into the Unified Armed Forces of Islam? How is that progressing?" asked the President.

"Fairly well, Mister President. While there have been certain issues, such as language, weapons and tactics; the new members of our armed forces have been vigorously attempting to adapt as quickly as possible," answered the Marshal.

"And the production of new military gear? Is it sufficient to supply our forces on a wartime footing?" asked the President.

The Marshal laughed. "Mister President, no soldier is ever happy with the amount of munitions or equipment he has. Even if he had enough to cover all of Asia, he would ask 'But can I have enough to cover Africa as well?' Yes, logistically we are in good shape. The previous two years have been good for production and the weapons and munitions we have produced are more than sufficient for our military. We have more than enough to take over Europe and then raw materials to produce more are not a problem since they are so abundant in the European areas. There are no shortages that I am aware of except the Navy and we have plans on taking the shipping construction yards intact during our invasion. However, new tanks, armored personnel carriers, rifles, machine guns, ammunition of all sorts and equipment are continuing to roll off the assembly lines as we speak. Also, we have plans to capture the production lines in Europe intact for our own use."

"And what problems does the Navy have?" asked the President.

"More than the Army and Air Force. It takes more time to build ships sufficient for operations on the ocean and our construction industry was never suited for that purpose. For years, most of the fleets of the individual countries in the Islamic Union were designed for coastal operations and not blue water operations. We have some, but not nearly enough to secure the sea lanes in the Atlantic in future operations. Plus, we haven't given priority to the Navy until recently since raw materials were a problem. It takes far less steel to make a tank than it does a destroyer or a cruiser. Most operations we are planning are taking place on land and only future operations will rely more on the Navy. We felt it prudent to give priority to the land forces in the beginning and then outfit the Navy. We cannot be challenged for the moment in the seas and have plans to destroy or capture the European assets during the initial invasions," said the Marshal.

"And what problems might you see during our European campaign?" asked the President.

The Marshal paused to think. An avid student of military history, he had studied every European war in depth while planning for what was being called the "liberation" of Europe. "Strategically, very few problems will be encountered as long as our lines of communication are secure. Tactically, the major problems I see are getting these bands of terrorists to stand up and fight and

not run away. Taking the territory will not be hard except in one case, but getting these infidels to stand up and fight might prove to be more difficult a task than the Operations Staff believes."

"And this one hard case of taking territory?" asked the President.

"Switzerland, Mister President. They remain an enigma. While the rest of Europe came crashing down after the United States, it almost seemed business as usual in that country. They had some economic problems, especially with what little fuel they have, but they never had the major riots or unrest like the rest of the world. Our Lion Claw teams and follow on Special Forces found it very difficult to operate in that country. The citizens there were very difficult to provoke and more often than not, attacked and destroyed our forces very effectively, often before the Swiss Army could be brought to bear. We finally gave up sending in teams for the most part since they rarely escaped alive. If you remember history, this was the only European country not to be invaded by Germany during World War Two," answered the Marshal.

"I never gave it much thought. Why was that exactly?" asked the President.

The Marshal smiled as he was about to give a history lesson. He often gave such lessons to the younger members of his staff when they were faced with a tough tactical problem. He enjoyed using historical basis to help them see a solution to a tough situation. "During World War Two, the Swiss remained entirely neutral, not supporting either side. Their Air Force shot down just as many Allied bombers as they did German planes if they crossed into their airspace. And yet, neither country ever retaliated. The Allies, of course, never had a reason to go to war with Switzerland since the focus was on Germany and Italy."

"The Germans looked into an invasion briefly before the eastern campaign into Russia. Of course, this was in 1940 when they still thought they could defeat the Allied powers. The general staff of Germany planned on using a quarter million troops to invade the country, but as events would turn in Britain in 1940, Russia during the winter of 1942 and 1943 and furthermore D-Day in 1944, the plan was scrapped," he concluded.

"A quarter of a million troops? That many to invade such a tiny country?" asked the President.

The Marshal let out a laugh. "Yes, Mister President, that many troops. There was compulsory military service upon reaching adulthood in Switzerland and it was something they took seriously. Every member of the Swiss Armed Forces automatically became part of the Reserves after this service and more often than not, kept their weapon issued from their military service. Even to this day, it is easy to find an automatic rifle sitting in the closets of most of the households in Switzerland. Knowing this, the Germans felt it would take at least this many troops to pacify the country. At the height of World War II, the Swiss had almost a half million troops under arms and well prepared defenses in the mountains. The same defenses exist today, making it almost impossible to reach into their interior."

"So this might be a problem?" asked the President.

The Marshal paused before answering. "Yes, Mister President, I believe so. The estimates given

by the General Staff seem to indicate it will be fairly easy to take over the country; however, I disagree with this opinion as noted in my own summary of the plan. The key to taking Switzerland is from both sides at one time. Airborne drops on the inside as well as coordinated attacks from the outside. The key is taking the mountain passes in this country, which will surely be blocked if we attempted a frontal assault. However, parachuting into the side of a mountain is not something to be taken lightly. Even the most experienced parachutist would have problems jumping into areas of that country, to say nothing of our airborne division. It will take much time, effort and training to take over that country in its entirety."

"Is it worth the risks?" asked the President.

The Marshal paused again to give the answer. "If you are asking for my professional military opinion, the answer is no. The risks do not outweigh the rewards in this case. My professional opinion is to wait and see and if the opportunity comes around, we should take it."

"Order it effective immediately, we will not cross into Swiss territory until you say so, Marshal. If what you are saying is true, we can neither waste the time or the manpower on that country until the time is right. Plus, with our other plans, that manpower will be needed in the future," ordered the President.

The Marshal was a little surprised the President involved himself in the plans. He rarely ever contradicted military plans. "It will be so ordered, Mister President."

The President and the Marshal continued to walk down the pathway in the city of Cairo, the new capital of the Islamic Union. The President enjoyed talking with the Marshal, since his candor was well known. He felt guilty attempting to press the truth from the Marshal since he knew in advance the Marshal would never conceal the truth from the Unified Islamic Counsel. "Tell me Marshal, why did you oppose the plans to attempt the invasion of Russia?"

"Russia, much like Switzerland, is a tough nut to crack. Even though the country is divided and in a state of civil war, our invasion would only solidify the various armies. Think of Russia as a large family of brothers. Brothers often fight amongst each other, but when an outsider steps in, they band together to defeat the threat. Russians will fight each other to no end, but if we were to invade, they would quickly put aside their differences and come after us with a vengeance. Don't be fooled by the reports from our intelligence services about the hard times they had in Chechnya and Afghanistan. They were not on their soil and not fighting a war they were used to. If we were to invade, they would have, as the Americans used to say, a 'home field advantage' and the will to fight us at every turn. Away from their home, Russians do not fight very well, but on their home soil, they will fight like a mother bear defending her cubs. Plus, the sheer size of the country makes securing it an extremely difficult task. The Russians would not stop until either they or we were completely wiped out. Hitler made the same mistake of thinking Russia could be conquered easily and we see where he sits in history," concluded the Marshal.

The President gave that small speech some serious thought before asking his next question. "And what of the long range planning on the invasion of North America? Your thoughts?"

The Marshal also paused and thought about the question. He had not necessarily been consulted during the initial planning of an invasion of North America since his focus had been on a European campaign. He had his own opinions on the matter and they did not necessarily coincide with those of the Unified Armed Forces Staff. He chose his words carefully. "Another mystery, Mister President. Americans have not fought against an invasion of their country in two hundred years. With the political fracturing of that country, it is almost impossible to tell how that campaign would progress. The Texas Republic and the AFNAS seem cordial enough with each other, but not with the United States. The New England States and those areas of Canada that joined them also seem to get along with both sides. Would our invasion bring them all together? I cannot tell you that with any certainty. The six major problems with a North American invasion not included in the official report are as follows."

"One, we will be at the end of a very long logistical chain. We would have to have major shipping traffic in the Atlantic at all times in order to support a full invasion of America. The current plans have us putting over a million troops on the continent and supplying them will take almost every cargo ship the Islamic Union owns. Even a tiny disruption of this shipping traffic could cause our forces to go on minimal supplies. It will not be like Europe with a simple crossing of the Bosporus Strait. Our ports and beachheads would become prime targets for attacks and submarines in the Atlantic could sink our shipping at will if they felt the need to. As I have already stated, we do not have a 'blue water navy' of sufficient enough size to adequately secure the sea lines of communications. We are attempting to build ships to help offset this disadvantage, but they take time to build as I have already said. Also, the supply lines within that country could be cut fairly easily by partisan and guerrilla forces."

"Two, the terrain is not necessarily in our favor in several parts of the country. The Appalachian Mountains near the east coast, Rocky Mountains in the western areas and the major rivers on the continent form natural barriers not easily breached. The mountain terrain very much favors the defender and stopping our forces on the hard surface roads going through passes in the mountains will be a trivial task even for small infantry units. The passes in the mountains form natural chokepoints that our supply convoys will have difficulty going through quickly. Securing the convoys will take a massive amount of troops; troops better spent spearheading our invasion. Going around the Appalachian Mountains through the southern states is an option, but places us in a curious supply situation when we turn north into the Midwest states. The rivers also pose a large tactical problem to the invasion forces. Bridges along them can be dropped fairly easily and since the rivers are so wide, our bridging forces would have major problems fording it. The Mississippi River is over a kilometer wide in some places which presents an engineering challenge we have never faced. Securing both sides of the river's bridges is the easiest way to do it, but it only takes one man with his finger on the trigger of explosives to ruin that plan."

"Also, it is not like fighting here. Our forces can be engaged and the enemy can disappear into the various forests before we can mount a serious counterattack. The entire continent has natural concealment for the smaller units we would be dealing with. The Texas Republic and the mid west states offer the type of terrain most suited for our shock armies, but it is a matter of getting the Americans to fight on our terms. I will explain in a moment what I mean."

"Three, even fragmented, most of the new nations have armed forces of some form or other. Mostly, they are scattered chasing down terrorist bands and criminal gangs, but would quickly turn their focus on us instead. Much like Russia, I feel the fighting brothers would quickly turn their attention to us and join together to come after us with everything in their power."

"Four, the fuel supplies are mainly in the Gulf of Mexico and in the Texas Republic. We would need to seize these oil wells and refineries quickly to disrupt the flow of fuel to their armies. Even with the destruction of refineries in the United States from both the nuclear attacks and the Lion Claw teams, if properly mobilized, there still remains enough capacity to supply a significant armored force that can threaten our armor and mechanized infantry."

"Five, even with the downfall of their civilization, they are still very technologically advanced and have amazing firepower at their disposal. If we invade, I can honestly see nuclear weapons being used on our beachheads and fleets as they approach. Since the Fall, the American nuclear arsenal has been more or less fragmented throughout the different new nations. These new nations do not have to worry about a Russian or Chinese response or world opinion. I feel they will use whatever weapons they have at their disposal to defeat us, up to and including nuclear arms. With their very survival at stake, they will use them even though we might also use them in return. My belief is Americans would rather see their homeland turned into a nuclear wasteland then be ruled by the Islamic Union. I have studied them enough to realize that they would not hesitate to use nuclear arms on their own soil instead of accepting certain defeat at the hands of an invader. But even without technology at their disposal, they will make up for it through sheer will and tenacity, which brings me to my final point."

"Last, but most important, is the American fighter himself. Americans are not used to losing and cannot stand to be defeated. Don't be fooled by the pacifist movement in the country that started after the Vietnam War. They won all the major battles there, but ended up losing the war because of the politicians. During their final air offensive in 1972, they brought the North Vietnamese back to the peace tables through airstrikes alone! Some historians say if the airstrikes went on for another week, North Vietnam would have conceded and admitted defeat. They were all but finished when Nixon ordered the bombing halted. They would have won that war in the late 1960s if the politicians would have let the military leaders do what they wanted, which was a full scale invasion of North Vietnam. Even in Iraq, when it looked as if the war was slipping out of their hands, the surge operation was implemented and the insurgency failed. This was mainly due to the politicians getting out of the battles and letting the soldiers run things."

"An American soldier is the most curious of opponents. He will follow no set doctrine if he feels like it and has no organized principles of war except to win at all costs. By their very nature, they are independent and free thinking, often following their hearts more than their brains. They are strong willed when it comes to certain things, freedom being at the top of that list. Their revolutionary army defeated one of the greatest powers on Earth in the 18th century, England. This army was mainly composed of farmers and merchants who had a great desire for freedom. They did it again, even after major defeats, in the War of 1812. England more or less gave up that conflict since they were in competition with France during that period. However, they knew they could never pacify the United States and sought peace. In each and every conflict with the Unites States, the nations which chose to go to war with them often found themselves defeated at

the strength and tenacity of the American fighting man. Even in Vietnam, the individual soldiers more than made up for the inept political decisions. Yes, they lost close to sixty thousand soldiers, but the North Vietnamese lost over *one million* on the battlefields. In 1965, one *Battalion* fought an entire North Vietnamese *Division* to a standstill. A little over four hundred troops held out against over four thousand and prevailed. Yes, they had massive artillery and aerial support, but, those soldiers held their ground like viscous tigers. Even with the Tet offensive during 1968 and the siege at Khe Sahn in which it looked like the Marines would be overrun, they eventually prevailed. Americans will not let each other die in vain and will do everything in their power to rescue their comrades in arms."

"What the General Staff does not understand is the Americans are unpredictable by their very nature and, when provoked, can be a most formidable adversary. Since the new formal governments in North America are mainly survivors of the original attacks and the ensuing Fall, the militia units and armed forces will not have their hands tied as they once did during the warfare of the last half of the twentieth century. These new politicians are often former military leaders and members themselves and need not worry about internal politics and pleasing the voters. Their main goal will be survival of themselves and their new countries. The General Staff sees the weakness of the internal struggle of the various factions inside the former United States and not the individual strengths of the American citizen. Their thinking is that the political situation is as it was before the attacks and have not adapted to the current situation."

"The combinations of the items I told you are very dangerous to our forces. Mostly, the American fighting man himself. True, the Americans have suffered great losses during the downfall of their civilization, but those that remained are very dangerous. Those that have survived this long means they are intelligent, adept at using firearms to protect themselves and can seek out survival in any possible case. We will be fighting them on the lands they have been defending against criminals and brigands since the fall of their civilization and it will prove difficult to root them out without suffering major casualties ourselves. Our armored forces will find it difficult to prevail over these small infantry and militia units since they will not stand up and fight them. They will hide until the major threats are passed and then attack the supply lifeline of our troops and attack the smaller units, headquarters and small units of our armor when it is not moving. They will lose troops in every situation, but at the same time, our own forces will be demoralized when they see their comrades beside them felled by a sniper shot or their food supply dry up when a convoy doesn't arrive on time. Morale of our troops will be critical and we must get the Americans to fight on our terms. Every minute we cannot defeat the smaller infantry forces will means the insurrection will grow stronger. This is what the General Staff has neglected to inform the Counsel," concluded the Marshal, glad someone finally asked.

The President pondered the long thoughts before replying. "Are you saying the General Staff misled us into believing an American invasion would be easy?"

"No, Mister President, they just never said how hard it would be. The Japanese Fleet Commander stated after the Pearl Harbor attacks 'I fear all we have done is awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with terrible resolve.' When I heard of the plans for a North American invasion, this was the first thought that came into my head. If we are to invade North America, we must be prepared to fully support our invasion force with whatever they need, secure

everything and lastly, kill every man, woman and child on the continent. That is what will be needed to be done in America to defeat them. Otherwise, we will be on a fool's errand and will eventually be defeated," answered the Marshal frankly.

"Such talk is safe with me, Marshal, but if the Counsel was to hear you speaking like this…" stated the President.

The Marshal let out a sigh before replying. "Mister President, you chose me to lead the Unified Armed Forces of Islam. The Counsel put me in that position over a dozen fully qualified people because of my integrity and my success as a soldier. I have never felt they put me in the position to lie to them. If I cannot speak the truth, why bother serving? If we are to invade North America after our conquest of Europe, I will help plan it to the best of my abilities as my current position dictates. But remember what I have told you here today, it will not be easy."

"What about our own nuclear weapons? Can they not be used, both to military advantage and as a psychological advantage?" asked the President.

The Marshal paused before giving the honest answer. "Not without expecting retaliation on our own forces and our homeland, Mister President. If we use nuclear weapons, the Americans will respond in kind. We saw as much after the initial attacks by Al Qaeda. Our own population would be at risk for a response since most of our industry and military bases lie in heavily populated regions. The Americans would not hesitate to use their own nuclear weapons of their own if we use them first, especially since there is no world opinion left to judge them. Also, they no longer rely on us for oil, so they have little to lose. They have a sufficient amount of nuclear arms to completely decimate our country and leave it a radioactive wasteland for the next thousand years. We have been unable to determine if their rocket forces still are operational, so I go on the assumption they are and can strike if needed. Even then, they still posses enough shipboard missiles and aircraft delivered weapons to more than make up for the warheads that may be sitting useless in the ground."

The President though a long while on the last statements given by the Marshal while they continued walking. "So, even without nuclear arms, can we take on the Americans and be victorious?"

"Nothing is certain in battle, Mister President. But I believe we could defeat the Americans conventionally," replied the Marshal.

"Could defeat and not will defeat, Marshal?" asked the President with a soft laugh.

"Not defeatist talk, but honest talk. In battle, it is as God wills," stated the Marshal.

The President let out another laugh. "It is a good thing God is on our side."

The Marshal laughed at the comment. "Funny thing, Mister President, the Americans think the same thing…"

CHAPTER 49 – KARMA

Time since attacks: 4 Years, 23 Days
Date/Time: 13 May/1123 Local
Location: LP/OP 1, near the Taylor's Residence

In the past two years since the Battle for the Dayfield Ranch and the First and Second Battles of the Gable Retreat, the situation had calmed itself dramatically. There was still no local government and no contact was made with the national government. They heard broadcasts from the government of the AFNAS, Texas, Pacifica, the New England States Alliance and the United States from time to time, but surprisingly enough, no formal government was to be had west of the Mississippi until you reached Pacifica. News reports were generally of a local nature and no global news was heard. Mail was still a haphazard idea and often mail was sent both in letter form and over the ham radio. Letters would travel a certain distance until it was unsafe to do so and then transmitted over ham to another station where the letter was rewritten and continued its journey. Eventually it would reach its destination, but the travel time sometimes was weeks and months.

The rest of the world hit rock bottom with civil wars still going on in Russia and China. India was still at odds with the Islamic Union over the Kashmir Province and battles still took place. Central America had stopped fighting and had focused on trying to pull itself back up. Some radio reports came in stating that the Islamic Union had invaded Europe, but these reports never had confirmation. False reports came out of IU government sponsored radio stations dispelling the rumors and that everything was fine. The residents had even heard the Islamic Union had invaded the continental United States, but again, these rumors had no way to be verified.

Over that time, the Ranch had grown even more with extended families of the residents showing up and offered a place to stay. The brother and mother of Heather Davis. Both Darren and Janet Thompson's parents, one grandfather and a brother and sister. Amy Kerns' uncle, aunt and two cousins made it in from Washington State. Stephen Garcia's complete family: his parents, grandparents, two uncles, two aunts, three cousins and his brother and sister had made the move from California. Frank received a letter from his family in Montana and they were getting along fine and had started a retreat similar to the Ranch although after the Fall. Thomas heard from his extended family in Middle Tennessee and they had taken to living on some old family property near Jefferson City. They had a rough time the first two years, but were getting along okay now. Sharon still had not heard anything from her family after nearly a year of trying. Several of the members of the Ranch had not heard from their families but they kept sending letters out.

Surprisingly enough, one of Dave's uncles and aunts had made it all the way from Maine to Colorado after Dave sent out a letter to his family letting them know they were safe. The rest of the Lawson clan and Renee's family was getting by in the small town of Indian River on the Maine coast that had banded together to survive. His Uncle and Aunt were offered a place to stay and originally didn't plan on it. However, as dangerous as the trek had been coming across, Dave finally convinced them to stay. They sent back a letter telling the rest of the family they

were safe as well as Dave and Renee and their plans to stay since the return journey might end up in disaster. Plans were still in the works to send out additional teams to look for additional families of the residents and to offer membership or to see if they needed anything to get by.

More housing had been built and the Ranch now looked like a small town with a second area for double and singlewide trailers having been built. The new units had been bartered for with dealers and owners along with the generators and solar power units. Sometimes their trips took them far away to find the necessary goods, but the community kept growing. With more manpower, the Ranch was secured much easier and the bands of looters and criminals knew to stay far away. Small communities across the state had grown in the wake of the Fall. The Ranch had not heard of all of them, but each of them had heard of the Ranch. While they wanted to keep a low profile, the gossip and folklore trees kept them somewhat in the spotlight.

The next problem was food, but again, with the additional people, more crops were planted and additional wildlife was taken from the National Forest. The cattle herd had grown and the residents were able to capture some of the buffalo they had seen two years prior. It would still be a couple of years before they were ready to harvest them since their offspring were just now being born, but they would have buffalo a lot more often in the future. More chickens, pigs, goats and sheep were gathered by bartering with the ranchers and farmers from the Colorado region. A church had been built and the Minister now had a place to live and hold worship services. The hardy community brought out the best in everyone and the local region was somewhat at peace for the first time since the Fall. A full time school, with Julie Zimmer as the Headmaster, was built and now had four full time teachers. A strange thing was the entire staff normally carried firearms in the class and the high school aged teenagers often did as well.

The times seemed strange, but for the most part, everything was somewhat normal given the situation. A visitor that was about to change their lives forever showed up one day.

"MASH, this is Hawkeye, contact! Stand by for SALUTE," radioed Sharon from LP/OP 1.

"Roger, Hawkeye, MASH standing by," radioed Jeremy from the conference center.

"Prepare to copy…one white male individual, walking through the field to my south-east approximately one hundred fifty yards north of T-R-P One approaching location Tokyo, not tactical, repeat, not tactical, uniform is olive drab pants, camouflage shirt, time now, equipment includes rifle, pistol, web gear and pack. Stand by for E-T-A to location Tokyo," said Sharon as she observed the man and calculated the time it would take for him to reach the Taylor's house.

Jeremy immediately notified the alert team, the individual residences throughout the Ranch and the recon patrols. After making the notifications, the Alert Team, call sign Radar, notified the command center they were enroute to a prepared location adjacent to LP/OP 1. Since the First and Second Battle of Gable Retreat and the Battle for Dayfield Ranch, the Ranch residents had steadily prepared battle works on the edges of the property and at various locations throughout. The defensive works were extensive, but not all completed. The location the Alert Team was headed for was a completed position, with a mix of hasty scrapes and prepared DFPs.

Sharon continued to observe the man and how fast he was moving. After one hundred yards traveled, she concluded he would make it to the Taylor's house in fourteen minutes and relayed this information to Jeremy. He immediately notified the rest of the residents and marked the position on the laminated map of the property they had devised. In a little over five minutes, the Alert Team notified him over the radio they were in position and were observing the individual.

When the man was within four hundred yards of the house, he did a strange thing. He dropped his pack and set it on the ground behind him. He also unstrapped his web gear and rifle and set them on his pack. After finishing, he waved in the direction of the house and called something Sharon could not understand.

"MASH, this is Radar. Individual is calling towards location Tokyo stating his desire to talk," called Heather over the radio and informed them of the additional details.

The contact was immediately relayed to Greg, call sign Potter. "Potter, this is MASH, it appears the individual wants to talk."

"We will continue to observe for a little while. I'm sending Team Honeycutt to sweep the tree line by T-R-P Five, it might be a while," stated Greg.

After an hour and a half, the second team relayed there were no additional personnel they could find in the woods located in the direction the man came from. While there was always the possibility his direction could have been misleading, the time it took to sweep the lines would have made most aggressors impatient. Greg decided to walk out to the man, although from a different direction than the defensive works. It took him five minutes to travel the distance with Stephen and emerge from the tree line. Sharon had adjusted her observation to the south of the roadway, keeping alert for additional personnel hiding in the far forest.

When Greg and Stephen were close enough, the man called out to them. "Took your time about contacting me, it seems the tales are true."

"I'm sorry?" answered Greg.

"Everyone says your group is pretty nervous about strangers and decent with the tactics. I might assume I'm being covered from several positions. I'm here to talk, that's all," stated the man.

"An introduction might be in order, Mister," said Greg impatiently.

"I'm David Fairborn, a Major with the Texas Militia. I have news and requests to make of your group. I am assuming I'm somewhat near the Dayfield Ranch," replied Major Fairborn. The information the man knew about the Ranch and its owner made both Greg and Stephen uneasy.

"You might be and might not be. What concerns might you have with that particular area?" asked Greg.

"Is it okay if we go someplace besides this open field? Being out in the open makes me a bit

nervous," requested Fairborn.

"Not a chance, Mister Fairborn. I think we will leave you right here for now while we talk," answered Greg. "However, it also makes us nervous having you so close to your weapons. Do you mind stepping away from them and consenting to a pat down?"

"Absolutely not. I am not sure who you people are and me giving up my weapons is not a good idea. We can stay here for now, but from I hear, it's not safe for either of us," replied Fairborn.

"We are fairly safe. In your case, I'm not so sure," said Greg with a half smile.

"Ahhh, so you do have me covered by another team. I think you all are members of what the locals call the Dayfield Ranch. It is owned by Thomas Dayfield and staffed by a family named the Taylors and a Ryan Meeks. They have stood up to several attacks and helped several local residents. They all speak very highly of your group, if that is who you are," smiled Fairborn.

Stephen gave away a little information as well. "We don't really know this Dayfield guy you are referring to. He tends to keep to himself and doesn't really like interference from outsiders. What business would you have with him if we happen to run across him?"

"You want the long story or the Cliff's Notes version?" asked Fairborn.

"We still have plenty of daylight left, Mister Fairborn," said Greg.

"Okay, long version it is. I am a Major in the Consolidated Militia of Texas, formed after the Declaration of Intent to Secede. I'm sure you don't want me to bore you with my personal details, so I'll move on," said Fairborn.

"Please bore us, Major," said Greg.

"If you insist. I was a Sergeant E-5 in the Texas National Guard before the Fall assigned to the infantry. Afterwards, I helped organize several towns into Militias and was given a commission by the Texan Congress. Since then, I was commander of several town militias in the panhandle of Texas and Oklahoma. About three months ago, I was ordered into the former Colorado and Northern New Mexico regions in order to make contact with the various militias and groups surviving up here. My orders were to evaluate these various groups in order to determine if they pose a threat to the security of Texas or to the general well being of peaceful groups."

"After arriving in Trinidad, a community which is surviving fairly well, I began hearing stories of a group near Cañon City which has kicked the butt of every gang and group which took it on. Well, actually, we heard about them all the way in North Texas, but only rumors of the group's existence. Some stories, but like most stories these days, they were pretty farfetched. I kind of expect to see them easily since they are ten feet tall according to the legends. Anyway, they have even gone so far as to liberate innocent hostages from other retreats and deal with the criminals, how shall I put this, with effective justice? Anyway, the further north I traveled, the more I heard about this group, to include some names of the residents as well as the occupations."

"I was able to ascertain the owner of the ranch which they were supposedly at, a Thomas Dayfield, was in the Air Force and from there it was an easy radio call to San Antonio to check on him. He was a Security Forces member in the Air Force and had a good record and good evaluations. In addition, Stephen and Kristy Garcia, Rick Jones, Dave Lawson and Darren Thompson are also names I checked which turned up the same results. Records also show George Taylor and Ryan Meeks to have been exceptional soldiers serving in their day before retiring. Actually, the former Air Force members are still wanted for Desertion by the United States; however, we could give a care about that in Texas."

Both Stephen and Greg instantly felt uneasy at the conversation and how this man knew more about them than they cared for. "I don't know any of those names, Major. How did you come by this information anyway?" asked Stephen.

"The Air Force Personnel Center was headquartered in San Antonio and the computers are still running. From there, it was an easy query. So anyway, I did more checking and found this group to have honorable intentions and wasn't a threat to anyone in particular. I found they just wanted to live their life in peace and survive the Fall. Anyway, the rest of the story."

"Almost a month ago, Texas and the Alliance were invaded by units of the Islamic Union. They were able to secure beachheads in both the countries and have expanded outward since. There are more coming and I fear our Navy is having a hard time stopping the shipping coming across the Atlantic. Just a lack of qualified people to run the ships for the time being, but that's changing. The IU seems content to consolidate their beachheads along the coast before moving inland. Intelligence has estimated they have at least three hundred thousand troops in North America right now with more on the way. From what we have determined, they hope to reach an end goal of a million troops before moving across the continent. All we have been able to do is contain them at the ports and various beachheads. Short of using nuclear weapons, there isn't any way of stopping them from building up to that number."

"So nuke 'em. Get rid of that garbage before they destroy us all," stated Greg.

Fairborn sighed before going on. "I'm afraid it's not that easy. They have surrounded themselves with thousands of Texan and Alliance citizens as hostages making it impossible to hit them without killing thousands of our own citizens at the same time. Additionally, most of our Army and Militia are on the front lines and our Special Operations are behind the lines doing as much damage as they can. We run the risk of dropping on our own forces if we were to use our nuclear armament. The forces are much too close together for us to initiate a strike."

"Also, with the original attacks, the Fall and the violence afterwards, North America lost over a hundred and fifty million people, probably more, but nobody is sure. Since the invasion, the Islamic Union has forbid any other religion besides Islam and has begun killing those who resist, so that number will rise unless we do anything about it. Our citizens are dying at an alarming rate in concentration camps set up for that purpose. It's been a fairly effective, but gruesome, way of dealing with potential problems in North America. We can't afford any more of our citizens to be killed."

"What about Europe and NATO? Don't they have to come through the Strait of Gibraltar to get here? Why not attack their shipping there where they are confined?" asked Greg.

"It would seem all of Europe was conquered as well, except for Switzerland and some of the Alpine parts of Germany, Austria and Italy. They invaded there first and swept across the continent in a manner of one year. Think the German Blitzkrieg of World War Two on a continental scale. In World War II, the Germans swept across the continent, but only one country at a time. This time, the Armies of the IU swept across the entire continent. The Europeans never had a chance. They were not organized at all except for Switzerland and it became kind of a haven for refugees until they shut the borders. Parts of Italy, Austria and Germany were voluntarily annexed by the Swiss and have been fortified since. The United Kingdom was last and put up a fight, but in the end, succumbed to the sheer numbers of troops the IU put in the field against them. The Swiss are about the only formal country left in Europe that the IU hasn't taken over. We don't know why, except the fact the country has become a virtual armed fortress. We figure the IU is a little afraid and taking it would mean a massive undertaking by their armed forces. Anyway, I digress."

"After they got Europe, they came after us. It seems the Islamic Union is bent on global domination. They haven't gone after Russia, China or India yet, but that's probably only a matter of time. It seems they are coming after us first since, historically, we have been kicking their butt for years. I guess they are seeking revenge and want us out of the picture before going after the big boys in Asia. Much of Africa, with the major exceptions being Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa had conceded to the IU. There are others of course and warfare hasn't broken out against any of those countries, but it's only a matter of time as well. South America and Australia are safe for now, but they are probably also on the hit list," concluded Fairborn.

An uncomfortable pause was had after the Major delivered the current events speech. It was Stephen who spoke up. "Okay, are you telling us this to warn us or is there something more?"

"A little of both, I suppose. I was hoping to reach the Dayfield Ranch and propose an idea to them," answered Fairborn.

Another uncomfortable silence as Stephen and Greg thought about it for a moment. "Stand by while we see if we can contact the Dayfield Ranch to see if he wants to talk to you," stated Greg.

Stephen was posted as an overwatch on Fairborn while Greg stepped away to relay the information to the Control Center. Stephen and Fairborn engaged in small talk, none of which revealed any more information about either. After Greg completed his radio call and was informed the group wanted further communication with the Major, he returned to the two.

"…and our crops were doing well except for the bad winter we had two years ago. Did you reach him?" asked Major Fairborn.

"Yes, and he wouldn't mind talking to you. However, there are several conditions on that meeting. One, you aren't armed, two, we blindfold you before we drive you to his place and

three, a complete search before we take you to meet him. Once we are done hearing what your proposal is, we drive you to another location, again, blindfolded and searched and drop you off. Do we have a deal?" asked Greg.

"I can live with that. When do we meet him?" asked Fairborn.

"As soon as we get a vehicle up here," answered Greg.

Five minutes later, one of the civilian vehicles arrived with Laura Matheson at the wheel. Fairborn was searched completely and Stephen found a concealed .38 Special revolver and several knives on him. "Just a little insurance," he said with a smile.

After completing the search, Greg and Stephen switched places and Greg completed another search. Laura had brought a hood to place over his head when he was transported. Police handcuffs were put on Fairborn's hands and leg irons on his feet. His gear, including the weapons, was left where he had set them down and he was helped over to the waiting vehicle by Stephen and Greg. Fairborn was loaded into the back cargo area of the Explorer and then driven for twenty minutes both north and south at varying speeds of the Ranch before turning back onto the road to be taken to the Conference Center. He was helped out of the back of the vehicle and walked into the dining room where Thomas, George and Mark were waiting at the table. Greg took the restraints off him, removed the hood and took a seat on the other side of the table.

"Please have a seat, Major Fairborn," said Thomas in a pleasant voice.

Fairborn rubbed at his wrists where the handcuffs had been placed and took a seat in the open chair across the table from the small group. They were joined by Ashley who carried an X-26 Taser in her right hand and her Glock on her hip and had both visible for Fairborn to see. She also brought along Spike, one of the military K-9s, who intently watched the unknown man. He wasn't growling, but the Major could see the dog looking him over and trying to decide which place to bite first when given the command.

"A Taser and a dog? Going to interrogate me?" asked Fairborn with a frown.

"No, but we don't see the reason to kill someone if we don't have to. You are looking for Thomas Dayfield? Well, you found him. I'm Thomas Dayfield," said Thomas.

"Well, I'd say it is a pleasure to meet you, but now, I'm not so sure," answered Fairborn crossly.

Thomas opened his hands on the table top. "Is there anything wrong with being a little prudent about our security measures?"

"No, I suppose not. I'm just not used to being treated like a criminal, but I cannot say that I can blame you with everything you all have been through," answered the Major.

"Everything we have been through?" asked Mark.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” stated Fairborn.

“The rest of our names aren’t important. Again, a security precaution,” answered George.

Fairborn nodded his head in agreement. “Very sensible. The stories, at least the ones that are going around are that your group is ten feet tall and bulletproof. Another one was about a retreat somewhere north of here had over a hundred gang members that eight of your people took out. Now with most stories, I’m sure these are a little exaggerated, but when one keeps hearing about a group that keeps winning despite the odds, there has to be some truth, somewhere.”

“Actually, the retreat story was only partially true, we only had four people doing that,” stated George, half joking.

Fairborn let out a good laugh and continued. “Actually, I heard different variations on the story with the numbers being as high as three hundred and one of your snipers took out a tank by firing down the main gun barrel and exploding the shell in the chamber. The stories kind of take on a life of their own, but obviously there is some truth to the tale. I’m curious to hear what actually happened at the Gable Retreat and the Battle of the Dayfield Ranch and about this other group that supposedly helped you, but maybe later.”

“So it’s partially true there is a group out here who is well trained tactics and can stomp most things sent their way, but don’t bother going after anyone they don’t determine to be a threat. They have plenty of weapons at their disposal, including military hardware stolen from the government and scavenged from their previous encounters,” said the Major.

Thomas was about to interrupt when Fairborn held up his hand and stopped him. “I’m not passing judgment. Do you know how often that story has repeated itself? Trust me, my basement was filled with government goodies that go boom both before and after the Fall.”

“Anyway, as a member of the Texas Militia, we are here to warn about the Islamic Union invasion and to make a request of all citizens of North America. I’m here actively seeking additional members for the Militia in Colorado and North New Mexico. Your group seems to be a perfect candidate for membership in our militias and would be a valuable asset,” said Fairborn.

“Why would we want to be part of the Texan Militia?” asked Thomas.

“You wouldn’t necessarily be forced to pledge allegiance to Texas, but since Colorado is still technically part of the United States, we would ask you forgo your allegiance to the US and support Colorado instead,” stated the Major.

“Okay, I think you have us a little confused here. Please explain,” requested Mark.

“Long story short, the former government of Colorado is about to declare its independence from the Unites States along with several other states west of the Mississippi. Now, we know they are not very well organized, but it is a first step in picking up the broken pieces from the Fall. The United States has completely moved its army east of the Mississippi and no longer is sending aid

to the Midwest states. For the most part, Washington has cut all ties with anything west of the Mississippi River and is concentrating relief efforts in the eastern part of the country where their major power base is, but I kind of figure you all knew that already. For all intents and purposes, anything west of the Mississippi has been abandoned by the US and is on its own. Colorado is about to become its own nation-state and a call will be made for volunteers to fight in Texas or the AFNAS. Texas, Mexico, Pacifica, the North East States Alliance, or NESA, and the AFNAS are prepared to recognize the legitimacy of the Sovereign Republic of Colorado when they announce their independence."

"Now your next question will be, 'why would I go and fight for Texas or anyone else for that matter?' Well, the answer is simple, if we don't stop the Islamic Union there or in the AFNAS, how long will it take before they reach Colorado? Also, their armed forces will be able to destroy the piecemeal bands of our freedom fighters fairly easily. If we stand together, we will be harder to beat and can provide a serious blow to their forces. Texas and the AFNAS have already pledged to support each other and a defense alliance is close to being signed by Mexico as well. I know it's strange to hear the Mexicans coming to the aid of Texas, but the world changed on us. San Antonio is being defended by the Mexican Army as we speak. An interesting twist on history don't you think? The Mexicans defending the Alamo? Anyway, the Mexicans know after us, they are next on the list. Their oil platforms in the Gulf and their refineries were targeted in the initial invasion, so technically a state of war exists between them and the Islamic Union. They are providing a good contribution to the defense of Texas."

"Pacifica is also getting a little nervous about having the IU forces in North America and is getting ready to commit troops as well. There still is major civil unrest in their country, so their initial contribution will be a token gesture. Hopefully, the country will lay down its differences and band together to fight the invasion. We aren't the Unites States anymore, but each alliance is pledging to support each other to fight the common enemy. Even with the population thin NESA, they are planning support," said Fairborn.

"What about the United States? Why aren't they committing troops?" asked George.

"Well, they are more comfortable avoiding direct confrontation with the IU, falling back on diplomacy rather than fighting. That witch in Washington has made herself President for Life and flat refuses to do 'anything that will anger either party in the conflict.' She got Congress to agree to hold off on elections until after the 'current crisis has abated.' She also has gone out of her way to arrest and convict conservative Congressmen for 'crimes against the State,' whatever that means, and put in her own cronies in their place. We have been in covert contact with several high ranking members of the Armed Forces of the United States and they support our cause, although they cannot make any moves at this time. However, they are gearing up their forces to fight when the time comes. It's all about timing," answered Fairborn.

"Okay, why us?" asked Thomas pointedly.

"Simple, most of you, if not all, are former military. We are actively seeking out former members of the Armed Forces of the United States to serve. It's not a matter of being in the Armed Forces, but rather a matter of training. We don't need to spend major amounts of time

getting you up to speed in military tactics. Even the older members of the groups can still be useful in training and support roles. We don't expect everyone to fight but each can do their part. Those members unfit to perform direct combat can be advisors and trainers, while the younger members go and fight. It doesn't take much to drive a truck or teach a class on ambush tactics. George Taylor would be especially useful in the role since his career was spent in Special Forces and a guerrilla war is what we are fighting for the most part right now."

"Plus logistically, it's a little easier. Most groups we have contacted are generally well armed and bring their own weapons to the fight. Since I've been here, I've noticed plenty of firepower as each of you are armed. I can only assume you all have enough weapons and ammunition and as long as it is standard calibers, we can assist with resupply. We have production facilities in Texas or the AFNAS for the major military small arms calibers to include the Russian and Combloc calibers. Honestly, we have an agreement with the old Lake City plant in Missouri. They have been churning out ammo for us since the invasion and combined with what we are producing, is more than sufficient quantities of ammo for our forces. If weapons are an issue, we can work that as well," answered Fairborn.

"If we bring our own ammo to the fight, some of it is going to be hollowpoint or soft point. Is that going to matter with The Hague Convention and all?" asked George.

"Texas never signed The Hague Convention and we are not going to abide by it. We believe in one shot stops, so bring whatever fits into your guns," answered Fairborn.

"What about our family's security? Say we go and fight, who looks after them?" asked Mark.

"After Colorado becomes independent, they will be asking Texas to help formalize local militias for security as well as forming a police force for the state. They would be responsible for local security. If things get bad here, you will be released from the Militia to tend to your family needs," said the Major.

"What about women?" asked Ashley from her overwatch position.

Fairborn turned to look at the woman. "What about the women?"

"Will we be allowed to fight in militias if we so chose?" she asked.

"As long as you are a part of an organized group, you can fight in the militia. More than half the militias in Texas have female members. I know of one group which is entirely composed of females. We have no problem with women. If you are vetted by your own group; we are not going to argue with your leaders. Our own Army has female members in all the roles, including infantry. If we are to defeat the IU, we need everyone to fight, not just the males," he answered.

"What about age requirements?" asked George.

"For militia service, it is sixteen. For regular Armed Forces service, the age is eighteen. We can waive the age requirements for the Militia as long as the individual proves to be competent in

military matters," answered Fairborn.

There was silence after the long announcement. George asked Fairborn to give the same history lesson he had given to Stephen and Greg. After several minutes of explaining the details of the invasion, he moved on.

"Now, I know you will want to take some time to think about what I have said here and the request I have made. I am prepared to wait three days for your answer before moving on north of here. I know of several other groups out there and I need to make contact with them as well. I have grid coordinates for my base camp and the remainder of my team. Once we are done here, I ask that when you drop me off, it's somewhat close to that location or near my vehicle, located close to these coordinates." He passed a slip of paper across the table. "Honestly, you can take all the time you need and can contact the Texas Militia through the outposts in the towns of Texline, Romero or Glenrio. You don't necessarily have to contact me directly, any commissioned officer in the Militia or Armed Forces can take your request," he concluded.

The group was again silent as they contemplated the offer. Greg decided to call for an emergency meeting that evening and could bring the suggestion up to everyone at one time.

"We can have an answer to you by tomorrow evening. Would you consider being our guest until that time? We can provide food and a bed," asked George.

"I should be getting back to my team, but if you insist, I cannot refuse a good meal and a warm bed to sleep in. I will have to contact my team and higher headquarters to let them know I won't be in tonight," said Fairborn.

"I think we can agree to that, although we will transport you to a location off site to make your radio calls. Also, a few restrictions would be placed on you while you are here," stated Thomas. "You cannot leave the premises without being escorted and announced by the Control Center. We will provide food and a bed for you to sleep with no restrictions. We will also provide you with safe drinking water and some food tomorrow before we set you off. A member of our group will be watching over for you and will be outside your room at all times. Your equipment will be returned to you with the exception of your weapons. We all feel the need to maintain self defense and in case of attack, your weapons will be returned to you by the member detailed to watch over you. Do we have an agreement?"

Fairborn thought for a moment before answering. "I agree to that. When can I make my call?"

"As soon as we can get the vehicle and driver back again. Is there anything you would need before then?" asked Thomas.

"I can't think of anything besides maybe a towel and some soap for when I return. It's been a while since my last shower," he said with a laugh. "Well, actually, a serious request. In many of the stories, I heard of another group that helped you in the Second Battle of the Gable Retreat. It seems like there is another group out there of mainly military folks that would be good allies to have and try to recruit. By chance do you all have contact with them?"

Thomas paused since the informal agreement between the group on the farm in Nebraska and the Ranch was to never mention each other's groups or locations. However, he had a feeling Troy and Craig would be mad if he didn't at least tell them about the Texas Militia offer and that they might have some company in the near future. They would be especially mad if North America had been invaded and they didn't know about it. "There might and might not be another group out there along the same lines as us. You know how people love to talk. However, if a group like ours were to exist, they probably would want to be below the radar scope, much like we do. I mean, we do try to keep a low profile as not to attract attention. Higher profile, larger target."

"Well, it just so happens there are two individuals I'm looking for, a Captain Troy Johansson and Major Craig Starkes. They were in your unit before you left, weren't they?" asked the Major.

"Yes, one was my commander and the other in charge of the S-4," answered Thomas after faking the thought process to bring up old unused memories otherwise not giving anything up.

"It also seems like some of the residents around Colorado know these names as well. Y ou happen to know why?" asked Fairborn.

"Haven't the first clue," asked Thomas without expression.

"Well, supposedly, they run a farm somewhere in Wyoming, Kansas, Nebraska or north Colorado and their group is formed along the same lines as yours. I would be surprised if your two groups didn't know each other already," said Fairborn with a smile.

"I would be surprised as well, Major. I can't tell you why we might not have met. Lots of stories out there, even about us," said Thomas with a straight face.

"But the stories about you are somewhat true, maybe exaggerated, but your group has a good track record of dealing with gangs, terrorists and criminals," said Fairborn with a smile again.

"There are also stories about how we never landed on the moon in 1969 and how the CIA blew up the World Trade Center on 9/11. It doesn't mean I believe them," said Thomas.

"Well, if you happen to know anyone who might know how to get in touch with that group, it would be nice information to have," said the Major as he let the matter drop.

"I can ask around, but I'm not making any promises," said Thomas.

"Any help would be appreciated. Now how about that shower?" asked Fairborn.

"We will be able to arrange that, Major. One final question for you though; how did you know so much about me and some of the residents here?" asked Thomas.

"As you said, people like to talk, and you people around here are kind of like rock stars to the local community. Yourself, Ryan Meeks and George Taylor are the best known names and it

made it easy to check your military records at Randolph AFB. The computer backups for the Army were there as well, so doing a check on them was easy. I just pulled up their DD Form 214s from the computer and some of their last performance ratings. The other names were included in your computer file as being possible known associates from where your last unit put in the report from your AWOL status. They were wanted for Desertion as well, but not as badly as you for some reason. It was easy to check them out as well," answered Fairborn.

Thomas let out a laugh while replying. "Nice to know someone cared enough with the world crashing down to file a report we were missing."

"Your last commander didn't care too much for you, as far as I could tell from his report. Not Major Starkes, but some Captain, I forgot his name. I've never seen a report with the quote 'the man should be hung at the main gate as an example for all to see.' We all had a good laugh at that one," said the Major with a chuckle.

Laura and Stephen were tasked to escort Fairborn to a location near Cañon City so he could make his radio call. Before he left, he gathered the radio out of his pack and left again in the vehicle, blindfolded as usual. While he was gone, the group went through his pack and took out any items which might have been questionable or could be used as a weapon. The remainder was set in an unused room as well as a spare towel, soap, shampoo and other toiletries.

Thomas went to the Control Center and patched into the ham radio to call the farm in Nebraska. After making contact, he was advised to stand by while they located Troy, Craig or the Chief. Ten minutes passed before Craig replied over the radio. Thomas relayed the information they had gathered in code as much as possible, but requested a face to face meeting with their leadership as soon as possible since it was too complicated a subject to relay in code. Craig acknowledged the transmission and passed a message back that they would be coming down the next day to discuss the matter in person. Thomas agreed to the request and signed off the radio, informing Greg of the intentions of Craig to come to the Ranch the next day. He returned home to dinner and was very quiet while eating, completely lost in his thoughts. Sharon knew something big was up since the residents had talked about the visitor most of the day. Nobody knew for certain what was going on, but knew it would be announced at the emergency meeting to be held at the church. The Conference Center wouldn't be large enough to hold everyone.

The vehicle returned after an hour and a half, just as it was getting dark. Every resident was there for the meeting with the exception of the four LP/Ops, which were manned by the younger members of the Ranch. Even the recon patrols had been recalled for the important meeting. It was the first time in a long time they had so little security out.

The meeting opened, but most people already knew somewhat about the visitor they had received. Greg took the floor and thanked everyone for coming on such short notice and then explained Fairborn's proposal. The entire group fell silent as the situation in Texas and the AFNAS was explained, specifically the invasion by the Islamic Union. "It seems as if the rumor mill is right for a change and the reports we got over the ham radio were true. Texas and the AFNAS were invaded a month ago by the IU. I know reports have been sketchy, full of misinformation and furthermore, we haven't had much communication with the outside world,

but we got confirmation today from Major Fairborn." Greg then followed up with the situation in Colorado and the move for independence. He finalized the speech with the request from the Texan and whether or not to support it.

"I know this is a pretty huge decision for everyone here and I'm not going to even try and debate the pro's and con's of it to everyone. As a matter of fact, I seriously doubt we need to discuss it in this group what-so-ever. Quite frankly, this is something each of us needs to discuss with your families and to make the decision for yourself. Nobody here needs to be swayed on their decision making process by anyone except their families. Also, nobody here will look down on anyone if they decide to go or even if they don't decide to go. We believe in free choice and your decision to join the militia will be one of free choice. Your homes will be kept up and secured by those staying behind."

"I will answer questions or let you meet with Major Fairborn if you would like, however, his time is short. We should provide him an answer by the day after tomorrow at the latest, but there are procedures in place to join the militia without going through him. The only request I can make is you notify me as the leader of the community of your desire to join the Colorado Militia if you choose that route. If nobody has anything else to discuss, I move we adjourn for the night and discuss this with our loved ones," stated Greg.

The move was seconded and everyone broke for the night, heading to their respective homes. Sharon waited for them to get home before asking the question. "You want to go don't you?"

"Not if it means leaving you here unprotected. I'm sorry, but I will have to pass on this one to make sure you and the children are safe," he stated with resolve.

"Thomas, I love you with all of my heart, but you darn well know deep down inside you will regret that decision for the rest of your life. Don't ever use us as an excuse to not do something. You and I both know this is what you want to do and don't try and deny it. Your unique talent in life is to help people and if you are ever going to help people, this is the chance. I think you were born to help people. You were born for this. I'm not telling you what to do, but this is something you need to do," she stated with resolve right back.

Is she trying to convince me to go, he thought before forming the words in his mouth.

"Not really, your mind is made up already; I saw it in your eyes at the meeting. My permission is just a formality. You will be safe, I know it. I will miss you horribly when you are gone, but I know in my heart it's where you need to be," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Who is going to take care of you, Angel and Brent when I am gone?" he asked, avoiding making a firm decision for the moment.

"I survived as a single mother before I met you and I can take care of myself and the kids pretty well. Wives have been holding children in their arms and watching their husbands go off to war for a few thousand years. Why would this time be any different?" she said.

"Sharon, I love you with all of my heart as well, but this is something I need to think about for some time before I make the decision," he said, turning to walk out of the house.

He sat on the porch for the longest time, watching the nighttime at the Ranch. He watched the various candles and lamp lights in the cabins and the other families having discussions about the offer made for the militia. Eventually, lights started going out in the various residences and the families went to sleep. Some stayed on much later than others as families took longer to discuss it. Sharon joined him on the porch after putting the children to bed, but didn't say anything. She sat down next to him and took his hand in hers and joined in the silent thoughts. Eventually, they returned inside and Sharon returned to the bedroom. As he was passing by his children's bedrooms, he stared at them for the longest time before joining her, but sleep did not come easy that night.

The next morning, he informed her of his decision to join the militia and his reasoning behind it. "If I don't get them stopped in Texas, the next thing we know they will be at our doorstep. I have to do this," he said, again with resolve.

"Baby, you never had to convince me. I knew all along what your decision would be once I told you it was okay. You just had to convince yourself it was the right decision, not me," she said with half a smile and tears running down her face, knowing her husband was going off to war.

And so the same situation replayed itself throughout the Ranch. Most of the men volunteered, but a lot of the women as well. In the end the following Ranch residents volunteered to join the militia and go to Texas and fight: Jeremy Baines, Scott Carlson and his daughter Mindy, Tim Daniels, Cindy Matheson, Stu and Misty Donaldson, the entire Dugger family, Stephen Garcia, Greg Henry, Jeff and Brian Holmes, Rick Jones, Amy Kerns, Dave Lawson, Ryan Meeks, Shannon and Michael Parsons, Heather Davis, Ashley Scott, Holly Meredith, Amber Taylor-Bates and her husband Heath Bates, Johnny and Darren Thompson, Mark Williams and Frank Zimmer. Of the families now living at the Ranch from either the farm or those recruited from refugees, another seventeen volunteered. Not all would return at the same time, or even return at all, but volunteer they did.

Craig Starkes and the Chief had made it to the Ranch in the early afternoon. Thomas and Greg briefed them in on the situation and told them of their intent to leave for the Militia. Craig demanded an immediate meeting with Fairborn as he was willing to go right then and there. Fairborn, the Chief and Starkes were introduced and the three held an impromptu meeting in the Conference Center before agreeing to take the Texan back to Nebraska where he could brief the entire group of two hundred and twenty-seven adults on the farm at one time.

Greg informed Major Fairborn that evening of the individual decisions and gave him a list of names that were volunteering. He made a radio call and arranged for transportation of the individuals to the Militia gathering point near Amarillo, Texas. He left a list of recommended supplies, weapons and items for the group before leaving with Craig and the Chief to go to Nebraska.

The group made a tearful departure four days later from the Ranch on trucks sent specifically by

the Texan Army. It took far longer than planned as many of the residents spent more time with their families since they did not know when they would be able to return. The driver's were patient since they had seen the same situation repeated time and time again. Eventually the trucks were loaded and they drove off south to Texas to begin their task in earnest.

…With each generation comes a great responsibility to ensure an acceptable future for their children and their children's children. The great responsibility given to our generation is to ensure our individual freedoms, our survival and, most importantly, our God given right to free choice is maintained. Knowing these things cannot live in the darkness of tyranny or an oppressive government; we hereby abolish all ties with the United States of America and immediately declare the State of Colorado to be an Independent Republic. May God bless us and keep us strong and guide us on the right path, forever and always…

Excerpt from the Colorado State Declaration of Sovereignty

EPILOGUE

Time since attacks: 37 Years, 1 Month, 24 Days
Date/Time: 13 June/1521 Local
Location: Town of Dayfield (The Ranch), Sovereign Republic of Colorado

…stated the reason for the decline was directly linked to falling gold prices. Gold prices around the world have declined in recent months after Utah announced it had found a significantly larger mine than expected.

In other economic news, the Alaskan Dollar fell for a third straight day against the Texan Dollar, the Russian Ruble and the Mexican Peso. The Alaska Dollar reached an all time high before slowly slipping off to the other currencies in the past few months. The AFNAS Dollar and the Indian Rupee both rose another quarter point before trading closed today in Atlanta.

Australia announced its national sales average rose by three percent over the past year. Government officials stated the growth was directly related to the new cold fusion powered vehicles produced in Australian industries. Australia is now the third largest producer of automotive vehicles behind the United States and the AFNAS. Mexico fell to number four and Germany to number five in the surprise jump by Australia from number seven to number three this year. Other top ten newcomers are Brazil and Lithuania with their revolutionary new liquid hydrogen process, bumping out Korea and South Africa. Experts claim Australia and Lithuania could knock off the United States and the AFNAS next year if trends continue.

The news of the world in your speakers, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week on TATB, Satellite Radio News, TM Band.

The ten day standoff outside the suspected drug producing factory in New Saint Petersburg has ended. Russian government police forces were preparing for an assault after negotiations failed yesterday when the leaders of the gang surrendered. Twenty-three individuals were taken into custody without incident by the police and were taken to the nearby federal prison. After entering the facility, the Russian Federal Police found manufacturing facilities for heroin and approximately two hundred kilograms of the drug ready for shipment. Russian officials were tipped off after a shipment of opium was intercepted by Islamic Union Border Police in the Afghanistan Province a month ago. The Islamic Union obtained the information about the destination from the drug runners after their arrest and prior to their execution. Russian prosecutors stated the trial would begin in two weeks against the accused.

The trial involving the Islamic Union Minister of the Treasury who used the word 'infidel' and stated 'all non-believers should be killed' in speaking to the Ambassador from the North American Union will start on Sunday. The Ambassador was meeting with the Ministry about trade agreements for grain and corn when the Minister broke out in a two minute tirade against the North American people. IU government officials ushered out the Minister, who continued to shout at the Ambassador, and the government has formally apologized to the Ambassador and

the North American Union as a whole. The IU has national laws prohibiting the type of language used by the Minister in any and all formal settings. The Deputy Minister, now acting as the full time Minister, stated he hoped the negotiations would continue as before and a new agreement could be reached. It is unknown whether the Ambassador will be testifying in the Union's Court for Religious Matters.

Austria has finally fulfilled its financial debt to the Russian government for money and materials loaned after World War Three. Austrian government officials stated 'it is a good day for our country to be financially free of all debts.' The Austrian Prime Minister handed over the last symbolic check from the Austrian State Bank to the Russian President at a ceremony in Moscow yesterday. Both leaders were in Moscow for a summit and the first meeting of the two national leaders. Bulgaria, France and Belgium are the last countries to owe the Russian government for the debts after the Third World War. France and Belgium are expected to repay their debts in full by the end of this year or early next year. The Bulgarian President is expected to repay the final payment in the meeting between those two leaders next month.

The bestselling historical non-fiction book, Rise from the Ashes, by Michael Parsons is still number one after sixty weeks on the Boston Globe Top Ten listing. Almost fifty million copies in twenty-one languages of both the e-book and paper versions have been produced of the novel since its release a year and a half ago. The book focuses on the history of his family and the families he joined with during the Great Fall, surviving the aftermath and fighting through World War III. Mister Parsons stated last month at a book signing 'I never thought the book would be that successful. I just wanted to write about the history of my family and the amazing families that were brought together during the Fall. My wife and I both kept diaries for years and I never thought they would be that intriguing.' Michael Parson still lives in Colorado with his wife, Shannon, where they are semi-retired as curators for a museum.

And in scientific news, the Armstrong Moon Base reports its oxygen producing generators are now back up and running full time. The base had been on backup systems for the past two weeks while the main generators were being upgraded and repaired. Future plans are in the works to upgrade the backup unit as well and overhaul the shielding systems. The base had been in the news recently as a micro meteor penetrated the electronic shielding of the oxygen producing generators causing a brief period when new oxygen was not being produced. The backup system turned itself on as it was supposed to after fifteen minutes of trying to restart the main system. No member of the expedition was hurt in the incident and the plans to upgrade the shielding system and oxygen generators were in place prior to the impact. After the overhaul is complete, the base will be able to increase its numbers of residents from the current level of fifteen hundred to two thousand.

The Mars expedition is now within three days of being captured by Mars planetary gravity. The six month journey to the red planet is about to end and the world waits anxiously for news of the successful 'orbital parallel parking maneuver' as the UN scientist puts it with a smile. A day after the capture, the expedition of ten people will descend to the surface and, for the first time in human history, mankind will set foot on another planet. UN Space Officials in Houston are still close lipped about who will be the first person to set foot on the planet. The current runners in the rumor mill coming out of Houston are Jackson Ford from the AFNAS, Elke Weber from

Germany or Dmitri Koronov from Russia. When asked who would be first in a recent video teleconference, all three raised their hands. Officials from Houston tell us the decision has been made and the world will find out as the expedition member comes down the ladder. This event will be carried live on Satellite Radio, Television and Prism 3-D Technology, starting at 9:00 PM Eastern Standard Daylight Time.

We'll be back for two hours of Al Mendez and his "Force the Issue" talk show after word from our sponsors. Today's guest will be the former U.S. Senator Maxwell Smith from Maryland, recently released from Fox Island Prison.

Are you tired of your solar and wind generators going down when you least expect it? Can't trust the power grid of your community during bad weather? Maybe it's time you upgraded to a MacDowell Home Fusion unit. This revolutionary new system provides uninterrupted power for any occasion and comes at a cost so affordable you would be crazy…

A small boy of seven came bounding into the kitchen where his mother was sitting and halfway listening to the satellite radio broadcast. She was busy looking through an old photo album of pictures that had been printed off a color printer some decades before and protected by the plastic of the pages. The pictures were of a group of people devoted to surviving. They had just returned that morning from attended the funeral of one of the men in the pictures. Although not family per se, the man they had laid to rest was closer to her family than most family members usually are. The little boy demanded to sit on his mother's lap and see what she was doing. Looking through the pictures, but not really understanding, the little boy asked "Mommy? Was he with Papaw during the war?"

"Yes, Tommy, he was. Here he is with your Grandfather and Grandmother outside of Great Uncle George's house right after the Great Fall and here is another picture of them during the troubles afterwards," said the woman of thirty-two as she turned the page. "Here is another picture of both of them right before they went to Texas to help the people fight there against the invaders. Here is another one of when they were in North Carolina and the next page is them in Florida. Your Grandfather, your Great Uncles and Great Aunts served together during the war. Here is a picture of all of them before they left the Ranch to go to Texas and fight," she said as she flipped back to the beginning.

"But Mommy, why did they go and fight?" asked seven year old Thomas Brent Hudson. She thought back to the stories her mother used to tell about why her father had gone to fight. Soon after finishing the fight against the Islamic invaders from the Middle East in North America, they had gone to Europe to help liberate the people there. Eventually the consolidated armies of the liberated nations went on to invade the Islamic Union with major help from the forces of the North American countries including Latin America as well as Russia and Switzerland. These nations, called the Free Nation Coalition, or FNC, banded together without distrust like the nations in World War II had endured. This time they put aside their petty differences and concentrated fully on victory over the enemy without expecting anything in return. And like World War II, it was again a fight for the survival of their populations. World War III lasted for almost seven years before peace was finally reached by a conflict weary world.

She picked her words carefully. "Well, sweetie, some bad people were doing some bad things in this world and had to be stopped. Your grandfather, great uncles and great aunts had to go and help stop them from hurting people like you and me and make it safe for us."

"Are the bad people coming here?" asked a wide eyed Tommy.

"No, sweetie, they aren't coming here," said Hope.

"But what if they do?" asked Tommy.

"Your father and I won't ever let them sweetie, you are safe here," said Hope, who knew her way around a firearm very well. Little did she know her words were a close echo of Thomas Dayfield to his daughter, Angel, many years before.

She thought about the history she had learned as a teenager in the schools about the troubles in the world from before her birth to her early years of life. She remembered the stories her father would sometimes tell about the war when she was old enough to understand. He never told her about the fighting, but rather the funny things that happened or of the people he served with. On the rare occasion she had brought up the battles he had been involved with, his eyes became distant and he would change the subject.

After the conquest of Turkey, the Islamic Union had consolidated its power in the Middle East, having more Islamic nations join the Union and launched an invasion of Europe. After securing their position in Europe, they had then sent troops to invade the AFNAS and Texas. Her father and her uncles and aunts had volunteered to serve with the Texan Militia after it was apparent Colorado was no longer part of the United States and a call for volunteers was made. After a military coup in Washington D.C. removed the former President for Life, the United States joined the fight as well. The military council made good on the promise for new elections as soon as their power was consolidated and the new nation quickly declared war on the Islamic Union and joined the war in progress.

All the able bodied males and females from the Ranch served with the 143rd Infantry Regiment (Militia) until most were recruited into the 14th Special Operations Battalion where they served out the remainder of the war, operating mainly behind enemy lines destroying high value targets and liberating towns and cities in North America and Europe. They went on to fight in the Middle East and Africa during the invasion that followed the liberation of Europe. They were in Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus when the cities fell and on the outskirts of Mecca when the Islamic Union used nuclear weapons on the invading armies to defend their territory. After the initial strikes, the Alliance, Russian and Texan forces responded in kind before a ceasefire was finally reached by the warring parties. The Islamic Union surrendered and sought peace since they would be unable to stop the invading armies from advancing further.

Although several nations wanted to extract a measure of revenge on the invaders from the Middle East and continue fighting, most of the civilized world was ready to stop and get on with repairing their damaged nations or begin anew. The total numbers of casualties from the original attacks, the fall of civilization and the Third World War had never been officially tallied, but

Hope knew the numbers were staggering. Her Father, Uncles and Aunts all distinguished themselves fighting against Islamic Fascism and the problems it brought. Stuart Donaldson, Cindy Matheson, Mike Dugger and Johnny Thompson along with four of the residents that moved in after the first eighteen months all paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom during the war and received military burials at the battlefields they fell on in Europe and North America.

Hope didn't tell her young son about the mass genocide committed by the invaders, or of the death camps, so much like the Nazis, her father probably encountered in Europe. After gaining a foothold in North America and Europe, the Islamic Union impressed laws forbidding any other religion except for Islam and enforced the death penalty for those who broke that law. The United States, the AFNAS and the Texan Republic lost over forty million people to this policy, and Europe lost over one hundred million before the invaders from the Islamic Union could be stopped. He never spoke of the modern day concentration camps he probably encountered, probably to protect his family, but Hope knew in her heart he was there. He was there helping liberate the oppressed people. It was what her father and adopted uncles and aunts did, help people, and they did it well.

After returning from the war, he helped rebuild Colorado, an independent nation-state joined in alliance with Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Arizona, Kansas, and New Mexico. It also included the former Canadian Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and the Northwest Territories joining after the invitation had been extended. Although in alliance, these states and provinces were completely independent from each other as there was no formal central government and only met for matters of mutual concern and defense. The nation-states of this new alliance called themselves the North American Union and established a Constitution in which each and every Amendment was voted on by its citizens. Each State voted on the new Constitution and added its local Amendments as each saw fit. One thing was certain though, each right was guaranteed by the local, state and regional government and none could ever be taken away, suppressed or restricted for any reason. The new Constitution also included a formal Amendment that guaranteed each State's individual right to remove itself voluntarily from the Union if the majority of the citizens decided to do so. It also held another Amendment that the citizens not only had the right, but the duty to rise up against the formal government in revolt if it ever trampled the rights of the citizens, whether it be local, state or national.

The formal high level "government" was simply a council of elected representatives from each state and had no authority to pass laws on the body as a whole. They simply resolved disagreements between the States and were the focal point for ambassadors and negotiations with foreign nations. Since the mid-west states had raised a substantial amount of volunteers to help fight off the invasion of North America during the Third World War, it also held close ties with the Republic of Texas and the AFNAS and regularly traded with them.

The Texas Republic was now at peace and enjoyed an economic boom after the war. The industries in that nation had taken off during the war and had continued to grow in the aftermath. With oil in the backyard and a good industrial base, the States of Texas and Oklahoma soon found themselves to be the most powerful nation on the North American continent immediately after the war. They used their power wisely by helping the other nations of the former United

States and Mexico rebuild after the war with no concern for compensation. They were compensated in return, but more as gifts and fair trade agreements more than actual funds drawn from the federal accounts.

The United States had been reformed and had a new Constitution in which the original Bill of Rights was rewritten in plain English for all to read. There was no gray area at all in the new Constitution and the new government had limited amounts of power on the individual States. The Second, Fourth, Fifth and Tenth Amendments were written so there was no chance of them ever being misunderstood by any party. Term limits were set for both the Houses of Representatives and the Senate, which limited the amount of power a political official could gather during office. Since the new Congress had met, fifteen Congressmen and six Senators had been tried and convicted of taking money in "campaign contributions" from special interest groups, as it was now illegal to do so. These examples of justice were now serving time in prison for taking the money. A Congressman or Senator who wanted to be reelected now had to spend their own money to campaign as it was illegal for a private individual to donate money to a "reelection fund." The replacement Congress now knew their boundaries and worked for the people and not for their own gains. A new prison was built specifically for these inmates, and other political inmates, on North Fox Island in Michigan. Like the old Alcatraz, it was best to stay away from that place.

A trial was held for the former President for Life immediately after the war and she was found guilty on counts of breaking the law of the original US Constitution, crimes against humanity and high treason when it was found that she willingly gave the Islamic Union detailed maps and intelligence documents about the state of the former United States military. The documents were given to the United States by the new government of the Islamic Union and included personal correspondence from her to the governing council of the IU and its military leaders. It also included the locations of secret bunkers, caches of weapons and troop concentrations of the new North American Republics as well as detailed analysis of the countries of Europe and Russia. In her defense she told the Justices present she gave them in exchange for a non aggression treaty, basing rights, logistical needs and further intelligence for the Islamic Union in North America.

The trial was fairly short, as trials go in the United States, as the new country was not in the mood for cheap lawyer tricks or a prolonged legal battle. In the first case heard by the new Supreme Court, the President was sentenced to death for high treason by a unanimous vote of all nine Justices. The sentence was carried out by a firing squad using the same weapons she attempted to confiscate during the Fall. The irony of the situation was not lost on the citizens of the United States during the televised execution and everyone moved on with rebuilding their shattered lives. The trials of the Congressmen and women, Secretaries of the various government departments, Military officers and Supreme Court Justices that had collaborated with the former President came after and more executions were held as well as lengthy jail sentences for many.

The Alliance of Free North American States was still fiercely independent, although it was friendly with its neighbors. It has resisted rejoining the United States on several occasions when the issue was put on the voting ballots during elections. The AFNAS government was close to the United States in nature, but with the weak Jeffersonian central government that could not

take away states rights.

The North East States Alliance voted to return to the United States after the end of the war and the new Constitutional Republic was established. It was joined by the Canadian provinces of Ontario, Nunavut, Newfoundland, Labrador, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick since the nation of Canada ceased to exist formally during the Fall and the times afterwards. Most Canadian citizens found their old socialist government was not needed to tend to their individual needs and decided to join a nation where the individual rights of its citizens were guaranteed without interference from the government.

Quebec became a separate nation, more or less, since it was politically different from the rest of Canada. However, it still held close ties and mutual defense pacts with the United States and the North American Union.

Pacifica finally settled down after the periods of unrest both before and during the Third World War. Returning veterans of World War III saw to that and the gang problems vanished virtually overnight. Most of the returning veterans had seen enough war and conflict to last them three lifetimes and were in no mood for it in their backyards. Many brought home weapons acquired as war trophies and those issued to them for their military service and put them to use breaking the power of the criminals. Peace was achieved and its government was closely patterned after the new United States. However, the liberal views of the West Coast states prior to the Fall were not present in either the new government or the Constitution. The Canadian Province of British Columbia joined their alliance as well. There was talk for a few years of the States of the Pacifica nation joining the North American Union, but it had never been put on the voting ballots.

Utah was still somewhat independent but was leaning towards joining the North American Union. The special vote was to be held later this year on the decision to remain sovereign or to incorporate into the Union. More and more of the residents had been clamoring to join into the Union since the state did not offer many natural resources and had a limited treasury. However, a recent gold deposit found in the south eastern part of the state helped bring their economy up and the drive for incorporation wavered a bit.

Alaska and the Yukon Territory of Canada were now joined in their own nation. They, along with Mexico and Texas, now supplied a good amount of petroleum products to North America and the rest of the world. Several attempts to get them to join the Pacifica nation or the North American Union fell on deaf ears as its citizens were content to govern themselves and live their lives in peace. Alaska became a wealthy nation by exporting oil and oil products to the world. It also became one of the focal points of cheap energy in the world with the University of Alaska finally perfecting cold fusion after World War III. Its oil products still brought wealth to the citizens, but the patents on the fusion technology brought even more. It quickly became one of the strongest nations in the world, economically.

Hawaii was now one of the most sought after vacation spots in the world. After declaring its independence from the United States, it devalued its new currency, kept it in check for inflation and released all public lands for private sales. During the war, it had voluntarily given the

AFNAS and Texas all the military equipment in the state during the Fall. And although it declared itself neutral in the conflict, it had covertly supplied food and funds to the warring nations. After the war, Hawaii decided to go back to its roots and focus on tourism as its main venue. It kept the rates for tourists fairly cheap and the hotels and vacation spots currently had a two year waiting list. Additionally, after the violence of the Fall and seeing nations be overrun during World War III, Hawaii, along with Alaska, was a nation that had a law requiring all citizens to keep and maintain a military style rifle and automatic pistol and a three day supply of ammunition at all times, reversing the gun control measures of the past. Crime was almost non-existent on the islands and would-be criminals quickly found themselves at the end of a firearm if they tried to rob someone. A minimum twenty-five year, no parole prison sentence came along with any crime committed with a firearm. Hawaii had an agreement with Alaska to house its prisoners in a prison facility built on the old Adak Naval Base. Strangely enough, Hawaii had no active duty armed forces to speak of and only a small police force, much like Iceland did. It patterned its militia much like Israel and Switzerland where the citizens became soldiers during times of need. Militia service was mandatory as was semi-annual week long training upon reaching the age of eighteen until fifty-five.

Mexico finally reached a semblance of order after the Fall and World War III. The corruption and power grabbing of the old government were gone with public executions being imposed on those that even attempted to be bribed. A revolution by the citizens during the Fall saw to a complete change of government. The new nation held bribery and corruption to the same standards as treason and murder and had little sympathy for those that broke the law. Both the government employees of the former regime and the groups that bribed them were put on public trial with no chance of appeal or bond and executed. Mexico was now a large oil and food producing nation in which its citizens were well taken care of under the new democracy. Drugs in the country were almost non-existent and drug dealers and producers met with the same fate as corrupt politicians. The rest of Central and South America soon followed Mexico's example and the quickest way to death was to grow, sell or be in possession of illegal drugs.

A Cuban revolution during the Third World War deposed the sitting communist government and formed a new democratic republic. The nation now enjoyed its pre-1960 status of a vacation paradise and its citizens were very well off. It was only behind Hawaii in terms of money spent by tourists. After the revolution, it copied Hawaii's new Republic to include its gun laws. Cuba was "accidentally" invaded by a brigade of troops from the Islamic Union that had lost their way and landed on Cuba instead of south Florida. Cuban Armed Forces had a hard time dealing with the invaders due to the fuel shortages on the island and that the government outposts along the coast had been quickly overrun. Since the citizens were not armed, they had to flee the scene fairly quickly away from the invaders. The accidental invasion was eventually defeated, but the unintended consequence was bringing the Cuban nation onto the FNC side of the war. In the aftermath of the war, Cuba subsidized the weapons industry in the country, built a new factory producing AK-47s and authorized copies of the Glock pistol and required its citizens to buy and maintain the weapon in case of another invasion. This rule applied to all adult members, both male and female of the Cuban nation. Again, crime was almost non-existent on the island and violation of the laws came with severe penalties. No longer were the Cuban Mafia or drug cartels using Cuba as a place to go. In the aftermath of the Revolution, all suspected communist leaders, drug cartel officials and mafia members were rounded up and shot.

The rest of the world seemed to follow the North American examples. The nations of Europe were once again secured thanks to the North American fighting men and women and those of the strong nations of Switzerland and Russia. The European Union still existed, but on a far lesser scale than before the Fall. The industrial base of the nations was quickly rebuilt after the war in a new "Marshall Plan" in which several nations took part. Unlike the Marshall Plan after World War II, the countries repaid their debts quickly after realizing they had been saved a third time in roughly a hundred years. This time, there was no Cold War that followed and no armed encampments that divided the continent. NATO was never reorganized after the war and the nations policed themselves. Switzerland became one of the strongest European nations, but again fell back into their somewhat isolationist stance after the war. It had only joined the conflict on the FNC side since the Islamic Union Special Forces teams had been found inside their territory and had been declared an "invasion" by the Swiss government. It was the first war that Switzerland had actively joined since the 16th Century, breaking its declared neutrality by declaring itself to be the victim of aggression by the IU. The Swiss soldier was a fierce fighter and the country gave a substantial contribution to the Coalition effort, single handedly winning the Battles of Beirut, Rome, Athens, Istanbul, Haifa and Alexandria. When the war was over, their military forces went home and became citizens again and the nation again declared its neutrality. Those territories claimed by the Swiss during the European invasion by the IU were given back to the original nations after the peace treaty had been signed.

Ireland and Great Britain had a minor shooting war five years after WWIII over Northern Ireland which ended in a little over two weeks. Northern Ireland was finally conceded to the Irish Republic and the nation was whole once again. Relations became friendly again between the two states and they traded regularly.

Unlike the last world war, this time Russia went home to rebuild its own damaged nation after the conflict was over, although they assisted in rebuilding the European nations as well in due time. Russian democratic forces eventually won their civil war and formed a new government based loosely on the Texan Constitution. It also adopted the Mexican "resolution" to dealing with corrupt politicians and government workers. Russia had grown dramatically stronger in the past decade with supplying high quality manufactured products to the world on newly built industries powered by cold fusion. Its oil and gold reserves also helped pull it out of the aftermath of the civil war and rebuild the damaged country. Although still the largest country on the planet in terms of military and natural resources, Russians respected their neighbor's borders and chose to become a powerhouse economically instead of militarily.

Russian democratic forces had also given extensive arms and munitions to the FNC prior to their declaration of war after the invasion of Europe by the Coalition. Millions of firearms, rounds of ammunition, explosives and individual equipment along with thousands of tanks, artillery pieces, armored personnel carriers, aircraft and millions of gallons of fuel were sent across the Bering Strait in the same manner of the Lend-Lease Act of World War II. Russians knew they were on the list to be invaded eventually and figured it was better for the Americans to bleed them out prior to joining. More than half the militias on the North American continent were armed with Russian weapons, some dating all the way to WWII. After the war, citizens could outright buy the weapons from the Russian government, no matter how many they owned.

China emerged from its civil war after nearly twenty years. Its population was above one billion prior to the Fall, but now numbered at a little over four hundred million. Genocide and atrocities on both sides killed hundreds of millions innocent bystanders before the war came to a close. Hundreds of millions more were killed by famine and disease during and after. The new government in China was a working democracy in action and the industrial base was only now starting to rebuild. It would take at least another two decades to get it anywhere near the pre-Fall levels China had enjoyed economically.

The rest of Asia had rebuilt after the Fall, helped in part by Australia and New Zealand. Those two nations now constituted the largest nations, economically, in the Pacific. Most nations reemerged from the Fall and World War Three with their societies in such disrepair it took nearly fifteen years to sort out. Most of the industry base in the Asian countries had been destroyed during the riots and violence of the Fall, but had been rebuilt after extensive public works. Another problem that the Asian countries faced immediately after the war was having so much money invested in American stocks and Treasury Notes. With the fall of the American economy, the nations fell as well and never did recoup the losses from the financial markets.

Africa, after nearly thirty years of genocide and inter-tribal warfare finally emerged from conflict. With the exception of South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania, the nations were gutted and population thin. Former enemies and tribes made peace and formed new nations and attempted to meet their own needs since the rest of the world no longer provided charity to their citizens. The Third World was on its own for the most part since they could neither rely on the old Cold War mentality of playing the Russians against the Americans. And since charity was so thin, these nations generally had to make do with what they had. Most of the nations of Africa were only now getting back into the world political stage.

The Israeli people never fully recovered from the violence of the aftermath of the Fall. Most Jewish people left in the world were welcomed into the plains regions of the North American Union and settled in Nebraska, Wyoming and South Dakota. The mass influx of Jewish families and individuals into the areas made a new state called "New Palestine," with the land being granted to them by the new state governments of the lands they occupied. Anti-Semitism had all but disappeared in the world in the wake of WWIII and the Jewish people of the world finally had a place they were safe. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem were still common and the Islamic Union guaranteed the safety of all travelers, with death being the verdict on any crimes committed against the visitors, no matter how minor. IU funds and resources were donated, partially as an apology to the thousand years of persecution, in helping built the new Jewish state.

The Islamic Union, after having surrendering and later signing a peace treaty had undergone several major changes to its government. No longer were clerics that preached hatred and inequality with other religions allowed to have government jobs or even preach their hatred in a mosque. The new government was formed under the eyes of the citizens and new elections were had six months after the cease fire had been arranged. A new democratic government was elected and the former government officials were publically beheaded on the State televised events. The new government also attempted as best as it could to make amends with the world, often donating large sums of money and materials to help rebuild those nations it had helped to

destroy. There was an odd thing about the aftermath of the war. The FNC did not impose any of these restrictions on the Islamic Union as part of the peace treaty, rather, its own citizens did.

For the most part, the Islamic religion took a different path and new Imams helped spread the intent of Mohammed's words to the people of the world, not by force, but by words only. A commission of conservative Imams was gathered to give the unbiased opinion of what the Koran meant instead of twisting it to meet their needs. The new commission was given lead over all Islamic branches of the religion, Sunni, Shiite or otherwise. Its words were law and the consequences for breaking the manner in which they were intended were decisive; death. No longer were clerics allowed to preach Islam by the sword. The changes were slow and subtle in some cases, but militant Islam was on the decline. The government for the most part controlled the religion and saw to it not to repeat the mistakes leading up to the Fall and the Third World War. There was still a lot of suspicion of the Islamic Union, but in the first five years, the nation helped identify and track down all Islamic terror groups and their supporters and bring them to justice, either in the courts or at the end of a firearm. The trials were quick and the verdicts simple, death by beheading. This did more to help their new nation be welcomed back into the world than anything else they ever could have done. Terrorism in the name of Islam was almost non-existent these days and those that used the religion as an excuse were quickly and ruthlessly hunted down and destroyed. Finally, after four thousand years of almost constant conflict, the Middle East saw peace.

The United Nations ceased to exist except as a formal body of members that now met in Havana, Cuba. The new group, by charter, could pass no laws, no security resolutions and had no authority to place armed forces anywhere in the world for so called "peacekeeping" missions. It met only for matters of mutual concern for all nations and devoted much of its time to scientific study and the pursuit of medical advancement. The moon base established in 2026 had been a United Nations project as had the Mars expedition that had been in the news recently. The cure for AIDS, cancer and a host of other diseases had been discovered in a large UN medical lab in Brazil and medical advancements continued in several labs around the world. The efficient and cheap manufacture of cold fusion technology had been perfected in other UN labs. The nations of the world kept the United Nations in check to ensure the body would never regain its pre-war strength and guaranteed the funds contributed to the body were spent on science and not on charity or forcing other nation's rules or views on each other. Funds could be loaned out to developing nations, but payment was to be made or no further technology or loans would be given to them for a period of fifty years. While the world was now more nationalistic than it had been, they knew the problems of the world would be better solved by working together instead of working separately. Knowledge and scientific ideas flowed freely into UN labs where the competition was to outperform each other and not for the sake of nationalistic ideals or military goals. Research was still conducted secretly in nations and corporations around the world, but those ideas that would benefit the population of the world were soon sent into UN labs and expanded on. Being requested to fill a position in a UN laboratory was considered to be one of the greatest honors that a scientist or a doctor could achieve.

Even with peace at last in the world, there was still much to be done. Brigands and bandits still roamed the new countries for several years until the local militias and newly formed national police could bring them to justice. Colorado was no exception to this rule. Hope remembered

up to her eighth birthday there still being a threat of these people before it being relatively safe. Her father turned down political appointments time and time again from the local and Colorado governments, choosing to focus on helping people start a new life in the aftermath of the troubled times following the Fall. The rest of the Ranch members followed suit, choosing to help others instead of going to some political office to make policy.

The Ranch was still there and her parents and most of the families still lived on the original property. After the war and after the Colorado Government was formalized, Thomas and Sharon Dayfield had an additional grant of five thousand acres of former United States National Forest land given to them by the Colorado Government. Other residents of the Ranch had deeds of similar size, none less than two thousand acres. The properties all adjoined each other into one huge area of middle Colorado and made the former Ranch members some of the largest landowners in the State.

The store and hunting retreat was still open and being run by Brent Dayfield and his wife Christine Garcia. A new larger group of rental cabins had been built behind the original cabins in the woods. The original cabins were either still occupied by Ranch residents or their immediate families. The Ranch had grown in population over the past thirty years and some of the property had been donated by Thomas and Sharon Dayfield for new housing areas. A museum had been opened on the original property owned by George Taylor. It was one of the largest and finest in North America of its type which focused on the Fall and the Third World War. A separate section was devoted to the Ranch and their struggle for survival in the dark days after the Fall. Darren Thompson, Michael Parsons, Dave Lawson and their families were the caretakers and continued to secure additional pieces for the museum from around the world. The rest of the residents had taken to farming the land or opening shops and the small town thrived and became an integral part of the local community.

Some families moved away after the dust cleared, but not too far. Other families came closer. One thing was for certain, they all kept in constant touch with each other. Her parents still lived in the same place they always had, except now instead of working hard, they took the time to enjoy the fruits of their labors. They still kept a garden, like most families did now days, and still were prepared for "anything we could possibly imagine" as her father tells it to visitors. To this day, he still carries his pistol in his shoulder holster along with her mother carrying hers.

They looked through the photo album again, the third time now for Hope Hudson, the youngest daughter of Sharon and Thomas Dayfield. Although they weren't blood kin, she still referred to the former Ranch residents as "Uncles" and "Aunts." Hope had been conceived after her father had returned from the fighting in North America and born after he went to Europe to help fight there. Thomas Dayfield, Senior had not seen his youngest daughter for the first five years of her life since he was overseas that whole time. It was something her father regretted her whole lifetime, but never told her. Hope had not been old enough to really remember his absence for the war, but her youngest memories were of her Father, Mother, Uncles and Aunts around the Ranch, always working, always doing something. Although always doing something, they always took the time for their children and now grandchildren. Today they had gathered to lay one of the original residents to rest on the property still simply called the Ranch. It was the only time in her life she had ever seen her father cry or her adopted uncles cry for that matter.

Today was a sad day for everyone with the death of Frank Zimmer. He left behind his wife Julie and his children and grandchildren after dropping dead from a heart attack during the dedication ceremony for the naming and incorporation of the town. They settled just down the road from the Ranch when it was safe enough to do so, but Uncle Frank always had an affection for the Ranch. In his will made out prior to leaving for the War, he requested to be buried there, in a quiet place overlooking the central pond. Thomas Dayfield, Senior had set aside a plot of land and had it formalized by the state as a cemetery some years before. He would probably be buried there as well when his time came, along with every other original Ranch resident.

Hope laid the photo album down on the table and set her son down. She needed to change before going to the wake for Uncle Frank at the Ranch. She told her son to go upstairs to get ready to change as well. He took off like a shot up the stairs while she followed at a more sedate pace. Her husband would be coming back soon from dropping off Auntie Amy and Uncle Greg at their house so they could change as well. She also remembered she needed to go by Auntie Amber and Uncle Heath's house to pick up the refreshments.

She chose a simple outfit to wear to the wake, especially since everyone knew Uncle Frank would almost never dress up and would have been appalled if someone came to his wake dressed formally. She sipped the Kahr PM40 that was once her father's into her waistband of her blue jeans at the small of her back and put the spare magazine pouch onto the belt loop, ensuring each magazine was loaded. As she was changing, a couple of pairs of her sons pants and shirts that needed mending caught her eye. She made a mental note to remember to take care of that soon, when everything was back to "normal."

Some thoughts by the author on "Normal"

I originally had the idea in my head to write a story in 2006 while I was deployed, but never gave it any serious thought until the summer of 2007 when I first came to Germany. I wrote a little in the book during my time in Iraq, but the majority was finished up in the summer of 2008. The original story was nothing more than random thoughts and ideas written down on a notepad and eventually expanded on. As I got into it more, the ideas flourished and became a life of their own. I started big in the world to set the tone of the story (Chapters 1-6) and focused on how those decisions affected the entire world afterwards (Chapters 7-49) and got big again (Chapter 50) to show the same choices made still affected the world as a whole. I finished off the story both small and large with the aftermath of the Fall and how the decisions were still affecting even the day to day Average Joe (or Hope), some 37 years after the attacks on America and how they shaped the world as they knew it. Some chapters make reference to the world politics of the future and I can hope the reader indulges me in my creative interpretation as to the state of the world both during and after the Fall.

Finishing the story was hard since I had the beginning and the ending written, but had to connect the two. Many a time I sat dumb faced at my computer trying to figure out a way to make everything fit. I had thoughts on occasion of shelving the whole story, starting with something smaller and coming back to it at another time. However, as soon as I was fed up and walked away, I would get a moment of inspiration and write a little more. Eventually, I figured everything out and managed to get everything into a logical (at least in my mind) sequence of events.

Some chapters were written well in advance of their timeline in the story, namely Chapter 35 – Lost Boys and Chapter 44 – Long Distance Rivalry and Chapter 45 – Strike First, Strike Hard, No Mercy. Originally, Chapters 44 and 45 were one HUGE chapter and I needed to break it up. I had a hard time fitting them into the story and almost omitted them from it altogether. Eventually, I was able to fit them in as my creative juices started flowing again. These specific chapters had been written over a year prior to posting as, again, random thoughts placed down on paper and eventually transferred to computer. Eventually the timeline worked out and I was able to "connect the dots" and get them to fit into the story. Many a pot of coffee and my nicotine habit was used in trying to get everything together for the story. I think I did a fairly decent job fitting everything together, but, as always, constructive criticism is more than welcome.

The ending might be seen by some as anti-climatic, however, I wanted to leave my options open to follow up stories if I feel like it. I left enough open space in there to provide stories if I ever felt the need to spend another year and a half writing up something else. [*Author's note: Since that time I've written a sequel named "Tales of the Ranch – Operation Eris" and have plans for further follow up stories during the World War Three timeframe*] I really have no desire to re-write any portion of the story like some stories I've read before.

The characters are, by and large, meant to make the reader think "Yeah, I know that sorta guy" more than just being a character in the book. Each character is meant to provoke a reaction from the reader in recalling someone they actually know or to say "I've been there before." Some parts may seem drawn out or overly dramatic, but it's what I consider to be essential to the

background of the characters. Real life is often dramatic and I tried to express the minor details of life in the story so the reader can relate to them in some way, shape or form.

The characters in the story are somewhat based loosely on people I know and friends of mine. However, each character is also representative of the normal conservative American. Each of us had a friend like Rick Jones, who loves firearms and the larger the better. Or Thomas Dayfield, who collects firearms, the more the better and would give the shirt off their back to a friend. Or Darren Thompson, the one who has the best tactics of anyone they know. Or Sharon Dayfield, caring and loving while having guts of pure steel and stands up for what is right. Or Tracy Daniels, the one that thinks the world owes them everything until faced with the problems of standing on her own. And George Taylor, a thoughtful grizzled veteran whose words are heeded by all. Or Morgan Gable, an egotist that uses a situation to their advantage instead of working together. And of course the ladies of the Ranch which rule the homestead with an iron fist, just like we often see in the real world. Gents, we may wear the pants, but our wives, fiancés and ladyfriends surely pick them out for us. Where would we be without the love, and steel resolve, of the ladies in our lives?

I know one complaint will be the money of Thomas and how it helped in the preparations of the Ranch. Honestly, I just couldn't have pulled the story off without it. Everyone knows about the person who has a considerable amount of wealth and comes into it. These folks either blow all the money in the first year, or continue working and never really lose anything. Thomas is one of those that falls into the latter category. Yes, the money and supplies are helpful and I hope it didn't detract from the story. Overall, the preparations for the story can be done by just about anyone, given the amount of time and effort. I'm not saying everyone can go out and build a completely off the grid living location as depicted in the story, but certain aspects can be achieved. Nothing was created or made up for the story. I tried to limit the technical details to those that actually exist (as the story was written from 2007 to 2008) and not get too carried away with making things up just to fit the story. Everything in the story is immediately available to those who want it. [*Author's note: Since that time, different technologies and items have come out. I have not redone the story to reflect current day technologies or commercial items. Additionally, when this was written, there was still a good chance of the Republicans winning the White House. So in reality, "Normal" is based on an alternate timeline*.]

"Normal" is not strictly a preparedness novel, but I did include a few lessons to be learned in the story. While of the SHTF or TEOTWAWKI genre, it isn't meant to be a teaching story like other stories are. Overall, I just wanted to tell a story about the lives of a group of people affected by decisions made in which they had no control over. And in telling that story, if some lessons are learned, so much the better. Yes, some of the items in the story are preparedness related and lessons can be learned, but the story is more about people than ideas.

In writing the story, I took the liberty of trying to comprehend what a person might go through in this situation. Would it be this way in real life? Maybe. Would there be more conflict within the group in a real world situation? Probably, more like absolutely. However, with the strong ties within the group from the start, everyone seems to know the overall goal and works towards survival. I felt more conflict within the group might distract from the overall story and the

dynamics of their personal relationships. They know they need each other to survive and that's the point I tried to convey in the story.

Could "Normal" become a reality? While a lot of things in the story could happen, the likelihood of them happening as the story tells it is remote. Great lengths were made in exaggerating the world politics and events. Do I feel the likelihood of another terrorist attack in the CONUS as being high? Yes. Do I feel like it will happen as the story tells it? Probably not. Do I feel like the average public could degenerate to acting the way I portrayed? We've already seen some of that in New Orleans and Los Angeles on a small scale. Do I feel like it is going to be as bad as I let on? I'm not sure. Having said that, could it happen? Who knows? Maybe, maybe not. But this is why we prepare, to plan for the worst, but hope for the best.

I hope everyone had as good a time reading "Normal" as I had writing it. Two years in the making with one hard year of writing.

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