

The Road Home

By: Ranger Rick

Not too far in the future...

Early November, 27 months after things fell apart:

Chapter 1, Crossroads

Moving out of the foothills on the hiking trail, Jake heard what sounded like a shotgun blast, off in distance. He immediately moved off the trail, went to one knee and removed his ball cap (a trick learned in the Army to enhance hearing). Jake, a tall, rangy 32 year old, with light brown hair, a full beard and piercing blue eyes, flicked off the safety on the FR-8 and listened. He faintly heard what he thought were dogs barking and maybe a woman or a child screaming. Jake put his cap back on and cautiously but quickly got back on the trail and moved out toward what had to be someone in trouble, probably at the trail head. He knew from his last map check that it had to be close.

In this day and age, Jake had found that minding his own business and avoiding other people was usually the smart thing to do. But having recent experience with feral dogs and knowing that a woman or child if not both were in trouble, he just couldn't leave it alone.

As he moved down the trail, Jake could see the trees thinning out and a blacktop road 40 yards below him. He heard dogs barking and growling, and the piercing screams of what had to be a child.

Jake sped to a trot and mentally took stock of his weaponry. He had the FR-8 (a Spanish bolt action Mauser with some modernizing features), loaded with five rounds of ball ammunition. The .38 S&W in a drop leg holster, loaded with six hollow points, a BK-7 combat knife on his right hip and a bayonet for the FR-8 on his left hip. Not exactly the tools he would choose, but they would do.

As Jake cleared the tree line, he could see where the hiking trail ended at the hard ball road and across that road, a scenic overlook parking area where all hell had broken loose. What Jake saw was a pack of at least 10 dogs converging on what appeared to be a bicycle tired garden cart. The cart was next to the fieldstone abutment wall of the overlook, on the far side of the parking area.

A man, a woman and three children were between the cart and the wall, attempting to fight off the dog pack, but were barely holding their own. The man had a single shot shotgun and appeared to be having trouble reloading it. A boy of about ten was keeping the dogs at bay with what looked like a baseball bat. The woman was jabbing at the dogs with some kind of spear and two young girls were huddled behind the cart screaming.

Jake moved down the trail to the road. Scanning for any pack members not already accounted for. Jake had

learned in recent dealings with feral dogs, that they had virtually no fear of man. Most feral dogs were former pets that owners couldn't bear to kill when they couldn't feed them anymore or pets that wandered off when their owner's died from one of the recent epidemics. Or, in some cases, wandered off when the owners were killed by "feral dogs" of the two legged variety. These newly feral dogs rapidly reverted to type and formed into packs. They were literally everywhere and were one of the more serious dangers of this new dark age.

All of the dogs Jake could see were large, of varying breeds and looked gaunt and underfed. They also were focused on their prey and had not noticed Jake as of yet. Jake got behind an oak tree at the road's edge and took off his Alice pack. He hefted it and wedged it into the crotch of the oak as high as he could reach. Hopefully he could come back for it.

Jake moved across the road and knelt next to the fieldstone wall bordering the overlook. He rested his rifle on top of the wall and sighted in on what he thought was the pack leader, a large Blue Tick hound, trying to scramble over the loaded cart to get at the family. Jake fired and hit the Blue Tick at the base of the spine, just below the tail. The 146 grain ball round key holed out through the dog's abdomen, spilling a loop of intestines on the ground.

The Blue Tick collapsed on top of his intestines with a loud yelp and three of his pack mates immediately attacked him. A Shepherd mix, an Elkhound and an indeterminate mix breed, began dismembering the Blue Tick just as the rifle shot registered on the rest of the pack. Jake rapidly worked the bolt without breaking his cheek weld and picked out another target. What appeared to be a large Boxer, which had turned away from the cart and was now running toward Jake's position behind the wall.

Jake aimed for the center of the Boxer's chest and fired when the dog was less than 10 yards away. The Boxer collapsed and rolled into a heap, very obviously dead. By this time, the man behind the cart got the shotgun reloaded and put a load of birdshot into the Shepherd's hip. From such close range that the #9 shot totally mangled the hip and the dog went down with a howl.

The rest of the pack, obviously the followers, didn't seem to know what to do. Several of them joined in the melee next to the cart and started fighting over the Blue Tick's corpse or attacked the Shepherd. Four pack members edged into the middle of the overlook and looked between Jake and the fight, whining and yelping, apparently looking for a way out.

Jake quickly shot all four dogs in the middle of the parking area. Three with the rounds remaining in the FR-8 and then rapidly reloading with a 5 round stripper clip from an ammo pouch on his LBE (load bearing equipment). He then killed the remaining dog in the middle of the parking area, with a well placed head shot and moved out across the parking area toward the dog pile next to the cart. He kept firing as he moved and shot the last four with one round each until there were no dogs left standing in the overlook. Although several were still alive, they presented no immediate threat due to the devastating wound effects of the 146 grain, 7.62 NATO rounds.

Jake reloaded with another stripper clip and closed the bolt on the FR-8 as he approached the family behind the cart. As he walked up to the cart, he noticed that the man had reloaded the shotgun and was now pointing it at him.

The man said in a shaky voice “H-h-hold it right there. I don’t want to shoot you, but I-I-I will, if you come any c-closer.”

Jake stopped several yards from the man and looked at him. The man appeared to be about forty, of medium height, with thinning blond hair, wearing a green nylon jacket, day hikers and jeans. He had the same undernourished, unkempt look that most people had these days. He was also apparently in the middle of the fight or flight adrenalin dump. So Jake decided to go easy. This guy would spook real quick and Jake didn’t want to be forced to kill him.

Jake noticed that the shotgun’s hammer wasn’t cocked, which gave him some reaction time if he needed it. So he took stock of the man’s family and the garden cart.

The woman was short, painfully thin, wearing jeans, running shoes and a much too large plaid wool shirt with a bandana tied over her dark brown hair. She was focused on her children, trying to determine if any of them were hurt. None of the children appeared to be injured, although the two young girls were hysterical and both blond little girls (4 and 6 respectively), were crying and clinging to the woman. The blond ten year old boy, who looked a lot like the man with the shotgun, held the bat across his chest and looked uncertainly at Jake from behind the cart. The cart appeared to contain various bundles, containers and bags. Some of which, had spilled from the cart and were strewn on the ground.

Jake looked back at the man holding the shotgun and said “Mister, if you’re gonna shoot me. You might want to cock that shotgun.”

Jake then slung the FR-8 across his back and waited. The blond haired man looking appalled brought the shotgun from his shoulder to his waist and clumsily attempted to cock it. Jake took three steps forward, grasped the barrel of the shotgun, levered it upward, grasped near the wrist of the stock with his free hand and twisted it from the man’s hands. The man slumped back against the fieldstone wall, with a resigned look on his face.

Jake broke open the shotgun’s action, ejected the shell into his hand and pocketed it. He then handed the shotgun back to the man and said “Mister, I’m not going to hurt you or your family. If I meant you any harm, I wouldn’t have wasted ammunition on those dogs.” The man let out a sigh and nodded his head in the affirmative as Jake unslung the FR-8 and walked toward the nearest wounded and whimpering dog.

As Jake walked up to a lung shot Golden Retriever, he pulled out the bayonet and fixed it to the muzzle of the rifle. He then rammed the bayonet hard into the dog’s rib cage just behind the shoulder. The dog stiffened and died. Jake then moved around the parking area and bayoneted any dogs that appeared to have any signs of life. When he was finished, he removed the bayonet from the rifle and cleaned it on the pelt of one of the dead dogs. Jake replaced the bayonet in the sheath and moved back toward the garden cart.

While Jake had been dispatching the dogs, the family sorted themselves out and started placing spilled items back into the cart. As Jake walked up, the man smiled hesitantly, offered his right hand and said “My name is Charlie Jenkins and I want to thank you for saving my family. I don’t know what we would have done, if you hadn’t come along.”

Jake took the offered hand and said, “Call me Jake and don’t mention it.”

“Just Jake?” Charlie asked.

“Just Jake.” Jake said, as the woman walked up to them.

Charlie said “Jake, this is my wife Katy and the boy is Joe. The girls are Sarah and the little one’s Junie.”

Jake nodded to the woman, shook her hand and said “Pleased to meet you all and glad I could be of some help.”

Katy said “Thank you...Jake? I won’t forget what you’ve done for my family. But I do have a question.”

“Yeah, it’s Jake, go ahead and ask your question.” Said Jake

“What do you plan on doing with all of this meat?”

“The dogs you mean? I hadn’t really thought about it.” Said Jake

“Well, I know it’s only dog but this is a fair amount of fresh meat and it’ll be worth something at the Crossroads.”

“The Crossroads?” asked Jake

“Yes.” Katy said, “That’s where we live, about fifteen miles southeast of here on the Interstate.”

Jake asked, “What is it, a small town?” Not having seen the name in his Road Atlas.

Charlie replied, “No, well maybe it could be considered a town now, or more like a trading post, but it used to be a truck stop where Interstates 55 and 57 meet near Sikeston.”

Charlie went on to explain that the Crossroads was a large truck stop owned by a man named Jarrett and that during the collapse, Jarrett had fortified the place and had a contingent of armed men to protect it. Charlie also said that the place had good water and its own electrical power source, in the form of wind turbines, solar panels and a big diesel generator. He went on to tell how a refugee camp had grown up around it and that it was the only relatively safe place in this part of Missouri. He also went on to explain that Jarrett was not a man to be crossed, but if you obeyed his rules you had nothing to worry about.

While Charlie was explaining this he was able for the first time, to really critically observe and size up Jake. What he saw was a tall bearded, powerful young man in some kind of hunting camouflage (Mossy Oak) shirt, cap and leggings (pack cloth gaiters), and wearing faded blue jeans. He also had some kind of large green and brown scarf around his neck and was wearing some kind of military harness with pouches, canteens and knives hanging from it. Additionally, he had a pistol strapped to his right leg and the rifle casually cradled in the crook of his left arm.

Charlie rightly concluded from the casual way that Jake disarmed him earlier and from his appearance, that

he was a formidable man. Not to mention the sure and easy way in which he handled his weapons while dispatching the dog pack. Charlie guessed Jake was a former soldier or policeman. But that wasn't important. What was important was that Jake could protect Charlie's family better than he could. And they had a fifteen mile trip back to Crossroads, pulling a heavily loaded cart, with nothing but a single shot shotgun and four rounds of ammunition for protection (five if Jake gave back the shell he pocketed).

And finally, Charlie had no illusions about his prowess with weapons or in a violent situation. Hell! He was a computer geek, who had never handled a gun, much less been in a fight before things fell apart. If it hadn't been for his farm raised wife, they would have all been dead by now. Charlie needed to convince Jake to go with them to Crossroads and believed he knew how.

"Say Jake, where are you headed?"

Jake looked at Charlie and said, "I'm just passing through, heading north, actually."

"Well Jake, I'll make a deal with you, why don't you provide an armed escort for us back to Crossroads and I'll split whatever we can get for this meat with you."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked, "Money isn't worth anything anymore and why do you think you need an armed escort?"

"Well Jake, we can sell this meat for silver coin or ammunition, which are the two primary mediums of exchange at the Crossroads. Or you could barter it for other goods and services." Charlie said with a leer and winked. "And isn't it obvious we could use an armed escort? If you hadn't come along, all of us would probably have died."

At this point Katy chimed in, "Carrying all of this raw meat is going to attract every scavenger in the area. We probably couldn't get it back home, without your help."

Jake gave Charlie and Katy a tight smile and started to ponder the offer. He only had a few days worth of food left and had not been able to take much game over the past few weeks. He did have something to use for trade, along with what they might be able to get for the meat. Maybe he could get some staples such as beans or rice for the trail. This might not be a bad idea thought Jake. But, he needed to be cautious; he didn't entirely trust Charlie Jenkins and this could be a set up.

Jake asked, "This Crossroads place, what are their rules on guns?" "I'm not going any place where I have to give up my weapons."

Charlie replied, "Jarrett doesn't have a problem with customers going armed, as long as they don't cross him. I guess you could say that Crossroads is a lot like those old west towns in the movies. Most everybody is armed, in one fashion or another and it can get violent at times, but you seem able to handle yourself."

"Charlie, looks like you've got a deal. I'll just go get my pack." Jake said as he grinned and started walking back toward the road.

Katy addressed her children as Jake walked away, "Joey, get the knives out of the cart. Girls, come and help

mommy, Charlie go get the water can, we have to get these dogs dressed out.” The kids did what their mother asked and with Charlie’s help, she set to butchering the dogs.

Several minutes later, when Jake returned with his pack, the butchering of the dogs was well under way. It seems that Katy knew what she was doing and the rest of the family had helped her butcher other animals before. Katy and Charlie were gutting and skinning out the carcasses. Katy was obviously very experienced at it, but Charlie was new to the game, although he appeared to have at least some experience. The three children were helping out as needed, even little Junie was helping as best she could.

The Jenkins’ family not appearing to need any help, Jake figured the best thing for him to do, would be to start his “escort” duties. Which he would begin by doing a quick recon of the immediate area to insure that there were no other threats around. He told Charlie and Katy as much, placed his pack next to the cart and moved out.

Jake checked below the overlook and scanned the valley with his small pair of binoculars, specifically to the southeast. He paid particular attention to the blacktopped road leading away from the overlook in that direction. Jake could detect no apparent threats but noticed that the road dropped down into the small valley and skirted the foothills to the west, heading in a generally southeasterly direction.

Jake, picked up the FR-8 and walked through the parking area to the hardball road. He entered the road and followed it south for a few yards when he heard water running. He looked off to his right, along the hillside and spotted a man made fieldstone grotto, with water running from a pipe into a small cistern. There was a brass plaque above the pipe naming it “Crazy Woman Spring, ca.1891.” This was only about 20 yards south of the head of the hiking trail and Jake assumed hikers must have used this spring for drinking water.

Jake stepped up to the cistern and noticed that a notch had been cut into the rim to act as an over flow channel and the water fell into a grate at the base of the cistern, disappearing back into the ground. Jake put his hand under the stream emitting from the pipe and it was ice cold and crystal clear.

At about that time, the boy Joey walked up holding a large cooking pot. He looked at Jake shyly and said “Mom sent me to get some water, so we can finish cleaning up. She told me to tell you, when you are finished with what you are doing, you should come and have some lunch. She is cooking some of the meat and making some beans.”

Jake said “Thanks son, I’ll be right along. But before you go, tell me, do you know if this water is safe to drink?”

Joey said, “Oh yes sir! This is good water, it won’t make you sick. When we came by here two days ago on the way to Aunt Martha’s, we got water here and nobody has got sick.”

“Thanks son, tell your parents I’ll be along shortly.” Jake told the boy and started off further south down the road. Jake thought to himself that the water was probably safe to drink but he still planned on filtering it when he topped off his canteens. One of the most valuable pieces of equipment he had, in his opinion, was the expensive backpacker’s water filter he had managed to acquire. It removed harmful substances down to the smallest microbe and was probably the main reason he was still so healthy. Before moving out, he would make sure to top off his canteens with filtered water.

Jake traveled another couple of hundred yards down the road, glassing the valley and surrounding area as he went. He saw a farm and several homes further south down the valley, but could detect no signs of life or occupation.

As Jake returned to the overlook, he could smell something cooking and noticed that the family had pulled the cart next to the picnic shelter adjacent to the parking area. Katy had a fire going in the fireplace of the shelter and was attending several pots on the fire. Charlie was redistributing the load in the cart and there was a pile of black plastic lawn bags next to the cart, which Jake assumed held the butchered and quartered dog meat.

Jake also noticed that the only signs of the dogs left in the parking area were blood smears on the pavement. He was curious about the gut piles and asked Charlie about them. Charlie told Jake that they had tossed what couldn't be used over the abutment wall, down the hillside.

Jake immediately thought of his alicie pack and looked to where he had left it and saw that it appeared to be undisturbed. He went and retrieved the pack and walked back to the picnic shelter. He pulled his weapons cleaning kit from an outer pocket of the pack, cleared and unloaded the FR-8 and began cleaning it at one of the picnic tables.

While cleaning the rifle, Jake noticed that the two young girls were helping their mother with lunch and the boy Joey was standing guard near one of the support timbers of the shelter, holding his mother's spear. From Jake's perspective, Joey made a pretty good sentry. The kid was constantly scanning the surrounding area in an alert manner and was taking his duty seriously.

As Jake finished cleaning the rifle, the six year old girl brought him a plastic cartoon character bowl of dog meat and pinto beans. She went to hand him a spoon and Jake smiled and said "No thanks honey, I've got my own. As the rest of the family, with the exception of Joey, started to eat. Jake dug his eating utensils from his pack.

At this point, for no other reason than his suspicious nature, Jake thought "what if they put something in the food?" On that note, Jake reloaded the FR-8 and slung it across his chest as he stood up. Jake took the bowl of food over to Joey and said "Here kid, you go ahead and eat. I'll take watch until you finish." Joey smiled, leaned the spear against the support post and took the bowl from Jake.

Jake looked at Katy and Charlie for any reaction. If the food had been poisoned, the natural reaction would have been to stop Joey from eating it. The only reaction that Jake got was mildly surprised looks from both parents, but they did not stop Joey from eating the food. The boy sat down at one of the tables with his parents and dug in with gusto.

While the family was eating, Jake curiously examined the spear and saw that it appeared to be a shovel handle with a 6 inch spear blade and cross guard pinned in place of the shovel head. The entire attachment was about 18 inches long and it was obviously wrought by hand, because Jake could clearly see hammer marks on it. Whoever made it was obviously a talented metal worker. The leaf shaped spear head was razor sharp and it, along with the cross guard were sturdy and well made.

Jake was thinking that there was probably a booming market for medieval weapons now that modern society had apparently collapsed. Jake just shook his head and wondered at how many people in this society had been apathetic about personal defense, especially firearms and basic marksmanship. Not to mention just keeping a few weeks supply of food on hand for the proverbial rainy day. Too many Americans thought the party would never end and the Government would always be there protect them, or bail them out of hard times. Well, the current situation put lie to that statement. As far as Jake knew, the U.S. Government ceased to exist over two years ago and it looked like it wasn't coming back anytime soon.

Jake felt fortunate in growing up in a home where shooting along with being prepared for any eventuality, was a way of life. He attributed it to his Scots Irish Hillbilly ancestry. Jake came from a long line of men and women that up until the latter half of the 20th century, lived on the ragged edge of poverty, and quite often ran afoul of the law or feuded with others of their ilk. Jake's forbearers were pragmatic people who led hard lives and figured every day was a "rainy day" and you better damn well be prepared for it. Jake figured that they had passed those genes on to him because he was definitely pragmatic about his current situation.

Here he was 600 miles, as the crow flies, from his home in southwestern Ohio. On foot, carrying a dead man's 50 year old rifle, wearing other dead men's clothes, with less than three days of food left and to top it off, winter was coming on. And to top it all off, he was now the guardian of a family of five and he had just agreed to "escort" them, for 15 miles, in the direction opposite of where he needed to go. To a place that might be a trap that he very possibly wouldn't walk away from. Jake said to himself "I must be crazy!"

Crazy or not, he needed food and some warmer clothing, or he probably wouldn't make it back to Ohio. Also, he needed information about the route he planned on taking home and any news that he could get about disease outbreaks, radiation and any potential enemies he might encounter. No, he guessed going to Crossroads was probably his best choice from a number of bad ones, if he wanted to get back home.

As Jake finished ruminating over all of this, Joey came back, picked up the spear and said "Thanks mister, you can go eat now." Jake smiled at the boy and walked over to the fireplace to get some beans and not so mysterious meat.

As Jake walked up, Katy came over and offered him an empty bowl and said with a smile, "Go ahead Jake, help yourself, what's left is yours."

Jake took the bowl, thanked Katy and spooned the remaining beans from the pot next to the fireplace, picked up the skillet and dumped the dog meat on top of the beans. It was a pretty fair portion, but not any larger than what the others had. Jake went to one of the tables, sat down and dug in. For dog and beans it was pretty good. Katy could obviously cook.

As Jake finished eating, the family placed all of the cooking and eating utensils on top of the load in the cart and started looking around the area to make sure they didn't forget anything. Jake also placed his bowl in the cart, wiped off the spoon on his shemagh and returned it to his pack.

Jake dug into the pack and pulled out a large plastic freezer bag and said "Folks, I'd like to contribute the desert." He then gave each family member two single serve packets of grape jelly (Jake had acquired a supply of jelly, honey and catsup packs from the ruins of a fast food chicken place). The kids got very excited, tore open the packs and started sucking the jelly from them. Junie spoke for the first time in front of

Jake and said “Mommy, this is good!” Charlie and Katy both seemed to enjoy their jelly and thanked Jake profusely for the treat, for their kids.

At this point Charlie said “Jake, we are ready to leave, whenever you are. We do need to stop at the spring and get water, if that’s alright with you?”

“Yeah, no problem, I need water too.” Jake said, as he shouldered his pack and prepared to leave.

The Jenkins family then prepared to move out. Charlie and Katie went to the front of the cart and placed homemade straps attached to ropes, connected to the cart, over their shoulders. Charlie was again carrying the shotgun and Katy had the spear. Little Junie was sitting on top of the load and Joey and Sarah were at the push bar, at the rear of the cart. Charlie looked at Jake, as if to ask if it was alright to go. Jake told him “Go ahead, lead out, I’ll follow along and keep an eye out for trouble.”

Charlie said to his family “O.K. lets go” and they started moving the cart out of the overlook, on to the road headed southeast. Jake saw that they had the cart thing down to a science. The Jenkins’ moved the cart along almost effortlessly without any apparent strain on those pushing or pulling. Even though the cart was probably pushing its weight limit.

As they got to “Crazy Woman Spring” The cart was stopped and the lunch dishes were removed by Katy and taken to the spring. Katy had a yellow bar of soap that she used to wash the pot, skillet, utensils and bowls. The two girls produced a couple of dingy towels and dried everything and placed them back into the cart. Charlie then filled what in another life was a 5 gallon plastic gas can from the cistern and told Jake they were ready when he was.

Jake told him “You all go ahead; I’ll catch up in a few minutes.” Charlie looked at Jake uncertainly, shrugged his shoulders, got back in the cart harness and the family started moving southeast, down the road.

Jake dropped his pack and opened the top flap. He got out his water filter and an empty two liter hikers bottle. The two liter bottle and his two G.I. one quart canteens constituted his water storage capability. Jake dumped all three containers and using the filter pump, refilled all three from the spring. He returned the two liter bottle to his pack and the two canteens to his LBE. As he was doing this chore, the Jenkins’ family was steadily moving southeast down the road.

Jake put on his alic pack and slung the FR-8 across his chest by the three point sling. He took one more look around the area and moved out after the Jenkins family. Jake thought to himself that for better or worse, he would find out what this detour to Crossroads would bring. He had a mother, father, an estranged ex-wife and a six year old son that probably needed him back in Ohio. As he increased his pace to catch up with the Jenkins family, he said to himself, “Well Ranger, time to suck it up and drive on. Here goes nothin...”

Chapter 2 Sheep, Wolves and Sheepdogs

Francis Xavier Middleton III hated the name he was given at birth. He much preferred the name he had given himself; The Hawk. The Hawk was a much more fitting name for the leader of the most ruthless and successful band of outlaws, in an area that included parts of four states.

And Francis looked hawkish; He was tall, thin and almost birdlike in appearance, with a prominent beak of a nose and a quick nervous manner. He was also absolutely ruthless and had no empathy for other people. Francis Xavier Middleton III, would have been classified as a sociopath, psychopath or as suffering from Antisocial Behavior Disorder, depending on who was doing the diagnosing.

The Hawk new his normal appearance was not very impressive, but he found ways to enhance it that were sinister and frightening to most of his victims. His shoulder length hair was dyed jet black and he sported black eyeliner, black fingernail polish and black clothing. To include the trademark of his band of “Reavers” as he had christened them, the black trench coat. The trench coats were the Hawk’s tribute to a couple of his Heros. The two perpetrators of the infamous Columbine school shootings.

The Hawk currently had 18 young men (shooters) and 7 young women (who he referred to as camp followers) as part of his merry band. The numbers varied due to operational casualties and the Hawk having to make an example every once and a while. But he had no problem in recruiting new shooters, especially as the Reavers’ notoriety grew.

The Hawk was 21 years old and from an upper middleclass family in what used to be St. Louis, Missouri. In high school, he was known as a nerd or a video game geek, and was picked on unmercifully by larger, stronger and more socially accepted males. He was awkward at best and lousy at sports. His father, Francis II, a prominent insurance executive and former college baseball letterman, had tried various things to bring Francis III out of his “geekiness.” Nothing seemed to work until they happened upon competitive pistol shooting. Due to his excellent eyesight and his video game enhanced hand and eye coordination, Francis III was fast and accurate. And for the first time in his life he was good at something that he felt really mattered in the world of men. As a junior in High School, Francis III, started dominating in the Jr. Competitions in his area and gained some local fame.

What Francis II didn’t realize was that he was providing his son with the tools and skills that would be turned on him and his wife one day. Francis III was amoral and hated his parents more than anyone. Even more than the cretins that picked on him in school. That is why when St. Louis exploded into riots and total anarchy; he brutally murdered his mom and dad, execution style in their bed. He then gathered five like minded friends (the nucleus of the Reavers) and started to rampage.

Their first stop was three streets over where the owner of a gun shop and good friend of Francis II lived. As things started to collapse, the shop owner had asked Francis II & III, to help him move his inventory of firearms and ammunition to his home, which they did. That was the point where Francis III, soon to become the self named Hawk, decided to start down the path of a ruthless killer.

On the night that the Hawk killed his parents, St. Louis was in the third day of an outbreak of cholera that

was rapidly spreading throughout the inner city to the suburbs. There had already been rioting over food, water and electricity, but to this point, what was left of the city government and remnants of the National Guard had contained things. The Hawk picked this night to implement his plans. He killed his mom and dad with his longslide Glock 34, donned his black trench coat, took the family escalade and rounded up his friends. Who had also murdered the remnants of their families according to the Hawk's plan. They went to the gun dealer's home, where the Hawk was able to gain entry through a ruse. The dealer and his family were murdered and the Reavers were off and running, with quite a bit of firepower.

Now two years later, the Hawk was standing in the yard of a farm in western Kentucky, while the Reavers were systematically stripping the farm of anything useful. They had attacked the place at around 3:00am and had taken it, with only one minor casualty. The farmer had fired a load of #4 buckshot at two Reavers assaulting up the house stairs. The body armor of the two Reavers had saved them, but one, known as "Slant Eye," had a superficial pellet wound in the upper left arm. The farmer was rewarded for his efforts with two 7.62X39 rounds in the abdomen, from a third Reaver's AK 47. All in all, they had gotten off pretty cheaply. On these raids, Hawk could usually count on losing one or two Reavers. These farmers usually put up a fight, however ineffective.

The farmer, bleeding but conscious, was lying at the Hawk's feet, curled into a fetal position from the pain and cramping of the abdominal wounds. The farmer's wife, pretty 14 year old daughter and 9 year old son were kneeling nearby, with their hands tied behind their backs. They were all sobbing and were obviously terrified.

The Hawk loved these moments. He got an almost sexual thrill from having the power of life and death over these people; he contemptuously referred to as sheep. In between spasms of pain, the farmer was begging the Hawk for the lives of his family.

"Please, let my wife and kids go. You've taken everything and we ain't no threat to you." The farmer gasped.

The Hawk smiled down at the man as he drew the Glock 34 from his thigh holster and said. "Don't worry about your family. I'll take care of them for you."

The Hawk fired one round into the left side of the farmer's head. Blood gouted into the air as the farmer's body thrashed in spasm and expired. The farmer's family started to scream and wail as they watched him die.

The Hawk looked at the farmer's wife and saw a washed out tired looking woman in her late 30's. He looked over his shoulder at his second in command and said. "Tate, give the woman to the boys, they deserve some fun before we head out."

Tate asked "What about the girl?"

"I'm saving her for Jarrett, she's pretty enough and should bring a good price. Have somebody put her in one of the trucks under guard, but nobody touches her unless I say so."

Tate acknowledged the Hawk's command and directed two Reavers to take the girl to one of the 2 and a half

ton diesel trucks, now coming up the farm drive to load the plunder. Two grinning Reavers dragged the girl away as she cried out for her mother and father. Tate then went over to the wife and grabbed her by the hair and started dragging her back to the house as she screamed for her children. The young boy sobbed as the last two surviving members of his family were taken away.

The Hawk looked at the young boy, smiled and shot him once in the forehead. As the child fell dead, the Hawk could hear the screams of the mother coming from the house, as his Reavers began the torture and gang rape that would shortly kill her.

The Hawk thought to himself as he moved back toward the cargo trucks and his Suburban; all in all a profitable raid. They had taken a lot of food, some livestock, a few guns, some ammunition and the pretty young blond haired girl they could probably sell at the Crossroads.

“Yeah.” The Hawk thought, “A very profitable night’s work!”

Three hours later, after the Reavers were long gone, Jess Markham, a barrel chested, 6 foot , 43 year old, with salt and pepper beard and close cropped graying brown hair, placed his PTR 91 (U.S. made version of the HK 91, 7.62x51 main battle rifle) on safe and knelt next to the bodies of the farmer and his son. Jess said to the dead man, “Jesus Dave, I’m sorry man. We tried to get here as fast as we could.”

Jess looked around as the rest of the improvised reaction force (mostly farmers and small town men), searched through the looted farm for survivors. Jess knew that they wouldn’t find anybody, alive at least.

This was the fourth farm in a fifty mile radius to be raided in the past 6 months. The raids were usually five to six weeks apart and the method of operation was always the same. The raiders struck very early in the morning hours, always at an outlying farm. They usually killed everyone, but it was suspected that they were carrying off some women and young girls, due to the bodies of some family members not being found. God alone knew what kind of hell those women and young girls were suffering.

The Raiders almost never burned any buildings, so there would be no tell tale beacons leading to the raid. They could strip a farm of anything useful within just a few hours and were usually long gone before any reaction force could arrive to engage them. The raiders took any casualties with them and other than expended shell casings and boot or tire tracks, there was never any clear cut evidence as to who was doing it. The only reason that Jess and the reaction force had responded this quickly was due to a neighbor, 3 miles down the road who had seen the Raider’s trucks and heard gunfire around 3:00am. The neighbor got on a horse and rode 6 miles into the small town of Johnsville, to spread the alarm.

Jess, a local farmer/survivalist and Army 82nd Airborne veteran of Panama and the Gulf War, was in town for his turn guarding the grain elevator and fuel supply. When the neighbor rode in spreading the alarm, Jess helped put together the reaction force and led it to the farm.

Jess had a very strong suspicion of someone who might know something about these raids. Jarrett; The man that owned the big truck stop/trading post over in Missouri. Jarrett had his fingers in a lot of pies and to Jess, just didn’t seem to be on the up and up. Jess had done some trading with Jarrett and always felt somehow dirty after dealing with him. Jess figured that if he was going to be able to find anything out that would help

preempt these raids, Jarrett's Crossroads would be the place. He would help bury Dave and his son first, but tomorrow he would see about heading out toward Crossroads to see what he could see.

As Jess stood up, one of the other men, a Johnsville resident came out on the front porch, from inside the house and threw up over the porch rail. Jess walked over to the man and said "Frank, what's the matter, what did you find?"

Frank looked up at Jess and with tears in his eyes said "Oh God Jess, we found Molly in the kitchen dead. They nailed her hands and feet to the floor and they raped her and then they cut her belly open and pulled out her lights! Jesus help me Jess, who would do something like that?"

"Frank, there's all kinds of evil people in this world. What we've got to do now is make sure that this don't happen to any of the rest of us."

"How?" asked Frank.

Jess said "I don't know yet Frank, but I figure we got about a month and a half before they raid again. I aim to find out who's doing this, and some way to stop them."

Frank nodded his head and looked down at his boots and sobbed. Jess walked into the house to see about Molly and get the burial detail started. He would go to Crossroads and try to recon this thing out. He had to, if he wanted to protect his family and neighbor's from these rabid wolves...

40 odd miles west, in the foothills of Missouri, Jake and the Jenkins' family were finishing a breakfast of dog meat and beans and preparing to make the final 2 miles of their journey to Crossroads. Looking southeast, Jake could already see the four big wind turbine generators at Crossroads down toward the end of the valley. Charlie told him that on a clear day, you could see them from 7 or 8 miles away.

Jake shivered as he was strapping his bedroll to the alicepack. The last four or five days had been unseasonably warm, in the high 50's, but this morning was so chilly, he could see his breath. Jake pulled the top of his Mossy Oak Gore-Tex rain suit from his pack and put it on. The rain suit along with his G.I. polypropylene long underwear, was the extent of his cold weather gear and he definitely needed to acquire more.

Charlie and Katy had the kids and garden cart ready to go and they moved out on to the road and headed for Crossroads. Jake put on his pack, picked up his rifle and headed out with them.

The trip had been uneventful, but had taken longer than Jake thought it should have. Even though the Jenkins' were experienced at moving the cart it had still taken almost a day and a half to go thirteen miles. A lot of the delay had to do with road grade and frequent rest stops for the kids. But it did give Jake time to get to know the Jenkins' story.

The Jenkins family was from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where Charlie was a computer technician for a local manufacturing company and Katy ran a second hand store. It seemed that for the first 10 months after

the initial terrorist nuclear attacks on Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, New York and Washington D.C., things stayed fairly normal in Cape Girardeau.

The city government along with a company of the Missouri National Guard had kept most of the infrastructure in place. Then about 10 months into the collapse, someone blew up a section of the flood wall that protected the town from the Mississippi River and most of it ended up under 6 feet of water. A lot of people died, but the Jenkins' lived far enough inland, and had enough advanced warning to get away with what they could carry. A National Guard sergeant directed them to the then FEMA camp at the Crossroads. It was 39 miles and it took them four days to get there, but they made it with the family intact.

By the time the Jenkins family got there, over 1200 hungry people inhabited the camp and the FEMA people were losing control. And Jarrett wasn't helping matters. It was suspected that Jarrett had fomented the riot where the 5 FEMA administrators remaining, were lynched by the camp residents. This was two weeks after the Jenkins family arrived. Jarrett and his men waited for the lynchings to take place, then violently put down the riot and established their authority over the camp.

It had been over a year since the riot and things had settled into some semblance of normalcy. Most of the residents of what used to be the refugee camp worked at some useful trade, hired out to the local farmers or scavenged like the Jenkins family did. There were now less than 300 of the original residents left in the camp.

The Jenkins' made a living pushing their garden cart far and wide, going through abandoned and presumably picked clean homes, businesses and towns, looking for items they could sell or trade at Crossroads. That, along with Katy's ability to recognize local plants and herbs, to be utilized as medicines or to eat, had allowed the family to survive, if barely. They had been on the return leg of a trip to Katy's aunt Martha's, to see if she was alive, which proved not to be the case, when Jake happened to rescue them.

For Jake's part, against his better judgment, he opened up, a little, to the Jenkins'. He told them his full name, Jacob Odell Craft and that he was from outside of Camden, Ohio. He told them that he had once been in the Army and had been working in Little Rock, Arkansas, when the nuclear attacks occurred, and was now trying to get back home. He told them about his divorce and his 6 year old son, Emmett and some things about growing up in rural Ohio.

What he didn't tell them was that former Staff Sergeant Jake Craft, of the 75th Ranger Regiment, with three combat tours in the Middle East, had been working as a contract soldier back in the Middle East, for a company called Blackthorn. He did this for several years before the attacks. During the attacks, he happened to be home between jobs, when he had been contracted to ride shotgun on emergency rail shipments of food and fuel for FEMA, responding around the country to where they were most needed.

On the last such trip, the train had been hijacked in Little Rock, Arkansas, by the Arkansas National Guard, on the orders of the Governor. This was about the time that what was left of the U.S. Government finally collapsed and the state governors that were left, stepped into the void. The security contingent to include Jake, were disarmed and unceremoniously thrown in jail. Jake and his coworkers had been rotting in the Little Rock jail, on short rations, for about three weeks when a Major from the National Guard came to visit them.

The Major, knowing that they were all very experienced prior military service, gave them a choice. Enlist for three years in the Arkansas Army National Guard, or rot indefinitely in Jail. The Major reminded them that the Governor had suspended Habeas Corpus and the bill of rights under the Arkansas Disaster Contingency Act. In other words, they had no rights. He told them that he needed infantrymen and he could guarantee them three hots and a cot and maybe a little pay, if they signed on the dotted line. Jake gave it some thought (for about 15 seconds), signed on the dotted line and began his new career as a 31 year old Infantry Private, in what was to become the Arkansas Governor's private Army.

Jake had spent the next 18 months putting down riots, burying bodies, going out on conscription parties and fighting the odd group that disagreed with the Governor's way of doing things. Jake hated what he was forced to do and came to loath the Governor and his minions, for forcing him do it. He had been looking for a way to desert, or "scamper" as the British say, from almost the beginning.

Jake eventually attained the rank of corporal (which he had tried to decline) and while leading a machinegun team on a company sized operation, he found the opportunity to scamper. This ill fated operation was against a small town in rebellion against the Governor's draconian policies. Prior to reaching the jump off point for the attack, their truck convoy was caught in a text book ambush, by the town's ad hoc militia. Those guys really knew their business and handed the reinforced rifle company it's ***.

Jake's company was decimated and routed. Jake's gun team was killed outright and he had the M-60 machinegun literally shot out of his hands, as he was trying to provide covering fire for the routed company. Jake was able to escape and evade, luckily with his pack and his LBE, but was unable to link back up with the remnants of the company.

When Jake finally decided to desert and head for Ohio, he found himself 40 odd miles north of Littlerock, in hill country, with nothing to eat and only a .38 revolver (he had purchased from a crooked supply sergeant, for an exorbitant price) and less than 30 rounds of ammunition for protection. Jake foraged from abandoned houses and businesses, occasionally running into feral dogs or the odd, very unfriendly, Arkansas hillbilly. After several weeks and nearly starving to death, Jake got lucky.

He was near one of Arkansas' many man made mountain lakes, when he came across a small subdivision of about 15 houses which appeared to be abandoned, but untouched by looters. In other words, it hadn't been burned. Jake decided to recon the place and learned that quite a firefight had taken place there. From the condition of the bodies that Jake located, in and around the houses, it appeared that several of the homeowners had gotten the looters in a cross fire and killed most of them before being over ran.

Jake found one such homeowner, a former Marine from some of the memorabilia in his house, that put up a hell of a fight. Jake found his body in the living room of the house surrounded by expended .308 brass and empty M-14 magazines, although the rifle was nowhere to be found. There were 9 dead looters within the marine's field of fire. Jake only found one other body of what appeared to be a homeowner, across the street from the marine's house, on the second floor lying in a pile of expended 12 gauge shotgun shells. This man appeared to have been wounded in the chest and then shot in the back of the head as he lay on the floor.

Jake found 4 more dead bodies, from their positions outside the houses and from their rusted weapons; he decided they must have been looters. All of this led Jake to conclude that everyone else had evacuated early on in the crisis and those two guys had stayed to guard the subdivision.

They obviously did a pretty good job. Jake found that most of the houses had been gone through but very little had been taken. He concluded that there were not enough looters left to carry everything of value away. Jake found a small amount of canned and packaged foods, clothing he could use and a place to stay out of the weather for a few days. He set up residence in the steel Quonset hut like workshop, behind the marine's house.

Jake decided to pay for what he would use by burying the marine and his neighbor across the street. He left the already decomposed bodies of the looters (Jake figured that the raid occurred at least a year ago) where they had fallen. Jake took the time to go through the two men's pockets to check their wallets and identify them. He did that and took half a day to dig them proper graves under the sign at the entrance of the subdivision. Jake made two crosses from 2 by 4's and etched the men's names and causes of death on the cross pieces, then said the Lord's prayer over the graves.

As Jake was setting up in the marine's workshop, he found the shop had a small woodstove with a stack of well seasoned firewood outside, along the back wall. Best of all, there was a well with a hand pump in the yard of the house next door and the water was fresh and clear.

Jake searched all of the houses and took all of the food (about a two week supply of things that were still edible) and some clothing that fit him, to the shop. He then searched the shop and found some things that got him really excited. He found that the man had stored some old clothes and household items in cardboard MRE and Mountain House freeze dried food boxes. He had not found any MRE's or Mountain House food. He also found a couple of 4 foot sections of 6 inch pvc pipe, with end caps and a pvc cutter under a work bench.

Jake was betting on the fact that the marine had a cache somewhere, hopefully close by. Jake knew about such things because his dad, a retired police captain and Vietnam veteran, was a survivalist. Jake's dad had several caches around their property back in Camden, containing just about everything needed to survive any disaster.

It took Jake two days of hard work to find the marine's cache. Jake did this by taking a 4 foot section of concrete reinforcing bar, found in the shop and sharpened it at one end. He then systematically went around the marine's yard, hammering it 12 inches deep every 4-6 inches. Jake did this in the front, back and side yards of the house to no avail. He finally found the cache under the wood pile.

Jake moved the wood from the piece of half inch plywood it was lying on, as it was the only place he hadn't checked. He then moved the piece of plywood and started probing the ground. Within a few minutes, he located the cache and dug it up. The cache consisted of 4, 4 foot sections of 6 inch pvc pipe, sealed with end caps on both ends. What Jake found in those pipes when he cut them open, would enable him to embark on his trip home.

Jake found the FR-8 rifle with 300 rounds of Australian ammo in bandoleers, a cleaning kit, sight tool and sling. In the same tube, he found a blue steel, Ruger Blackhawk, .357 magnum, single action revolver, 5 1/2 inch barrel, with the extra 9mm cylinder and 100 rounds of magnum ammunition. There was also a leather cartridge belt and holster for the Ruger. The second tube was crammed full of Mountain House individual meals, MRE's and a three months supply of multiple vitamins. The third tube contained a three day

frameless pack, two surplus wool blankets a G.I. camo poncho, some good outdoor clothing and a good pair of boots (all too small for Jake, with the exception of three pairs of wool backpackers socks), water bottles, a good wrist compass, Road Atlas, small binoculars, a Blast Match and the backpackers water filter, with an extra filter cartridge. There was also a small solar battery charger, 8 rechargeable D cell batteries and a two cell Maglite flashlight.

The fourth tube contained mostly first aid supplies and one very valuable item; a carton of Marlboro cigarettes (10 packs), sealed in a vacuum bag. Jake didn't smoke, but he had seen the exorbitant prices people were paying for tobacco in Little Rock and figured the smokes were probably more valuable than the Ruger pistol and ammunition. Jake felt as if he had hit the lottery.

Jake figured that this was the marine's second line, "in case of emergency break glass," cache. From the small size of it, Jake also figured that this guy probably had a retreat somewhere, probably not too far away from the subdivision, maybe deeper in the mountains, but he could find no clues as to its location.

Jake had also found a large gun safe in the marine's basement and although he did locate the combination to the safe (taped under the desk in the study/office), he was unable to open the safe. This was because, Jake assumed, one of the looters in frustration, had sheared the electronic combination device from the door of the safe and smashed it. Jake tried to put it back together, but it was beyond repair.

Jake spent about a week resting, eating, getting his strength back and planning his trip home. He figured he had about 600 miles to go and he could cover somewhere between 15 and 20 miles a day. That meant, all things being equal, he should be able to walk home in a little over 2 months. But Jake knew that due to variables in terrain, weather, violent people, feral dogs and his limited food supply, it would probably take a lot longer than that to get home.

He knew that he could do it physically. Jake was in pretty good shape, although about 30 pounds lighter than when things fell apart. Jake was a muscular 200 pounds on a 6 foot 1 inch frame, when the nukes hit. He figured that now, a little over 2 years later, he was a very lean 170 pounds or so. Jake was also a long serving light infantryman. He had put a lot of miles on "LPC's" (Leather Personnel Carriers, aka boots), and could make good time road marching with a heavy pack.

And luckily for Jake he had been issued a new pair of "LPC's", in the form of the old style black, lug sole combat boots, a little over a month before the ill fated operation that gave him the opportunity to desert. He had been wearing the rough out, brown Danner's, he had been arrested in, but they had finally worn out and he had been issued the combat boots out of the AARNG's dwindling stocks. The old style combat boots were nearly waterproof and virtually indestructible and lucky for Jake, broken in. They should last him all the way home.

So, a week after finding the cache, Jake set out for Ohio carrying a 70 plus pound pack and a dead man's spare rifle. Most of that 70 plus pounds, was in water, food and a lot of ammunition. Jake not only had the 250 rounds of the Australian ammo for the rifle (he had zeroed and fired 50 practice rounds through the FR-8) and the pistol ammo, he also had 200 rounds of M80 (7.62x51 NATO) linked ball, he had in his pack when he deserted. Ammunition was very valuable these days and could be used for barter. And besides, it could also be fired in the FR-8, being of the same caliber. Jake was carrying about triple the basic ammunition load for an infantryman; he hoped he wouldn't need it, for other than trade.

Jake spent the next 2 weeks moving from Arkansas into Missouri over side roads and the occasional hiking trail. He didn't travel as fast as he thought he would. He tried to avoid freeways, figuring they would be routes more likely to be ambushed. Jake also avoided areas and towns that appeared to be inhabited. Crossing and going around these obstacles was taking time. He had successfully avoided any human contact, ambushes and violent encounters, other than some feral dogs, until he ran across the Jenkins family.

Jake's ruminations had carried him through the last couple of miles, when the features of the Crossroads became more detailed as they approached it. As they crested the last rise and entered the overpass, crossing the freeway, Crossroads spread out before Jake.

What he saw was the ubiquitous late 1990's freeway truck stop on steroids, that had grown beyond its original boundaries. The place was probably 50 to 60 acres and was surrounded by a twenty foot grass covered earthen berm, fronted by a 6 foot ditch and timber gated at 3 points that Jake could see. The gates corresponded to the original entrances of the truck stop. The four huge wind generators were located adjacent to several prefabricated steel buildings near the eastern edge of the berm and Jake also saw a large array of solar panels, covering about an acre, just south of the steel buildings.

The main building, to include the fuel pumps, truck wash and mechanics bays, were near the center of the complex and were flanked by what looked like a large motel on the north side and what Jake thought was a large night club to the south. Interspersed throughout what was originally a large expanse of concrete semi trailer parking area, was a collection of semi trailers, wooden storage sheds, tents and booths. There appeared to be several hundred people conducting commerce and milling around that area. To Jake, it almost looked like a county fair.

Jake asked Charlie if that was the Refugee camp. Charlie told him, "No, that's the market," and pointed to the southeast, down the access road about 200 yards from one of the Crossroads' gates. Jake saw a large ramshackle collection of tents, shacks, vehicles, people and a lot of smoke, spread out to the southeast down the access road. Whereas the Crossroads appeared well ordered and clean, the refugee camp was a study in haphazard and poverty.

As they crossed the overpass and approached the first gate, Jake noticed that the gate was manned by armed men. All four of them in a mixture of Army combat uniforms (ACU's) and civilian clothing. Three of them were carrying M 16A2 rifles and wearing Molle ballistic vests and Kevlar helmets. The fourth, who appeared to be in charge, was armed with a holstered pistol and was wearing no visible body armor. He was wearing a leather jacket, boots and jeans. Jake also saw armed men walking along a trench dug into the top of the berm and what appeared to be machinegun bunkers at each corner of the compound and flanking each gate. The bunkers did not appear to be manned, but Jake couldn't be sure.

As they walked past the gate, down the access road, Jake asked Charlie "What happens now?"

"Well, I figure we get this meat down to a guy named Ross, at the camp, and see what he'll give us for it. Then we can go to our place and settle up." Answered Charlie

Jake thought about it for a moment and said "Look Charlie, you go ahead and see what you can get for the meat. I want to check out that market. You just tell me where your place is and I'll be along a little later."

Charlie, looking somewhat confused said “Fine Jake, our place is across from the blacksmith’s shop, near the center of the camp. If you get lost, just ask anyone where Charlie and Katy Jenkins live and they will be able to direct you.

Jake thanked Charlie and Katy and said goodbye to the 3 kids. He gave each of them a jelly packet before they separated. That made the kids happy and put a smile on Jake’s face as he turned toward the nearest gate.

As Jake approached the gate, he got a better look at the four guys manning the gate, all in K-pots, with the exception of the honcho in the leather jacket. The three flanking the open gate were in full Molle gear and carrying M16’s. The guy standing near the center of the opening and briefly speaking to people or checking out vehicles, in some cases horse and mule drawn improvised wagons, was not wearing a molle vest and had an alic pistol belt around his waist with a UM-84 holster and a magazine pouch attached to it. As Jake approached the guy, he noticed a set of buck sergeant stripes pinned to the collar points of his leather jacket.

“Good morning sergeant.” Said Jake

The sergeant eyed Jake and said, “Morning - state your business.”

Jake grinned at the guy and said, “I might want to do some trading, is there a problem?”

“No, just make sure your rifle is on safe and sling it. And be advised, if you cause any trouble it’ll go hard on you. We usually hang thieves and trouble makers around here.” He looked Jake up and down pretty thoroughly, as he delivered the speech.

Jake grinned again and said, “I ain’t looking to cause any trouble. I just need a few things and I may be able to find them here, that’s all.”

The honcho grinned tightly at Jake and said with noticeable sarcasm in his voice, “Pass friend.”

Jake slung his rifle and passed through the gate, entering what in earlier times, just a couple of years ago, would be described as a huge swap meet or flea market (depending on what part of America you were in). Jake couldn’t believe how many people were milling around, haggling, or browsing the merchandise. A lot of Americans had died in the last 2 years and it was becoming strange to see large groups of people congregating.

The sales venues ran the gamut of everything from semi trailers, small sheds and booths, to people displaying their wares on blankets spread out on the concrete. Jake saw that everything imaginable was for sale; from now useless electronic equipment, to clothing, footwear, house wares, firearms, ammunition and even home brewed liquor and beer. He also saw several booths selling marijuana, raw tobacco, herbs and medicines (both modern and holistic).

What really surprised Jake, was the amount of food being offered. Food distribution had been tightly controlled in Arkansas and Jake had not seen this much food in one place, in more than two years. Most of what he could see was apparently dried or fresh farm produce; corn, grains, beans, vegetables, potatoes and

some things he didn't recognize. There was also a fair amount of fresh, smoked and jerked meat and even live stock for sale. If the Governor of Arkansas ever got wind of what was going on here, he would probably try to invade and annex this part of Missouri. The farms in the outlying areas seemed to be producing a lot of food.

Jake started looking for the things he needed and found most of it within a couple of hours. But, when he finally decided to try to trade for what he needed, he immediately ran into problems. It seems that his major items for trade were out of the reach of people who had things he wanted. The Ruger pistol and its accessories (handguns were at a premium), and the Marlboros were what he thought of as his main trade items and nobody could afford them. He was told several times, if he wanted to move them, he should try his luck at Jarrett's store.

Jake did have a fair amount of what was really the primary currency here, ammunition. Charlie had talked about pre 1965 silver U.S. coins and Jake saw people buying things with coins, but by far ammunition was the most common form of currency at the Crossroads. And it seems that there was a fairly complex system in use to value each type and caliber.

Jake had 428 rounds of 7.62 NATO (.308 caliber) and he learned that it was quite valuable. For example; he learned that five rounds of that caliber would buy a pound of jerky or 2 pounds of corn. Beans or rice were a little more expensive at 7 rounds per pound. He figured that he had between 200 and 228 rounds to play with, which would leave him enough ammo to feel safe on his trip home. He also had the 50 rounds of .357 magnum for the Ruger, but he wanted to save that in case he couldn't sell the pistol. He was short of .38 ammo, he only had 18 rounds left and hoped he could find some more.

Jake started trading the linked M-80 ball ammunition for what he thought he needed. He would agree on a price for the items and break the requisite number of rounds from the 100 round belts as payment.

He started looking for warmer clothing first and after looking at a lot of the stuff being offered, from the practical to the absolutely ridiculous. Jake found a guy at a booth that was selling a lot of foreign military surplus clothing. What Jake settled on was a Korean, or maybe Chinese (he couldn't tell), knock off of an olive drab green, M-65 field jacket (with liner), fortunately in his size. The jacket was a polyester cotton blend, very well constructed and combined with his rain suit and polypropylene long underwear, should do for cold weather gear. He also bought a brown wool watch cap, a heavy dark blue chamois work shirt and a pair of Swiss army gray wool winter pants. He tried to find some decent gloves, to no avail. His G.I. leather gloves with wool liners would have to suffice.

While wandering around the market, Jake was able to learn that it was Saturday (he had lost track of the days, of late) and the biggest market day of the week. The surplus vendor told him that there was some kind of activity everyday, but Saturday had turned into the day that vendors and customers from four states congregated at Crossroads.

Jake bought a bowl of alleged deer chili (he had to supply his own bowl) and half of a loaf of coarse wheat bread, for 6 rounds of ammo, at a booth near the western berm. Jake dumped his still heavy pack next to a light pole and sat down with his back against the pole. As he started eating his lunch, Jake looked at his battered Seiko and saw that it was only 1:30pm. He figured he had plenty of time to finish his business before it got dark and he should still have time to put this place a few miles behind him before making camp

for the night.

While he was eating, Jake started taking in the place and the people around him. What he again realized was that since the collapse, those that had survived the famine, disease and violence, had changed. These people were leaner (in a lot of cases gaunt), fitter and most of the men wore beards. Most of them also seemed to be more on edge and more aware of their surroundings (in condition yellow). In a lot of ways these Americans reminded him of the Afghani villagers he had known during his combat tours in Afghanistan. They appeared to be ready for whatever came at them, unlike most apathetic distracted Americans, from before things fell apart. And most of them were visibly armed, both men and women.

Jake saw people carrying everything from mostly sporting shotguns and deer rifles, to every kind of obsolete former Soviet and eastern block bolt action rifle (Mosin-Nagants and Mausers), to the ubiquitous SKS. He also saw quite a few AK 47's, AR-15's and even a few Main Battle Rifles, such as M1A's, FAL's and HK 91's. He also saw handguns in an almost bewildering variety, carried in every manner, from all manner of holsters to stuffed into belts.

He did have one thought that he found amusing; almost all of these folks looked like slightly unkempt homeless vagrants, from before the collapse. Not that they appeared overly dirty, but they were slightly unkempt and looked like they worked hard between their probably weekly baths, and most of those he saw were wearing well worn clothing and shoes.

These survivors, like Jake, had apparently adapted to a different reality since things changed. Jake couldn't help thinking about how many had died in the attacks and those that did not adapt, and died in the last 27 months. It was probably in the multiple millions, but he might never know the actual tally. Hell, he wasn't exactly sure of what had actually happened. All he knew for sure were that at least 5 major cities had been nuked and that started a domino effect with the infrastructure. Which apparently led to a total collapse of the overly complex American society.

It kind of made him melancholy to think about these things, which also led him to thinking about his family back home and the fact that they might all be dead. He tried to put it out of his mind, but it would always be there, until he got home.

In studying the compound, Jake realized that it was a lot bigger and there were more buildings than he originally thought. In addition to the truck stop proper and the pre-fabs near the wind generators, there were 10 or 12 steel warehouse buildings along the western and northern perimeters, between the parking lot and the berm. There was quite a bit of activity near some of these buildings. Men were moving pallets with forklifts in and around some of the buildings. Near the largest building on the Northern perimeter, there were 6 large storage tanks of some kind, with several large tanker trucks adjacent to them. Jake thought it looked like a fuel installation, but couldn't be sure. He could also hear what he thought were generators running and there was also quite a bit of activity at the mechanics bays, where a dozen men were working on vehicles.

As Jake finished his deer chili, he gathered up his mess gear and headed toward a water spigot he had seen near the edge of the parking lot, located over a drain. Several people were filling up water containers, so Jake waited his turn and cleaned out his camper's mess kit and washed his face and hands. After tasting the water and determining that it was ok, he topped off his one partially empty canteen. As Jake returned to

where he had left his gear (10 yards away), he saw a wild haired, emaciated, filthy bearded individual, in an equally filthy blue suit and carefully knotted tie, standing near his pack looking around furtively.

Jake eyed the character and said as he walked back, “Hey partner, don’t get any ideas, that’s my pack.”

The character in the suit, straightened to his full height, squared his shoulders and said, “Sir, I have no designs on your property, I am a U.S. Senator and would not sink to thievery!” The character, with his head held high, walked off into the center of the compound with as much dignity as he could muster, with his left shoe sole flapping. Which caused Jake to break into laughter.

One of the women that had been drawing water was walking by and said, “I see you met the honorable Mr. Carrington, of the great state of Illinois.”

“That was James Carrington?” Jake asked

“In the flesh and oh how the mighty have fallen.” chuckled the woman as she walked away.

Jake had another laugh and shook his head. James Carrington had been one of the most liberal and vocal left leaning members of the Senate. He was an unabashed Europhile, rabidly pro abortion, anti gun, anti Bill of Rights in general and openly contemptuous of any form of self determination by the people. He figured that he and his elitist friends could make better life decisions for the unwashed masses than they could for themselves. Jake also remembered his stance on the war on terror and his unending contempt for all things military. From seeing Carrington in his current state, Jake laughed and said to himself, “Maybe there is a God!”

Jake knelt down in front of his pack and took stock of where he was as far as trading for needed items. He had spent 57 rounds of 7.62 ammunition on the clothing and the little bit of food he had eaten for lunch. He had calculated that he would have enough to buy about three weeks worth of food, while lightening up his pack considerably. He did need to see what he could get for the Ruger and the cigarettes. A vendor that he tried to sell the Ruger too, told him about Jarrett and that he could find him at either the main truck stop building or at the “Crazy 8.” Which Jake learned was a strip club, bar, bordello, that he had thought of as a nightclub, just north of the truck stop proper. Jake got his gear together and headed out to find this Jarrett and see about doing business...

Chapter 3, Friends and Enemies

Big Bob Jarrett was a large man and a hard man. He was 6 foot 3 inches and 245 pounds of muscle going to fat; from the top of his balding gray head, to the silver tips of his custom made cowboy boots, Jarrett made a lasting impression. He made people think that he could look right through them and that they couldn't get anything past him. In most cases it was true. Jarrett had the knack of reading people and had the ruthlessness to act decisively on it. He could use his fists and he could use weapons, from knives to pistols and even the odd axe handle. Jarrett had employed them all effectively because of his natural propensity for violence.

Jarrett grew up on the bad side of Nashville and started out stealing cars as a teenager and selling them to the local chop shops. He graduated to hijacking semi trucks and strong-arming for loan sharks and bookies along with distributing pot and methamphetamine. And he was smart and cunning. In his entire criminal career, Jarrett had never spent more than a few days in jail. Where others did stupid things like becoming drug dependant, or just talked too much; Bob played things careful and thought things through. That was why he left Nashville in the early 90's, with several million dollars to start a new life where the 55 and 57 freeways met.

Jarrett had come to know a lot about truckers, from hanging around truck stops and stealing their loads, or selling them crystal meth and pot. He also got to know their other vices, which gave him the idea for Crossroads. Jarrett had already acquired the land as a speculative investment and on deciding to leave Nashville, came up with the idea for a full service truck stop where the two freeways came together. And he meant full service! Not only could a trucker get food, fuel and repair services. They could get other services from Jarrett; for instance a clean decent motel to rest in and two bars and a strip club to unwind in. They could also rent or buy X rated DVD's for the DVD players in their trucks. Jarrett also ran a discreet prostitution operation along with the limited selling of drugs. The word got out quick and Jarrett made his initial 7 figure investment back in less than 2 years. That's when the money really started rolling in.

He greased a few local palms and being outside any city limits in the county, could pretty much do what he wanted to do. Until he came to the notice of a local state senator, who decided that Jarrett's operation, albeit mostly legal, was his ticket to Washington. He tried everything he could to get Crossroads shut down. But due to its location and Jarrett's cash infusion to the local economy, was not able to hurt the operation, with one exception. The senator was able to get the local power company to shut off the power to Crossroads on moral grounds. This was due to the Chairman of the board of the power company being a devout Baptist.

Jarrett took this in stride and decided to produce his own electricity. He had seen a television show on alternative energy methods and subsequently hired a consultant. After spending a staggering amount of money, he had his own power system in the form of the wind generators, solar panels and two large marine diesel generators. This and the fact that he had good water and his own security force in place, allowed him

to survive the collapse and prosper even more. As the local cities and towns slipped into decline, Crossroads became the major trading hub in a four state area. He had even begun to produce fuel in the form of ethanol and bio-diesel, by moving the necessary machinery from a defunct refinery in Southern Illinois, to the Crossroads and hiring the refinery's Chief Engineer to run it.

Things had been going good up to this point, but there were variables in the equation. Jarrett found the need to expand his security force, because his current force was proving to be too small and its commander was not up to the task. He accomplished this initially by hiring one Sergeant First Class Randall Sweetley, formerly of the U.S. Army and his 33 infantrymen. Sweetley and his men, along with 2 Hummers, 3 Stryker APC's and 2 two and a half ton trucks, were providing security for the FEMA camp, when Jarrett approached Sweetley with the proposition to come on board.

Sweetley, correctly deducing that the FEMA operation was falling apart, defected prior to the riot and lynchings of the FEMA staff, and took over the Crossroads security operation. And he had done a good job in Jarrett's opinion.

He had smoothly integrated with the existing 15 man force by killing their commander; a failed, drunken ex-Memphis cop, that had outlasted his usefulness. Sweetley had then convinced Jarrett to build the berm around the truck stop and implement all of his security suggestions. Jarrett had done this and although expensive and requiring a lot of effort, he had enough sense to realize that Sweetley was on the right track.

Now Sweetley had convinced him they needed to embark on what he called "phase two." According to Sweetley, they needed to at least triple the size of the force, in order to start sending out patrols as force projection and to provide for adequate defense of the truck stop. Sweetley believed, and Jarrett agreed with him, that they needed to expand their area of control and demonstrate that they were a force to be reckoned with.

Sweetley, a large powerful black man, with 19 years in the Army and the bearing of a professional soldier, was a contradiction. Jarrett had initially expected Sweetley to turn his job offer down, due to his professional bearing, but what Jarrett didn't know at the time, was that he and Sweetley were cut from the same cloth. Sweetley, 38 years old and from the mean streets of Newark, New Jersey, had joined the Army one step ahead of a rival gangs hit contract. After killing one of the rival gang's members and feeling the need to put Newark behind him, he had joined up at 17 with the blessing, and the permission signature of his heroin addicted single mother. He never looked back.

Sweetley had prospered in the Army, because he was smart enough to play the game. He had also augmented his salary by loan sharking to other soldiers and occasionally misappropriating Government property, and selling it. But, like Jarrett he was careful and never got caught. He and Jarrett made a good team, both being amoral and totally ruthless. But, they both instinctively knew that at some point, either Sweetley would make his move to take over or Jarrett would feel threatened to the point of removing Sweetley; it was only a matter of time.

Sweetley had the loyalty of his troops and Jarrett had the loyalty of his private bodyguards, consisting of a well armed, tight knit group of his relatives from Eastern Tennessee. This force, consisting of 12 hard young men, was an assortment of Jarrett's nephews and cousins and they were fiercely loyal to Jarrett. One of them, young Benny Nyby, 22 years old and as crazy as they came, stood off the right front corner of Jarrett's desk, near the wall. Benny alternately gave Sweetley hard looks and fiddled with the MP5 submachine gun, hanging on his chest. "Yeah," Jarrett thought to himself, 'Benny's bugnuts, but he would die for me.' And that's all Jarrett could ask.

That was one of the reasons that he spent so much money on outfitting his bodyguards. MP5's, SWAT body armor, only the finest weapons and gear, and before the collapse, he had sent all of them through select executive protection seminars and shooting courses. This paid big dividends after the collapse, especially when the now deceased commander of the security force had started to fall apart. When that occurred and before Jarrett could hire Sweetley, some of his bodyguards had stepped in and bolstered the security force, facilitating Sweetley's smooth take over and absorption of the force, once he was hired.

On this overcast Saturday afternoon, Sweetley was meeting with Jarrett in his office that overlooked the main retail floor of the truck stop. They were drinking coffee and Jarrett was smoking his ubiquitous Marlboro, as they discussed Sweetley's ongoing recruiting operation and the fact that he was having a hard time finding suitable candidates.

They had reached a lull in the conversation and were sipping their coffee, when Sweetley happened to look out the two way mirror toward the main entrance to the retail area, just as Jake walked through the door. "Right there is what I'm looking for." Said Sweetley, pointing toward the main entrance below.

Jarrett asked, "What do you mean?" as he looked to where Sweetley was pointing.

"That's a soldier and I'd say a good one." Sweetley said as he pointed toward Jake who had walked up to the main counter and was speaking to the clerk.

Jarrett took a moment to study Jake and saw a tall, bearded man in a green army coat, carrying a rifle and a pack. He didn't look appreciably different from anyone else in this day and age. He looked just as ragged and unkempt as Jarrett's usual customers, other than his coat being obviously clean and new. Jarrett said, "I don't get it, how can you tell?"

"Well, his equipment is in good order and he carries himself like a soldier. He scoped out the room like he was looking for a likely ambush. That guy's a soldier and I know soldiers." Said Sweetley, by way of explanation.

At this point, Jarrett picked up the telephone from his desk and dialed a three digit number. After speaking

into the phone for a moment, he hung up and looked at Sweetley and said, “That was the clerk, your soldier boy has a gun to sell and I told the clerk to send him up. Maybe you can recruit him.”

Sweetley laughed and said, “Yeah, Maybe I can. I guess we’ll have to see.”

They heard someone coming up the stairs and saw Jake through the half glassed door, as he got to the landing and knocked. Jarrett said, “Come on in.” Jake walked through the door and asked, “You Jarrett?”

Jarrett said, “I’m Jarrett, what can I do for you?”

“Well, I’ve got some stuff I was told you might be interested in.”

“Could be, what have you got?” Asked Jarrett.

Jake leaned his rifle against the desk, removed the pack and sat it on a chair in front of Jarrett’s desk. He opened the top flap of the pack and removed a leather belt wrapped around a holstered pistol and 2 boxes of ammunition. He placed the items on the desk and scanned the room, as Jarrett removed the unloaded pistol from the holster and examined it.

Jake gave Benny the once over and Benny just sneered back, oozing aggression. Jake figured he bore watching. He then looked toward Sweetley, who smiled and nodded at Jake. Jake nodded back and decided that Sweetley was probably the more dangerous of the three in the room, just by his easy confidence and his bearing. Jake wasn’t sure, but he figured Sweetley had probably been a soldier, he had the look of a professional senior NCO, even in civilian clothes. Sweetley was wearing a black polar fleece jacket, brown cargo pants and heavy hiking boots, which did nothing to conceal his military bearing. He appeared to have a drop leg holster on his right leg, but Jake couldn’t see what was in the holster because of the way Sweetley was sitting. He figured that whatever it was, Sweetley was probably proficient with it.

Jake then examined Jarrett sitting behind the ornate oak desk, dry firing and sighting the Ruger at inanimate objects around the room; In Jake’s mind, what he saw in Jarrett was the typical sly southern operator. The kind of man that would take you for everything you had and you wouldn’t realize you’d been taken, until 15 minutes after Jarrett was gone. Jake also instinctively read the cruelty and ruthlessness in Jarrett’s eyes and the set of his mouth. He also realized that there was a striking family resemblance between Jarrett and the mutt with the MP5. The same close set eyes, the same cruel set to the mouth and the same bone structure. After taking all of this information in, Jake realized that he was possibly in a very dangerous situation that could turn ugly real quick. He decided that he needed to be loose and ready to act quickly, if need be.

Jarrett slid the Ruger back into the holster and pushed the belt and ammunition toward the front of the desk and said, “I’ll tell you what, I’ll give you 25 for the lot...” Jarrett paused then continued, “Say, I didn’t get your name?”

Jake, who had taken an immediate dislike to Jarrett and Benny, because they represented every bad stereotype of Jake's own heritage, looked Jarrett dead in the eye and said, "I didn't give it."

Jarrett looked annoyed and said, "Well mister, whatever your name is, like I said, I'll give you 25 for the lot."

Benny didn't like this smart boy's attitude at all. Benny had an instinctive dislike of Jake, because Jake exuded a quiet confidence that Benny himself did not possess and never would. Benny had spent his short life being adjudged as marginal and weak of character by most of the people he interacted with. This drove Benny to a sort of insane one-upmanship that manifested itself in dangerous ways and made him unpredictable at best.

Jake noticed Benny fidgeting out of the corner of his eye and addressed Jarrett, "The names Jake and you said 25....25 what?"

"\$25.00 in face value silver coin." Said Jarrett

"Jake gave a snort of a laugh and said, "You're kidding, right?"

Jarrett again looking annoyed said nothing.

Benny was outraged. Nobody talked to Big Bob Jarrett this way and he felt his anger take hold. Benny said, "Hey, smart boy, watch your mouth. Show respect for your betters!"

Jarrett looked pointedly at Benny and said, "I'll handle this Benny."

Jake couldn't resist and said sneeringly to Benny, "Yeah Benny, you better let your boss handle this. You wouldn't want to get in over your head now, would ya?" Jake then looked back at Jarrett.

Benny had no will to resist what happened next; a white hot rage welled up in him and he took a step toward Jake as he snapped the safety off on the MP5. An inarticulate snarl welled up out of his throat as he started to swing the MP5 upward to kill Jake

Jake, seeing Benny's agitation and movement from the corner of his eye, acted when he heard the safety click off on the MP5. Jake turned into Benny and snap kicked him hard in the groin, simultaneously deflecting the muzzle of the sub machinegun away from him with his right hand. Benny let out a high pitched scream and started to collapse; Jake stepped in and struck him square in the middle of the face with a hard, short left jab, breaking his nose, which propelled Benny straight down to the floor on his stomach. Jake spun toward Jarrett and Sweetley, and drew his revolver covering them both, as he knee dropped on to

Benny's back. Jake started disarming the whimpering Benny with his left hand as he covered Jarrett and Sweetley with the .38 in his right. The MP5, a Sig Sauer pistol, a snub nosed .38 and a knife were all tossed toward the door by Jake, safely out of anyone's reach.

Jarrett was stunned. He had never seen anyone move so fast in his life. One moment the guy was baiting Benny and in the next had totally eliminated him as a threat. Not to mention getting the drop on both him and Sweetley. Jarrett glanced toward Sweetley and was a little surprised to see him sitting on the sofa, with his arms crossed, grinning from ear to ear.

Sweetley was impressed and his evaluation of Jake was confirmed. Jake's combat reflexes were off the scale and Sweetley knew that Jake was probably a former elite soldier, with a lot of ground combat time. Reacting the way Jake did to Benny's aggression was a skill that was developed in hard places, that usually generated a whole lot of body bags and survival was more a matter of skill than luck. Yeah, Sweetley thought, this guys a keeper. Sweetley figured that now was the time to defuse the situation and salvage what he could. Knowing Jarrett, he wasn't going to want to put up with Jake's effrontery. Sweetley would have to sell him on the idea, or shoot it out with Jake. And Sweetley didn't like the odds on the outcome of that gunfight.

Sweetley locked eyes with Jake and said, "Looks like you've gotten yourself into a hard place Jake."

The barrel of the .38 locked on to Sweetley and Jake said, "I've been in hard places before mister, they hold no mystery for me."

Sweetley said with a chuckle, "I bet they don't; what were you...Seal, Recon, SF (Special Forces)?"

The barrel of the .38 didn't waver as Jake answered, "I was a Ranger, second of the seventy fifth, if it means anything."

Sweetley, gave a surprised grunt and said, "Yeah, it means something; I was with the 10th Mountain during operation Dragon. I was in 3rd battalion, 1st Brigade when we got ambushed in Kindahar pass. It was elements of the 2/75th that rolled up the ambush and held the Taliban in place until we could regroup. That was definitely a hard place; we lost some good people that day." As he finished speaking, he locked eyes again with Jake.

Jake said, as he stood and lowered the .38 slowly to his side, "I was there, on my second tour. I had a squad in the initial assault on the flank of the ambush position..." "I lost three good Rangers that day... Yeah, that was a hard place."

Sweetley glanced at Jarrett, who sat frozen with his hands folded on the desk, during their walk down memory lane. Sweetley figured this was the time to try to salvage the situation.

“Look Jake, I owe you one for Kindahar; so, would you take my guarantee of your safety and put the gun away?” “Maybe you and Jarrett could start over and do some trading, what do you say?”

Jake looked from Sweetley to Jarrett and back again, sighed and holstered the .38 and said, “Yeah, I’ll take your word for it. I don’t want anymore trouble, but I won’t be pushed either.”

“Fair enough.” Sweetley said and looked at Jarrett, who correctly interpreted the cue, sighed and said, “No hard feelings and let me apologize for Benny. He never did have any sense, or much self control. Shall we get back to haggling?”

During this exchange Benny lay on the floor alternately moaning and gagging up blood. It was apparent to everyone in the room that it would be more than a few minutes before Benny was his obnoxious self again.

Jake said, “Yeah, no hard feelings. You said \$25.00 in face value silver?”

“That’s right.” Said Jarrett, and they started negotiating a price they could both live with, over the next ten minutes. During this haggling, Jake introduced the carton of Marlboros to the deal and just for a moment, Jarrett’s careful façade slipped, and Jake knew he really wanted the smokes. Jake also threw in the 143 rounds of linked machinegun ammunition, which Sweetley told Jarrett he could use for his M240’s.

When it was all said and done, Jake closed the deal for \$75.00 in face value silver coin (roughly equivalent to \$750.00 in pre-collapse dollars), three days of room and board and the full amenities of the motel, and finally 100 rounds of .38 ammunition from Jarrett’s store downstairs. Jake was happy with the deal and so apparently was Jarrett.

At about the time they closed the deal and Sweetley was about to offer Jake a job, Benny finally sat up with a groan and looked at Jake with pure venom in his eyes. Jake looked him right back in the eyes and gave him a smirking grin. Benny started reaching for weapons that were no longer there and looked at Jarrett with confusion.

Jarrett said, “Benny, don’t worry about your guns. Right now, I want you to go see Doc Jacobs and have him check out your nose and your balls.”

“But Uncle Bob...” Benny started to reply

“Just shut up and do it Benny!” Said Jarrett forcefully

Benny hung his head, stood up very gingerly and shambled toward the door, giving Jake a wide berth. Benny left without further comment.

Jarrett shook his head and said, “That boy’s gonna meet a bad end someday, if he don’t learn to think before he jumps into things.”

Sweetley, nodding his head in agreement said, “You know Bob, you might want to rethink his being one of your bodyguards.”

“Yeah, I’ll give it some thought.” Jarrett said absently to Sweetley, redirecting his attention to Jake.

“Well Jake, we got off to a bumpy start, but no hard feelings.” Jarrett said as he stood and stuck out his right hand.

Jake took the offered hand and said, “No hard feelings Mr. Jarrett and thanks for doing business with me.”

“Don’t mention it. Anyway, I’ll call downstairs and have Williams, the clerk, pay you off and see about setting up your room in the motel. In the meantime, I need a word with Mr. Sweetley.” Jarrett said, politely dismissing Jake.

Jake said, “Thanks again, Mr. Jarrett.” Shouldered his pack and rifle and headed out the door.

Once Jake was out of the room and down the stairs, Jarrett slammed his right fist down on the desk and said, “I want that S.O.B. dead!” “Dead before nightfall, do you hear me Sweetley? I want him dead!!”

“Relax Bob, we don’t need this boy dead. We need to recruit him.”

“I don’t know Sweetley, you’re asking a lot of me...”

“Bob, I know you think this boy has insulted you personally, but look at it this way; If Benny had come at you the way he came at Jake, what would you have done?”

Jarrett looked at Sweetley and said, “Yeah, you’ve got a point. I would’ve killed him.”

“Yeah, and Jake didn’t, you got to give him that.” Said Sweetley

“O.K. here’s the deal; if you recruit him and he works out, fine. If not, I want him gone from here pretty quick. If Benny and his brothers and cousins know he’s working for you, with my blessing, they’ll leave him alone. If not, it’s only a matter of time until they kill him and he will probably take a few of them with him. That would be inconvenient for me. Do you read me Randall?”

“Loud and clear Bob, let me go down and talk to him, I’ll keep you posted.” Sweetley said, as he moved toward the door. As he got to the door, he looked at Benny’s weapons lying on the floor, laughed, shook his

head, and went through the door and down the stairs.

Jarrett pulled a letter opener out of the desk drawer and slit open the vacuum bag containing the carton of Marlboros. He removed the carton from the bag, held it under his nose and inhaled deeply. The smell of fresh tobacco flooded his nostrils. Jarrett sighed and said to himself, "Hell, getting these makes up for letting that S.O.B. live... For now, anyway..."

As Sweetley got downstairs, he saw Jake talking with Jarrett's chief clerk, at the main counter. The clerk was setting two boxes of pistol ammo and two heavy bags of coins on the counter as Sweetley walked up.

Jake acknowledged Sweetley with a nod and pulled the ammunition toward him, and opened one of the boxes. Jake confirmed that the ammunition in the boxes was as marked; ".38 special, 158 grn, +P, jacketed soft point." The ammunition appeared to be new and the primers were sealed. Jake closed up the ammunition boxes and focused on what the clerk was doing.

The clerk had opened one of the heavy cloth bags and poured the contents out on to the counter. Jake saw that they consisted of dull silver nickels, dimes and =quarters. The clerk swiftly started counting and stacking the coins. Jake made sure to count along with him. The last thing he wanted to do was get shorted.

When they finished counting, the final tally was \$50.00 total from the first bag. The clerk then poured approximately half of the coins out of the second bag and they started counting them together. They got up to \$68.00, at which point the clerk reached into the bag two more times, to reach \$75.00 in face value silver, pre-1965 U.S. coins.

The clerk asked Jake if the count was good and Jake said it was. Jake indicated the empty dirty white cotton bag, and the clerk nodded. Jake started sweeping the stacks of coins from the counter into the bag and tied off the string at the mouth. On finishing, he thanked the clerk, picked up the ammo and looked at Sweetley.

Sweetley said, "Did you get the key to your room?"

"Yeah, I got it right here." Jake said, as he patted his right breast pocket, then bent over his pack and placed the ammo and heavy bag of coins inside. He then stood, hefted the pack onto his left shoulder and picked up his rifle.

Sweetley said, "Good, I'll walk you over to the motel and help you get settled. There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Oh Yeah?"

“Yeah.” Said Sweetley, “I’ve got a proposition for you, but it can wait until you get settled in your room.”

As they walked out of the truck stop and headed toward the motel, Jake wondered what Sweetley’s “proposition” was. He figured that whatever it was, he needed to be careful. The soft soap about the Kindahar pass aside, Jake wasn’t sure he trusted this glib character. He also figured that his time at the Crossroads was limited and the clock was ticking. He didn’t think Benny, or Jarrett for that matter, would let pass the way he had pulled Benny’s punk card. So, he needed to finish getting re-supplied and get back on the road. He had three days comped at the motel, but it shouldn’t take more than another day, two at the most, to finish his business. Then he could quietly slip off and put this place behind him.

Although, in hind sight he should have kept his mouth shut and handled things a little differently. He grinned as he admitted to himself that sometimes, he was his own worst enemy. Especially when people pushed him; Jake never was one to be pushed and whenever pushed, always pushed back harder. As Benny found out the hard way.

During their short walk to the hotel, Sweetley formally introduced himself to Jake as, “Sergeant First Class Randall Sweetley,” and told him that he was the commander of Jarrett’s security/military force. He also told Jake about being part of an ad hoc rifle company from Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, that had been protecting the then FEMA camp and when that operation fell totally apart, he had signed on with Jarrett, bringing what was left of the rifle company with him.

Sweetley also questioned Jake about his service in the Army. Jake was frank and truthful with Sweetley, and Sweetley was impressed. Especially with the fact that Jake was Airborne and Ranger qualified, got out as a Staff Sergeant and had three combat tours in the Middle East (two in Afghanistan and one in Iraq). Jake didn’t elaborate on his time as a military contractor or his time in Arkansas. Sweetley seemed to only be interested in Jake’s Army career and didn’t probe into his life any further.

On entering the lobby of the motel, Sweetley walked up to the reception desk and spoke with the hard looking middle aged woman behind the counter.

“Hello, Becky, this is Jake and Jarrett has comped him a room for the next couple of days, you got it ready?”

Becky frowned and said, “Sure Sweetley, Bob called over here himself and said that you’d be bringing Mr. Jake over. You got the key Mr. Jake?”

“Yeah, right here.” Jake said as he pulled the motel key from his breast pocket and handed it to Becky.”

She said, “Thank you.” With a slight, momentary smile and then rang a bell on the counter. A short, gaunt elderly man came out of the back room wiping his mouth with a paper napkin and said, “Yes Miss Becky?”

“Harold, get Mr. Jake’s things and take him up to 212. Hurry up, you old geezer, he ain’t got all day!”

“Yes Miss Becky, right away Ma’am.”

Harold scuttled over to Jake and tried to pick up the pack that Jake had placed on the floor, but he was having trouble picking up the heavy pack. He tried several times, but its weight kept overwhelming his meager strength. Harold gave Jake a pained look and shrugged his stooped shoulders.

“I swear Harold, you are absolutely useless!” Becky said with disgust in her voice. Jake chuckled and said, “No problem, I’ve carried this pack a lot of miles, I can carry it a few more feet. Lead on Harold!”

Harold led Jake and Sweetley to the lobby elevator and pushed the up arrow. At this point, probably for the first time, Jake realized that this entire operation had electrical power to spare. Jake remembered that in Little Rock and out at Camp Robinson, (Arkansas National Guard base) electrical power was carefully rationed for essential operations, such as hospitals, critical industries, or the Governor and his cronies. Jarrett, it seemed, had all the electrical power he needed.

They rode the elevator to the second of three floors, where Harold led them down the exterior balcony to room 212. Harold unlocked the door, held it open for Jake and Sweetley, ushering them into the room. Harold turned on a lamp on a table next to the door and looked at Jake expectantly.

Jake, realizing that Harold was hoping for a tip, reached into the top of his pack, which he had placed on the bed and pulled out the bag of coins. He untied the bag, reached inside pulling out a handful of coins. Jake selected a sliver dime and gave it to Harold and said, “Thanks, old fella, You’ve been a big help.”

Harold lit up with a big smile and said, “Thank you Mr. Jake, you need anything, you just ask for old Harold.” He then backed out of the room, bowing repeatedly as he closed the door and left.

Sweetley laughed and said, “You made Harold’s day, guests around here don’t tip much, especially to somebody like old Harold.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, Harold is from the old FEMA camp and those people are universally held in contempt around here and treated like second class citizens.”

“Why’s that?” asked Jake

“Most of the people that ended up in those camps came from big cities and most of the people that live around here are country folks. With what’s happened over the past couple of years a lot of animosity has built up between the two groups. The city folk complained a lot and demanded a lot, especially at first. The country folk believe that the city people were a bunch of freeloaders that have gotten what they deserve and believe they are shiftless and too lazy to work. It’s probably a lot more complicated than that, but that’s the short version.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense, you said you had a proposition for me?” asked Jake as he tossed his rifle on the bed next to his pack.

“Yeah, what I have Jake is a job offer. I could use someone with your demonstrated ability. My problem lies in only one of my young NCOs having any real combat experience. The rest of my troops, to include the sick, lame and lazy I inherited from Jarrett’s original force, are as green as grass. I’m in the process of expanding my force and I can make you a lucrative offer.”

“What’s your offer, Sweetley?”

“Well, if you sign on for two years, I’ll make you a platoon leader, equip and arm you much better than you are now, and when the two years are up, you can keep the weapons and equipment. You would also get room and board, and as an NCO that means here at the motel. You would also get \$50.00 in silver a month and a share of any spoils of war, in any operation we are involved in. Well Jake, That’s the offer, what do you say?”

“This is kind of sudden Sweetley, I hadn’t thought much about whether I was going to stay around here or not. Do you need an answer right now?”

“No, take your time, but I would like to know within the next couple of days.” Said Sweetley

“That’s fair; I’ll let you know within the next couple of days.” Jake said as he took off his LBE and field jacket and tossed them on the double bed.

Sweetley started walking toward the door and said, “Alright Jake, I’ll let you settle into your room. When you have an answer, Becky or Harold will know where to find me. I’ll see you later.” Sweetley left and closed the door behind him.

Jake sat down in the chair next to the bed and looked around the room. It was almost surreal; there was a telephone and even a television set. Just for grins, Jake picked up the TV remote from the table and hit the power button. The TV came on and it was a porno film. Jake hit the channel up button and the next channel was a western and the next channel was an old film noir movie from the 1940’s. The fourth and final channel was a series of still advertisements for the Crazy 8 strip club/bordello and ads for the other services offered at the Crossroads, such as fuel, mechanical services, food, laundry services, barbering services and

medical services.

Jake turned off the TV and went into the bathroom, where he found towels, soap and shampoo laid out on the sink counter. He turned on the hot water and within seconds, steaming hot water came out of the faucet. Jake turned off the water and headed back into the room. He locked the deadbolt and put the chain on the door, sat down in the chair and began taking his gaiters and boots off. He stood up and stripped naked and went to his pack and removed his toiletries kit, then went into the bathroom, where he took a long hot shower. The first shower he had taken since leaving camp Robinson and it was wonderful!

After his shower, as he was toweling off in front of the mirror, Jake looked at himself. What he saw was a bearded, wild haired almost gaunt faced apparition, looking back at him. He thought about shaving off his beard, but decided against it. He brushed his teeth, combed his wild hair and returned to his pack and got out the new shirt and wool pants he had bought. He quickly dressed, put his boots on (with no socks) and gathered up his dirty shirt, pants, G.I. long underwear and filthy socks. He also pulled a zip lock bag from his pack that contained his other dirty socks, and a brown t-shirt and dumped it with the rest. Jake broke down his bed roll and added his two wool blankets to the pile. He finished by adding his filthy shemagh and bundled all of this together and put it on the floor next to the door.

He then faced a dilemma; could he feel safe in leaving his pack and other gear in the room? He wasn't sure, but he thought he would talk to Miss Becky about it when he went downstairs. The money though, was a problem, that he wasn't about to leave in the room.

What Jake came up with worked pretty well, but wasn't the most comfortable solution. He had an empty 50 round canvas Australian ammo bandolier that he turned into a money belt. He stuffed \$65.00 in the five pockets of the bandolier, snapped them and then secured each pocket with a strip of duct tape from his pack.. He put the improvised money belt across his shoulder, under the blue shirt. He then took the remaining \$20.00 in the cloth bag and put it in the lower pocket of his field jacket and put it on. He put on the .38 holster and dropped the two speed loaders into his right breast pocket, put on his ball cap, shouldered his rifle and picked up the dirty laundry from the floor.

Jake took a last look around the room, left and locked the door behind him. He hoped his gear would still be there when he got back. He went down the exterior stairs and walked back into the lobby, where he found Harold standing behind the registration desk. Jake smiled at Harold and said, "How's it going Harold?"

Harold smiled from ear to ear and said, "Just fine Mr. Jake, how can I help you?"

"Well Harold, two things; will my gear be safe in my room and how do I get my laundry done?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Jake, nobody will bother your things. They hang or burn thieves around here and besides, you are the personal guest of Mr. Jarrett and Mr. Sweetley. I guarantee your stuff is safe."

“Well that’s great Harold, but I would be very grateful if you kind of kept an eye on my room and let me know if anybody is nosing around?” Jake asked as he slid two silver quarters across the counter to Harold.

Harold’s eyes widened and he looked around as if to see if anybody else was around and said, “You bet Mr. Jake, you don’t have anything to worry about, I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Thanks Harold, now what about my laundry?”

Harold pulled a cloth mesh laundry bag from under the counter that had a plastic tag with the number 212 on it and said, “This is the laundry bag for your room, all you do is put your clothes in it, give them to me and you will have them back clean and pressed by tomorrow morning.”

Jake did so and handed the nearly full bag to Harold and said, “Thanks Harold, I’m going out for a while. Oh, one more thing, I’m curious, what did you do before things fell apart?”

“I was the president and CEO of the First National Bank of St. Louis.” Harold said with no sign of now being servile in his voice.

Jake just nodded his head and said, “We’ve all lost a lot Harold, I’ll see you later.”

Jake left the motel and headed back out into the market area. He saw that some of the vendors were closing and looked at his watch. It was approaching 5.00pm and the sun had going down, but the entire area was well lit by the parking lot lights. Jake decided to do some shopping before seeing about dinner and going to bed.

Over the next hour Jake was able to buy 5 pounds of beans, 5 pounds of rice, 3 pounds of very good beef jerky and 2 pounds of smoked and salted bacon. He ran across some canned goods but didn’t trust them because they were out of date. He was also able to find 4 more speed loaders for the .38, for a dime apiece. He also bought a Blackhawk Butt pack for his LBE, another G. I. poncho and a poncho liner from the same surplus dealer he got the clothes from. And he still had almost a third of the \$20.00 in silver he was carrying in his pocket.

Jake returned to the motel and went back to his room, where he left the items he purchased and noticed that everything was as he left it. He went back down to the lobby, where Harold directed him to the restaurant/bar. On the way there, Jake found the barber shop and it was still open. One of the barbers told him that on Saturdays they stayed open until 10:00pm. Jake got a haircut and a beard trim, which cost him 75 cents, plus a 20 cent tip!

He then went to the restaurant which was pretty crowded, but he got a table within a few minutes. He

ordered an open faced roast beef sandwich, mashed potatoes and peas, iced tea and apple cobbler for desert. Probably the best meal he'd had in 2 years. He settled his bill for \$1.20 plus a quarter tip, which he felt was pretty steep and headed up to his room.

As Jake stripped and got into bed, he figured that all in all he had accomplished a lot today. He was leery of both Jarrett and Sweetley and figured that by Monday, he would leave this place. He was going to go through the market one more time tomorrow, probably after he went to see the Jenkins family. As he drifted off he thought how comfortable the bed was and the fact that he wouldn't get to sleep in one for a long time after Monday...

While Jake was drifting off to sleep; 60 miles away in Kentucky, Jess Markham was planning his trip to Crossroads. Jess would be taking one of the 4 ton Johnsville city trucks, his old Toyota Landcruiser and a Jeep as security vehicles. The 4 ton truck was loaded with 25, 55 gallon barrels of 180 proof ethanol, 200 pounds of tobacco and 30 pounds of marijuana, for trade at the Crossroads market. Six other men, all well armed would be accompanying him. The trip was ostensibly being made to trade these items for medical supplies, batteries and any available seed corn that the community could really use. Even though Jarrett was now producing fuel, he still bought ethanol from outside sources and the Johnsville ethanol was high grade stuff.

Producing ethanol had been the salvation of Johnsville, Kentucky. One of the local town characters, 74 year old Bertram Pye, came from a long line of bootleggers and he still knew how to make "shine." He had offered his services to the town, which readily accepted and he became the resident expert and chief distiller for the town. There were probably 30 stills up and running in and around Johnsville, all due to old Bert, producing a prodigious amount of alcohol fit both for fuel and for drinking. As a result of this every available piece of tillable ground, not used for other food production, was planted in corn. Tobacco was also a very lucrative crop and some tillable land was also reserved for its production.

Bertram's sons and grandsons didn't follow him into the family business, instead choosing to cultivate the more lucrative cash crop of marijuana. This after the collapse had become a legitimate trade item for not only its impairment qualities, but as a medicinal remedy for various things. The Pye clan went from being white trash petty criminals, to wealthy if not respected members of the community almost overnight. A lot changed after modern society collapsed.

Jess didn't feel comfortable in leaving his family, but his two brothers could handle things while he was away, and this trip was necessary. Jess had to find out what he could about these raiders and figure out some way to effectively defend against them, not to mention trying to get that young girl back.

Jess said goodbye to his family, got in the truck and headed out to Crossroads. He hoped he was doing the right thing. A lot of folks were depending on him...

At 11:15pm, that evening, The Hawk and the Reavers returned to Crossroads, gained admission at the east gate and drove their convoy to the warehouse building they rented from Jarrett. The doors were opened by one of the Reaver women that had stayed behind, and the vehicles were driven inside and the doors closed behind them.

Everyone dismounted from the vehicles and Tate started directing the Reavers on what to do with the plunder and livestock. He came over to the Hawk and asked about the girl. It was obvious to the Hawk that Tate wanted the girl, but he was going to be disappointed. It was too dangerous to keep the girl around because somebody might recognize her. The Hawk planned on closing the deal with Jarrett tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest, so the girl would be sold south as soon as possible.

Jarrett had an arrangement with some guy down around Memphis, where they traded women to each other for their various vice operations. This got the girls far enough away from their home areas that there was less of a chance of being seen by anyone that knew them. The Hawk had a good thing going with Jarrett. The last thing he needed was a bunch of angry farmers wanting to lynch him over some little inbred tramp. And Jarrett wouldn't jeopardize his operation for the Hawk. If a bunch of rednecks showed up demanding his head, Jarrett would hand him over in a minute and no lost any sleep over it.

"Tate, you can't have the girl, she goes to Jarrett tonight if I can close the deal." Said the Hawk pointedly.

"I don't want to keep her boss; I just want to use her for awhile." Tate said with a leer.

The Hawk thought about it for a moment and said, "O.K. Tate, but if you leave any marks on her or hurt her, we won't get a good price from Jarrett. And, only you Tate, if any of the others get at her I'll have your head along with theirs. Are we clear on this?"

"Yeah Boss, loud and clear." Tate said with a big smile as he walked off toward where two of the Reavers were standing guard over the despondent young girl.

"Boys, take her to my room and wait for me there." Tate told them as he went to make sure that his earlier orders were being carried out. The two Reavers pushed the girl toward the rear of the warehouse, leaving the Hawk standing next to the Suburban alone.

The Hawk sighed and started to walk to his room, so he could get cleaned up and go parlay with Jarrett. The Hawk figured that Jarrett was probably holding court, as usual at this time of night, at the Crazy 8. As the Hawk got to his room, two of the "camp followers," Cindy and Rosa were waiting outside his door.

Cindy smiled at the Hawk and said, "Anything we can do for you Hawk?"

The Hawk smiled and put his arms around both Gothic looking young women and said, “Sure girls, come on in. You can help me clean up and unwind a little before I go see Jarrett.”

The girls giggled and started running their hands up and down the Hawk’s body as they all three entered his quarters and closed the door behind them...

At a little after midnight, Hawk entered the Crazy 8 and noticed that the party was in full swing. Nude young women were dancing to the music on the stages, the craps, black jack and roulette tables were crowded and it was standing room only at the bar. A cocktail waitress who couldn’t have been more than 15, dressed only in a g-string came up to the Hawk with a mug of cold beer on her tray. The Hawk smiled at her, took the proffered beer and walked deeper into the club. He didn’t notice her shudder with revulsion as he walked away.

All of Jarrett’s people, with the exception of his bodyguards and Sweetley and his people, gave the Hawk VIP treatment, for two reasons. First of all it was known that Jarrett did a lot of business with the Hawk and wanted him kept happy. Secondly they catered to him out of pure animal fear. The Hawk had killed four people in the Crazy 8 over the last year; three men in gunfights and one of the dancers that had refused to sleep with him. The dancer he had strangled in the room reserved for couch dances, as several of his Reavers stood by laughing. Jarrett had looked the other way because his relationship with the Hawk was so profitable and the killings were chalked up as the price of doing business.

The Hawk approached the large raised horseshoe shaped booth that was always reserved for Jarrett. Jarrett was holding court there flanked by two semi nude dancers and four of his inbred bodyguards were surrounding the booth. Sweetley and several men that the Hawk didn’t recognize were sitting in the booth and four or five other dancers were hovering around.

As the Hawk walked up and waved to Jarrett, he was confronted by Benny Nyby. Benny stepped in front of him to block his path to the table. The Hawk grinned at Benny and said, “Hey Benny, you shoulda zipped instead of zagged.” Referring to the splinted and bandaged nose and the two magnificent black eyes that Benny had.

Benny said, “Fugg you athhole, what do you want?”

“I got business with Jarrett and if you don’t want to get your eyes dotted again, you’ll get out of the way Benny.” The Hawk said menacingly.

“Benny, let the Hawk come up.” Said Jarrett, as he rose from the booth to greet the Hawk.

The hawk stepped up onto the raised floor that the booth sat on, as Benny faded into the background like a whipped dog. He took Jarrett’s proffered hand and nodded at Sweetley. Sweetley nodded back and the

Hawk examined the three other men at the table. One of them he finally recognized as the guy from Memphis Jarrett did business with. He was a short, beer gutted man with a pockmarked face and a permanent leer. The other two he didn't recognize, but he recognized their type. Both were young, fit and armed to the teeth. These guys were shooters and depending on what developed, the Hawk thought he might offer them jobs.

"You know Greer, Don't you Hawk?" Jarrett said gesturing toward the guy from Memphis.

The Hawk said, "Sure, how are you Greer?"

"I'm fine Hawk, just talking to Jarrett about all of the fine girls you two have sent my way and hoping you might have some more merchandise for me while I'm here." Greer said through his permanent leer.

"We may have something for you, Jarrett will let you know."

Jarrett nodded and smiled, acknowledging his role as Hawk's broker of girls and stolen goods.

"Well, I'm leaving about 10:00 tomorrow morning, so let me know Jarrett. On that note, I think I'll turn in." Greer said as he stood up and started away from the table. Jarrett pointed at two of the dancers, indicating they should go with Greer. They both nodded and flanking Greer, with their arms around him, escorted him to the door. Greer was laughing and running his hands up and down the nude flanks of the two girls as they left the club, headed down the connecting hallway to his VIP room at the motel.

The Hawk sat down and signaled to the waitress for another beer and turned to Sweetley and said, "Hey Sweetley, are you gonna introduce me to your friends, or what?"

Sweetley looked at the Hawk, hesitated momentarily and said, "Sure Hawk, this is Grey and Wilcott." He indicated the tall well built young black man named Grey and the red headed, freckle faced Wilcott. "They came up from Memphis with Greer because they heard we were hiring. Grey is a Marine and Wilcott is ex Army. They've decided to sign on with us, ain't that right boys?" Both men nodded at the Hawk but said nothing.

"Say Bob, what happened to Benny's face?" asked the Hawk

As Sweetley broke into laughter, Jarrett got an angry look on his face and said, "Benny ran into somebody that is a whole lot meaner than he is. I didn't like what happened much, but maybe Benny learned an invaluable lesson."

"Whats that Bob?" Asked the Hawk

"Maybe Benny has learned when to keep his mouth shut =and let me do the talking. I don't know though, that boy never did have a lick of sense."

"Yeah, you shoulda seen it Hawk, this guy took out Benny and got the drop on me and old Bob so quick, it'd make your head spin." Sweetley said laughing.

“Yeah Hawk, he was damn sure fast, maybe even faster than you.” Jarrett said pointedly.

“Nobody’s faster than me.” Said the Hawk seriously, as he took another drink of his beer.

“I would take odds on that, if I hadn’t already offered him a job.” Sweetley said, deadly serious.

The Hawk slammed his beer mug down on the table and said, “What do you mean by that Sweetley?”

All conversation at the table stopped as Sweetley and the Hawk tried to stare each other down. Neither man would give an inch. Wilcott and Grey had been chatting up a couple of the dancers but the confrontation between Sweetley and the Hawk had their undivided attention. Jarrett just sat back and smiled.

“I’ll tell you what I mean Hawk.” Sweetley said with a sneer. “This guy may be coming to work for me. I’ve got plans for him and the last thing either Jarrett or I need is for you to meddle in our operation. It would be inconvenient for me to have you two going at each other. You clear on that?”

“What do you say Bob?” The Hawk asked Jarrett, with fire in his eyes.

“Well Hawk, as Sergeant Sweetley says, he’s offered this boy a job and if he goes to work for us, we don’t need any complications. Having said that, if this boy don’t go to work for Sweetley, then all bets are off.” Jarrett said with a wink at the Hawk.

Sweetley had to bite back an angry retort. So, Big Bob was still *****ed about what had happened in the office with Benny. Well, these Hillbillies were a clannish bunch. Anyway, he wanted Jake on board, but not bad enough to jeopardize his position. If it came down to it, he would have to cut Jake loose. Too bad, but he could still get one more barb into the Hawk.

“You better hope he goes to work for me Hawk, I don’t think you can take him, at least not by yourself.” Sweetley said as he stood up and motioned for the two new shooters to follow him. As they started to walk away Sweetley said to Jarrett, “You’ll have to excuse me Bob, I’m going to check the guard posts and get these two guys settled into the barracks, before I turn in. Good night.” Sweetley walked out of the club, followed by Grey and Wilcott.

The Hawk was not happy. His inferiority complex, his cowardice and his rage were in full swing. The Hawk had never been bested with a gun, either in speed or accuracy. He had killed a lot of men over the past couple of years and he planned to kill many more. But the Hawk was obsessive/compulsive and he knew, even though he was afraid, that he would have to do something about this mysterious shooter or it would drive him crazy. He did not possess enough maturity or experience to realize he was being goaded into fighting this guy by Jarrett.

Jarrett smiled and said, “Relax Hawk, I could care less if you kill this guy. I was only trying to keep Sweetley happy, because I need him and his men.”

“Who is this guy?” asked the Hawk.

“All I know is he is some vagabond soldier named Jake and he is impressive. Like Sweetley said, he took

out Benny and had the drop on both of us before we could move. I'll tell ya, it took about ten years off of my life!" Jarrett said with a chuckle, as he took a drink of his bourbon.

"Tell me what happened." Said the Hawk.

Over the next ten minutes, Jarrett told the Hawk about their first encounter with Jake and how Sweetley had defused the situation. He also told the Hawk what Jake looked like and that he was staying in the motel for a couple of days. The Hawk started working out his strategy for killing Jake as he and Jarrett discussed the most recent raid and what the Hawk had for sale...

45 minutes later the Hawk returned to the warehouse that he rented from Jarrett, for what he thought was an exorbitant price. When he got there, he acknowledged the two Reavers on guard and entered the warehouse. The post raid party was in full swing. Wild laughter, a song by the band Disturbed and the smell of marijuana permeated the place. One of the camp followers was dancing and stripping in the bed of one of the pick-up trucks, with the rest of the Reavers and their women cheering her on.

The Hawk pulled one of the drunken and stoned Reavers, they called Porky, away from the melee and asked, "Where's Tate?"

Porky looked at the Hawk with vacant eyes and said, "I don't know, I ain't seen em Hawk."

"That's alright Porky, get back to the party, I'll find him."

Porky staggered back to the crowd around the pick-up whistling and shouting for the girl to "take it all =off!" As the Hawk walked to the rear of the warehouse, where there was a small suite of former offices where he and his command staff had private rooms.

As he got to Tate's door, he could hear voices, laughter and a girl sobbing inside. The Hawk knocked loudly on the door and could here a loud curse and then Tate's voice saying, "Go away, I'm busy!"

"Open up Tate, it's me." The Hawk said, loud enough for Tate to hear him through the door.

A moment later the Hawk heard the bolt slide back and Tate opened the door. Tate was sweaty and flushed and only wearing a pair of black jeans. His glistening torso and muscular arms were virtually covered in prison tattoos. The Hawk looked past Tate and saw that his steel single bunk had been pulled into the center of the room. The young blond girl was nude and her hands were tied to the steel bar at the head of the bed. Her former guards, now drunk and stoned were each holding one of the girl's legs, as she lay on the bed and sobbed. The Hawk could see blood on the girl's thighs and his anger flared.

"Damn it Tate, I told you not to hurt her!" The Hawk flared.

"Relax boss, she ain't hurt, it was just her first time is all." Tate said laughing, taking a pull from a glass of clear liquid that Hawk guessed was 180 proof alcohol.

"Jarrett will be over at about 9:00am to check her out, have a couple of the girls clean her up, when you get finished with her and have them bring her to my room."

“Hell, I’m finished with her now boss, I wanna get to the party, you can have her.”

The Hawk’s anger flared again, “I wouldn’t take you leavings Tate! You clear on that?”

“Yeah Hawk, relax, I’ll have a couple of the girls clean her up and bring her to your room.”

The Hawk turned around and stalked off to this room, with Tate’s laughter following him. The hawk was angrier at himself than he was at Tate. Because he knew that he would have the girl. He had become very excited seeing her tied to that bed, sobbing and bleeding. He wanted that power over her and maybe it would keep him from obsessing about this Jake character.

150 yards away in the motel, Jake snored faintly and dreamed about getting home. He had no idea that something had been set in motion that would have a profound effect on many people’s lives and could quite possibly be the death of him. Jake blissfully snored on, but tomorrow was another day at the Crossroads...

Chapter 4, Situational Awareness

Jake's internal alarm woke him up at a little after 6:00am, on Sunday morning. It was still dark out, but Jake had slept for about 9 hours and there was no way he could go back to sleep. He rolled out of bed into the push-up position and started knocking them out. He reached 200 and collapsed onto his stomach. He rolled over to his back and started doing crunches. He did 200 crunches, alternating between front and both left and right sides. By the time he finished, he was covered in a light sheen of sweat, but was barely breathing hard.

He stood up and walked around the room for a few minutes to cool down. This had been a ritual with Jake for about 12 years. Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he always tried to ensure that he did his "Daily 400." Jake was also a runner, he hated to run, but saw the necessity of staying in good cardiovascular condition. So, he ran, whenever he could and especially whenever he had too. Being able to run at a good pace for miles had saved his life more than once. As the old saying went, "Run, run, run away, live to fight another day," was an axiom that Jake lived by.

Jake went into the bathroom and took a long, hot shower. He came out of the bathroom, toweling himself off when he saw the small coffee maker sitting on the dresser. He went over to it and discovered that there was coffee, both decaf and regular, in pre-measured paper pouches that also acted as filters. There were also packets of cream, sugar and artificial sweetener. Jake was again surprised at Jarrett's largesse. Coffee was hard to come by and was right up there with tobacco and good booze, as grossly expensive and hard to come by luxury items.

Jake took the coffee pot to the sink and filled it. He poured the water into the coffee maker, put in one of the regular pouches of coffee and turned it on to brew. When it was finished brewing, he poured a cup. He took the cup of coffee and sat on the bed and turned on the TV. He flashed through all four channels a couple of times until he settled on an old black and white western starring Gregory Peck. It was about a gunfighter trying to leave his bad old life behind. Jake wasn't paying too much attention, it was just background noise. What he was really doing was planning what he was going to do next.

Jake had already decided, even before Sweetley had offered him the job, to put this place behind him. On the face of things, Crossroads seemed like a place that offered the hope of putting things back on the road to recovery, but Jake knew better. Jarrett was nothing more than a petty criminal at best, or a tin pot dictator at the worst. Jarrett was in it for Jarrett and if Sweetley was able to build his army for him, Jarrett was going to expand his sphere of influence well beyond Crossroads. Jake believed if it was allowed to happen, it would bode ill for the people in the surrounding countryside and he wanted no part of it. Jake had spent the last year and a half soldiering for a tin pot dictator. He would die before he let himself be forced into doing that again.

Now that he had finally articulated this to himself, Jake moved on to more immediate problems. First of all he had a lot of money and it was heavy. He didn't see any reason for carrying any more than 10 or 15 dollars in silver while heading home. He figured that amount could come in handy if he needed to purchase food and such further up the trail. That would still leave him with a little over \$50.00 (equivalent to \$500.00 in pre-collapse dollars), which he needed to dispose of. He had already decided to give some of it to the Jenkins family, say \$5.00, but that still left more than he needed for the road.

There were still a few items he was looking for, mostly small things, like a couple of fiberglass, collapsible tent poles, so he could make an Alpha tent out of one of his ponchos. Maybe another pair of blue jeans, his one pair was getting pretty worn and some baking soda to use as tooth powder. Or maybe even a better rifle.

He had been beating around the idea of maybe getting some kind of semi-automatic rifle, but they were at a premium. He might be able to get an SKS or an AK for what he would have left, but he doubted it. Even if he could acquire one of those, he would have to change ammunition, get magazines and get rid of the FR-8. Even though it was a good rifle, he wasn't convinced he could get much for it because it was an old bolt gun. He would have to look around and see what came up.

In a perfect world he would have a DMR (designated marksman's rifle), a retrofitted M-14 like he had carried on his first combat tour. On that tour, Jake a newly Ranger qualified PFC was one of his platoon's designated marksmen. He was selected as a designated marksman, because he was one of the best rifle shots in the battalion. And Jake had done some good work with that rifle. It had won him his first Bronze Star. He single handedly took out a six man Mujahadeen element, which had ambushed Jake's squad from a valley rim more than 400 yards away.

Jake and another Ranger were at the rear of the movement formation as the squad was taken under fire by a PKMG and AK-47's; from the rim of a small valley they had just entered. Jake and the other Ranger were able pull back into the mouth of the valley as the rest of the squad was pinned down on the valley floor. They were able to get up on the valley rim near the mouth, where Jake was able to take the Mujahadeen under fire. Jake killed the machine gunner and a guy with binoculars, he assumed was the element leader, at which point the other four panicked and tried to pull out. Jake took out all four before they could get back over the valley rim and fade into the mountains. The Ranger with Jake also engaged the enemy element, but he was carrying an M-4 carbine and wasn't able to get any hits, although his fire did aid in displacing the enemy.

The Ranger squad leader regrouped the squad and found they had taken no casualties. He then decided to check out the bad guys that Jake had taken out. When the squad reached the enemy position and secured it, the squad leader was very impressed with Jake's quick thinking and excellent marksmanship. The machine gunner and the alleged element leader had been taken out with head shots and the other four had all been hit at least once, center of mass; two of them had taken two rounds apiece, because as Jake explained it, "They were still up, so I figured I better put em down." Jake had only expended 8 rounds of ammunition in that

one sided fight. The squad leader put Jake in for a Silver Star, but it was downgraded to a Bronze Star with a “V” for valor. Jake didn’t care; he wasn’t in it for the medals.

After wasting time wishing for something he wouldn’t get, Jake decided he would finish his shopping today, spend one more night in the motel and leave early tomorrow morning. On that note he stood up from the bed and adjusted the towel around his waist and walked over to the window. He opened the curtains a few inches and looked out on the market area of Crossroads. It was a little before 7:00am and there was already quite a bit of activity; vendors were setting up for the days trading and there were quite a few people milling around. Mostly around the booths that sold food and drink.

Jake did notice a 4 ton steak bed truck, with a full load in the back accompanied by a jeep and an old Toyota Landcruiser. This convoy entered through the southeast gate and pulled up to the front of the truck stop building. Six armed men got out of the vehicles and conferred in front of the building. Five of them stayed with the vehicles, obviously guarding them and the sixth handed his rifle (an HK 91) off to one of them and started walking into the truck stop. Jake saw that he was a tall, barrel chested man, with a salt and pepper beard and a very determined look on his face. He was also wearing an old faded woodland pattern field jacket and a Tennessee Titans ball cap. Jake figured he was another old soldier, from the looks of him, on some kind of mission.

Out of the corner of his eye, through the window, Jake noticed something sitting next to his door. He went to the door and opened it to find that his laundry had been delivered. Jake picked up the full mesh bag and carried it back into the room. He started unloading it on to the bed. Jake was pleasantly surprised to find that everything had been washed, neatly pressed and folded. They had even pressed his Shemagh! You couldn’t fault the service at Crossroads.

Jake rapidly put on his thermal underwear and dressed in his jeans and Mossy Oak shirt. He put on his boots, gaiters, his operator’s belt and pistol holster. As he was getting dressed he realized that he was probably in a lot more dangerous position then he had initially thought. He didn’t really believe that Jarrett, or Benny for that matter, would let what happened in the office yesterday drop. And he really didn’t trust Sweetley either. There was just something about him that wasn’t quite right, but Jake hadn’t figured it out yet.

If he was smart he would load up and leave now, but he still wanted to go through the market one more time. This might well be his last opportunity to re-supply between here and Ohio and he wanted to take advantage of it. What he needed was a cutout; somewhere he could stash his pack, outside of Crossroads, where he could get his hands on it if he had to escape and evade. That’s when he got the idea to leave it with the Jenkins’. He would go see them, let them keep his share of whatever they got for the dog meat and pay them to keep his pack for a day or two.

There was some risk in this plan. He believed that the Jenkins’ were good trustworthy people. But Jake

didn't trust too many people, for good reasons. Survival, in this new Dark Age, was a precarious thing, especially if you had a family to care for.

It would be real easy to sell out somebody you didn't know that well, even if they had saved the lives of your family. If by selling them out, you guaranteed that your family ate the next day, or for the next week, most people nowadays would do it. Well, life was full of risks and Jake felt that the Jenkins' were probably the best option he had.

Jake loaded up his pack, with everything he had bought so far. He did redistribute some of his gear by making a bug out kit out of the butt pack he had purchased. He put about a pound of beans and rice in a ziplock bag and a pound of jerky in another and put them in the butt pack. He put in his flashlight, solar charger, water filter, some first aid supplies, his cooking utensils, his toiletries kit, weapons cleaning kit, a bandolier of rifle ammo and a box of pistol ammo. The last thing he put in before closing the butt pack was his two piece gortex rain suit. That left a little room in the butt pack, but not much. He also made a second bed roll out of the new poncho and poncho liner. He put that on top of the load in his alice pack and closed the top flap.

Jake then tied the butt pack to the top of his pack, with some of his dwindling supply of parachute chord. He made sure his ammo pouches were full of stripper clips and topped off his canteens and water bottle in the bathroom sink, after he brushed his teeth. He then made a final sweep of the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. He took one final look around the room, put on his LBE, shouldered his pack and rifle and headed out the door.

As Jake stepped out onto the balcony he saw a maid, two rooms down, pushing a cleaning cart toward him. Jake was hoping not to run into any of the staff; the fewer of Jarrett's people that knew what he was doing, the better.

The maid, a thin middle aged woman, with gray hair, smiled and said, "Good morning sir, are you checking out?"

"Good Morning; no, I'm going to get some breakfast and do some shopping at the market today. I'll be staying here tonight." Jake said with a smile.

"Very good sir, I'll make sure your room is tidied up before you get back." The woman said, smiling back shyly at Jake.

Jake walked on past her and headed down the stairs. When he got to the bottom, instead of heading out into the market area, he walked through a breezeway to the rear of the motel into the parking lot behind it. Jake turned right, heading toward the southeast gate that let out on the county road. This would lead him to the old FEMA camp.

As Jake got to the gate, one of Sweetley's men was passing people through from the outside, Jake assumed to shop at the market. The guard never even looked at Jake as he walked out and turned east down the county road. "So far, so good." Thought Jake.

Situational Awareness

It only took Jake a few minutes to walk the 200 yards beyond Crossroads and reach the refugee camp. It struck him that if John Steinbeck's novel, "The Grapes of Wrath" had been set in the 21st century; this is what the "Okie" camps would have looked like. It was a study in poverty and haphazardness.

The former FEMA camp was a collection of white tents, clapboard shacks and no longer operable vehicles, partially surrounded by an 8 foot chain link fence topped by triple strand barbwire. Parts of the fence had been pushed down to allow the camp to expand into the surrounding area. It looked like it covered more than 10 acres, of what Jake guessed used to be pasture land south of the county road. It was laid out in a grid of mud and partially graveled streets and at just a little after 8:00am, there was quite a bit of activity.

Children were everywhere, running and playing in the muddy streets. Jake wasn't surprised, he knew that children were very resilient and almost always made the best of any bad situation. He just shook his head and laughed. A lot of adults were moving from place to place, cooking meals, doing laundry or carrying water and firewood. The kids seemed happy, the adults to a man and woman had looks of resignation or despair on their gaunt, weathered faces.

Jake observed all of this as he was walking east on the county road, headed for what looked like the main gate. As Jake got there he saw that both gates were off the hinges, lying in the ditch and the sandbagged guard position had been burned, shot up and partially torn down. As he walked through the gate opening, two ragged men, carrying spears, blocked his path. They were a mutt and Jeff team, both carrying spears exactly like the one that Katy Jenkins had the day Jake met her. The taller of the two scowled at Jake and said, "What do you want here?"

Jake said, "I'm here to see Charlie and Katy Jenkins."

"What do you want with them?" The taller asked in an unfriendly way.

"Look Mister, I'm a friend of theirs and that's all I'm gonna tell you. Are you gonna let me pass or is this gonna get stupid?" Jake had the FR-8 cradled in the crook of his left arm; he reached over with his right hand and clicked off the safety for emphasis.

The shorter of the pair grabbed the big guy by the arm and said, "Relax Ralph, I think this is the guy that Katy told me about." The shorter one turned to Jake and said, "Mister is your name Jake?"

"Yeah, I'm Jake, you gonna let me through?" Jake was rapidly losing patience with this pair of would be sentries.

“Yes, you can pass Jake, we all know what you did for the Jenkins family and we appreciate it. Most people around here wouldn’t have wasted the ammunition on saving the lives of folks from the camp.”

Jake relaxed slightly, safed the rifle, smiled and said, “I’m not most people.”

The two guards stepped aside and Jake walked into the camp. As he passed the pair, the taller one scowled and the smaller one nodded at Jake and smiled. As he got past them, Jake remembered he didn’t know exactly where the Jenkins’ lived. He stopped, turned around and addressed the smaller guard again, “Say buddy, could you tell me where I can find the Jenkins family?”

“Yes I can, you just head on down this street here and you’ll come to a signpost. There is a sign on it that points the way to the Blacksmith’s shop, the Jenkins’ live right across the street from there.”

“Thanks a lot buddy.” Jake said as he turned away and headed down the street. Jake walked a few yards down the street and was immediately surrounded by children; asking for food, money, where he was going, what he was doing, all at the same time. They went with him down the street, keeping up the banter constantly. Just like kids in third world countries, where Jake had been before. He guessed this meant what was left of the United States was now third world, or from the looks of this place the fourth world! These kids also had their hands all over Jake and his equipment, just like in third world countries. Jake had to spin around several times and warn the bolder kids off, because he didn’t want them to get their little hands inside his pack or pockets. Given the opportunity, they would rob Jake blind before he got to the Jenkins’ house. Judicious mock kicks and threats with the rifle butt backed them off to a safe distance.

Jake got to the rough signpost, set in the middle of the street. It was a wooden 4”X 4” with handwritten signs pointing off in different directions. There was a sign pointing to the now defunct FEMA headquarters and signs pointing to the infirmary, library, water point, chapel etc. There were even signs pointing toward St. Louis, Cape Girardeau, Memphis, Springfield and one pointing to Washington D.C. that had been crossed out. The sign he was looking for, “Blacksmith” pointed to his left down the intersecting street. Jake looked that way and saw smoke and realized he could hear what sounded like someone beating on an anvil.

Jake turned left down the street and with about 15 ragged kids in tow, set out toward the smoke. As he walked down the street he marveled at the variety of dwellings these people had constructed to shelter in. There were a lot of disabled vehicles and some of them had been turned into homes by adding tent fly and cardboard or wood additions. There were shacks constructed of everything from wood to corrugated metal, to stacked plastic milk crates. There were also quite a few backyard storage type sheds that were turned into homes and some of the large white FEMA tents were also still in place. The one thing that seemed to be missing was the ubiquitous FEMA trailers. Jake hadn’t seen one yet.

Most of the adults Jake passed either gave him fearful or angry looks, but none of them said anything. One

thing Jake noticed was that he didn't see too many firearms. He saw a few, but not to the extent of what people outside the camp were carrying. He figured that had something to do with the former FEMA administrators.

In the past, when you submitted to FEMA "aid", you had to give up your weapons; a fact that someone like Jake found ridiculous. Jake had been raised to believe that weapons equated to individual sovereignty, in other words, a man or a woman, were the lords of their own destiny and could determine what was best for them in any circumstance. His people believed that the ability to defend one's self was the cornerstone of individual sovereignty.

His family tree contained a long line of people who had an inherent mistrust of government, even though quite a few of them had worked for the government as police officers, firefighters, soldiers and in a very few cases, elected public officials. Jake's father especially was a firm believer in personal sovereignty. As a long serving police officer, Jake's dad had great respect for individual rights and self determination and he passed those traits on to Jake and his other children. It was part of their Scots Irish family traditions. Surrendering your ability to defend yourself, to Jake's people, was just that, surrender!

As Jake approached the apparently busy Blacksmith's shop he looked across the street from it and saw a fairly large wooden, storage/garden shed, with a large yard area containing what had to be the Jenkins' garden cart and a large amount of what appeared to Jake to be junk. Lawn chairs, bicycles, lumber, boxes, barrels, all sorts of miscellaneous items. It was surrounded by a knee high clapboard fence made from mismatched cast off lumber. Not very unlike many other "homes" he passed on his way here.

As Jake was walking up, he saw the Jenkins' 10 year old son, Joe, in the front yard working on a bicycle. Jake called out and waved, "Hey Joe, how's it going?"

Joe looked up, recognized Jake and said, "Hey Mr. Jake, good to see you. Hey mom, hey dad, Mr. Jake is here!" Joe then ran to the gate to meet Jake. Jake thrust out his right hand, offering it to Joe. Joe hesitated and looking somewhat surprised, took Jake's hand and shook it. He smiled from ear to ear and said, "Boy am I glad to see you Mr. Jake. We didn't think you were ever going to come."

"Well Joe, I got a little side tracked, but I said I'd come by and I did." Jake said as he tossed the boy's hair affectionately. He thought of his own son and how much he missed him. Jake looked back across the street at the group of 4 or 5 men in front of the shack and open sided, roofed shelter that was the Blacksmiths shop. He looked past the group of men into the open sided shelter and saw a tall, longhaired, bearded man, wielding a hammer over an anvil. The man was holding a piece of white hot metal with a pair of tongs on top of the anvil. He looked across the street at Jake, smiled and started working the metal with the hammer. The other men in the group looked sullenly at Jake and whispered among themselves.

As Jake turned back to Joe, he saw that the rest of the family was coming to greet him. Charlie came from

behind the shed that was their home. Katy and the two little girls, Sara and Junie, came from inside the shed. It was a happy reunion for everyone and Jake marveled at the open affection that came from these people. Jake realized that no matter how hard life had been for them, the Jenkins' family were truly good people; the kind of people that were needed if this country was ever to recover from this mess.

They pulled Jake into the cluttered yard and Charlie said, "Come on around back, we were just about to have some breakfast, you're welcome to eat with us."

Jake hesitated and thinking how poorly they lived lied and said, "No thanks Charlie, I ate at the Crossroads before I came by, but I need to talk to you and I'll sit with you folks while you eat."

"Are you sure Jake? We have plenty." Charlie said as he led Jake and the family around behind the shed.

"No Charlie, I'm stuffed, but thanks anyway." Jake said

As they rounded the back of the shed Jake saw that they had constructed an open sided, tarp roofed shelter, off the back of the shed; which acted as their cooking and eating area. There was an old wooden picnic table, with benches attached, a large charcoal grill with a wood fire burning in it and breakfast laid out on the table, which consisted of what looked like cornmeal mush. Charlie directed Jake to a lawn chair at the head of the table and the rest of the family sat on the benches. Jake dumped his gear and rifle and sat down. Charlie sat down at the opposite end of the table and said to Jake, "Would you like to say grace?"

Jake, momentarily flummoxed by the request, could not for the life of him remember how to say grace over a meal. It had been a long time since Jake had prayed before eating and it brought back childhood memories that made him immediately homesick. Not knowing what to do Jake just said, "No Charlie, since I'm not eating, why don't you just do what you normally do?"

Charlie smiled at Jake and said, "Let's bow our heads everyone." Everyone at the table, including an embarrassed Jake bowed their heads, as Charlie continued, "'Our heavenly father, we thank you for this bounty we are about to eat and ask you to provide for and protect our loved ones and friends who are not here with us today. We also thank you for delivering our friend Jake to us and are thankful that we are all safe, healthy and are here to face a new day. In Christ's name, amen.'" Charlie looked up, smiled and said, "Let's eat!"

The kids didn't have to be told twice, they dug into their bowls with gusto. As the family started eating, Katy turned to Jake and said, "We were worried about you Jake, when you didn't show up yesterday." Jake smiled and said, "I didn't mean to cause you to worry, I was able to do some trading yesterday and got a motel room last night." With Jake's statement, Charlie and Katy looked at each other pointedly and Charlie said, "Gee Jake, that must have been expensive, it would take us a month of scavenging to pay for one night in that place."

“Well Charlie, I traded a gun and some other things to Jarrett and part of the deal was a couple of nights in the motel. Whether it was expensive or not, didn’t mean that much to me at the time.”

Charlie looked uncomfortable and said, “I guess you came for your share of what the dog meat brought?”

“No, now that you mention it, I came for another reason, but I am curious about what you got for all of that meat.” Jake said and smiled at Charlie

“Well, we got 10 pounds of cornmeal, 7 pounds of dried soup beans, 4 shotgun shells and \$1.35 in silver for the dog meat. I guess you’ll be wanting your share?” Charlie asked with a tone of embarrassment

“No Charlie, you folks keep what you got for the meat. I made out better in trading than I thought I would. Besides I don’t like cornmeal much.” Jake said with a laugh

“Are you sure Jake?”

“Yeah, I’m sure Charlie. This side trip has turned out pretty good for me. You folks keep what you got for the meat. Besides, if it had been left up to me those dogs would have rotted where they fell and you were the ones that hauled it the 15 miles anyway.”

Charlie and Katy both looked relieved and Charlie asked, “You said you had another reason for coming?”

“Yes Charlie, I did. I want you to keep my pack for me, for a day or two.”

“Well, yes Jake, we can do that, but why?”

“I’ve made a couple of people angry with me and I may have to leave Crossroads in a hurry.” Jake said with a lopsided grin

Charlie looked troubled and said, “Jake you have to be careful with those people over there, they don’t like to be crossed and they do hold a grudge, especially Jarrett.”

Jake laughed and said, “Well Charlie, I believe Jarrett is one of those that ain’t too happy with me. Another is one of his inbred bodyguards. I had a little altercation involving them both, but on the face of things, the problem was straightened out.”

“Don’t you believe it Jake!” Katy said with emphasis

“I know Katy; I’ve already figured that out, that’s why I’m asking you to keep my pack. I may have to leave there in a hurry and I don’t want to hide it in the woods. So, you guys are my only other option.”

Charlie nodded and said, "We'll keep it Jake, it's the least we can do for you."

"I appreciate it Charlie, but I want you to know, if they come here looking for me, tell them everything you know. I don't want you jeopardizing the kids or Katy over me." Jake said pointedly

"What do you mean Jake? I wouldn't tell them anything!"

"Charlie, listen to me; I can handle myself, I don't have a family to worry about, you do. If they do come here I'll probably be long gone and you can honestly say you don't know where I'm headed. That's the way you need to play it."

"You listen to him Charlie, Jake knows what he's talking about." Said Katy

"Thanks Katy; well Charlie do we have a deal?"

"Yeah Jake, we have a deal." Charlie said with a sigh

"Good, I've got something for you." Jake pulled out the cotton coin bag and sat it on the table; he also pulled a large ziplock bag out of his pack along with the second bedroll. "Charlie, there is a little over \$5.00 silver in this bag, it's for you." Charlie and Katy's mouths dropped open. Jake held up the ziplock bag and said, "This is the rest of the grape jelly packets, I want the kids to have them. Don't worry; I kept a few for myself." All three kid's eyes lit up and they started to chatter about the jelly until Katy shushed them.

"Jake you don't have to pay us; we owe you our lives..." Charlie said

"I want too Charlie, don't worry about it, use the money as you see fit."

"Thank you Jake." Katy said as she reached over and grasped Jake's hand

"Don't mention it Katy, you folks have done more for me than you know. If it hadn't been for running across you folks I would have been starving by now. As it is, I am well supplied and can be on my way."

"Why don't you leave now, instead of going back over there?" asked Charlie

"I've got a few more things I'd like to get and besides, I would like to sleep in a bed one more night before heading out." Jake said with a smile

"Jake you know it's foolish to go back there." Said Katy

“You’re probably right Katy; I’ve never been known for my good sense.” Jake said with a wry smile

Jake got up from the table and placed his pack in the chair. He untied the butt pack and placed it on the ground and stood there trying to decide if he needed anything from the pack, before giving it to the Jenkins’. He decided to take the two remaining bandoliers of rifle ammo, but nothing else. He figured that he had everything he would need for his bug out kit. He also had quite a bit of his survival gear distributed in his LBE and in his pockets. Even if he had to abandon his pack, he would still have enough gear and food to survive, at least for awhile.

Jake attached the butt pack to his LBE and tied the bedroll on top. He put the LBE on, fastened the buckle and jumped up and down a few times. The load didn’t make any appreciable noise and nothing came loose. The children found Jake’s antics amusing and the girls giggled. Joe just smiled and shook his head. When Jake was finished, he looked at Charlie and said

“Well, looks like I’m ready to go. You can expect me back sometime tomorrow or at the outside, the day after. If you don’t hear from me after that, the pack and its contents are yours. There is quite a bit of food in here, make good use of it, if I don’t come back.”

“We’ll keep it safe for you Jake.” Katy said

“Jake I sure wish you’d reconsider, Jarrett’s bad news and if you’ve crossed him, he’ll be gunning for you.” said Charlie with a look of concern on his face

“I’ve made my decision Charlie, for better or worse.” Jake said with a smile

Charlie just nodded as Jake said his goodbyes to the children and Katy. Joe shook his hand and the girls each gave him a peck on the cheek. Katy gave him a long hard hug and said, “Thank you for saving my family and take care of yourself.” She was crying as she broke away.

Katy and the kids started cleaning up the breakfast table as Charlie walked Jake back around to the front of the shed. As they got to the yard gate Jake heard a bell ringing, from the center of camp. “What’s that about?” asked Jake

“That’s the bell for the first Protestant church service of the day. The Catholic’s have already had their mass, so it’s time for non-denominational Protestant services. That’s the service we attend; we’ll be going as soon as we clean up the breakfast dishes”

As Jake was shaking Charlie’s hand and saying goodbye, he noticed quite a few people, both adults and children, moving down the street toward the center of the camp. He also noticed that the crowd at the Blacksmith’s shop had grown to ten or twelve men. All of them were looking at Jake with hostility. One of

them he recognized right away; the former senator, James Carrington. Carrington was still in his ridiculous threadbare suit and was eying Jake with curious contempt.

“What’s the story on the Honorable Mr. Carrington?” Jake asked sardonically, with a jerk of his head toward the crowd across the street. Charlie got a knowing look on his face and said, “Him? He’s been here since the very beginning. He came, I was told, to inspect the camp and got stranded here when things really fell apart. His entourage deserted him and he’s been hanging around causing trouble ever since. He’s the one that started the riot against the FEMA camp administrators. Rumor has it that Jarrett paid him to do it, but whatever he got paid ran out a long time ago. Now he lives on charity, or we think, he sells information to Jarrett. The folks here tolerate him, but nobody trusts him.”

“Thanks Charlie, That’s good to know, well I’ll be seeing you.” Jake threw Charlie a short wave as he started walking away. “Take it easy Jake, we’ll be praying for you.” Charlie said as he turned back into his yard and walked back around the shed.

Jake rapidly moved back to the intersection with the sign and turned right toward the main gate. No children were following him and he assumed that they were headed for church, or had found something more interesting to occupy their time. As he approached the gate the Mutt and Jeff team were still standing guard. The tall one was still eying Jake with hostility but the shorter one smiled and waved Jake on through the gate.

As Jake entered the county road and turned left toward Crossroads, he looked back and saw James Carrington hurrying toward the gate, from within the camp. Jake got the impression that Carrington was following him.

Jake knew he hadn’t been followed from the motel. So, the only thing he could figure was that Carrington was just curious or could smell some kind of profit in keeping tabs on him. Jake thought about waylaying Carrington on the road and discouraging the man from following him, but he thought better of it. It would attract too much attention if he were seen smacking Carrington’s sorry butt around in the middle of the road. Jake decided to ignore him, for now.

Jake approached the southeast gate of the Crossroads and re-entered without being challenged by either of the guards. As he approached the motel and the other main buildings from the back, his stomach growled loudly and he realized he hadn’t had anything to eat since supper last night. He decided that he would go back to his room, dump his LBE, get something to eat and do some more shopping.

Jake climbed to the second floor of the motel and entered his room. He dropped his LBE and rifle on the bed and realized that the maid had cleaned the room. Jake went to the bathroom, did his business and while he was washing up, noticed that the maid had put another roll of toilet paper on the counter, in case Jake ran out. Jake grabbed the extra roll and took it to his LBE. He got one of his spare ziplock bags from his field

jacket pocket and put the toilet paper in it. He then put the bag into his butt pack.. Toilet paper was worth its weight in gold and Jake was tired of wiping his butt with leaves. He had run out of MRE toilet paper a long time ago and besides, he figured Jarrett could afford losing a roll or two.

As Jake started to leave his room, he realized with his long underwear on and his heavy shirt, it was a little warm for the field jacket. It was approaching 10:30am and it was already in the high 40's, with little wind. Jake stepped back into the room and took it off. He transferred the four spare speed loaders to his shirt pockets, took the 50 round rifle bandolier from the bed and put it on. The last thing he did was grab a couple more ziplock freezer bags from his jacket pocket and stuffed them in a back pocket of his jeans. Jake made sure the curtains were drawn, left the room and locked the door behind him. He went downstairs and entered the restaurant.

There was a long line and a sign saying, "Breakfast Buffet, 7:00am to 12:00pm." Jake could smell the food and his mouth started watering. It took him about 10 minutes of standing in line, before he reached the cashier just inside the door. As he stepped up, the pretty female cashier told him it would be \$1.00 in silver or an equivalent amount in ammunition, in order to eat. Jake pulled four quarters out of his jeans pocket and paid the girl. He figured Jarrett was making a killing off of the buffet, at what was equivalent to \$10.00 a head.

Another girl, presumably the hostess, escorted Jake to an already crowded table with one empty seat. Jake made sure his rifle was on safe and hung it by the sling from the back of the chair. He nodded and said good morning to the people already seated around the long table and went to the buffet to get a plate of food.

Jake filled his plate up with eggs, biscuits and gravy, sausage and home fries. He got a second plate and put a short stack of pancakes on it and covered it with syrup. He returned to the table and sat down to eat. There were pitchers of coffee, water and sweet tea on the table, but curiously, no milk. Jake thought it was strange that Jarrett could provide this bounty, but no milk. There was butter and what appeared to be cream for the coffee, but no milk!

Jake poured himself a cup of black coffee and dug into his food. As he was wolfing it down, a man across and to the left of him chuckled and said, "Looks like you're making up for lost time." Jake looked up and recognized the man as the same one he had seen earlier this morning from his motel room window. It was the tall, barrel chested guy in the Titans ball cap and the old camo field jacket. Jake saw the friendly mischief in the man's eyes, smiled and said with a chuckle, "Yeah, I haven't had it this good in a long time."

The man pulled a battered briar pipe and a tobacco pouch from his coat pocket, and while he was loading the pipe said, "That's one thing you can say for Jarrett, whatever his character flaws, he lays on a good feed." Some of the other people around the table got concerned looks on their faces and looked around furtively. One of them said in a pronounced drawl, "Look mister, I don't give a damn what you think of

Jarrett, but you oughta know better than talk like that around here.” With that comment, he stood up and motioned to the two women with him and they all moved to another table that had recently become vacant. Others also began to move to other tables and soon Jake and the man in the Titan’s cap, had the table to themselves.

The man finished loading his pipe and said to Jake, “I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable, my wife says I never know when to shut up.” Jake grinned at the man and said, “Don’t feel bad, I’m told I have the same problem and I’m not a fan of Jarrett’s,” Jake said with a crooked smile. The man chuckled again and said, “Not many people are; Jarrett is a necessary evil around here and if you need things and want to do business you have to put up with him.” The man pulled out an old Zippo lighter and lit his pipe, puffing out a cloud of smoke. He asked Jake, “Does this bother you?” Jake shook his head no and continued eating.

The man puffed on his pipe quietly and looked around the room as Jake finished his food. Jake pushed back from the table and was contemplating going back for seconds when the man stuck his right hand across the table and said, “The names Jess Markham.” Jake put down his napkin and reached across the table and said, “Jake Craft, pleased to meat you.” The man smiled and said, “The pleasures all mine, anybody who don’t think as highly of Jarrett as Jarrett does, is alright by me.” Jake poured another cup of coffee and looked at the field jacket on the back of the man’s chair. He saw an 82nd airborne patch on the sleeve and combat infantry badge and senior parachutist wings on the left breast. He was impressed; if this guy had been in combat with the “Deuce”, he had probably seen the elephant. Jake took a sip of his coffee and asked, “I know what my beef is with Jarrett, Mr. Markham, what’s yours?”

Markham smiled and said, “Call me Jess; anyway, it’s a long story, but in a nutshell, I live in a small farming community in western Kentucky. We’ve been doing business with Jarrett for a couple of years. We trade food stuffs, tobacco, marijuana and locally produced alcohol; for medicine, fertilizer and other hard to obtain necessities. For the last 6 months or so, there have been some farms raided in our community. People have been killed, the farms stripped of anything useful and we believe some young women and girls have been kidnapped and taken away. With what I know of Jarrett, he’s probably in it up to his neck. That’s why I’m here, I’m trying to find out what I can and maybe threaten Jarrett to keep him from doing it, or allowing it to happen. I haven’t thought it all the way through yet and I sure don’t have proof that Jarrett’s involved, I guess I’m grasping at straws here.”

Jake nodded his head and said, “Well Jess, my recommendation would be to think this thing through before you take it any further. Jarrett probably has eyes and ears all over this place and I believe he would kill you in a minute for talking the way you are.” Jess thought over what Jake said as he puffed on his pipe. “You are probably right Jake; I have been trying to see Jarrett since 7:00am, this morning, with no luck. I got the impression from his clerk, Williams, that he’s avoiding me. I think I may have compounded the problem by asking around about raids on farms and who might be doing them. I did get a few leads, but not much.”

“If it were me, I’d take what I’ve got and get out of this place, while I still could.” Jake said, as he sipped his

coffee. “You’re probably right Jake, but I’m going to play this out and see where it leads, There’s a 14 year old girl missing, I owe her that much,” Markham said as he knocked the dottle out of his pipe on to his empty plate and put it away. Jake nodded and deciding he really didn’t want anything else to eat, stood up and took his rifle from the back of the chair. He slung it over his shoulder and said, “I wish you luck Jess, watch your back.” Markham just nodded his head and poured another cup of coffee as Jake walked out of the restaurant.

Jake walked out of the motel and headed out into the market area. His conversation with Markham reinforced his need to finish what he was doing and put this place behind him. He needed to stay focused and not let the luxuries of this place lull him into complacency. That was why Jake had stayed away from the bars and the strip club. Jake was only human and he knew if he started drinking, things might get out of hand. Jake wasn’t an alcoholic, but it was medicating himself with booze that cost him his marriage. When his wife left him and took the boy, he stopped drinking and shortly thereafter, went back to the Middle East as a contractor. By that time it didn’t take a genius to figure out that civilian life wasn’t working out for Jake.

He’d had a few drinks, mostly a beer or two, since then and never had a problem with it again. But, in these times, he had the mission to get home and he had no intention of screwing that up. He had to get what he needed and get out of here.

Jake spent the next couple of hours shopping. He bought a rubberized green shoulder bag, he guessed was some kind of foreign military haversack, for 40 cents, to carry the stuff he bought. He also bought another half pound of jerky and of all things, a half pound of oatmeal; he also got a box of baking soda to use as tooth powder. He wasn’t able to find any tent poles to use for the Alpha tent, or any suitable blue jeans. He would go with his current pair and the wool pants he bought the day before.

Probably the neatest thing he bought was an alcohol stove. It was an ingenious little device that was cut and hammered out of aluminum beer cans, by a guy at the Tinsmith’s booth. It came with printed directions, a small windscreen, pot stand and an 8 ounce bottle of grain alcohol, all contained in a small cloth bag. Jake bought a second bottle of alcohol for 20 cents. It would come in handy on the trail.

Jake marveled at some of the things at the Tinsmith’s booth. The guy made every item imaginable from cast off scrap metal. The most ingenious thing was a two burner copy of a Swedish alcohol stove to be used in the home. The Tinsmith said it was his biggest seller. It seems that most people had gas or electric stoves in their homes, which for obvious reasons no longer worked. Alcohol being the most common and inexpensive fuel available made it an ideal choice for home cooking. The guy told Jake he couldn’t make them fast enough. They were pricey though, at \$20.00 in silver.

Jake still had over \$40.00 in silver and he headed to where the firearms dealers were located. He walked through the area trying to find something within his price range. He was unable to find anything appreciably

better than the FR-8 in semi-auto. When he half heartedly offered all of his cash and the FR-8, in trade for a Romanian AK-47 and four magazines, he came up \$20.00 short. He was almost glad that he wasn't able to close the deal. The FR-8 might not have a high rate of fire, but it was much more accurate than an AK and Jake knew from experience that accurate fire, was effective fire..

As Jake got to the end of a row of booths and stands he saw a strikingly pretty woman, with a small boy and girl at the end of the row. The woman, although somewhat disheveled was a striking redhead and both small children were carrot tops too. They had some items laid out on a blanket and a large child's red wagon, heaped with their belongings. Jake walked up to the family out of curiosity and looked at what was displayed on the blanket. There were some jewelry items, an Ipod, some silverware and of all things, a Glock 22 pistol and 3 magazines. Jake spoke to the woman and asked, "Excuse me, how much do you have on the Glock?"

The woman looked pained and said, "I was asking \$50.00 in silver for it." Jake shook his head and said, "Sorry, that's too rich for my blood," and started to walk away. The woman said, "Mister, what are you willing to offer for it?" Jake stopped and turned around and came back to the blanket and knelt down. "Do you mind if I look at it?" The woman shook her head no and Jake picked up the Glock and cleared it.

Jake performed a function check and the pistol seemed operable. It was a late model 40 caliber, 15 shot Glock model 22, with Tritium night sights and appeared brand new. He examined the magazines and they also appeared to be new. As far as Jake could tell, it had not been fired, other than test firing at the factory.

Jake looked at the woman and said, "I have a limited amount of cash and if I bought it from you, I'd still have to buy ammunition and a holster. I would like the gun, but I don't see how I could afford it with these conditions." Jake looked at the woman and shrugged.

The woman looked at Jake determinedly and said, "Make me an offer." Jake did some calculating in his head and said, "The best I could do is \$20.00 that should leave me enough to buy ammunition and such." Jake didn't think she would take the deal and was shocked by what she said next.

"You've got a deal Mister." She said and stuck out her hand. Jake held up his hands and said, "Wait a minute, are you sure? I feel like I'm robbing you." The woman laughed and said, "You are the first man that's been forthright with me all day. Most of those guys," she jerked her head toward the gun and ammunition dealers, "have offered me a lot less and some of them made propositions that no decent woman would consider, not even in desperation. And I'm desperate! I'm trying to get too Memphis and the \$20.00 you offered will get me and my children there. The surprising thing is that you didn't ask me for sex, to close the deal."

Jake turned beat red and said, "Ma'am, my mother raised me never to take advantage of a lady in distress, it never crossed my mind!" The woman laughed musically and said, "That's alright, I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's been a long day. So, are you interested in my dead husband's gun, for \$20.00 in silver?"

Jake sighed and said, "You've got a deal, Ma'am."

Jake counted out the \$20.00 to the woman, who thanked him and shook his hand to close the deal. He put the Glock and 3 magazines in his haversack and wished her luck. She smiled and asked him, "Are you married Mister?" Jake said, "No, I'm divorced." The woman laughed and said, "Well Mister, if I didn't have family to go too in Memphis, I might try to work another deal with you. I'm a good worker, a good wife and according to my dad I, "throw good pups," she gestured at her two small beautiful children, "My husband went and got himself killed over something stupid and I'm going to have to find a new one pretty soon, if these kids are going to make it."

Jake looking embarrassed again, blushed and didn't know what to say. The woman laughed again and said, "Not only are you a gentleman, you're shy too, aren't you?" This time Jake laughed and said, "Well, I guess so Ma'am, I never was much of a ladies man." She smiled and said, "That speaks well of you Mister, good luck with your new gun." Jake smiled and wished her a safe trip and walked off, back up the row of gun and ammunition dealers.

Over the next 30 minutes, Jake was able to buy two boxes of 40 caliber, 155 grain, SXT police ammo for the Glock. He tried to find a decent drop leg holster for it, but nobody had one. What he settled for was a black leather shoulder holster, with a double magazine pouch attached, that was made, in of all places the Slovak Republic. It was made of good leather and fairly new. He had originally intended on selling the .38, but not being able to get a good leg holster for the Glock, changed his mind. Jake didn't have any experience with shoulder holsters and figured he needed a handgun he could get too quickly, if he had too. So he decided to keep the .38, for that reason alone. Besides, it had served him well and Jake was the kind of guy that became attached to good equipment.

After buying the ammo and holster he had \$12.00 and change left from \$50.00 he started with. He figured he had done about as much damage as he could for one day and headed for his room. He figured he would eat dinner in the restaurant, turn in and get an early start tomorrow. He had noticed James Carrington lurking around, but didn't see him now. The only thing he needed to do was avoid Jarrett, Benny and most of all Sweetley, before he left in the morning....

75 yards away, in the Hawk's rented warehouse; the Hawk, Jarrett and Greer had just closed the deal on the young girl and was each drinking a shot of bourbon to seal the deal. The hawk's women had done a good job of cleaning the girl up and making her pretty for Greer. They had also given her an intravenous dose of their dwindling supply of heroin, just to make her docile. They had made her look absolutely stunning and were even able to hide the bruises. Greer seemed to be pleased; so pleased that he met the asking price of 8 ounces of gold for the girl, without batting an eye.

Jarrett was also pleased, as Hawk figured he should be. Jarrett got 40% of everything he brokered for the Hawk and he brokered a lot of plunder. The hawk felt like he had been cheated, but what could he do?

Jarrett provided everything the Hawk and his Reavers needed in way of support and a safe haven. But Jarrett's was starting to wear on the Hawk.

Greer shook both of their hands and motioned to two of his men to take the girl. Greer's men took the girl's arms and quickly snapped handcuffs and leg irons on her and hustled her out of the warehouse, where Greer's modified school bus waited for the trip to Memphis. The bus was painted a dark, mottled brown color, to include the side windows. The bus had also been reinforced with add on armor plate and there was an armored gun cupola on the roof, with of all things, what looked like a German MG 42 mounted on a ring mount. There were also 3 additional SUV's and a 4 ton truck in Greer's convoy to Memphis.

As Greer was about to leave, he laughed and said to Jarrett, "Hey Bob, I got a good one for you." "Oh Yeah?" asked Jarrett, "Get a load of this; before I came over here a good looking redhead, with 2 little kids comes to my room. The redhead asks if I'm the man convoying to Memphis and could she get a ride? I tells her sure, as long as you can pay the fare. She asks me what the fare for her and her kids would be and I says oh, \$10.00 silver for you and \$5.00 apiece for the kids. She looks real desperate like and says she can come up with it. So I tells her fine, meet me at the southeast gate at 3:00. Now here's the funny part; if she shows up no matter what she came up with, I'm going to let her and those 2 kids get on the bus. Then about 10 miles down the road she's gonna realize that she sold herself and her 2 brats into slavery. Ain't that a hoot?" Greer finished. Jarrett busted out with a belly laugh and said, "I swear only somebody as devious as you woulda come up with that one Greer, only you." Jarrett slapped him on the back and walked him to the warehouse door.

As Greer's convoy started toward the southeast gate, Jarrett turned to the Hawk, who had also walked outside. "Well Hawk that was a good piece of business. Now on to another little piece of business." Jarrett had the 8 fat gold one ounce Krugerans in his hand and was shaking them. "Hawk how would you like all 8 of these?" The hawk looked Jarrett in the eye and said, "Sure, who do I have to kill?" "Well funny that you should mention it, I need you to take out a guy named Jess Markham. He's from over in Kentucky and he's been pestering my people about the raiding that's been going on over there. I'm supposed to meet him at the Crazy 8 at 9:00pm and I want you to pick a fight with him and kill him." Jarrett said by way of explanation.

The Hawk thought about it for a few minutes and said, "O.K. Jarrett, but I got an adjustment to the deal; I want 10 ounces to kill the Markham guy and you throw in this Jake character as a bonus. I want him too, and you know why." Jarrett laughed and said, "Yeah Hawk, I know why; you can't stand it that people might think somebody is faster than you. Alright, you've got a deal. You take them both out, but remember; it's gotta be seen as a fair fight, or we're both in trouble. As far as Jake goes, I'll smooth things over with Sweetley, I can't afford to have you two going at each other."

The Hawk said, "Alright, deal!" Jarrett laughed and said, "Now here's the funny part, it looks like Jake and Markham know each other. One of my snitches saw them having breakfast together this morning and they were pretty chummy. I don't know what that's about but hey, they might be together tonight and you can get

them both at the same time.” Jarrett continued laughing as he walked off toward the main truck stop building, trailed by his two bodyguards.

The Hawk smiled for the first time since yesterday. Last night with the girl had left him less than satisfied. He was preoccupied with this Jake and his own insecurities. But now, closure was in sight. He would take three of his toughest Reaver’s to the club tonight and settle this, once and for all. Everyone would know that he was the best and to be feared by all. The Hawk walked back in the warehouse to plan and get a few hours rest before nightfall...

75 yards away, as Jake approached the front of the motel, he saw Jess Markham walking toward him. Markham smiled and said, “Afternoon Jake, did you get fleeced, or did you do the fleecing?” Jake smiled and said, “I made some pretty good deals, but I’ve used up most of my cash. I guess that means it’s about time to go.”

Oh, are you heading out now?” Jess asked. Jake thought about it for a second before answering. Jess wasn’t really prying into his business and besides, Jake found that he was really coming to like the guy, so he said, “No, not today, I’m probably going to head out tomorrow.” Jess nodded and asked, “Which way are you headed?” Jake hesitated and Jess added, “Hey, I’m not being nosy, I was just going to say, if you were heading north or east, I could give you a ride. At least as far as Johnsville, Kentucky.”

Jake thought for a moment and said, “It just so happens I’m headed that way, at least generally. Why don’t we go to my room and look at my road atlas and you can show me where it is.” Jess shrugged and said, “”why not? I don’t have anywhere to be until 9:00pm tonight, lead the way.” Jake smiled and said, “Follow me sir.”

As Jake and Jess entered the motel, Greer’s convoy drove past toward the southeast gate. If Jess would have had any inkling that the young girl he was looking for, was on that bus, he would have stormed it by himself. It was probably better that he didn’t know. Greer’s convoy stopped at the gate and picked up the redheaded woman and her two children. Three more innocent lives were unknowingly heading into misery...

Chapter 5, The Crucible of Combat

Jake and Jess Markham were sitting at the table in Jake's room. They were drinking coffee and had just finished doing a map recon of Jake's road atlas. By their reckoning, Johnsville was 66 miles away and Jess had offered to give Jake a ride there. Jake had agreed eagerly to the offer, especially after talking over his intended trip to Ohio with Jess.

Jake had originally figured to go through southern Illinois and Indiana, in order to get home, generally shadowing the Interstate freeways. But, after talking to Markham, he figured that he would be better off going through Kentucky. Markham had told Jake that due to topography and rural family bonds, Kentucky had pretty much stabilized in the past year or so; at least outside of the few large cities in the state. Those larger cities, such as Lexington, Louisville and Paducah, were virtually burnt out, disease ridden shells and should be avoided at all costs. But otherwise, Jess believed that Jake would have better luck and safer travel, by going through Kentucky. He also felt that by using what had become a modern day, word of mouth jungle telegraph; Jake could travel from community to community, through the hills and mountains, with few problems.

Markham also told Jake that with the way things were now, he might even be able to get word to his family in Ohio, that he was coming; because there was quite a bit of communication and commerce being conducted along the Ohio River. Jess even thought that Jake wouldn't have to do much walking. There was quite a bit of travel from community to community and he felt that it wouldn't be too difficult to hitch rides.

Jake thought all of this over and got excited at the prospect of expediting his trip home. Especially, now that it was getting colder. If things only went half as smoothly as Jess thought they would, Jake could be home by Christmas; if there was still a home to get to.

Jake and Jess had spent some time talking over their individual experiences in the army, while Jake cleaned and loaded the Glock and made sure the shoulder holster was adjusted and fit properly. It was during this conversation that Jake discovered Jess was a veteran of the invasion of Panama and also of what Jess referred to as "Desert snore" (Desert Storm, the first Gulf war). Like the two old soldiers they were, they shared their combat experiences with each other, without any bravado. Just two guys exercising that special bond of both having been in hard places and seeing good friends maimed and killed.

As they were finishing their coffee and as Jake was trying on the shoulder holster, Jess said, "Jake, there is somebody I want to introduce you to, before I go see Jarrett tonight. His name is Mark Webb and he's guarding my Landcruiser, down in the parking lot. I'm going to tell him that I promised you a ride and if anything goes wrong with Jarrett tonight, I want you guys to leave immediately and head for Johnsville."

Jake thought about it for a minute and said, "Jess you're crazy for doing this. If you walk in there alone,

Jarrett may well have you killed.” Jess sighed and said, “I know Jake, but what choice do I have?” Jake threw up his hands and shrugged as Markham continued, “We are going to get hit again and the next time it might well be my place. I’ve got a pretty defensible location and plenty of weapons and ammo. But the drawbacks are the only real shooters I have are my two brothers, a 15 year old nephew, my 13 year old daughter and in a pinch, our wives. I have been training them, but none of them has ever been under fire and that worries me. Along with that, I’ve got a sister in law that is a total pacifist, who has made a sport of undermining everything I do. Also on the debit side, between me and my brothers’ families, we have seven other kids, four of them less than 6 years old! I don’t know what else to do.”

Jake sat down and said, “Jess, granted you’ve got to go see Jarrett, but you can’t go alone. What about this Mark Webb, can he back your play? Jess shook his head and said, “No way, Mark is a good man, but Jarrett’s thugs would eat him alive. He only stayed with me today, to watch the Landcruiser, because he drew the short straw.”

Jake looked Jess in the eyes and said, “I guess that only leaves one choice, I’ll have to back your play.” Markham shook his head and said adamantly, “Look Jake, I can’t ask you to do that! You could get yourself killed; I don’t want that on my conscience.”

Jake let out a short laugh and said, “Jess, this is my choice and something I feel the need to do. I spent the last year and a half in Arkansas, all be it not by choice, doing the dirty work of a man a lot worse than Jarrett. It is something I thought I’d come to terms with, but no amount of rationalization will change what I allowed myself to do. Maybe doing this for you will be some atonement. Hell, I don’t know, but regardless of what you say, I’m gonna have your back at the Crazy 8 tonight.” Markham reached across the table and shook Jake’s hand and said, “Alright lets figure out how we’re going to skin this cat.”

Fifteen minutes later they thought they had come up with what was a workable approach that hopefully, wouldn’t get them killed. Jake would go into the Crazy 8, 15 minutes before Jess was to meet with Jarrett; He would case the place and try to take up a position where he could surreptitiously cover Jess’s back during the meeting. He would also hang back in the club and cover Jess’s exit, if he was given the opportunity to leave. They would meet Webb back at the Landcruiser, go get Jake’s pack from the Jenkins’ and pull out tonight.

If things went sideways in the club, they would rally near the entrance to the hallway the connected all three buildings, at the rear of the room and try to make their way out in the confusion. If this occurred, they were going to brief Webb that if he heard gunfire from the Crazy 8, he was to wait ten minutes then take the Toyota out of the southeast gate and head east down the county road and pull off 200 yards past the FEMA camp. He was to wait for them there; if they didn’t show up within an hour after the shooting, he was on his own. It wasn’t much of a plan, but it was all they came up with.

They had also concluded that Jarrett knew that they had met and were friendly with each other. As far as

Jake knew, Jarrett knew they were together now and somebody was watching the room. He figured they needed an edge and the only thing he could think of was to change his appearance; he decided to shave off his beard, which should help in the dark club. As far as his clothing went, he couldn't do anything about that. Then he had an idea. "Hey Jess, how big is Webb?" "Markham thought a moment and said, "Webb's a little taller than you and kind of gangly. He used to be heavyset, but the last few years took care of that. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I had the idea of maybe switching jackets with him, to help alter my appearance." Said Jake

"That would probably work, he's wearing an old barn coat and it should fit you. You could also switch caps with him, he's wearing an old feed cap, that should help too."

Jake smiled and said, "Stay here while I go shave." Jake got his toiletries kit out of his butt pack and headed into the bathroom. He didn't have any shaving cream, but the soap in the bathroom would do. Jake lathered his face as best he could and began hacking at his face with one of his two disposable razors. He was glad he had the barber trim the beard; the job of shaving it off would have been more difficult if he hadn't. A few minutes later he walked back into the room and was putting his shaving kit back in the butt pack when Jess exclaimed, "Man, do you look different!" Jake laughed and said, "That's what I'm counting on. If Jarrett's people don't know it's me, all the better."

At this point, Jake started preparing for combat. He didn't want to give the impression of being armed to the teeth, when he went into the Crazy 8. He took off his shirt and put the shoulder holster on over his long underwear top. He put his shirt back on and only buttoned the bottom 3 buttons. The shirt was big enough on him that you couldn't easily see the holstered Glock. He drew the Glock and cleared it and practiced pulling it out of his shirt a half a dozen times. He felt comfortable with the setup, with one exception; even though the Glock seemed to function well, he had never fired it. He hoped he wouldn't have to find out whether it worked or not.

He reloaded the Glock and put it back in the holster and tucked in his shirt. He also unsnapped the revolver speed loader pouch from his LBE and put it on his operator's belt, in front of his right hip bone. He had six speed loaders for the .38 (4 in his shirt pockets), for a total of 36 rounds of +P, soft points. He had three magazines for the Glock for a total of 45 rounds of .40 caliber hollow points. He drew out the Glock again, dropped the magazine and inserted another round; he now had 15 in the magazine and 1 in the chamber, for a total of 46 rounds for the Glock. The last thing he did, was un-clip the Techlocked, Kydex sheathed, BK-7 utility knife from his LBE and put it on his operators belt, behind his right hip. Jake would go to this prospective fight carrying 82 rounds of ammunition, 2 pistols and a very sharp knife. He hoped he wouldn't have to use any of them.

Jess Markham was also pretty well armed. He was wearing a level IIA ballistic vest under his shirt and had a customized .45 automatic, in a high ride holster on his right hip. He had a total of 10 magazines for the

.45, 4 on his belt in a duplex magazine pouch and the other 6 in his jacket pockets. He also showed Jake the Beretta .380 automatic he carried in an ankle holster, with 2 spare magazines, on his left leg.

Jess looked at his watch and said, "It's going on 6:30pm and we should see about getting ourselves something to eat. I would say that Webb needs a break too; so why don't we go to the Landcruiser and you can put your gear in their. Then we can eat."

Jake said, "Sure, sounds good to me, but tell me where it's parked and I'll come a few minutes after you. The less we are seen together, the better."

"O.K., it's parked out front near the truck stop building." Said Jess

"I've got a better idea, why don't you go get it and park it behind this building near the back of the parking lot. I'll watch for you, and meet you in the lot. That way, we have less of a chance of being seen together."

"Sounds good to me, I'll see you in a few minutes." Jess said, as he left the motel room

Jake finished getting his gear together and made one last check of the room before leaving. Before he left, he decided to take all four packets of coffee that were left and all of the cream and sugar packs. He went into the bathroom and took the 2 remaining, unopened bars of motel soap and the remaining tiny bottle of shampoo. He stuffed all of this in the butt pack and shouldered his rifle and equipment. He went to the window and peeked out of the curtains and looked both left and right down the landing. He didn't see anybody and was glad the sun had set. Jake opened the door and quietly closed it behind him. He quickly but quietly went to the exterior stairs and went down them.

When he got downstairs, Jake ducked into the breezeway that led to the parking lot and stepped into the shadows. He didn't see or hear anyone and thought, "So far, so good." Jake edged to the rear of the breezeway and waited for the Landcruiser to arrive. Several minutes later, the faded blue vehicle rounded the southern end of the building and backed into an empty space at the rear of the parking lot. Jake could see two men in the front seats; he took one more look around and not seeing anyone else, rapidly walked between the few parked vehicles and made his way to the Toyota.

As he got up to the passenger side door, Jess stepped out and asked, "Did anybody see you?" Jake continued around to the rear of the vehicle and said, "Not as far as I could tell."

Jess had followed Jake and the guy in the driver's seat also got out and walked to the rear of the vehicle. Jake saw that he was a tall, slope shouldered, freckle faced man in a bright green feed hat and a faded blue denim barn coat. As he walked up, Jess said, "Mark this is the guy I was telling you about, Jake Craft; Jake Craft, this is my neighbor Mark Webb." Jake and Mark shook hands and exchanged pleasantries as Jess opened the rear doors of the Toyota and said, "Go ahead and dump you gear in here Jake"

Jake put the FR-8, LBE and haversack on the floor between the jump seats. He noticed some kind of green tactical vest, with bulging pouches all over it, an HK 91 and a short barreled Mossberg shotgun lying in the floor. He looked at the HK 91 and said, "Nice HK 91."

Markham laughed and said, "That's not an H&K, it's a PTR 91." Jake looked at him with some confusion, as Jess continued, "It's an American copy, made to H&K specifications, on tooling bought from the Portuguese government. It has a heavier barrel and a better finish than the original 91, but it's essentially the same rifle. I kind of got hooked on the locking roller, delayed blowback system a few years back. I have several variations to include an HK 91, a Cetme and a couple more of these. They are great rifles, but they take some getting used to."

Jake nodded his head, impressed with the rifle; he did have some familiarity with this type of rifle. He had done some joint training with Norwegian and Pakistani troops and they carried G-3's (the select fire, military version), and he had fired familiarization courses with it. He thought it was a reliable, hard hitting weapon. Jake especially liked the sights and wished he had one in place of the FR-8. They could lay out an awesome amount of accurate firepower. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons he liked the FR-8 so much, was due to the sights being similar to those on an HK 91.

Jake looked at his Seiko and saw that it was almost 6:45pm and said, "We have more than two hours until you meet with Jarrett. I don't know about you two, but I'm for getting something to eat" Jess nodded his head and said, "Yeah, I'm getting hungry too, but I don't think it's wise for us to go to the restaurant together. And, we all three can't go, somebody has to stay with the cruiser."

At this point, Mark Webb said in a pronounced Kentucky drawl, "Ya'll don't need to worry bout me, I ate about an hour ago. I got a couple of burgers and some home fries from one of the stands. I figured it was ok; cause I was able to keep an eye on the truck from the stand. The meat tasted kinda funny, but it was still purty good."

Jake thought for a moment and said, "Mark could you go get me and Jess some food from the same stand?" Mark answered, "Sure, if it's still open, but hey, when are you fellers gonna tell me whats goin on?" Jess said, "I've got a better idea, I'll go get the food Jake; Mark you stay here and Jake will fill you in on what's going on and your part in it. So, where is this burger stand?" Mark said, "Whatever you say Jess; It's the third booth down the row from the truck stop building. The guys got a big smoker grill, you can't miss him."

Jake reached into his pocket and brought out a handful of silver coins and offering them to Jess said, "Get me a couple of burgers and some fries." Jess waved off the money and said, "I'll buy Jake, in these circumstances it's the least I can do." Jake nodded and put the money back in his pocket. Jess asked Mark if he wanted anything else and Mark said, "No, I'm good." Jess said, "Don't get alarmed if it takes a while. If

the burger guy is closed, I'll have to get something from the motel restaurant." With that Jess walked off toward the breezeway that led through the motel.

While they waited for Jess to return, Jake briefed Mark on what was going on and his part in it. Jake couldn't fault Webb's courage, for after he briefed him Webb said, "Don't you think it'd be better if I went with you? I mean three guns would give better odds than two." Jake shook his head emphatically and said, "No Mark, I don't see it that way. Jess has to go in there and I have a lot more experience at this sort of thing than you do. Our best chance of coming out of this alive is if you stay with the vehicle and act according to the plan." Mark thought about it for a moment and said, "Awright Jake, I'll do it your way. I'd do anything for Jess Markham; if'n it hadn't been for him, me and my family would've starved to death two years ago. If this is how he wants to do it, that's how it'll be." Jake said, "Good, now give me your hat and coat."

Twenty minutes later, Jess Markham came back carrying two plastic grocery bags. Jake and Mark had been sitting in the front seats of the Toyota and stepped out as Jess walked up. They all three walked around to the back of the vehicle, where Jess passed one of the bags to Jake and said, "That's a pretty good disguise Jake; I sure wouldn't have known you." Jake threw up his hands and said, "Let's hope the bad guys don't either."

Jake was now wearing Webb's faded blue barn coat and bright green feed cap. He had also taken off his shirt, in order to gain better access to the shoulder holster. He was only wearing his long underwear top and the shoulder holster under the barn coat, but the coat was lined and he was warm enough. Webb was wearing Jake's field jacket and Mossy Oak, Gortex cap. While they were exchanging clothes, Jake noticed that Webb had a large revolver in a cross draw holster, on a leather cartridge belt; he hoped Webb knew how to use it.

As they started eating their burgers Jess said, "You were right Mark, these do taste kinda funny." Jake after taking his first bite of burger, started laughing and said, "You might be surprised to know you are probably eating a Golden Retriever burger." Webb's eyes got real big and Jess said, "What?" Jake laughed again and explained about his run in with the dogs and the Jenkins' family. He finished by saying, "I think I know what happened to all of that meat Charlie said he could sell." Webb didn't seem too happy about possibly having eaten a dog, but Jess was more pragmatic about it, as he started on his second burger he said, "Oh well, meat's meat; they taste pretty good and it probably won't kill me."

They finished eating and began the wait until they had to be at the Crazy 8. Webb volunteered to top off their canteens at the truck stop, saying he had to go to the bathroom and have, "a sit down." Jess laughed and said, "That Golden Retriever giving you some trouble there Mark?" For the first time Webb laughed and said, "No, it's just anytime I think you might get me killed, I gotta go." Jess turned serious and said, "I appreciate you being in on this Mark, you can pull out at any time, you know that." Mark shook his head and said, "No Jess, that ain't an option." With that statement, he turned and walked toward the truck stop building carrying the empty canteens.

Webb was back within 15 minutes and they all sat in the Toyota and went over the plan again. Webb fidgeted and Jess smoked his pipe, Jake sat in the back on one of the jump seats and started putting on his war face. He did this by playing what if scenarios with a possible fight at the Crazy 8 and planning for any contingency. Jake knew that if things went sideways tonight, the best way to survive was to take the initiative and keep it. He did another weapons and ammo check and sat back to wait.

At 8:40pm, Jess looked at his watch for the hundredth time and said, "It's time Jake." Jake said, "Right." and stepped out of the back doors of the Landcruiser and walked around to the passenger side. He leaned his elbows on the door sill and asked, "Everybody knows what they have to do?" Jess and Mark both said they did. Jake smiled and said, "Well boys, here goes nothing; I'll see you on the other side of this thing." He walked off toward the breezeway that led through to the front of the motel

As Jake got out front, he checked his reflection in the big lobby window of the motel. As he was adjusting his cap lower over his eyes, he saw the clerk, Harold at the check in counter and Harold saw him. There was no recognition in Harold's eyes as he looked at Jake. It looked like Jake's disguise was effective. Jake turned away and started walking toward the strip club. "So far, so good."

Jake entered through the main entrance of the Crazy 8 and was immediately blasted by the loud music. Jake made the 2 security guys at the door, but didn't detect any other security types, as of yet. The place was fairly crowded but there seemed to be plenty of tables. Jake looked toward where Jess told him Jarrett held court; a large horseshoe shaped booth on a raised platform, near the center of the back wall of the club. Jake made his way to a back row of tables and found a small unoccupied table with three chairs, where he could keep his back to the wall. Jake sat down and started scanning the room and marking potential threat areas and taking in what was going on.

In a lot of respects the Crazy 8 was a typical Strip club, with elements of a casino thrown in. There were partially and totally nude young women dancing on stages scattered throughout the club; being cheered on by the crowd. The bar was a large, oval island located approximately in the center of the club. In the very center of the bar was a large runway type stage, with three girls dancing above the bartenders. There was also a semi-private room divided into small alcoves, with couches in them, for the ubiquitous couch dances. There were blackjack, roulette, and craps tables; all crowded and in full swing.

Off to Jake's right, was a stairwell leading upstairs, with a large hard looking woman sitting at a desk adjacent to it and an armed guard was standing behind her. As Jake was watching, one of the scantily clad dancers led a man up to the desk. The man and the hard looking woman had a short conversation; the man handed her some money and the dancer took his hand and led him upstairs. Jake assumed he had located the prostitution operation.

As Jake sat there taking things in, he started to get angry. Jake had never liked these places much; not that

he was a prude, but Jake was the kind of guy that didn't care much for the phony lust and attraction these women professed to have for their customers, in order to get paid. Jake didn't begrudge the dancers making a living; he just never cared to play along with the con. But tonight, that wasn't the problem; the problem lay in the fact that a lot of these dancers and waitresses were very, very young. A brunette, dancing on a small stage near Jake couldn't have been more than 14 or 15 years old and she appeared to be drugged. Her eyes were glassy and she was not dancing to the beat of the music. There were several men cheering her on, but she didn't seem to know they were there.

Jake felt the rage growing in him and had to repress the urge to start killing some of the leeches around him. He needed to stay focused, but he could use this outrage in the fight if need be. Jake had found that he was able to channel his rage and remain focused in a fight and it had worked very well for him in the past. Oh yes, Jake was almost hoping for a good fight, because this place sickened him!

As Jake sat there stewing, a young waitress came up to the table and hesitantly asked, "S-s-sir, could I get you something?" The young girl, maybe 16 years old, was wearing nothing but a G-string and this fact both shamed Jake and caused his rage to spike. As he looked at her, the young girl recoiled a couple of steps, from the frightening look on Jake's face. Jake caught himself and softening his expression said, "I'm sorry, I was a million miles away, what did you say?" The girl, appearing flustered said, "I just asked if I could get you anything?" Jake smiled at her sincerely and said, "Yes you can Miss, bring me a beer, ok?" The girl smiled back hesitantly at him and turned away to go get him a beer.

Jake brought his expression and his body language into neutral. He didn't want to attract any attention and blow his cover. He sat there and continued scanning the room for a few minutes, when the young girl came back with his beer. "That'll be 50 cents sir." Jake wasn't surprised that the beer was pricey and was sure that Jarrett was making a vast profit. He paid the girl, tipped her a dime and thanked her for the beer. As she walked away, Jake took a sip of the beer and found that it was cold and tasted pretty good, although it had a somewhat harsher aftertaste and was heavier than most domestic beers from before the collapse. Jake figured that Jarrett either had his own micro-brewery or somebody else did and was selling Jarrett beer.

Jake looked at his watch and saw that it was 5 minutes till 9:00; as he looked back up, Jarrett made a grand entrance surrounded by 4 of his bodyguards, to include Benny. Jake had to chuckle at Benny's face; Benny had two spectacular black eyes and his nose was bandaged and taped all the way down his cheek bones to the jaw line. Jake hadn't thought he'd hit him that hard, but obviously he had.

Jarrett glad handed a few admirers, spoke to one of the bartenders and made his way to his reserved table. A waitress immediately sat a bottle of bourbon and several glasses on the table, as Jarrett sat down. The bodyguards took up positions around the table and scanned the room. Jarrett sat back in the booth and poured himself a stiff shot of Bourbon, took a sip and smiled. To Jake, Jarrett appeared to be smugly pleased about something, and was enjoying the moment.

A couple of minutes later, an almost physical ripple went through the crowd and Jake's eyes were immediately drawn toward the main entrance. A group of four young men had walked through the door and the crowd's fear of them was palpable. They were all dressed alike; wearing black $\frac{3}{4}$ length trench coats and mostly black clothing. All of them had their collar length to shoulder length hair dyed black and all appeared to be wearing black eyeliner and black nail polish. Jake recognized them as "Goth's;" Adherents to the Gothic movement in music and dress of the late 20th Century. To Jake, they looked almost comical, but to others in the club, they were to be feared. They were also heavily armed and from the easy way they carried their weapons, were comfortable in their use.

The Goth's moved to a table near the bar and with a gesture at the occupants cleared the table, where they all sat down but one. The one left standing was tall, thin to the point of starvation and had what looked like some kind of Glock strapped to his right leg. He looked toward Jarrett across the room, caught Jarrett's eye, nodded and sat down. Jarrett held his shot glass up in mock salute and laughed. He then tossed down the contents and poured himself another one. Jake was pretty sure he had found the ones who maybe intended to kill Jess.

Speaking of the devil; Jess walked through the main entrance and made his way toward Jarrett's table. He was punctual, as he and Jake agreed upon. As he stepped up to the nearest bodyguard, Jarrett stood up, said something and motioned Jess to come up and sit down. The bodyguard stepped aside and Jess stepped up on the raised platform. Jarrett stood up, made a show of shaking Jess's hand and slapping him on the back, offered him a seat. Jess sat down, Jarrett sat also and poured Jess and himself a drink.

Jarrett made a toast and as Jess was tossing back his shot, Jarrett laid his right forefinger along side of his nose and tapped it three times. The skinny Goth leader said something to two of his goons and they got up and went about ten feet away and stood near the bar. The remaining goon shifted to a seat next to the skinny leader and fidgeted with something under his right arm. Jake figured he had a sawed off shotgun under the trench coat.

Jake, as unobtrusively as possible, took a final sip of his beer and got up from the table. He slowly made his way along the back wall of the club and headed around the periphery of the room to the bar. He got to the bar and eased down it until he was where he could both see the two Goths at the bar and the two sitting at the table. He shouldered his way up to the bar and bought another beer. He turned around and placed his back to the bar and acted like he was interested in the dancer on a small stage, near the Goth leader's table and waited.

Jake was in a position to observe all of the players; Jarrett and Jess were in a heated conversation, with a lot of gesticulating and apparent anger on Jess's part. Jarrett just laughed and then appeared to turn serious; he gestured toward the Goth leaders table and said something. Jess turned and looked toward the Goth's table; the skinny Goth leader, who had been watching the exchange between the two men intently, smiled and threw a mocking salute at Jess. Jess turned back to Jarrett, said something and stood up. The bodyguards

had stepped toward the table, but Jarrett waved them back. Jess said something else to Jarrett, turned and made his way determinedly toward the Goth leader's table.

“Oh sh#t, here we go,” thought Jake. He sat the beer mug on the bar, eased his right hand down and unsnapped the thumb break on the revolver holster, gripping the .38. He figured to start with the .38 because he knew it would work. He would, hopefully, be able to transition to the Glock if he had too, and he prayed that it would work too.

As Jess was stalking purposefully toward the Goth's table, Jarrett got up and he and his bodyguards moved toward the stairway, where Jake had seen the dancer take the John. Jarrett and his guys stopped there and were watching things unfold with Jess and the Goths.

Jess walked up to the table, pointed his finger at the Goth and said something. Jake was no more than 8 feet away, but due to the loud music couldn't make out what Jess was saying. Jake started moving toward them, to close the distance. The Goth leader stopped smiling and he and his shotgunner got to their feet. The Goth leader threw back his coat exposing the Glock on his thigh and said, and this Jake heard, “I'm gonna enjoy this, but I'm sorry your friend Jake isn't here, I've got something for him too.” Jake rapidly closed the distance to 4 feet behind the Goth's left shoulder and said, “Be careful what you wish for a\$\$hole, it may come true.”

Jake had to give it to him; the skinny ba\$tard was fast, but not fast enough. The Goth rapidly turned and drew on Jake, but before he could fire, Jake had already drawn the .38 and speed rocked two rounds into the guy's center of mass. As the Goth leader started to collapse, Jake locked his right arm out and fired one more round at his head, completing a failure drill. The Goth leader went down turning over the table and impeding his shotgunner, who was trying to get his weapon out of his coat. Jake traversed left toward the two goons at the bar, as he saw Jess draw the .45 and fire three rapid shots toward the shotgunner.

Jake closed his left hand around his right on the grip of the revolver and assumed a classic modified Weaver stance, shooting the goon closest to him twice, center of mass; he went down like he was pole axed, before he could draw his pistol. Jake traversed to the second goon, who was having trouble getting an AK-47 from under his coat. Jake snapped off his remaining round, it was an obvious hit, because the guy stumbled against the bar and fired a few rounds from the AK into the floor. The .38 being empty, Jake dove around the curve of the bar and executed a rapid speed load. Jake stepped back out around the curve of the bar and before he could engage the guy with the AK, the back of that guy's head exploded all over the bar and he collapsed like a sack of grain..

Jake traversed to his right and saw Jess standing in an Isosceles triangle stance, holding the custom .45. Jake not knowing whether the shotgunner was down, started looking for him. He was lying next to the Goth leader frothing foamy blood from his mouth and convulsing. Jess had obviously settled his hash. The fight probably hadn't lasted more than 5 or 6 seconds and they'd put down four men; and now women were

screaming, men were shouting, and everyone was trying to get out of the club at once. That's when all hell broke loose.

Automatic weapons fire started knifing into the crowd and tearing up the bar and tables all around Jake and Jess. Jake went immediately prone and started looking for Jess. Jess yelled, "I'm hit!" and crashed to the floor 6 feet from Jake. Jake holstered the revolver and reached into his jacket drawing the Glock, and started high crawling toward Jess, pulling over tables and chairs as he went, as dubious cover and concealment. As Jake got to Jess, the auto-fire stopped and everyone who could move, rapidly streamed out of the Crazy 8. Jake could hear empty magazines hitting the floor and the clicks and clatter of men reloading weapons over the scurrying of the people trying to get out.

Jess was reloading the .45 and seemed to be ok, so Jake chanced looking over an overturned table, toward where the fire had come from. He saw Jarrett's bodyguards, 30 feet away, ranked in front of the stairwell. They had all obviously ran dry at once and were in the process of reloading as Jake took them under fire. From a kneeling position and behind the scant protection of the table; Jake, traversing from left to right, fired two rounds apiece at the first three bodyguards. Jake aimed low, for the pelvic region of each man, because he knew they were wearing body armor. The first one sat down with a surprised look on his face and collapsed backward; the second one grunted and fell into the third taking them both down, which caused Jake to miss, but the guy was still out of the fight, at least momentarily. Jake was more than pleased that the Glock worked flawlessly.

That left the fourth bodyguard, Benny Nyby, still fumbling with a magazine for his MP-5. Benny locked eyes with Jake and recognition was almost immediate, he let out an inarticulate scream, turned and fled into the stairwell. Jake snapped off three rounds toward Benny's fleeing back, but Benny got into the stairwell and disappeared. Jarrett was nowhere to be found. The third bodyguard untangled himself from his partner and while he was struggling to his knees, Jake shot him twice in the head and he collapsed back on his partner. Jake ducked back behind the table, executed a tactical reload, pocketing the partially empty magazine and high crawled back over to Jess.

As he got back to Jess he asked, "How bad is it?" Jess groaned and said, "It's the leg, but I don't think it's broken, it isn't bleeding much, but it hurts like hell. I think I took two in the back, but I can't tell if they penetrated the vest." Jake said, "Let me see," and rolled a groaning Jess onto his left side and pulled up his jacket, so he could get his hand under the vest. There was no blood and Jake told Jess as much. Jess was visibly relieved and asked, "What now?"

Jake looked around and didn't see any immediate threats, so he stood up, reached down and helped a groaning Jess to his feet. Jake draped Jess's right arm over his left shoulder and used his left arm to support Jess around the waist and said. "Come on Airborne, what happens now is we get out of here, I hope your buddy waited for us." Jess grunted and put some weight on his right leg and wincing with pain said, "Mark will be there and I think this leg will hold, come on lets go." Jake had an Idea and took Jess to the bar and

said, “here lean on the bar and watch the doors, I’ll be right back.” Jess nodded and said, “Ok, but hurry up, I don’t know how long I’ll be able to stand here, without passing out.”

Jake went to the shotgunner, lying near the overturned table, holstered the Glock and knelt down. The guy was very obviously dead, having drowned in his own blood. Jake looked over at the body of the Goth leader and saw no signs of life there. Jake turned back to the shotgunner and pulled back the bloody trench coat and found a cut down, side folding stocked, Remington 1187, 12 gauge shotgun, with the barrel sawed off even with the magazine tube. It was attached by a nylon loop to the guy’s right shoulder.

Jake was able to unclip the sling loop from the swivel near the hinge point of the stock, and retrieve the shotgun. Jake ejected the chambered round and caught it in his left hand; he saw that it was a green double ought buckshot round. When he had opened the bolt, another green round had sprung on to the feed ramp, ready to chamber. Jake let the bolt go forward, chambering the round and fed the round from his hand into the tubular magazine. He pushed his thumb against the base of the round and discovered that the magazine was full. He figured there were 4 rounds in the magazine, with one in the chamber, which gave him five in the gun. Jake rapidly searched the guy’s pockets and came up with five more shotgun rounds, which he pocketed. He now had some extra firepower, in case they needed it.

Jake went back to get Jess and while holding the shotgun in his right hand by the pistol grip, helped Jess hobble to the rear entrance of the club, which led into the connecting passageway, between the club, the truck stop and the motel. Jake noticed quite a few dead and wounded lying in the club. He was amazed at the indiscriminate carnage caused by Jarrett’s bodyguards only emptying one magazine apiece. He didn’t have time to feel bad about it as he got to the passageway and turned Jess right toward the motel. As they entered the passageway, they heard shouts coming from the main entrance of the club, but didn’t hang around to see who was doing the shouting.

As they headed toward the motel, two men came running toward them, armed with M-16’s. The two men pointed the M-16’s at them and the one in the lead shouted at Jake and Jess, “drop your weapons, get on the ground!” Jake threw off Jess’s arm and let him drop to the floor; Jake dove forward and rolled to his right coming up into a prone position and as he started to engage the threat with the Remington, heard four rapid, very loud, booming shots coming from behind the guys with the M-16’s. The guy on the left crumpled to the floor like a rag doll, and the one on the right grunted and stumbled against the wall. Jake fired one round of buck shot into the guy’s torso, taking him out of the fight for good.

At that point, Mark Webb came running up with a smoking Ruger Red Hawk, .44 magnum in his right hand and said, “I got tired of waiting and figured you fellers might need some help.” Jake got up and asked, “Where’s the vehicle?” Mark knelt down next to Jess and said, “Its right behind the motel, so let’s go.” Jake sighed and said, “You hope it’s still behind the motel; anyway, help Jess and I’ll bring up the rear.” Mark helped Jess to his feet and moved out. Jake thumbed another round into the magazine of the shotgun and moved out after them.

They saw no one else as they moved into the back of the truck stop and passed through to the passageway leading to the motel. Before they got to the motel proper, Mark stopped at a door marked “swimming pool” and went through with Jess. Jake followed and found himself next to an empty swimming pool and he could see the Toyota beyond the fence, in the rear parking lot. There were quite a few people milling around the parking lot and people had come out of their motel rooms, on to the balcony and were looking toward the Crazy 8. One of the people in the parking lot was James Carrington, but when he saw Jake, he scurried away and disappeared.

One guy in the lot asked, “What happened?” Mark and Jess went past him to the Toyota, without answering; Jake said in passing, “Looks like there was a gunfight between Jarrett’s people and some weird looking guys dressed in black. Our buddy got hit, so we decided to get out of there as quick as we could.” The guy shook his head and said, “Jarrett got in a fight with the Reavers? That don’t make no sense, they work for him!” Jake just shrugged and went to the Toyota and helped Mark load Jess in the back. Jake started throwing weapons and gear into the front passenger seat and got in the back with Jess. He told Mark, “Let’s go and once you get out of that gate, don’t stop for anything.”

Mark got in the driver’s seat, fired up the Landcruiser and revved it up a few times. Jake said, “Mark, settle down and take it easy, drive out of this place like nothing happened. We don’t need to attract anymore attention.” Mark nodded in the affirmative, took a deep breath and pulled away from the curb, heading down the parking lot toward the southeast gate. As they approached the gate, a large crowd of people and several vehicles were making their way through, out on to the county road.

Mark eased into the gateway, when it was their turn, expecting to be stopped; but the guard just waved them on through and kept looking back toward the truck stop buildings anxiously. Jake holstered the Glock, looked at his watch and saw that it was only 9:12pm; He figured they were still within the confusion envelope and that Jarrett’s people had yet to get their ducks in a row; but it wouldn’t be long before they did. Sweetley was a pro and Jake was sure he would step in and organize the pursuit, and Jake was positive there would be a pursuit.

Jake imagined that Jarrett was absolutely beside himself by now. Having lost three bodyguards, four of the Gothic “Reavers” and two of Sweetley’s men; Jarrett had to be screaming for vengeance. Staying with that train of thought, Jake realized that the gunfight at the Crazy 8 had hurt Jarrett badly. Not only losing the men, but the loss of face. Jake was sure that it had already got out that Jarrett had orchestrated the gunfight. Jess had told Jake, how Jarrett was impressed with his own intelligence and constantly bragged about how slick of a manipulator he was. He would definitely want to get even with them over this.

Jess was sitting across from Jake on the other jump seat, groaning at every bump in the road. Mark had turned east down the county road and shot past the FEMA camp at better than 60 mph. Jake kept watch until Crossroads was out of sight. He turned to Jess and said, “I better take a look at that leg.” Jess groaned and

said, “The legs numb, but where I got hit in the back is killing me!”

Jake said, “Ok, let me get my first aid kit and I’ll take a look at the leg and the back.” As Jake started to lean over the front seat to get his gear, Jess stopped him and said, “Jake, get my Arktis vest, it’s got a real extensive first aid kit in the large left rear pouch.” With that statement, Jess collapsed back against the jump seat and groaned.

Jake leaned over the seat and pushed his LBE and haversack into the floor; he grabbed Jess’s heavy tactical vest and hauled it into the back seat. He got it situated on his lap and found the first aid kit. He pulled a molle medic’s pouch out of the large vest pouch and unzipped it. He retrieved a small bottle of Betadine solution, some Curlix (super absorbent gauze used to stop bleeding), some 4x4 gauze pads and two Carlisle field dressings. He placed all of this on the floor at his feet and drew his knife. He situated Jess where he could get to the leg wound and slit open Jess’s pants leg front and back. He needed a flashlight, so he asked Jess, “I need a light, do you have one?” Jess said, “Yeah, one of the upper left front pockets on the vest.” Jake retrieved a Surefire P-6 and turned it on, focusing the beam on Jess’s right thigh.

Jake found an entrance wound on the back, outside of the thigh and an exit wound on the front, slightly larger than the entrance wound. There was some bleeding but not much. Jake said to Jess, “You’re lucky, it isn’t bleeding much and it didn’t hit bone or the femoral artery. Also, they were either using ball ammo or a hollow point didn’t expand; either way, you’re lucky.” Jess just grunted in reply.

Jake poured Betadine in and around the wounds on the thigh and swabbed it around liberally with a 4x4 gauze pad. He then opened a pack of Curlix and said, “This is going to hurt some, so hang on.” Jess just nodded and gripped the roll bar. Jake started pushing some of the Curlix gauze into the exit wound, and Jess gasped a few times while he was doing it, but didn’t complain. He repeated the process with the rear wound and then used the Carlisle dressings to cover both wounds. He retrieved an Ace bandage from the first aid kit and wrapped it around the Carlisle dressings and taped it down securely. “Jess grinned, for the first time since the gunfight and said, “Good job, it looks like you’ve done this sort of thing before.” Jake grunted and said, “Yeah, more times than I wanted to. And you’re welcome. Now let’s take a look at your back.”

Looking at Jess’s back was easier said than done in the bouncing Landcruiser. Jake had been vigilant about watching for pursuers, but as of about 5 minutes ago, there were no vehicles behind them. So, he said to Mark, “Find a place to pull off the road, I need to look at Jess’s back and I can’t do it in this bouncing truck.” Mark said, “Ok Jake.” And a couple of minutes later, Mark pulled off on to a side road that looked like a logging trail and drove about 50 yards into some trees and stopped in a cleared area. Jake said, “Mark, grab a weapon and pull security on the trail while I take care of Jess.” Mark grabbed his Mossberg shotgun and got behind an oak tree next to the logging trail.

Jake got Jess out of the Toyota and had him sit on a fallen tree trunk. He pulled off his jacket and shirt,

which caused Jess some pain and finally got the vest off of him. Jake took the flashlight and examined Jess's back. There was one very large discolored bruise on the right lower back, about where the kidney was and another large discolored bruise right below the left shoulder blade. Jake asked, "Where does it hurt most?" Jess reached down and gingerly touched his right kidney and said, "Right here Jake."

Jake figured that the pain was from blunt force trauma to Jess's kidney. The bruise below the shoulder blade wasn't giving him any trouble yet, so Jake disregarded it. For the first time he became concerned about Jess going into shock and started looking for the signs. Jess seemed to be ok, no nausea, he was flushed as opposed to pale and seemed to be lucid. Jake said to him, "Well, Dr. Jake's diagnosis is, basically you've taken a helluva 9 millimeter kidney punch and other than being sore and passing blood over the next few days, you'll probably be alright." Jess laughed and said, "Thanks ever so much, Doctor Killjoy, how much do I owe you?" Jake laughed and said, "I'll send you an itemized bill, now let's get you dressed and get you on your way."

Jake got Jess's shirt and coat back on him and helped him to the front passenger seat. He took out all of the gear he had thrown there and sat it by the vehicle. Jake helped Jess get situated and helped him recline the seat somewhat and got some Motrin from the first aid kit and gave it to him. Once he had Jess situated he called Mark over, "Hey Mark, bring it in." Mark came over to the Toyota and Jake said, "Here's your hat and coat, give me mine back. The traded clothing and Jake also got his shirt out of the tangle of equipment and put it on, along with the field jacket and cap.

Mark put his barn coat and feed cap back on and asked, "What now, Jake?" Jake stopped untangling his LBE and Haversack and said, "Now you get Jess home as fast as you can." Jess chimed in and asked incredulously, "Ain't you coming with us Jake?" Jake answered, "No, I'm not Jess. I'm going back to the FEMA camp to get my pack; I ain't leaving it behind, if I can help it."

Jess said in exasperation, "Forget the pack Jake, hell, I've got a pack you can have and I'll grub stake you too, it's the least I can do; you've saved my life three or four times tonight, at least." Jake laughed and said, "Look Jess, I have to do this my way and I'm going back for the pack, plus I want to snoop around a little and see what's going on back there. Besides, if there is anybody on your trail, I might get an opportunity to fire them up and slow them down some." Jess just nodded in resignation but asked, "You are still planning on coming through Johnsville, on your way home?"

Jake nodded as he put on his LBE and haversack and said, "Yeah Jess, that's the plan; I'm going to take you up on your offer to help me get home." Jess said, "Good, good, now get out your road atlas and I'll show you where I live." Jake did so and Jess pointed out the location of his farm, about 5 miles northwest of Johnsville. Jake wrote the address down in his pocket notebook and as he was putting the road atlas away, Jess said, "Look if you have trouble finding it, just go into Johnsville, I'll put the word out and have people watching for you. When should we expect you?"

Jake thought for a moment and asked Mark, “Mark, how far have we come, since leaving the Crossroads?” Mark said, “Well, I’d say 12 to 15 miles; we passed through what was left of Sikeston about 10 minutes ago and I believe we are in the National Forest. Another 8 or 10 miles to the state route leading north into Kentucky; So, I’d say closer to 12 than 15.” Jake nodded thoughtfully and said, “It’ll take me 4 or 5 hours to get back to the FEMA camp, that’s using caution and that’ll give me time to find a spot to lay low in. I may have to stay hidden for a day or so, until things settle down. Let me see, it’s a little over 60 miles to Johnsville; so being conservative, start looking for me in five or six days. If I don’t show up by then, I ain’t coming.”

Jess didn’t like that final comment and said, “Look Jake, I wish you’d reconsider, you don’t have to go back.” Jake didn’t answer for a few minutes; he had Jess’s vest in his hands and was digging the 9 millimeter slugs out of it. When he got both of them out he juggled them in his hand and offered them to Jess saying, “Here ya go, a couple of souvenirs for your collection. You can tell your grandchildren all about your exploits at the OK corral and how you single handedly took down the bad guys.”

Jess took the two misshapen bullets from Jake and said sourly, “You’re not going to change your mind, are you? Jake gave a crooked smile and said, “No, I’m not. Get used it. Relax Jess, you’ll see me in a few days and we’ll tell lies about the fight together and impress the girls with our death defying feats!” Both Mark and Jess laughed at that one and Jess appreciated Jake’s dry and twisted sense of humor. Jess really liked this guy and realized why; Jess and Jake had “rode the river together” so to speak. As Jess knew from personal experience, when men went through the crucible of combat together a bond formed that, in some respects was closer than blood ties.

Jake and Mark put the weapons and equipment into the back of the vehicle and Jake got his gear on and made ready to leave. Jake walked back to the passenger side of the vehicle and asked Jess, “Before I go, I’m curious about what went down between you and Jarrett; and what was up with the guys in the makeup and black coats?”

Jess explained that Jarrett had been arrogantly candid with him about the raids and who was doing them and how he supported and profited from their activities. Jarrett told him all about the Reavers and their leader, the skinny guy, called the Hawk. Jess further explained that he almost killed Jarrett right there, but decided to stick to the original plan, but he was so angry, he had allowed Jarrett to bait him into confronting the Hawk. Jarrett did this by telling him the Hawk had sold the young girl from the last raid, to somebody Jarrett didn’t know. “That’s the point where I lost it and decided to confront the freak; with the intention of beating the girl’s location out of him.” Jess hesitated for a moment and said, “It didn’t quite work out like I planned.”

Jake shook his head and said, “It never does, old buddy, it never does. Anyway, I hate to say this, but the girl’s on her own now. You have a family to worry about and you have to consider that Jarrett’s going to come after you and them.” Jake turned to Mark Webb and said, “Mark, thanks for saving our butts in that

hallway, I owe you one. Now, get this hard headed hillbilly home and have somebody with better medical training than me, look at those wounds.” Mark stuck out his hand and Jake took it as Webb said, “Anytime Jake, and if’n you ever need another getaway driver, let me know.” Jake just nodded by way of reply, shouldered his FR-8 and stepped up to where Jess was reclining in the Toyota.

Jess was softly laughing to himself and Jake asked, “What’s so funny?” Jess wiped his eyes and said, “I was just thinking of my liberal, pacifistic sister in law. She’s a Nurse Practitioner, hell she’s almost a Doctor! Anyway, she lives with us and she is going to give me par-dee hell for getting shot, probably after refusing me any pain medication, while she straightens out the mess you’ve made of me.” Jake laughed, sticking out his hand and said, “Just tell her it was all my fault, along with the crappy doctoring.” Jess laughed again and said, “She’d never believe it, she knows me.”

Jake and Jess shook hands warmly and Jess said, “Keep your powder dry Ranger, I’ll see you in a few days, right?” Jake said, “Lord willin and the creek don’t rise.” Jake turned back to Mark and said, “Get him home Mark, I’m counting on you.” Mark said, “No problem Jake.” Jake grinned at both Jess and Mark, slung the FR-8 across his chest, turned and faded into the southern tree line. Mark got into the drivers seat and cranked up the Toyota. As he put it in gear, he said to Jess, “You ready Jess?” Jess adjusted his position on the seat, laid the Remington 1187 across his lap and said, “Yeah Mark, let’s go home.” Mark turned the Landcruiser around and went back up the logging trail to the county road and turned toward home...

Chapter 6, The Raid

Jake was making good time heading west down the county road. He fell into the quick and easy pace of an infantryman traveling light. Every once and a while, he had to step off into a field or tree line and take cover until a vehicle passed. None of the vehicles that passed seemed threatening, nor did they contain large groups of armed men bent on revenge. Jake fully expected to see Sweetley's Strykers and Humvees barreling down the road, but that never materialized.

About two hours into his road march, it started raining and began turning colder. Jake stepped off into the ditch and climbed into the tree line; found an area where he was hidden from the road and took a break. He got his rain suit out of the butt pack and put it on. He ate a piece of jerky, drank some water and moved out again.

A couple of hours later, Jake topped a rise and could see the faint glow of the lights of Crossroads off to the west, maybe 2 miles away. He figured he should slow down the pace and think about moving off the road and going cross country for the last mile or so. The last thing he needed was to get spotted by some of Jarrett's people.

Jake moved to within a quarter mile of the FEMA camp and from a small hill, started glassing the camp and what he could see of Crossroads from the military crest with his binoculars. There were several fires burning in the FEMA camp, but only a few people were moving around. Jake saw two spear carrying sentries at the main gate and two more walking the streets of the camp; it all looked pretty peaceful.

Jake turned his binoculars on what he could see of the Crossroads; there didn't seem to be too much going on there. The only thing out of the ordinary was the Stryker armored vehicle outside the southeast gate, oriented east. There was someone manning the M240B machinegun, in the commander's hatch and a few helmeted individuals at the gate proper.

Curiously, there had not been a pursuit as of yet and the level of activity was not what Jake thought it would be. Jake looked at his watch and saw that it was a little after 2:00 am. He decided to find someplace on the hilltop to laager up for the rest of the night. He intended on getting some sleep and continue observing the situation throughout the next day. If things stayed calm, he would infiltrate the FEMA camp after dark tomorrow night and retrieve his pack from the Jenkins'.

Jake pulled back into the copse of trees at the top of the hill, looking for a concealed place to laager up and call it a night. Jake found a very dense stand of spruce trees and made his way inside. He had to duck walk under the low hanging evergreen boughs, but once through, he found a small 20 foot square clearing in the center of the stand. Jake thought it would be a pretty good hidden camp site.

Jake pulled out his bayonet and cut some spruce boughs from the lower portions of two trees near the edge of the clearing. He was clearing out an area to pitch a poncho hooch, as it was still raining and he wanted to stay dry. Jake quickly unrolled his bedroll, untied the poncho liner and started setting up a hooch using the poncho. He tied parachute chord to the grommets on the poncho and rapidly strung a makeshift tent between the trees. He cut more boughs to pad the floor and to cushion his body for sleeping, and to keep him off of the wet ground. Even though the poncho was camouflaged, Jake used more spruce boughs to put on top of and around the hooch, to help break up the outline and disguise its man made shape.

When he was finished, he crawled into the hooch, dragging his LBE, rifle and haversack after him. Jake situated his gear and stripped off his rain suit. He laid the rain suit aside, put on his gloves and wool watch cap, wrapped himself in the poncho liner and was lulled to sleep by the falling rain within minutes...

As Jake was blissfully sleeping and shortly after Jess and Mark made it safely back to Johnsville; Jarrett, Sweetley the Hawk and James Carrington were in Jarrett's office, organizing revenge.

The Hawk was looking pale and wan; he also had a large goose egg on the back of his head, from hitting the table after Jake shot him in the chest. Fortunately for Hawk, Jake's headshot had missed, but not by much; he had felt the third bullet crack past his head just before crashing into the table and blacking out. The Hawk also had a large bruised area covering the center of his chest, where the level 3 body armor stopped the bullets from penetrating, but didn't dissipate much of the blunt force trauma. They had hit less than 2 inches apart and the Hawk's vest didn't have a hard trauma plate. His chest was really sore, he had a tremendous headache and his confidence was shaken to the core.

The Hawk had never been beaten and he was trying to deal with the shock of it; because, if he didn't, it would mean being ousted as the leader of the Reavers and probably cost him his life. And Francis Xavier Middleton III would rather die than be anything other than the leader of his Reavers. That's why he was showing none of his volatile emotions while attending this meeting. He was trying to play it cool and brazen this thing out, and he was convinced he could. What he failed to realize was that Jarrett and Sweetley knew he was shook; and planned on taking advantage of it.

The Hawk had entered into combat against someone that he didn't have an edge on and lost badly. He was lucky he wasn't dead and realized it. He was still running the gunfight over and over in his mind, not understanding that it was a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He kept re-living the paralyzing terror of Jake's rounds impacting in his chest and him not able to get a round off!

It didn't help matters that Jake was a tall, well built, hard looking man; just the kind of guy that the Hawk had taken special relish in killing in the past. In other words, Jake was the kind of guy the Hawk would never be and the Hawk couldn't handle it. Jake frightened the Hawk more than anything ever had in his life. Jake Craft had become the manifestation of the Hawk's own personal boogie man.

Sweetley looked at the Hawk, smiled and thought about how lucky this kid was. The Hawk had gone up against a real warrior and was found wanting. Even though the vaunted Hawk had walked away with his life, Sweetley knew he was shaken to his bones. If he ever ran up against Jake again he would probably soil himself.

Sweetley was having a hard time not laughing in the Hawk's face, but controlled himself. It wouldn't serve to openly ridicule this kid right now. Especially since he had volunteered to do Jarrett's dirty work for him; which would allow Sweetley to conserve his own forces. Sweetley had his own agenda and its fulfillment was getting closer every day.

Jarrett had been furious and had initially wanted Sweetley to mount up his entire force and go after Jake and Markham. Jarrett was adamant at first, but Sweetley had talked him out of it, even though he had lost two of his own men. Sweetley, ever the realist, reminded Jarrett that if he made him go swanning off to Kentucky after these two guys, the Crossroads would be left unprotected and Jarrett's enemies would love to take advantage of that.

Sweetley also convinced Jarrett that they could brazen this thing through, by just waiting it out. And then the Hawk stepped up stating that he was taking his Reavers and going after Jake and Markham. Sweetley had advised Jarrett to support the Hawk in this, stating that it was a win, win situation. On the one hand Jarrett would get revenge for his nephews and cousins that had been killed and Markham wouldn't be putting Jarrett's name in the streets about the raids anymore. If Jake and Markham won, they would be rid of the Hawk and the Reavers, who had been drawing too much attention to themselves of late. This was the kind of situation that Jarrett relished; he would win either way it went.

It was after 2:00 am and they were winding down when Carrington came scratching at the door, claiming to have some important information that they needed. Jarrett, who had dealt with Carrington before, kept Sweetley from throwing him out; Sweetley couldn't stand the smarmy snake and made no secret of it. Jarrett asked, "Hey, Jimmy (Carrington hated to be called Jimmy, that's why Jarrett did it), what have you got for us?"

"Well Bob, you had asked me to keep an eye on that Jake fellow and I did. I've come up with some information, which may be of help to you in your endeavors against your foe." Jarrett laughed out loud and said, "God Jimmy, you're so full of sh#t, your eyes are brown! Come on, out with it."

"Well Bob, I've got two things that may help; number one is, Jake went to the FEMA camp this morning and met with Charlie Jenkins. I don't know..." Bob interrupted him and said, "So what, I don't care if he met with that worm Jenkins, if it doesn't help me kill him." Carrington turned on his transparent charm and said, "I thought you would be interested Bob, in whom so ever this chap saw." Jarrett made a come on motion with his hand and Carrington continued, "Second of all, I observed Jake and the other two conspiring at their vehicle in the motel parking lot; that was prior to the unfortunate business in the Crazy 8.

When the shooting started, the chap they left with the vehicle ran into the motel and it just so happens, I retrieved the vehicle registration from same, while said vehicle was unattended.” Carrington pulled a piece of paper from the breast pocket of his threadbare suit and with a flourish, handed it across the desk to Jarrett.

Jarrett unfolded the paper and said, “Well, Well, what have we here? Hawk, looks like we won’t have to look too hard for Jesse Thomas Markham; we have his address right here; 331 Rural Route 18, Johnsville, Kentucky. The Hawk just smirked and nodded as Jarrett continued, “Jimmy, you have delivered, as you always do and it’s worth \$25.00 in silver to me.” Jarrett reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small clinking bag, as Carrington’s eyes lit up. Jarrett tossed the bag to Carrington and said, “Thanks Jimmy, that’ll be all.” Carrington, realizing he had been dismissed, bowed himself out of the room and headed for the bordello, where he knew he could get a nubile young girl and some Methamphetamine. It would be his much deserved reward for a job well done.

Jarrett turned to Sweetley and said, “Tomorrow, I want you to go see this Jenkins guy, and sweat him for what he knows.” The Hawk jumped in and said, “Let me have him, I’ll make him talk!” Jarrett shook his head no and said, “No Hawk, this guy needs to go back to the camp alive. He is well respected in the camp and the last thing I need right now, is trouble from them. Let Sweetley talk to him and return him home alive; if Sweetley comes up with anything useful, he’ll let us know. Besides, what else do we need? We know where they are and your crew and some of my boys are going to go get them.” The Hawk reluctantly agreed, but he was frustrated and wanted to hurt someone.

Jarrett closed the meeting by saying, “Anybody got anything else?” Both Sweetley and the Hawk said no, “Good, everybody go get some sleep; we’ll meet back here tomorrow afternoon one more time, before Hawk heads out to Kentucky.

Sweetley and the Hawk left the office, heading downstairs and Jarrett was left alone in his office. Jarrett lit a Marlboro, sagged back in his chair and rubbing the back of his neck thought how amazing it was that not only did soldier boy Jake and Jess Markham survive the ambush; but for all intents and purposes, they won! Jarrett was a lot more worried about the outcome of this thing than he let on. That was the reason why he was willing to risk letting Benny and four of his cousins go on this raid with the Hawk. This thing had to be settled, because if it wasn’t taken care of, worse case scenario was that he would have a war on his hands with half of the inbred hillbilly’s in western Kentucky. That was something he couldn’t afford to let happen, at least not yet...

At 6:30 am, on Monday morning, the sun shining through the spruce trees woke Jake up. He stretched and yawned in welcome of the new day. It had stopped raining sometime in the night and with the bright sunshine, it promised to be a fairly warm day. Jake took off his gloves, watch cap and field jacket; he immediately started in on his daily 400 (200 push-ups and 200 crunches).

When he finished exercising, he started digging items out of his butt pack and haversack, in order to cook

breakfast and do his morning toilet. Jake was looking forward to trying out the alcohol stove. Jake decided he was going to have oatmeal and coffee for breakfast. He pushed away some of the spruce boughs near the edge of his shelter and dug out a small depression for the stove with his backpacker's trowel.

Jake took the little stove out of its bag and removed the top, exposing the fiberglass insulation inside. He consulted the direction sheet and saturated the fiberglass with alcohol from one of the small bottles. He put the top back on the stove and sat it in the small depression he had made. He squeezed a small amount of alcohol around the recessed rim of the stove and lit it with a butane cigarette lighter (Jake had a Blastmatch for fire starting, but figured it would be overkill for the little stove). There was a faint, almost invisible blue flame around the recessed rim. According to the instructions, this would heat the stove up and cause it to light automatically, once it was warm enough.

Jake got out his small cook pot and filled it with water from one of his canteens. He then sat back and waited for the stove to light. After a couple of minutes the little stove ignited with a faint whoosh. Jake put his pot on the pot rack, above the stove and put the lid on it. He sat back and timed how long it would take to boil the water. A little over 6 minutes later, the pot was boiling merrily. Jake added a couple of handfuls of oatmeal to the boiling water and let it cook for a few minutes. While it was cooking, he poured about a third of a cup of water in his canteen cup and got one of the coffee filters out.

He took the oatmeal off of the stove and put the canteen cup on to boil. He thought about adding more alcohol, but the stove was blazing away so he left well enough alone; especially since there was a warning against adding fuel to a hot or burning stove on the instruction sheet. It took the canteen cup almost 9 minutes to reach a rolling boil. Once it reached a boil, he slit open the coffee filter cartridge and poured some of the coffee into the boiling water and started stirring it with his spoon. He added coffee until he thought it was dark enough and took the cup from the stove. He realized it would be full of grounds, but didn't care.

He recovered the small pot of oatmeal, stirred in a packet of sugar with his spoon and began to eat. It was pretty good, so he must have gotten it right! He finished his breakfast repast by drinking the coffee and it was alright too; although it was full of coffee grounds.

Jake used some of the water in his partially empty canteen to clean up his breakfast dishes and then brushed his teeth, using the baking soda as tooth paste. When he was finished, there was about an inch of water left in the canteen and Jake finished it off. He put the canteen cup and canteen back on his LBE and figured he would find a water source later and top off. He still had one more full canteen, but always got nervous if he was short of water. You could live for a month or so without food; you could only live a few days without water.

Jake picked up his trowel and got the roll of toilet paper from the butt pack. He grabbed the FR-8 and moved out of his hiding spot and found a place in the tree line to do his business. When he was finished, he

came back to the camp site, changed his socks and packed his gear. The last thing he did was take down his poncho shelter, rebuild his bedroll and tie it to his butt pack. He would start his day by doing a good visual recon of the surrounding area.

Jake crept back to his vantage point from the night before and started glassing the FEMA camp, Crossroads and the surrounding area. The Stryker was still outside the southeast gate of the Crossroads, but everything else looked normal. Jake decided to try and find a water source.

30 minutes later, Jake found a creek running along the base of a small ridge, 400 yards northeast of his hill. He found a spot where the water was running over some rocks and looked clear. He got out the water filter and pump filtered a quart of water into his empty canteen. When he was finished he returned to his hill and resumed his vantage point and visual recon.

Nothing happened until about 10:00am; a Humvee pulled out of the southeast gate and headed east down the county road. The Humvee stopped at the main gate of the FEMA camp and Sweetley got out of the passenger side and approached the guards. Two of his men got out with M-16's at port arms and followed him. Another soldier was in the top hatch manning a squad automatic weapon (M249 SAW). The guy in the hatch was leaning on the weapon, obviously trying not to be threatening, but he was probably ready if something jumped off.

Sweetley conversed with the guards and one of them walked back into the camp; the other one waited at the gate with Sweetley. 20 minutes later, the guard returned and had Charlie Jenkins with him. As far as Jake was concerned, Charlie looked apprehensive and frightened of Sweetley. Sweetley talked to Charlie for a few minutes, went back to the Humvee and returned to Crossroads. Charlie talked to the guards for a few more minutes and walked into the camp, presumably going back home. Jake didn't know what was said, but would bet it was about him. Jake hoped that Charlie and his family weren't in danger because of him.

Jake decided to pull back into the little spruce clearing and get some more sleep. It was a bright sunny day and when Jake got back into the sheltered clearing, it was warm enough to take his jacket off. Jake shucked his gear and took off his jacket. He took the bedroll off of the butt pack and spread it on the ground. Jake lay down and got comfortable. He used the butt pack as a pillow and tilted his cap down over his eyes and promptly went to sleep, in the warm sun.

Sweetley walked up the stairs to Jarrett's office. When he got to the door, he knocked and heard Jarrett say, "Come in." Sweetley walked in and Jarrett was in the company of Benny Nyby and one of Jarrett's other nephews, Cory Jarrett. There was also Jarrett's "flavor of the month" dancer, named Liz, standing behind Jarrett at his desk, rubbing his shoulders. Jarrett had obviously just gotten out of bed because he was still in his robe.

What a lot of people didn't realize was that the entire second and third floors of the truck stop building were Jarrett's home. It was also the home of his bodyguards and their families. Jarrett's personal suite of rooms

was just on the other side of this office. The bodyguards had the third floor.

Sweetley said good morning all around and started briefing Jarrett about his interview with Jenkins; “I just got back from the camp a few minutes ago and Jenkins didn’t have anything useful to tell me.” Jarrett stopped Liz from rubbing his shoulders and asked, “Why was Jake over there yesterday?”

“They met on the trail about 15 miles northwest of here, a couple of days ago. It seems that Jenkins and his family had been set on by a pack of wild dogs and Jake bailed them out.” Anyway, Jenkins told him about the Crossroads and brought Jake here. Jenkins says the reason Jake went to see him, was to get his cut of the action for the dog meat that Jenkins had sold.” For what it’s worth Bob, I believe him; he has no reason to lie.” Sweetley explained.

Jarrett thought about it for a moment and said, “I ought to kill Jenkins for ever bringing that guy here, but I won’t; its water under the bridge. Anyway, I was just briefing Benny and Cory on tonight’s operation; do you have anything to add, Sweetley?”

“Yeah Bob, I do.” Sweetley turned to Cory Jarrett and said, “I’ve got an M240B (machinegun) , 1200 rounds of belted ammo, an AT-4 and a case of fragmentation grenades for you downstairs; try to bring the gun back in one piece.” Cory looked at Sweetley and said, “No problem Sarge, I’ll get it back to you.”

Sweetley was impressed with Cory Jarrett. Cory wasn’t like the rest of his family; he had a wife and 2 kids and was a lot more serious, and not as crude as the rest of Jarrett’s crew. Sweetley had found out that Cory was an Iraq war vet, with a Combat Infantry badge and a Bronze Star. But he was still a Jarrett. He might not have been as crude as the rest of them and he was the only one that had been a soldier, but he was still part of the criminal hillbilly clan and Sweetley knew for a fact that he would do anything that Jarrett told him to do.

Cory was also the most serious threat to Sweetley’s plans to take this place over for himself. If Sweetley killed Jarrett, he would have to make sure to get Cory too. Cory was well respected, very competent and Jarrett’s heir apparent to the throne of Crossroads. If Cory had been in the Crazy 8 last night, Jake and Jess might not have made it out and they wouldn’t be here today, planning this expedition to Kentucky.

Sweetley was surprised that Bob would let Cory go on this raid, but figured that having Cory go, would better the odds of Bob’s other people coming back alive. Sweetley hoped they all got smoked; that would put him in the perfect position to off Jarrett and take over this place. Well, one could always hope.

As Sweetley was getting ready to leave, the Hawk made his entrance, along with his second in command, Tate. Sweetley also figured that if Tate had been in the Crazy 8 last night, things might have also turned out differently. Tate was the Hawk’s enforcer and apparently had no problem playing second fiddle to the eccentric Hawk. As long as he was able to rape, pillage and kill to his hearts content, he seemed content

with the way things were.

Sweetley knew Tate was good in a fight and an effective killer, but he wouldn't make a good soldier because he was a slave to his degenerate appetites; no self discipline. That was why he seemed content as the Hawk's number two; he had enough sense to know that he wouldn't be an effective number one.

Jarrett said, "Ok Hawk, has everything been worked out for tonight?" The Hawk sat on the sofa gingerly and answered, "Yes Bob, at a little after sundown, our raid force will start leaving Crossroads, one vehicle at a time and meet up on the other side of the FEMA camp prior to finally moving out. We will have a final briefing and then move out to Johnsville Kentucky. Once we are within a couple of miles of Johnsville, we'll find a place to lay low and send out a reconnaissance element to locate Markham's farm and put it under surveillance. Once we get the lay of the place, the assault element will move up and we'll take the place. That should be sometime around 3:00am, tomorrow morning."

"Why meet outside the FEMA camp, why not leave here together?" asked Jarrett. Cory answered for the Hawk, "In the past Uncle Bob, whenever they've went out all together, the word spread like wildfire that the Reavers were going out on another raid. This way there won't be any indicators of the raid. Besides, we don't know if this Markham left a stay behind to maybe radio ahead that we're coming. This increases our chance of surprising this guy and taking him down with minimal casualties." Jarrett accepted this and just nodded his head, smiling affectionately at his nephew .

Sweetley was impressed and figured that this was Cory's idea and that the Hawk, not being an absolute fool, went along with it. This guy was too competent; he would have to be dealt with, if he came back alive.

Jarrett closed the meeting by saying he was tired and wanted to take a nap; he stood up, grasped Liz's hand and walked through the door leading to his suite of rooms. Cory and Benny followed him leaving Sweetley alone with the Hawk and Tate. As they left the office together, Sweetley stopped the Hawk and Tate, at the bottom of the stairs and said, "Good luck Hawk, I hope this works out for the best." The Hawk was somewhat taken aback and blurted, "Well, thank you Sweetley!" They shook hands and Sweetley turned and walked out of the truck stop, leaving the Hawk to wonder what that was about...

Three and a half hours later and 620 yards away, Jake was back in his observation position on the hill. He had eaten a supper meal of beans, rice and jerky; cleaned up, packed his gear and moved into position. He was well rested, had a full belly and was cleaning and checking his weapons while he kept an eye on what was going on below his hill. Nothing much was happening and he planned on moving down and infiltrating the FEMA camp, as soon as it got dark.

Jake would get his pack, say his goodbyes and be back on the road home well before midnight. He planned on moving ten or more miles tonight, before finding a place to camp. He figured that within a couple of days or so, he should be in Johnsville . What he didn't know was that he would end up there sooner than he

thought.

A little after 6:00pm, the sun began sinking below the western mountains and Jake made ready to move into the FEMA camp. He put on his gear, checked his weapons for the last time and moved down the hill. He got to the county road and as he prepared to cross, 200 yards east of the camp, a vehicle left the Crossroads, heading in his direction. Jake pulled back into the tree line and waited.

The vehicle, a battered 4 wheel drive pick-up, stopped across the road from Jake and two armed Reavers or Goth's or whatever you called them, got out and stood around at the rear of the truck. They seemed to be waiting for something. Jake thought, "What the f%#k?" and drew further back in the tree line, but not so far that he couldn't see the two guys with the truck.

Over the next thirty minutes, seven more vehicles, and two motorcycles showed up, and parked behind the pick-up. There were two more pick-ups, three SUV's and two 2 and a half ton, box trucks, bringing up the rear. What was interesting was that there were 15 or 20 Reavers, at least 5 of Jarrett's bodyguards to include Benny, and five or six other armed guys that Jake hadn't seen before; all milling around on the other side of the vehicles.

In the next instant Jake said to himself, "Well I'll be damned, I thought I killed you!" For none other than the skinny leader of the Reavers, who Jake had thought he'd killed last night, walked up and called the group to order. He led the group down the embankment, into a field where one of the men lit a gas lantern and they all gathered around the skinny Reaver, as he started talking.

Jake realized that he needed to get on the other side of the road and hear what was going on. He had a sneaking suspicion that whatever was going on, would probably bode ill for his friend Jess Markham. Jake started moving west through the tree line, paralleling the road. He was trying to determine if they had put any security out on the vehicles. It appeared that they hadn't and all of them were at the meeting in the field. With the gas lantern burning brightly, their night vision would be destroyed and Jake could probably get across the road undetected. Jake eased back up to the road, near the end of the vehicle column. He looked both ways and not seeing any vehicles or anybody, rapidly but quietly walked across the road to the rear of one of the 2 and a half ton trucks. Jake got to the rear of the truck and peaked into the open back. What he saw was a few tarp covered boxes and some rope, strewn in the back of the truck.

He knelt down and looked under the truck toward the field. Twenty yards away the group was in a semicircle around the lantern and a map, getting briefed by the skinny Goth; Jake remembered that he was called the Hawk. The Hawk was talking, but Jake could barely hear him, so he moved out on the road side of the vehicles and crept about halfway down the column, stopped between two of the SUV's and knelt down. Jake could now make out what the Hawk was saying.

"...lay low until the reconnaissance is finished and if all goes well, hit the place at about three am. We'll

strip the place, take any women and valuables and be gone before daylight. But, the most important things to remember are; number one, the one they call Jake is mine. If anybody takes him alive, bring him to me and it's worth ten ounces of gold." There were several gasps and murmuring as the Hawk continued, "Number two, this guy Jess Markham has to be killed, if we let him get away Jarrett will not be happy and we'll probably have to do this all over again.

The Hawk addressed one of his Reaver's, a guy named Reggie, "Reggie, do you remember how to fire that rocket launcher?" Reggie smiled and said, "Sure do Hawk, some tings you don't forget." The Hawk then addressed Tate, "Tate, everybody that got those grenades, knows how to use them? I don't want any stupid accidents." Tate answered, "Yeah Boss, we spent most of the afternoon practicing the drill. We'll be Ok." The Hawk nodded his head in affirmation and asked, "Does anybody have anymore questions?"

One of the Reavers named Slant Eye asked, "Boss, how reliable is the address we were given?" The Hawk smiled and answered, "I'd say pretty reliable, we got it from his vehicle registration." The Hawk waved a piece of paper and continued, "One of Jarrett's snitches took it out of their car, while the gunfight was going down last night. Be thankful that he did, if not for Senator James Carrington, this operation might have been a lot more complicated. Anymore questions?" Jake said to himself, "Carrington, you *****."

As several other raiders asked questions, Jake was ten yards away furiously trying to figure out what to do. Jess and his family were in danger and Jake was the only one who knew what was going down. Jake thought about firing them up now, but that wouldn't delay them much and probably get him killed. No, there was a better way.

Jake stealthily made his way back to the last truck as the briefing broke up. He climbed into the back and crawled under the tarp, partially covering the boxes. Jake situated himself, drew his BK-7 combat knife and waited. He regretted having to leave his pack, but there was no other choice. He hoped the Jenkins' got good use out of it and its contents. Jake gripped the knife firmly, if anybody got in the back of this truck, they wouldn't make it to Kentucky, alive at least.

The Reavers and the rest of the raiding party broke up and headed for their respective vehicles. It happened that Slant Eye was driving the last truck in line. He had been wounded in the arm on the last raid and wasn't at 100%. So, he had been relegated to the position of truck driver. He wasn't happy about it. He would get a full share of the raid profits, but had to miss out on most of the fun. Oh well, his arm was healing and there was always next time. He started the truck and moved out, following the rest of the convoy.

As the vehicles moved out, Jake sheathed his knife and realized what amateurs these guys were. If Jake had been running this convoy, there would have been a drag vehicle pulling rear security. The truck Jake was in was pulling up the rear and Jake had only heard one door open and close, before the truck was started and the convoy moved out. This bunch was ripe for being ambushed or rolled up. Jake thought their amateurishness could be used to his advantage. He hoped so, the odds were better than twenty five to his

one. Jake had faced tough odds before, but never this one sided.

Jake laid back, made himself comfortable and started planning contingencies. He knew they were going to hit Jess's farm and he was the only wild card in the deck. So, what he needed to do was make himself a force multiplier. What he planned on doing, if he stayed concealed, was once the raid started he would be a one man reaction force and hit them, right up the backside, so to speak. He would cause them a lot of confusion and as many casualties as he could. The thought that it would probably cost him his life, never figured into the equation...

60 some odd miles away, outside of Johnsville, Kentucky the Markham family had just finished supper. Jess's wife Paulette, was overseeing the after dinner cleanup, bossing her sister's in law, and the kids around; Jess, his brother's Jimmy and Jeff, were sitting at the table, along with his wife's sister, Gaby (Gabrielle). Jess was smoking his pipe and attempting to coordinate tonight's increased security with his brother's, when Gabby started in on him.

"You should be in bed, you idiot! You were shot for God's sake!!" Jess let out a sigh and said, "Gaby, for Pete's sake, give me a break, will ya? This is important and could very well mean all of our lives." Gaby crossed her arms, harrumphed and said, "You love dis, you hope they come ere, so you can shoot some more of dem and be de big hero once again; Merde!! Gaby's Cajun roots became more pronounced the angrier she got, and boy could she get angry!

Jess was getting a little angry himself, "Gaby, that's enough, you are a guest in my house, but I'll only take so much of this. I am trying to protect us, don't you understand that?" Gaby stood up, pushed her chair in and stared hard at Jess and his brother's; the only thing she said was, "Merde!" and stormed out of the room.

The youngest one at the table, 34 year old Jeff, shook his head and said, "That b#&ch is crazy!" Jess's anger spiked and he pointed his finger at Jeff and said, "Jeff, that's enough, I can deal with her crap, but I refuse to deal with yours. Put a lid on it!" Jeff held his hands up in surrender and said, "Ok Jess, understood, now what about tonight?"

Jess had put his family on full alert, as soon as he got back from the Crossroads. It wasn't hard to motivate them, when he came home with several gunshot wounds. Once Jess explained what had happened, and the fact that they were threatened, his family, for once without any prodding, implemented their contingency security plan. Normal security at the farm consisted of most of the adults and teenaged adolescents, with the exception of Gaby who refused, going armed at all times, at least with a handgun. There was also one person in the cupola, on the roof of the house, acting as an OP (observation post) 24 hours a day. The cupola was one of the security measures that Jess had designed into the house. It was not such an unusual feature on old two story farm houses; they usually had a weather vane on top of them. Jess's had a weather vane; it was also cast out of reinforced concrete and had hardened steel shutters over the windows.

Jess had made his money in construction, specifically the concrete business. His Dad had started the company back in the 1960's and Jess had taken it over, after getting out of the Army; when his Dad developed Parkinson's disease. Jess hadn't wanted to take over the family business. He was going to school at the KSU, studying to be a civil engineer, when he dropped out in his third year to step in for his Dad.

Jess had been very successful and had expanded the company. He had also made a lot of money. While working the last job he personally oversaw; rebuilding part of the Mississippi river levies after the massive flooding of the 90's. He was appalled at how ineffective the government, both federal and local had been at coping with the disaster. Then Jess had an epiphany; he had been married for a few years and had three kids with his high school sweetheart, when he realized how easy something like this could happen to him and his family and he had an obligation to do something about it.

His wife wasn't as hard to convince as he thought she would be, because a lot of her family had been hurt and a few killed during the Mississippi floods, and with what was going on in the world in those days, Paulette readily agreed. They decided to sell the controlling interest in the family company to his brother's and become farmers.

Jess's family had originally come from Johnsville and Jess had inherited what was left of the old family farm, from his parents and by buying out his brother's shares. At the time, it was a gutted clapboard house, a collapsed barn and 114 acres of rolling farmland and hills, which used to be a prosperous corn and tobacco farm. Over the next 8 years, Jess and Paulette razed all of the old buildings, Jess built a new two story, reinforced concrete house (He was in the concrete business, after all) that looked like an old fieldstone farm house; a new barn and several out buildings to include three tobacco sheds. They had gotten lucky and been able to acquire another contiguous 200 acres (that had been part of the original farm) and after the first 5 years actually broke even.

They had also become full blown survivalists; they laid in a deep pantry and lots of survival preps. Jess pursued his hobby as a rifle shooter and amassed an impressive gun collection. Jess had also started restoring old 4 wheel drive vehicles, and even turned a profit doing that. Paulette canned, sewed, shot with Jess and home schooled the kids; they both gardened and grew corn and tobacco on the farm. They had also been working toward taking the farm totally off the power grid, but that project hadn't been completed when everything fell apart. The place was partially solar powered and they had a 5 K generator, but they had planned on damming a nearby creek and installing a hydro powered turbine, but that didn't get done.

All in all, they were pretty lucky, luckier than most Americans who had survived the collapse. Jess could feed his family and had a good supportive community and neighbors, but what about dealing with the wolves of the world? Jess realized that if he lived through the next few weeks, he was going to start advocating some kind of really organized defense force, for the Johnsville area. They had dealt with a few problem groups in the past and some individuals, but they were not ready for every threat they faced and

they needed to be. Jess decided to sell the idea to his neighbors, but that could wait; it was time to take care of the here and now.

Jess focused back on his brother Jeff and said, “Starting tonight, we are going to have one in the OP and one on duty downstairs, after dark. The guards have to be fully dressed, armed and wear their tactical vests while on duty. Also, I need you two to check the concertina wire on the house perimeter and make sure the strands are still wired to the pickets. And make sure the vehicle barricade is across the driveway. Jimmy, you’ll take the first watch in the OP and Tracy (Jess’s 13 year old daughter) will relieve you at midnight. Jeff, you’ll take the second roving watch downstairs, Will (Jimmy’s 15 year old son), can take the roving watch until midnight. I don’t know how long we’ll have to do this, but better safe than sorry. Any questions?”

Jimmy asked, “What about the signal flares?” Jimmy was asking about what Jess thought was a dubious plan at best; what the locals had come up with since the last raid, was to issue out flares to every homeowner, with the idea that if you were raided, you fired a flare and everybody would come running to the rescue. They had built a watch tower on a hill above the town and it was manned at night, specifically looking for flares. If a flare was seen, a reaction force of “Minutemen” would be mobilized and come running. Jess didn’t have much confidence in the scheme. The last time the Reavers hit them it took more than two hours to get together a reaction force and respond.

Jess answered Jimmy by saying, “If we get hit we’ll put up a flare, but remember, we’re 5 miles from town. By the time anybody got here it would be over. You have to get it through your heads, we’re on our own.” Both brothers got very sober looks on their faces and left to check the wire and bed down the livestock. Jess prayed that they wouldn’t get raided, at least before he had healed up. He didn’t dwell on it anymore; he got up, got his crutches and went to help his brothers...

Jake, of all things, had fallen asleep; the vehicles had slowed down and turned off of the main road. Jake looked at his watch and saw that they had been driving for two and a half hours; it was now a little after 9:00pm. In normal times it would have only taken a little over an hour to drive the 60 plus miles. But, since the collapse, with road conditions and bridges being out, it took a lot longer to go anywhere these days. Jake drew his knife and started getting anxious; if anybody started digging around in the back of this truck, he was screwed.

What Jake didn’t know, was that they had pulled off at an old strip mining site and would wait for the Markham farm to be recon’d , prior to the start of the raid. The two guys took off on the motorcycles just a few minutes after the convoy arrived, to recon Jess’s farm. The vehicles were all turned around facing back toward the state road. The raiders got out of the vehicles and started a fire. There was quite a bit of drinking and dope smoking going on around the fire.

The Hawk and Tate wouldn’t let it get out of hand though. Jarrett’s bodyguards didn’t participate, because Cory wouldn’t let them. They stood well away from the fire and checked their weapons and repeated to

Cory what their duties were in the raid. Benny was the only one who complained, “Dang Cory, why can’t we have no fun?” Cory just looked at him and said, “Shut up, Benny,” and resumed his brief-backs of the other bodyguards.

Jake started to relax when nobody came to the back of the truck. He chanced crawling from under the tarp and peeking out from around the back of the truck and saw most of the Reavers gathered around a fire. They were passing bottles of liquid courage and joints around. Jake had nothing but contempt for them but that didn’t cause him to underestimate them as opponents; even a stoned idiot with a gun could kill you.

Jake crawled back under the tarp, drank some water and tried to relax. He was keyed up but knew that it would probably be hours before they moved out. He checked his weapons again and that calmed him down. He actually looked forward to taking these guys on; they were verminous wolves and needed exterminating, especially the Hawk; that little creep needed to go and if Jake got the opportunity, he would finish what he started the night before...

It was a little after midnight at the Markham farm. Jess was getting into bed with his wife, who was already asleep. He had checked on his daughter in the cupola and spoken with his brother Jeff, prior to coming upstairs. He was tired and his bruised kidney and leg were hurting. He needed to get some sleep, but was too keyed up. He lay there for about an hour before drifting into a fitful sleep...

It was 2:00am and the recon element had come back. Most of the raiding party had been either sleeping in the vehicles or still partying around the fire. When the two motorcyclists came back there was a flurry of excited activity. All of the Reavers were woken up and they all met around remnants of the fire. The Hawk turned the meeting over to one of the motorcyclists, who had drawn a diagram of the Markham farm house on a piece of paper. The Reaver was giving them the layout, obstacles and the approach. When he was finished the Hawk took over.

“As you can see, the farm house is about 100 yards from the road down this tree lined lane, partially surrounded by concertina wire. The lane itself is blocked about half way to the house by some kind of steel gate and barricade. What we will do is the entire element will drive to within 50 yards of the lane. We will dismount and Cory your support element will skirt the trees down the lane and set up the machinegun, flanking the house and barn.”

“Tate, you will take the main assault element down the road past the lane and get online and maneuver through the trees to this rise just outside the wire. That’s the closest covered position to the wire. You’ll standby there until the wire is breached. Once through the wire, you’ll assault the place from the front as Cory lays down a base of fire.”

“Stan, once everybody is in place, you’ll turn into the driveway lane and speed toward the barricade. You’ll turn off into the yard and breach the wire once you get abreast of the rise. That’s where Tate and his people

will move through and assault the house.

Wilkes, your group will go on past the support element and get behind the barn and cover the rear of the house. If anybody gets out the back, take them out. Slant Eye, you and Skeeter will stay with the vehicles, until we've secured the objective. Once it's secure, you'll come up and we'll get the trucks loaded and be out of there. Any questions?"

There were no questions so they mounted their vehicles and moved out. They would have been flabbergasted if they knew that the success of their raid depended on whether or not a 13 year old girl paid attention to her Daddy or not and one vagabond ex-soldier that was very, very good at soldiering; did what he did best.

Jake heard most of the briefing while lying on his stomach and peeking out around the back of the truck. He was somewhat impressed; the Hawk had given a fair briefing of a boiler plate raid plan. He had left some points out like possible defenses, and choke points, but other than that, not bad; with one glaring exception. No contingencies; what if the plan went out the window, what would you do? There was none of that, these screwballs had only been up against people that could barely defend themselves; well, Jake had something for these guys, a big monkey wrench, right in the middle of their plan.

It took the trucks less than 15 minutes to get near the farm and they at least had enough sense to approach blacked out. They got to their jump off point, dismounted and prepared to move out; that's when the 13 year old girl factor kicked in...

"Uncle Jeff, We've got vehicles on the road, just south of the driveway." Tracy Markham said into her FRS radio. Tracy was in the cupola OP, behind her Daddy's PTR 91-PR (perimeter rifle). Her uncle Jeff came back on the radio and asked, "Are you sure honey? I don't see anything." Although, he thought he'd heard a motorcycle, off in the distance an hour or so ago.

Jeff was at one of the front windows and couldn't see the road through the trees. Tracy said, "I'm sure, you better wake everybody up, I think Dad was right, we're about to be hit." Jeff acknowledged and ran upstairs to wake everybody up. It was starting to look like his brother was right.

Tracy was looking through the illuminated reticle of the scope on the perimeter rifle, searching for targets. There was no moon, but the light over the barn lot, and the stars gave her enough light to see by. She thought she detected movement along the driveway lane but couldn't be sure.

A moment later, after tracking back across the trees lining the rural route, she saw a man step from behind a tree, holding a rifle. He turned back and motioned at someone to follow him and that's when Tracy fired. The 168 grain, match round struck the man just below the left nipple, at an oblique angle and he went down like a sack of grain.

A ragged volley of muzzle flashes appeared from the trees, along with the crack of rifles and young Tracy went to work suppressing the bad guys. She was methodical and very accurate and hit three more raiders, before the rest of them pulled back and found thick trees to hunker behind. The Hawk had just lost a sixth of his force, in the first two minutes of contact, along with the initiative.

Tracy used the lull in firing to open one of the steel shutters and fire a red star shell flare from the marine flare gun they kept in the cupola. She hoped their neighbors saw the flare and came to help. Tracy closed the shutter and settled back behind the big rifle, looking for more targets.

As Tracy was re-engaging the men in the tree line, a battered pick-up truck turned into the lane and sped toward the vehicle barricade. Tracy swung her rifle toward the truck and started firing. She put several rounds through the windshield and hood of the truck but it kept coming. When the truck was parallel to the small rise, it turned sharply right off the driveway and crashed into the ditch. Tracy put three more rounds through the windshield for good measure and before turning to other targets, thought it was a good thing that her dad had deepened the ditches.

The Hawk cowered behind his tree and cursed; the ditch lining the driveway was obviously deeper than they had thought and it looked like Stan was either dead or incapacitated. They would have to find another way to breach the wire. As it was they were stuck in this tree line, at least until Cory got his machinegun working and took some of the pressure off. They had to breach the wire, but how?

Intermittent firing had started and Jake figured that it was time to make his move. He looked out of the truck, searching for any sentries. He spotted two near the front of the column of vehicles. They seemed to be engrossed with what was going on up ahead and Jake took advantage of it. He took off his LBE and field Jacket, he had already clipped his knife and speed loader pouch to his operator's belt, in their accustomed places. He slung the FR-8 across his back and got out of the truck. Just as he stepped down, a belt fed machinegun started chattering off to his left, about 100 yards away.

Jake made his way to where he had observed the two sentries and found them sharing a joint and adding commentary to the raid. One of them said, "Woo Hoo, that Cory's sure got that big gun workin!" The other one laughed and said, "He sure does Skeeter, he's making it sing!" Jake crept up behind them and with the BK-7 combat knife in his hand said, "Hello ladies, are we having fun yet?"

The two sentry's turned and their mouths gaped open; Skeeter looked at Jake in absolute horror as Jake kicked Slant Eye hard in the crotch and followed up by slicing the razor sharp knife across his throat. Slant Eye collapsed into the roadway, gouting arterial blood all over Skeeter and Jake, from his carotid artery. Skeeter turned, dropped his rifle and tried to run, screaming "Hawk, Hawk, help me, help me!" Jake jumped over Slant Eye's corpse and caught Skeeter in a couple of steps, hooked him around the neck with his left arm and rammed the knife hard into his right kidney. Skeeter stopped struggling and went limp.

Jake eased him down on the road and tried to pull the knife out of Skeeter's back. That was easier said than done; Jake had to kneel on Skeeter's back and really work at getting the knife free, which he finally did. He finished up by cutting Skeeter's throat for good measure. This was the first time Jake had ever used a knife to kill a man. He'd been trained to do it, but never had. Now he was kneeling in the middle of the road, covered in Slant Eye's blood, totally exposed. He should have just shot them both!

Jake checked to see if anyone else was around. He could see raiders about 50 yards down the road ducking in and out of the trees and shooting at what he assumed was Jess's house, but nobody else was near the vehicles. The firing was intermittent and there appeared to be some yelling and confusion. It looked like the Hawk's plan had already started falling apart, but that machinegun had Jake worried.

Jake moved back to the first guy he had killed and stripped the bloody trench coat from him. That's when he found something he could really use. The big guy (Slant Eye) was wearing a ballistic vest and Jake rapidly stripped it off him. He also took the guy's knit watch cap, his AK-47 and his shoulder bag ammo pouch. Jake went back to the truck and rapidly put on the vest, bloody trench coat and the knit watch cap; Jake had now become a Reaver.

He took his gear and the FR-8 and placed them in the tree line, behind a scrub oak and hoped he could come back for them. He checked the AK, apparently a folding stocked Yugoslavian M 70-AB2; as far as AK's went, one of the better ones. He had a 30 round magazine in the well and five more in the magazine pouch. Jake now had a rifle that would put out some firepower. He moved into the tree line and started to hunt.

Tracy Markham had dominated the fight for the first few minutes, which gave her family time to get moving and in position to return fire. But, when the machinegun started hammering the cupola, she figured she was living on borrowed time. She couldn't get an angle on the machinegun, but he had one on her. The gunner was hammering the steel shutters with controlled bursts and Tracy had already been cut about the face by spalling metal from the insides of the two plates to her right. She knew she was bleeding, but didn't figure she was hurt that bad, yet. She kept up a steady fire toward the muzzle flashes, coming from the tree line at the road and wondered why they didn't advance. What she didn't know was that it was because of her effective rifle fire. The much feared Reavers had been stopped by a 13 year old girl, firing a rifle that was almost as long as she was tall.

Jess Markham was in his den, firing on the flanking machinegun with his PTR-91K, from a slit in the shutter covering a window. His wife and two brothers were in the front of the house adding their fire to Tracy's; his brother's wives and his nephew, 15 year old Will, were covering the rear and far side of the house. Jess had hit one, maybe two of the gunner's support element, but hadn't been able to hit the gunner. The gun was in a good defilade position and was alternating between hammering the cupola and the windows on the front and his side of the house.

Jess's study was on the front corner of the house, which meant he could either fire at the machinegun on the flank or fire to the front of the house, if needed. Jess spent most of his time engaging the machinegun, but every few minutes he would go to the front window and fire at what he assumed was the main assault element beyond the perimeter wire, adding to the volume of fire being put out by his family members in the front part of the house. One thing he was glad of; the concertina wire and the elaborate vehicle barricade in the driveway had been very effective, so far. Not too long ago, his wife had balked at the money outlay for the wire and his building of the barricade. Jess felt vindicated.

As he returned to a side window and re-engaged the machinegun; he began to worry for his daughter in the cupola, because he wasn't sure that the shutter plates would hold up to the incessant pounding of the 7.62 X 51 NATO (.308) machinegun. He could still hear the booming cracks of her rifle coming down the stairway; so his baby girl was still in the fight and doing what he had taught her. Jess resumed shooting at the Reaver's supporting gun and prayed that his family would live through this.

Gaby and the younger children were in the basement. The children were wide eyed and frightened, but stayed quiet. Gaby had her medical supplies laid out and her aid bag ready. She also, in defiance of her beliefs, had a 9 millimeter Beretta pistol in her hand; she had been taught by her father, as a child to shoot, but had rejected violence as an adult and a medical practitioner. She had decided she would defend the children if she had too. She said a silent prayer and apologized to her dead husband's memory saying, "Sorry my love, if need be, I must do this evil thing for the children."

Tracy had a skinny raider in her crosshair, when one round of a 6 round burst penetrated the plate to her right oblique. The nearly spent round deformed badly as it penetrated through the steel plate. The nearly spent round yawed through the plate and hit young Tracy, side on, just above the right ear and took her out of the fight. Her limp body fell into the bottom of the cupola and the big rifle fell on top of her. She never knew what hit her...

Cory turned to Benny and said, "Benny, go tell Hawk to get moving, I think I took out the sniper on the roof, he's not firing anymore." Benny wide eyed and frightened, looked uncomprehendingly at Cory. Cory said, "Move out you little sh#t!" Benny's brain finally kicked into gear and he ran back into the trees and paralleled the lane to find the Hawk.

Cory resumed hammering the windows on the first floor of the house with well controlled 6 to 9 round bursts. Cory was a good machine gunner and every few moments he would stop firing and let the gun cool. He didn't have a spare barrel, so he couldn't afford to burn this one out and destroy the gun. His cousin, Rafe Cullen was acting as his assistant; feeding him ammo and adding his sub machinegun fire to the fight.

They had already lost two of their family members in this fight. Rafe's brother Earl, had taken a round high in the chest and died almost immediately. Another cousin, Luke Hoskins, was lying behind a tree 5 yards

away with his left arm almost torn off at the shoulder and probably bleeding out. If the Hawk and Tate didn't get it together soon, Cory was going to break contact and find a better position to support the assault from. It was obvious that the wire wasn't breached and the assault was stalled at the tree line. So, if the Hawk couldn't get things going, maybe Cory could. In the meantime, he would pound the house with the machinegun and see what developed.

Jake was moving down the tree line, skirting the driveway lane; he was headed for the machinegun position. As he got to where he could see the flash bulb effect of the muzzle flashes, somebody came stumbling through the trees toward the road. Jake stepped out and Benny Nyby, came running up to him.

Benny saw one of the Reaver's coming his way through the trees; he went up to him and asked "Where's the Hawk, I got a message for him." Jake looked at Benny, smiled and asked, "Hey Benny, how's the beak?" Benny recoiled in horror, recognizing Jake's voice, and started to stumble backwards fumbling with his MP-5. Jake shot him three times in the chest with the AK; the steel core rounds punching cleanly through the ballistic vest and Benny collapsed. As Benny lay on the ground frothing oxygenated blood, Jake stepped up to him and shot him once through the bandage on his nose. Benny's body shuddered and went limp. Jake knelt down and searched Benny's equipment for anything useful and came up with two M-67 fragmentation grenades. He figured they could come in handy. Jake moved on toward the chattering machinegun.

The Hawk had never had a raid fall apart like this; he had always been successful in the past and had fooled himself into believing he really knew what he was doing. He wasn't about to give up though. He still had more than 15 men to assault the house and the sniper fire had stopped. He called Tate over to the tree he was taking cover behind and said, "Tate, I believe Cory has taken out the sniper, get them moving, we've got to get through that wire!" Tate nodded and said, "Right boss," and moved back to the Reaver's and got them headed toward the rise.

The assault element moved out in short rushes toward the wire. They were taking heavy fire from the house, but it wasn't as effective as the sniper fire from the roof, because once through the trees the small rise gave them some cover. They moved out and after about 20 yards, topped the small rise and came upon Jess's concertina wire.

Tate had the presence of mind to pull his assault element back behind the rise as they came under withering fire from the front of the house. One of his men had been hit and fell thrashing into the wire as the rest of them retreated back to the rise. Fortunately, they took no more casualties as Tate arrayed his troops along the little rise and started firing up the front of the house. He looked to his left and saw Stan's pick-up stranded in the ditch and realized that he needed a diversion in order to cut through the wire.

Tate called the Reaver over that was carrying the AT-4 (disposable 84 millimeter anti-tank rocket launcher). Tate asked him, "Reggie, you think you can hit the house from here?" Reggie took a moment to examine the

farm house, roughly 70 yards away and said, "Sure Tate, piece of cake."

"Ok, when I tell you too, I want you to put it right through the front door." Reggie nodded, uncapped and extended the launcher tube. Tate went down the line telling the other men that they were going to rush the wire and start cutting a path through it, when Reggie fired the rocket. Tate reckoned that they should have enough time to cut through the wire and be at the house, before the people inside recovered from the rocket blast.

Tate came back to Reggie's position and said, "Whenever you're ready." Reggie who was sighted in on the front door, looked back over his shoulder and said, "Back blast area clear!" turned back and got on the sight, and after a moment pressed the trigger. There was a loud banging whoosh and an almost immediate cracking explosion from the front of the house. Incoming fire from the house ceased and there was a large cloud of smoke billowing out of the front door. Curiously, a perfect smoke ring popped out of one of the front windows. Tate jumped up and screamed, "Come on, let's go!" and took off for the wire obstacle, 10 yards away.

In the farm house, Jess picked himself up from the study floor and asked, "What the hell was that?" Jess was momentarily disoriented, but shook it off and realized that there was no more firing from inside the house. He limped from the study (he had abandoned the crutches), into the smoke filled hallway and looked to his right toward the front door.

The reinforced steel door was hanging by the top hinge, and had burst open into the hallway. There was a baseball sized ragged hole near the center of the door and the hallway was totally wrecked. There were small fires burning in places, so he pulled a fire extinguisher off of the wall and put out the small fires. Jess saw a body lying in the hallway and limped over to it. He painfully knelt down next to it and searched for signs of life; there were none. The body was so badly burnt and torn up, he couldn't recognize who it was, so he got up and limped into the living room and saw his wife, Brother Jeff and Chris, Jimmy's wife, staggering up from the debris filled floor.

Jeff looked at him wild eyed and asked, "My God Jess, what was that?" Jess leaned against the door jamb and said, "I think they just shot us with an anti-tank rocket, it killed Jimmy. If they have anymore, we're screwed." Chris let out a half muffled sob and started toward the hallway but Jess stopped her,

"Chris, you can't help Jimmy now. You need to stay here and fight for your children's lives." Chris looked shocked, but stopped, nodded her head once and returned to her window and started firing her AR-15 at the men at the wire. Paulette and Jeff returned to their windows and started firing also; nobody said a word as Jess returned to the study and resumed his one sided fight with the machinegun. He would mourn his brother later, if he lived through this.

Tate and his assault element were arrayed along the wire obstacle, just beyond the rise. Firing had resumed

from the house and most of the Reaver's had gone prone and started returning fire. Two of them started working on the triple coils of wire with wire cutters.

Back behind his tree the Hawk, was reassured that Tate was finally breaching the wire. The Hawk overcame his fear and sprinted to the rise and flopped down behind it, where he could see his assault element returning fire at the house and the two men cutting a path through the wire. It looked like things were finally coming together. Then there was a cracking explosion fifty yards to his right front and the machinegun fire stopped.

Jake had crept to within 7 yards of the machinegun position. The gunner would fire several 6 to 9 round bursts at the house and pause to let the gun cool. Jake assumed, correctly, the gunner didn't have a spare barrel to change out, so he was trying not to overheat and ruin the gun. Jake was almost directly behind the gun and had a clear view of the gun team and two dead guys lying near them.

Jake took one of the M-67 baseball grenades from his coat pocket, and thumbed the safety clip off of the safety lever and held the grenade to his chest. He stuck his left index finger into the ring and pulled the pin. Jake peeked out from behind the tree, marking the gun's position; he let the safety lever fly and the fuse ignited with a hissing sputter. Jake counted to himself, "one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three one thousand," and tossed the grenade, underhand toward the gun. He ducked back behind the large maple tree and the grenade landed between the outstretched legs of the assistant gunner, Rafe, and immediately went off with a violent cracking explosion.

Rafe's mangled and smoking body was thrown out into the middle of the driveway lane. His body absorbed almost all of the shrapnel effect of the grenade and that saved Cory's life, but the explosion blew Cory three feet to the left of the machine gun and rendered him unconscious. Cory Jarrett was effectively out of the fight and Jake had a belt fed machinegun. The real fun was about to begin.

Jake had braced himself, stuck his fingers in his ears and ridden out the concussive crack of the exploding grenade. He looked out from around the tree and saw the lifeless body of the gunner laying a yard to the left of the gun and the eviscerated smoking body of the assistant, sprawled in the middle of the driveway. Jake rushed out to the gun and went prone behind it. A rifle round cracked into a tree to his right and Jake made himself as small as he could behind the gun, executed a function check and took stock of how much ammo was at hand.

In the house Jess had been steadily firing at the machinegun crew when there was a bright cracking explosion and a body flew out into the driveway lane from the machinegun position. It lay there smoking and he thought, "What the hell?" and held his fire while trying to figure out what was going on. He saw movement near the gun and fired at the movement, but couldn't tell if he'd had any effect. The gun was no longer firing and the only thing Jess could guess was maybe the gun had overheated and exploded. He figured he would use the lull in the firing to check on his other family members and see how they were holding up. He really needed to check on his daughter in the cupola; he was really worried about her, he

hadn't heard her rifle firing for about 5 minutes. So he headed for the stairs to check on her.

Jake determined that the machinegun was operable and had located another 300 rounds of linked ammo. The gun had a partial belt of ammo in the feed tray and Jake linked the three 100 round belts to the one in the gun. It took him a few minutes to do this, but once finished, figured he had almost four hundred rounds to play with.

Jake reoriented the gun toward the assault party, near the wire 60 yards away. He locked in behind the gun on its bipod and started firing at two men who were apparently cutting the wire. Dirt geysers exploded around the men and one of them scrambled back over the rise; the other one lay next to the wire motionless. Jake started firing 6 to 9 round controlled bursts at the rest of the assault party in front of the wire. The entire assault force panicked and scrambled back over the rise; where they reoriented and returned fire at Jake's position with little effect because he was in defilade. Jake worked the gun sparingly, trying to conserve ammo and started planning what he was going to do next.

The Hawk was behind the rise as the assault element scrambled back behind it. Instead of immediately taking charge, he started berating Tate for failing to breach the wire. At that point they started taking more machinegun fire from the left flank. The Hawk hunkered down and tried to make himself smaller behind the rise and tried to figure out why Cory Jarrett was shooting at them. What he didn't realize was that he had failed the leadership test just as completely as Tate. The Hawk had lost any initiative he may have had. From now to the end of the fight, at best, he would be reacting as opposed to acting. He didn't have enough experience to know that was the path to defeat.

At this point the Reaver named Reggie crawled up to the Hawk and said, "Boss, use the grenades!" The Hawk looked at Reggie uncomprehendingly and asked, "What?" Reggie grabbed the Hawk's arm and said, "Use the grenades to breach the wire!! We got two grenades apiece and if we concentrate them in one spot, we can blow a breach." The Hawk thought about it and said, "Get Tate over here." Reggie crawled away to find Tate and the Hawk started thinking they might pull this out yet.

Jess had found his daughter Tracy lying lifeless in the floor of the cupola; he almost lost it completely, but got hold of himself and checked for vital signs. Tracy had a strong pulse, but was bleeding from the side of her head and was unconscious. Jess slung his rifle across his back and despite his leg wound and back pain, picked up Tracy's limp body and carried her down to her aunt in the basement. As Gaby started working on Tracy, Jess vowed to himself that he would kill, without mercy, every raider that had attacked his family. He changed magazines in his rifle, putting the partially spent magazine in his Arktis vest and headed back upstairs; vowing to avenge his daughter.

Wilkes and his 4 men were behind the barn, watching the back of the farm house. The fight had been going on for about 15 minutes, but Wilkes' group had yet to fire a shot. A couple of his guys were fidgeting and wanted to rush the house, but Wilkes made them hold their positions. One guy, Perkins, kept sticking his

head out from behind the barn and Wilkes told him repeatedly to stop doing it, but the guy wouldn't listen. He just sneered at Wilkes and looked around the barn again, when his head virtually exploded and his lifeless body collapsed.

Young Will Markham had just killed his first man. He was watching to the rear of the house, through one of the steel shuttered kitchen windows. He was agitated and feeling anxious about all of the firing and the explosion that came from the front of the house, but he was a good kid and knew how important it was to watch the back of the house. His uncle had trained him well. Will thought he had detected movement from near the rear corner of the barn, but hadn't been sure. Finally he realized that a man's head and a rifle barrel were poking out around the corner every few minutes. Will looked through the Eotech optical sight on his AR-15 and waited. When the head appeared again, Will fired and saw the man collapse and fall out from behind the barn. Will stayed sighted in on the corner of the barn and waited.

Wilkes said to the other three men, "See what you get if you don't listen to me? Pay attention and you might live through this." Wilkes hoped he would live through this. The raid was taking too long; which meant that a large reaction force could be coming from Johnsville to take them out.

Wilkes was not a Reaver; he had been hired yesterday by the Hawk to augment this raid, along with these other guys. He had been put in charge of this short squad, because he seemed to know what he was doing. Wilkes knew what he was doing, but liked things to go a lot easier than they were now. He preferred defenseless victims and these people were anything but.

Wilkes decided to give this another 5 minutes and then he would head back to the trucks and get out of here. The rest of the group agreed with Wilkes' assessment and were also ready to leave. But first they grabbed the ill fated Perkins by the ankles, dragged him behind the barn and started rifling his pockets for anything valuable. While dragging him behind the barn, two more rifle rounds thumped into his body. Wilkes said half to himself and half to the shooter in the house, "That's fine buddy, as far as I'm concerned the back yard's yours..."

Jake was playing a cat and mouse game with the guys behind the rise; he was firing bursts intermittently and only when he had a target, as he was slowly but surely running out of ammo for the machinegun. He was down to less than 200 rounds, but had already hit at least four of them, maybe five. The guy laying lifeless at the wire, maybe his buddy that scrambled back over the rise; a guy that stuck his head up too far, trying to get a bead on Jake and two guys that got up and ran back toward the road, probably trying to get in position to flank him. He had taken those two down with a long burst that dropped them both, just short of the tree line.

Two grenades went off close together in the wire obstacle. Jake said to himself, "Sh#t, they're trying to blow a breach!" Jake knew he had to get a better angle on them before they breached the wire. If they breached the wire and spread out to rush the house; Jake knew he wouldn't be able to break up the assault

before they reached Jess's home; and if they reached his friend's home, those inside were probably doomed. Jake fired another burst at the rise and tried to figure out where to move the gun for a better angle on the assault force.

Jess came back upstairs and noticed that things had quieted down some, as there was not much firing going on. He first checked on his nephew in the kitchen, who told him that he had shot a man at the corner of the barn, but had seen no other movement since then. Jess told him to stay sharp, but didn't tell him his Dad was dead and moved down the hallway into the living room. Paulette, Jeff and Chris were all at their posts, keeping up a steady volume of fire at the group pinned down beyond the wire.

Chris was crying softly and Jess noticed that she was bleeding from her right ear. Jess figured it was from the AT-4 explosion, it had rung his bell also. Other than that they seemed to be in good shape. As Jess walked up to his wife Paulette she stopped firing and said, "I believe we have an ally outside Mon Cher." Jess asked absently while wiping blood from his nose, "Oh really, Mon Petite?" "Yes husband, the machinegun no longer fires at our house, but fires at the cochon by the wire." Jess was surprised to hear that and looked through Paulette's firing slit to see for himself. He didn't have long to wait as a few seconds later an 8 or 9 round burst from the machinegun, tore up some of the turf near the rise.

Jess wondered if maybe some of the reaction force had gotten here already. He dismissed that idea, because the fight had only been going on for about 20 minutes and his nearest neighbor was a couple in their seventies. He didn't think it would be that old man; who walked with a cane and was half blind. No this had to be somebody else. Could it be Jake? That didn't seem likely, but you never know, Jake was a resourceful SOB.

Jess moved back to the study and tried to get a better look at the guy behind the machinegun. Just as he looked through the shutter slit, a controlled burst came from the machinegun, impacting near the wire obstacle. Whoever he was, he could gun an M240 and Jess figured he owed him big time. That was when Jess heard the two grenades go off in the wire. He rapidly shifted to the window that let out on the front of the house and looked for targets.

Jake wished he had more ammo, but he would have to make due with what he had. Jake crawled back from his position, dragging the gun behind him and stood up. He pulled back into the trees and paralleled the driveway down toward the main road. He intended on getting into a better position to flank the assault element at the rise, before they could breach the wire; start in on them with the machine gun and when that ran dry, finish them with the AK. But Jake had forgotten something; in the fog of combat, he had forgotten that the Hawk had detailed an element to cover the rear of the house and that element was about to factor into Jake's fight.

Wilkes looked at his watch and saw that his 5 minutes was up. He turned to his short squad and said, "Come on, we're out of here." Wilkes led out and started paralleling the driveway back toward the road. As he got past the barn and picked up the tree line, he saw a Reaver with the machinegun stand up and take off for the

road. Wilkes could see four bodies lying in and around where the machinegun position had been and said to himself, "Hell, I would've pulled out too!" He turned back to his men and said in a low voice, "I just saw the machine gunner pull out and head toward the trucks, stay close and be quiet. It looks like we're out of here." Tate led out and followed the machine gunner. He didn't realize that things were not what they seemed.

Jake got to a position roughly 40 yards off of the left flank of the assault element and set the gun between a fallen tree and its stump. He locked in behind the gun and started looking for targets. He could only spot five men, on the left flank of the rise and was frustrated that he couldn't see anymore of them, due to the way the rise curved toward the house. Jake locked the butt of the gun into his shoulder and gave the guy on the very end of the firing line a 5 round burst. 3 of the rounds impacted into his center of mass and he rolled screaming down the back side of the rise. The guy next to him tried to reorient and return Jake's fire. Jake gave him a 6 round burst that missed, corrected his aim and hit him through the head chest and back, with the next 5 round burst. Hitting the second guy was like kicking an ant hill; the assault element realized they were flanked, panicked and started making for the road as fast as they could, firing their weapons in all directions as they fled.

Jake laughed and had just started taking down the mass of running men, when the fallen tree and stump started disintegrating under massed semi automatic rifle fire. Jake abandoned the machinegun by rolling over the fallen log, which saved his life. The log provided Jake just enough cover and concealment to get into the deep ditch that paralleled the driveway lane, before the tree came completely apart under the heavy gunfire. He low crawled down the ditch toward the road; berating himself for forgetting about the element that had been covering the back of the house.

Jake was sure it was that element, which was now trying to kill him. He crawled on, looking for more cover, where he could turn the tables on them. The AK was slung on his back, so he drew the Glock from the shoulder holster and made for a large pine tree, just to the right of the ditch. He could hear the guys that had been shooting at him thrashing around in the brush. He slowly climbed into a kneeling position and waited.

Wilkes had been following the machine gunner, but lost him about 30 seconds ago. He had halted to try and find the gunner again and his squad was milling around and making too much damn noise, when he heard the machine gun start stuttering off to his left near the driveway lane. Wilkes snapped his head to the left and saw the muzzle flash of the gun and looked beyond it, trying to determine what the gunner was shooting at. Wilkes saw the guy in the assault party roll down the rise and heard him scream; realizing that the machine gunner was firing up the assault party, Wilkes clicked off the safety on the heavy Springfield Armory G-3 and started firing at the traitorous machine gunner, just as the gunner laughed and touched off another burst. His men, realizing what he was doing, joined in and the stump and trees around the machine gunner started coming apart.

Wilkes and his men emptied their magazines within a few seconds of each other and started reloading.

Wilkes slammed another magazine into the G-3 and tried to see what kind of affect their flurry of fire had on the machine gunner. There was still steady fire coming from the house, but it was all directed at the tree line along the main road. The assault element had regrouped in the trees and was again firing toward the house. Wilkes motioned one of his men over and asked, "Are you loaded?" The man answered, "Yeah, I'm topped off." Wilkes said, "Ok, me and you are gonna go make sure that guy's dead." The man nodded, shouldered his AK-47 and motioned with his head for Wilkes to lead out. Wilkes stepped out from behind the tree and with the G-3 at high shoulder point, moved out slowly toward the shredded machinegun position.

The Hawk, to his credit rallied the remaining 9 men of his assault party in the tree line next to the road. They had settled down and were returning fire toward the house. The Hawk was on the left flank, next to a large tree trying to determine what had happened with the flanking machinegun. He had seen the muzzle flashes and heard the massive volley that apparently silenced the gun and the only thing he could figure was that it must have been Wilkes' group that took out the gun. He didn't believe that Cory Jarrett had fired them up; that didn't make any sense! Cory and his party had to be dead, so it had to be Wilkes who took out the enemy machinegun. But, who was the enemy machine gunner?

Jake now saw what he was dealing with; He could see all four men that had fired on him, less than 10 yards away. Two of them had stepped out from the brush and trees, and were moving toward the silent machinegun. Jake shifted position slightly and lined up the tritium night sights of the Glock, on the lead bad guy. Jake fired five rounds and it looked like the guy's rifle broke apart and he went down with a startled yell. The second guy was perfectly silhouetted between two trees, firing his weapon in wild arcs: Jake snapped off five more quick rounds and the second guy dropped out of sight. The other two, behind some trees, didn't even return Jake's fire; they just took off through the trees toward the road and the getaway vehicles. Jake heard some thrashing coming from the brush, where the first guy went down; he fired three more rounds at the sounds and they stopped. Jake tactically reloaded the Glock and sat there listening, but heard no further noises.

Jake holstered the Glock, took the AK from where it had been slung across his back and laid it next to the tree. Jake removed the black trench coat; it had been a hindrance anyway and tossed it in the shallow ditch, along with the watch cap. He checked the action of the AK and made sure a round was chambered and the magazine was seated, before he started to move down to the end of the driveway lane. That was when someone busted through the brush to his right rear and headed toward the road. Jake was caught off balance and wasn't able to fire before the guy was gone. He could hear him thrashing through the trees toward the road and thought, "I guess you used up one of your nine lives tonight buddy boy." Jake continued stealthily toward the road, to hopefully finish this thing once and for all.

Wilkes was more frightened than he had ever been in his life. As he moved out toward the machinegun, the butt stock of his rifle shattered and it scared him so badly, he virtually collapsed, which saved his life. His partner hadn't been so lucky. He didn't understand it, that guy should have been dead! It didn't make any

sense, but Wilkes couldn't worry about that now; he was more concerned with getting away alive. He headed toward the trucks and burst out on the road near the head of the column. The two guys that had been with him were starting one of the pick-up trucks as Wilkes arrived. Wilkes didn't say a word; he just threw himself over into the bed of the pick-up truck, as it u-turned out of the column and accelerated down the road. Wilkes regretted losing the rifle, but he could always get another one. It was a heavy b%#ch anyway and he'd had a hard time getting used to it. He would replace it, in the usual way, by stealing another one...

The Hawk had briefed Tate and his six remaining men and was just about to have them move out, when one of the trucks started up and u-turned out of the vehicle column and sped south down the Rural Route. The Hawk threw up his AK-47 and almost fired at the fleeing vehicle but thought better of it. It wouldn't accomplish anything, and he had to get his remaining men down that driveway and hit the house from the flank. He knew that the front door of the place had been blown open and had a vague idea about somehow rushing it from the flank. He told Tate, "Ok Tate, lets go and finish this thing." Tate smiled and signaled the three Reavers in the lead to move out.

The AK Jake liberated from Slant Eye had been converted to fire fully automatic. Jake had discovered this by the three position selector switch (Semi-auto AK's had two position selectors). Jake set the selector to the middle of the three positions, for fully automatic and shouldered the rifle. He was kneeling at the base of an oak tree, where the driveway lane met the road, oriented toward what was left of the assault element. He had laid out all of his spare magazines on the ground next to him, along with the remaining fragmentation grenade. As the gaggle of Reavers stepped out on to the road, and that's what it was a bunched up gaggle. Jake locked the stock into his shoulder and sighted in on the lead man. As the gaggle started moving toward Jake, he let the lead man get to within 12 yards of his position and touched off two rapid three round bursts.

The lead man and the one behind him, both went down with a clatter and the rest of the assault element started firing wildly and trying to seek cover in the open roadway, with little success. It was like shooting rats in a barrel; Jake emptied one magazine and reloaded, as he was taking fire from several Reavers in the roadway and opposite ditch. As they returned Jake's fire, he would locate their muzzle flashes and return their fire. He had good cover behind the oak tree and they were firing wildly anyway. Jake began to think he might get out of this unscathed after all.

The Hawk, Tate and Reggie, bringing up the rear of the formation had immediately jumped into the nearside ditch as Jake took the assault element under fire. The Hawk cursed because he couldn't get an angle on their attacker's position to return fire. But that also meant that he couldn't get at them either, due to the trees. The Hawk called Tate over and said, "Tate, Reggie and I will try to get in a position to pin this guy down, and I'm sure it's only one guy. I want you to move down the inside of this tree line and flank him and take him out."

Tate smiled and laying his AK aside, took the pump shotgun from his back and racked the slide. The Hawk continued, "Once you've taken him out make for the vehicles, we have no chance of salvaging this, it's time

to leave while we can. Clear?" Tate smiled once again and said, "Sure Hawk, I'll blow this guy away and meet you at the trucks." He crawled into the tree line adjacent to the road, stood and stealthily headed for Jake's flank; he was going to enjoy this, as he always did.

Jake was dueling with one guy in the far ditch and another lying in the road, using one of his fallen partner's bodies for cover. Jake was getting worried; he didn't think he was engaging the entire assault element. He was starting to realize that some of them had made it into the tree line and were probably flanking him, but he couldn't move until he dealt with the two guys in the road and ditch. He figured they were just trying to get back to the vehicles and was just about to cease firing and let them; when the tree he was using for cover started coming apart to his left and he felt a sledgehammer blow on his left arm, left shoulder and left buttocks. The pain was enormous and Jake fell into the ditch to his right front and fought the pain and nausea, trying not to pass out.

Jake knew he had been hit hard but he wasn't ready to die yet. He choked down the nausea and focused on fighting through the pain. His left arm wouldn't work and he had dropped the AK anyway, so he reached down and drew the .38, vowing to himself to continue the fight. He briefly thought of his son and his family; that they would never know how he had died in this ditch. He got angry and put those thoughts out of his mind, deciding it was time to Ranger up! He rolled over onto his back with a muffled groan and prepared to take it to the enemy, in any way he still could.

Tate had rapidly skirted the trees and got to a position where he could see Jake's left side and back, as he fired up Tate's buddies in the road. Tate smiled wickedly and from the hip, slam fired five double ought buckshot rounds at Jake as fast as he could work the shotgun's action, from 12 yards away. That was why Tate liked this old sawed off Ithaca 37; all you had to do was hold the trigger back and every time the pump action closed, it would slam fire.

Each 12 gauge, double ought buckshot round contained nine 33 caliber lead pellets. Essentially, Tate had put 45, 33 caliber bullets in the air, into Jake's position, with devastating effects. While he was firing, Tate saw the tree trunk explode in splinters and Jake's body fall twisting into the ditch on the far side of the tree. Tate smiled again and called out to the Hawk, "I got him, it's clear." Tate started thumbing more buckshot rounds into the magazine tube of the shotgun, as he moved toward where Jake was lying in the ditch. He was going to make sure this guy was dead. Tate hoped the guy was still alive and conscious when he stuck the shotgun in his mouth and blew his head off. Wouldn't that be rich?

The Hawk and Reggie moved out into the roadway and headed toward the vehicles. The two Reavers, the one from the ditch and the wounded one, using his dead partner for cover, joined them and made their way to the Hawk's Suburban. The Hawk heard vehicles and saw headlights coming up the rural route from the south and realized that they needed to get out of here right now. Reggie and the other two Reavers piled into the Suburban and Reggie took the wheel, starting the big vehicle. The Hawk called out to Tate, "Hurry up Tate; I think a reaction force is coming and I don't want to get hung by a bunch of yokels."

Tate had just stepped up to the guy lying in the ditch, smiled into his pain filled, obviously conscious blue eyes and said, "Be right there boss, I just got one more thing to do. He thumbed a final round into the Ithaca and said to the guy lying in the ditch, "You almost had us tough guy, but in the end you lose."

Tate pumped a round into the chamber of the shotgun and was swinging it toward Jake's head, when Jake smiled through the pain and said, "Not today sport." Jake rammed the .38 up into Tate's groin and fired off three rounds as fast as he could pull the trigger. Tate dropped the shotgun and took several staggering steps backward and sat down hard in the ditch. Tate clutched his smoking groin, whimpered pitifully and vomited a startling amount of blood into his lap. He coughed once and fell over backward dead. Jake dropped the arm holding the .38, and rolled over on to his stomach in the ditch.

Jake lay there and marshaled his strength; he had to kill the Hawk, but wasn't sure if he could stay conscious long enough. He had recognized the Hawk as the remnants of the assault element ran by heading for the Suburban. With every bit of strength he could muster, Jake was able to push himself up on to his knees in the ditch. He dropped the .38 onto the black topped road and reached across his chest to draw the Glock. The Suburban had pulled out into the middle of the road and sat there idling. Jake could just see the Hawk standing on the other side of the vehicle, holding an AK-47 and looking anxious. Jake lifted his right arm and tried to take a bead on the Hawk, but he was weaving around like a drunk; he thought, "What the hell!" and fired all fifteen rounds at the Hawk, as fast as he could pull the trigger. As the slide locked back Jake's strength gave out and he collapsed back into the ditch and passed out.

Jake's rounds started snapping into the bodywork and sparking off of the hood of the Suburban. Two rounds impacted the windshield as the Hawk, recognizing his nemesis Jake in the glare of the headlights, dove into the passenger seat. The Hawk, his courage completely broken screamed at Reggie, "Get us out of here now!!" Reggie dropped the vehicle into gear and sped north up the Rural Route, as the Hawk sagged into the seat, a broken, but still dangerous man...

Mark Webb was in the lead vehicle of the reaction force from Johnsville. In less than 45 minutes, they had been able to assemble a reaction force of town's people and pick up some men of the outlying farms and homes on the way. There were nine vehicles containing 27 heavily armed and angry men, speeding toward Jess Markham's farm. Webb was sitting in the front passenger seat of a Johnsville police car, being driven by the town's young police chief. The chief, 28 year old Barry Cuttler was driving the heavy police cruiser with expertise and the relief force convoy was closed up together and going better than 70 miles per hour. As they topped a rise, they saw the headlights of a vehicle barreling toward them.

Cuttler said, "Mark, do you know what Jess's vehicles look like?" Mark turned to him and said, "Shore do Barry." Cuttler reached over and hit the hidden release button on the upright shotgun rack and said, "Good, take this 870 and if that ain't one of Jess's vehicles, put a couple through the radiator.

Webb acknowledged Cuttler's suggestion, took the shotgun, checked the action and leaned out of the passenger side window. Webb took a bead on the grill of the rapidly approaching vehicle. As it approached to within 25 yards of them Mark, an avid hunter and excellent shot, fired three well aimed rounds of buckshot into the grill and one into the windshield of the speeding truck that he had never seen before. The pick-up emitted a cloud of steam and ran off into the off side ditch with a crash. One of the guys in the back seat said, "Good shootin mark, they ain't goin no place, anytime soon!"

Cuttler got on the police radio and told the last car in the reaction force, the other Johnsville police car, to drop off and check out the disabled truck and take into custody any survivors. His officer acknowledged and the police car slowed and dropped out of the convoy near the disabled truck. Cuttler accelerated toward Jess Markham's farm and turned to Mark and said, "Good shooting Mark, I hope we get to Jess's place in time to do some good." Mark said, "Yeah Barry, me too..."

Jess had moved to the front of the house with his brother Jeff, Paulette and Chris. There had been no more fire directed at the house for several minutes and then there was a flurry of firing near the end of the driveway lane followed by another couple of minutes of silence. Then there was a series of rapid pistol shots, followed by a vehicle speeding off northbound on the rural route. For the last couple of minutes there had been an eerie silence. Then the FRS radio in Jess's combat vest, set to a pre-coordinated emergency channel crackled and a voice came over the radio.

"Airborne, Airborne (Jess's family's call sign) this is Minuteman 6, what is your status, over?" Jess relaxed with visible relief, realizing the Johnsville reaction force was within striking distance of his farm. Jess took out the radio and pushed the transmit button. "Minuteman 6, minuteman 6, this is Airborne 6. Be advised the homestead is still secure, the homestead is still secure. Bad guy's status, aborted the raid, aborted the raid, not confirmed, I say again, not confirmed. Airborne has one KIA and four WIA." Your ETA? Over."

Minuteman 6 came back and said, "Airborne, minuteman 6. Will be your location in 5 mikes, I say again 5 mikes; Will approach northbound on RR (Rural Route), additional elements dismounted approaching from south and west. How copy over?" Mark smiled and said into the radio, "Good copy, holding our fire, Airborne standing by."

Jess realized he could hear vehicles on the Rural Route, coming from the south, but within a few moments the sounds stopped. A couple of minutes later he got three red flashes from a flashlight in the tree line near the road. He took the Surefire P-6 out of his Arktis vest and gave four white flashes back. He safed his rifle and told his family to hold their fire as his friends and neighbors stepped out of the tree line and approached the house on line, stopping near the wire obstacle. Two of them waved and the one in the lead came down the driveway lane, toward the house slinging his rifle and was followed by the second man, carrying some kind of pack. Jess leaned against his shattered front door and waited as the two men climbed the vehicle obstacle. His family members stayed in front of their firing slits, in case it was a ruse.

Barry Cuttler and old Dr. Kincer walked up to the front steps and Cuttler said, "Sorry it took so long to get

here Jess, we came as fast as we could. You alright? You look like hell!” Jess laughed and said, “You oughta see the other guy, anyway, glad to see you and you too Doc.” Dr. Kincer asked Jess, “Where am I needed most?” Jess got a pained look on his face and said, “You better get down to the basement, Gaby is down there working on Tracy, she’s been hit in the head.” Dr. Kincer pushed past Jess without a word and headed down to the basement. Cuttler said to Jess, “You go sit down someplace, while we sweep the area and see if any of them are left alive. I’ll let you know what we find.” Jess just nodded and turned back into the house to tell Paulette about the condition of her only daughter and his nephew about his father...

Mark Webb and his neighbors were checking out the vehicles and the dead and wounded raiders on and near the road. Mark had to stop one of his neighbors from shooting a critically wounded Reaver lying in the road by saying, “Don’t kill him, we’re gonna hang any survivors.”

Frank Nickleson, was standing over a bloody Reaver lying in the ditch next to the driveway and said, “Hangem hell! I’m gonna work on this one with a knife just like they did to Molly; then I’m gonna shoot him in the head like they done poor Dave!” Frank hadn’t been the same after witnessing the aftermath of the last raid. Most everybody thought that the experience had completely unhinged him.

Mark stepped over to the ditch just as the wounded Reaver moaned and tried to sit up. Frank said something unrecognizable as human speech and violently kicked the wounded Reaver in the side of the head. The Reaver collapsed back into the ditch as Mark grabbed Frank and pulled him away. Frank tried to struggle out of Mark’s arms, but wasn’t strong enough. He broke down and started sobbing saying, “Kill em, kill em all, kill em all.” As he broke down completely and sagged in Mark’s arms. Mark had a couple of the other men disarm Frank and take him back to one of the vehicles with the admonishment to make sure they watched him.

Mark looked back at the Reaver lying in the ditch. He was a bloody mess and Mark knelt down to check and see if he was still alive. As he found a pulse at the man’s throat, Mark looked down and saw the faded blue jeans and the mossy oak gaiters and exclaimed, “Oh my God, It’s Jake!” He looked closer at the bloody face and it was indeed Jake Craft. Mark took a moment to wonder how Jake got here so fast and thought, “Well, at least he’s alive.” Mark called a couple of men over and explained who the man was and they picked Jake up and carried him to Jess’s house. Mark hoped that the Doc could save him, but from the amount of blood, it didn’t look good...

Chapter 7, Best Laid Plans

It wasn't the throbbing pain that brought him back to consciousness; it was the thirst. The thirst was maddening as Jake swam back into consciousness. He was lying on his right side and other than the throbbing pain in his head, felt alright. That is until he tried to move.

As Jake tried to roll on to his back, his left arm, shoulder and left buttocks reminded him that he had been shot. Jake settled back on to his right side and the pain subsided somewhat, but the thirst came back with a vengeance. Jake took in his surroundings as he looked around for something to drink.

He was in a four post double bed in somebody's bedroom; obviously a woman's room by the décor and the faint smell of powder, lotion and perfume. Jake noticed a repetitive scratching noise and looked for its source. Beyond the foot of the bed, a woman was sitting at a mirrored vanity brushing her long dark hair. She was wearing a long white flannel nightgown and of all things, a pair of Ugh boots. The room was dimly lit by a kerosene lamp, but Jake couldn't make out anymore details about the woman or the room.

Jake tried to speak to the woman to ask for something to drink, but the only thing that came out was a choking croak. At that, the woman turned toward the bed and looked at Jake rather coolly. He was immediately taken aback by her striking good looks and her piercing gaze. She had dark eyes, an aquiline nose, a full lipped mouth and a strong jaw line. She looked to be in her late twenties but somehow seemed more mature.

The woman gave a little smirk and said, "Well, the great warrior is awake!" All Jake could do was hoarsely gasp, "Water." The woman put down her hairbrush and gracefully stood up. She walked over to the bed side table and poured a cup of water from a plastic pitcher. She sat on the side of the bed and put her hand under Jake's head and lifted it from the pillow and placed the cup to his lips. Jake greedily gulped at the water.

The woman pulled the cup away and admonished Jake by saying, "Not so fast, it will make you nauseas, you must go slower." Jake nodded his head and the woman resumed feeding him the water.

Jake had noticed that the woman spoke with an accent that he couldn't quite place. It was an odd mixture of southern drawl and maybe French, but he couldn't be sure. He was sure of one thing though, she was the most striking woman Jake had ever seen and she made him feel somehow doltish.

As Jake drained the cup she asked him, "Would you like some more?" Jake nodded his head yes and blurted out, "Who are you? Where am I?" The woman turned her piercing gaze on Jake and said, "Mr. Craft, I am Gabrielle Langlois-Parker, and you are in my bedroom."

Jake was taken aback and didn't know what to say. Gabrielle Langlois-Parker gave a musical laugh and

said, "You are in the guest room of the Markham farm, Mr. Craft. I apologize, I shouldn't be flippant. You were shot and then kicked in the head by a mentally disturbed man. You are being given the VIP treatment around here because of the men you killed a few days ago." This last was said with just an undertone of reproach in her voice and Jake realized that he knew who this woman was. She had to be Jess's 'Pacifist' sister in law; the nurse practitioner.

Jake laid his head back on the pillow and said, with a little reproach of his own, "You're welcome!" Gabrielle looked down her nose at him and said, "I make no secret of disdaining violence Mr. Craft, there should always be another way to settle things. But it seems that nowadays, people shoot first and want to talk later, *c'est ne pas?*"

"Lady, the bunch that hit this place didn't come here to talk. They came to kill, steal and rape! Trying to talk it over with them would have only made things easier for them. You don't negotiate with a rabid dog; you put it down; and those boys were worse than rabid dogs!"

Gabrielle was somewhat taken aback herself, by the power and conviction in what Jake said. She would never admit it, but this Jake Craft had an unsettling effect on her. She had tried to maintain her professional objectivity while caring for him over the last few days, but this man had somehow gotten under her skin. She was not sure of the emotions he triggered and because of that; she took an antagonistic stance toward him.

It had been two years since her husband had been killed in New Orleans and she was experiencing emotions she thought she never would again. It was confusing and stimulating at the same time. Her husband had been a man of character who also spoke with conviction. But there the similarity ended. Dr. Jerome Parker had been a healer and a man of culture; not a killer like this man lying in her bed, shot full of holes.

Gaby refilled the water cup and assisted Jake in drinking it. As Jake finished the second cup he asked, "What's the prognosis?" Gaby looked at him and said, "You have a mild concussion, and were struck with four shotgun pellets; one in the upper arm, one in the shoulder and two in the buttocks." With the last statement she gave another musical laugh and continued, "All of the pellets have been removed and you have been sutured by a very good doctor, who you will be seeing in the morning. We have you on an antibiotic regimen and as long as infection doesn't set in, the prognosis is good. On the negative side, you have suffered some muscle damage, we will just have to wait and see. Any further questions Mr. Craft?"

"No, no further questions, but I have one request." Gaby raised her dark eyebrows at this and Jake continued, "Since we are going to be such good friends, you can call me Jake. What do I call you?" Gaby stood up from the bed and took several pills from a bottle on the table and said as she offered them to Jake, "You can call me Nurse or Mrs. Langlois-Parker. It is your choice." Jake took the pills and said with a smile, "Ok Nurse, what are these for?" Gaby looked exasperated and said, "They are Ibuprofen, for the pain. Take them now and go to sleep. The doctor will be in to see you in the morning." Jake got up on to his right

elbow and took the pills, motioning for the glass of water. Gaby poured him some more and handed him the cup. Jake tossed down the entire cup and asked, "Ok Nurse, could you now assist me to the bathroom?"

Gaby said, "I don't think that's a good idea, if you have to urinate, I can assist you." Jake didn't like that idea one bit and said, "Help me up, I can walk!" Gaby crossed her arms and said, "If you try to get up, you'll tear the sutures and start bleeding again. We can't have that." Jake, momentarily rendered speechless, didn't say anything. Gaby reached under the bed side table and retrieved a handheld urinal. She held it up and said, "No need to be embarrassed Jake, I'm a professional." Jake, resigned to his fate, nodded and Gaby pulled down the covers.

Jake had never been this embarrassed in his life. Gaby seemed faintly amused and took it in stride. Within a few moments Jake was able to finish his business and Gaby replaced the urinal below the bed side table and said, "Now that we have been so intimate, you may call me Gaby." With that statement, she walked back to the vanity and picked up the kerosene lamp and said, "Goodnight Jake, if you need anything, just call out; I will be in the next room." With that she smiled and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

As Jake lay back on the bed, he experienced a riot of conflicting emotions. It took him a few moments to figure it out, but in the end, he could reach only one conclusion; He was smitten! Which he could ill afford, in the present circumstances; he needed to heal up and get back on the road home. As these thoughts ran through his head, his body took over and he lapsed into a deep healing sleep...

As Gaby got back to her cot in the room shared by the young girls of the Markham family; she experienced some riotous emotions of her own. Yes, this Jake was a handsome man, in a rough sort of way. But, Gaby tried to put that out of her mind. He also had a dry sense of humor; which Gaby had always found attractive, but he was a soldier! A killer of men!

Gaby had always been attracted to strong men, but never that type; and besides, what about Jerome's memory? She felt as if she was betraying Jerome somehow, with these feelings. It was all so confusing and she lay there for a long time before finally falling asleep...

The following morning, Jake was awakened by children's voices in the hallway, outside of his room. He lay there for a long time and tried to shift around to a more comfortable position on the bed. He was able to get partially on his back, without too much pain. He took stock of his wounds and their condition.

His left arm was strapped to his side with an ace bandage around his torso. It seemed that the pellet he had taken was in the upper arm near the joint. His left shoulder was also heavily bandaged and there was a throbbing pain on his back above the clavicle. His butt hurt the most. The left cheek was one big dull, throbbing ache. His headache had subsided and he felt almost human. Ten minutes later a knock came at his door.

Jake said, "Come in." and Jess Markham hobbled through the door with the aid of a cane. Jess smiled and said, "Good morning Jake, how are you feeling?" Jake grinned at Jess and said, "I'll quote my old granddaddy, 'every day above ground, is a good day!' How are you doing Jess?"

Jess gingerly sat down in the chair next to the bed and said, "Not too bad Jake, I seem to be healing up pretty well." Jake nodded his head and Jess continued, "Jake, I just wanted to thank you for what you did. If it hadn't been for you, I don't think any of us would have made it." Jake shook his head and said, "No thanks are necessary Jess, they needed killing, lets just leave it at that, ok?"

Jess laughed and said, "That's easier said than done. You are the hero around here, especially in my wife's eyes. You saved her husband's life and then turned around and saved her whole family. So, lay back and enjoy it. It'll do you some good." Jake just shrugged his good shoulder and asked, "Fill me in, what happened on your end of the fight?"

Jess spent the next ten minutes telling Jake about losing his brother James and the fact that his daughter had been wounded. Not as severely as they had originally thought. She had taken a nearly spent round above the right ear, but other than being severely concussed, it looked like she would be ok. He also told Jake about how Mark Webb had found him in the ditch and brought him to the house, where he had been treated by Dr. Kincer and placed in this room to recover. He finished by saying, "It was a near run thing Jake, if they had gotten through the wire we would've been done for." Jake just nodded his head in agreement.

Jess also told him that they had 6 surviving raiders in custody in Johnsville. There had initially been 10 surviving raiders, but 4 had succumbed to their wounds. Jess told Jake that they hadn't decided what to do with the raiders yet, but they were having a community meeting the following week to discuss it.

Jess stood up and said, "Look Jake, you get some rest. The women will be bringing you some breakfast in a little while and Dr. Kincer will be by later to check on you. By the way, what did you make of my widowed sister in law?"

Jake, realizing Jess was speaking of Gaby, laughed and shook his head saying, "She's something else, a real looker too!" Jess laughed and said, "Be careful Jake, if a Langlois woman works her Cajun charms on you, you're doomed!" They were both sharing a good laugh as Gaby and another woman walked into the room.

Gaby was carrying a cloth covered tray, which she gracefully sat on the bed side table. Jake looked at the other woman and saw an older version of Gaby. They shared the same striking good looks and the obvious character. Jess smiled at the second woman with affection and said, "Jake, I'd like you to meet my wife, Paulette. Paulette, this is Jake Craft." Paulette smiled warmly and came and sat on the bed. She took Jake's right hand in hers and said, "I am so happy to see you are awake and feeling better. I want you not to worry about anything, you are an honored guest in our home. Just relax and let us heal you."

Jake blushed in embarrassment and said, “Well Ma’am, I’ll be on my way as soon as I can, I don’t want to impose.” Paulette, cut him off by saying, “Nonsense, and you will call me Paulette. I will not let you leave here until you are well, do you understand me?” Jake had to smile, for he saw that this woman would brook no argument. All he could do was say, “Yes Paulette, whatever you say.” She nodded her head and said, “Good, now let Gaby examine you, so you can eat your breakfast.” With that she stood up and said to Jess, “Come husband, we have work to do!” Jess just smiled, winked at Jake and followed his wife from the room.

Once they left, Gaby stuck a thermometer in Jake’s mouth and took his pulse at the wrist. After noting his pulse and temperature she said, “Very good, no fever and a resting pulse of 60. From the looks of you Jake, I take it you are obscenely healthy, no?” Jake had to laugh at her antagonism, right out of the gate; this woman was something else. Jake responded by saying, “I am obscenely healthy, yes; always have been, when people weren’t punching holes in me.”

At that Gaby had to laugh, she couldn’t help herself. She helped Jake into a sitting position and carefully propped him up on some pillows. She retrieved the breakfast tray and brought it to the bed. Gaby sat on the bed and placed the tray on her lap. She uncovered the tray and Jake saw a farm breakfast of bacon and three eggs, over easy and a big bowl of cornmeal grits. Jake’s mouth started to water as Gaby prepared to feed him.

As Gaby fed him, Jake was again struck by how good looking she was. She was wearing a well fitting pair of jeans and a man’s flannel work shirt. The shirt was too large for her but did nothing to conceal the swell of her breasts or the curves of her figure. Gaby had her hair pulled back in a French braid, which only accented the strong beauty of her face. It had been a long time since Jake had been with a woman and the natural urges welled up in him. Even though wounded, he wanted this woman with a power that startled him.

Jake knew he was on dangerous ground and realized he had to control himself. Jake, unlike his older brother, had never been much of a ladies man. He was too much of a brooder; prone to the dark moods of his Scots Irish ancestry. Women were attracted to him but he had always been awkward around them. He was much more comfortable when he didn’t have to deal with situations like this. But now, it looked like he was in danger of making a fool of himself.

What he didn’t know, was that Gaby was having some of the same feelings. Gaby’s dark beauty and haughty character had both attracted and repelled men throughout her life. She had always been suspicious of charmers and smooth ladies men. She had fallen in love with her husband, because he was neither a charmer, nor smooth. Jerome had been awkward with her at first, but she had found this amusing and flattering at the same time. They had fallen in love out of mutual admiration of their professional abilities and their strong characters. What Gaby wouldn’t admit to herself, was that she saw the same strong character traits in Jake, along with a strong physical attraction. Jake, in her eyes, was ruggedly handsome

and when he smiled, his normally brooding features would light up with amused mischief. Gaby didn't know what lay in store with Jake Craft, but she knew she had to be careful. She did not want to be humiliated.

When she finished feeding Jake, she sat the tray aside and said, "Now, I need to take the bandages off of your wounds. Dr. Kincer has arrived and when he finishes with my niece, Tracy. He will be in to examine you." Jake nodded and said, "Ok, nurse, whatever you say." Gaby smiled and said, "Good, I want you to know, this will hurt you more than it will me." She retrieved some scissors from a small plastic tray on the table and started cutting the tape holding the ace bandage in place. As she freed his left arm, Jake tentatively started to flex it. Gaby said, "Hold still you fool, do you want to start bleeding again?" Jake harrumphed and said, "Relax Gaby, I'll take it easy, I'm just trying to see if it still works." She gave him a piercing look and continued with the scissors.

As she un-banded the upper arm and shoulder, she said, "That's doing nicely, obviously you heal fast and there is no apparent infection, although the bruising is spectacular." She was very business like and Jake could tell she really knew what she was doing. As she freed the shoulder and upper arm, Jake tentatively rolled the shoulder and winced with the pain. Gaby gave him a haughty look of disdain and said, "You will hold still, or I will restrain you!" Jake gave her a lopsided grin and said, "Yes Ma'am, three bags full Ma'am. I'll be a good boy, I promise."

Gaby couldn't help herself, she gave her musical laugh and said, "You are a smart a\$\$, aren't you?" Jake had to laugh himself, "Yes Ma'am, guilty as charged. My smart a\$\$ has gotten me in trouble more than once." All Gaby could say was, "I'll bet..."

As Gaby finished with the bandages, she asked Jake, "Do you need to use the urinal, before Dr. Kincer comes in?" Jake blushed and said, "I wish you'd just help me up, so I could go to the bathroom." Gaby crossed her arms and said, "You will not get out of that bed until the doctor says you can, and that's final! Do you need the urinal?" Jake frowned and just nodded his head. Gaby got the urinal for him and helped him do his business. It was humiliating, but not as bad as the night before. Jake guessed that you could get used to anything.

Gaby fussed around the room for a few more minutes and Jake enjoyed watching her fluff pillows and arranging things in anticipation of the doctor's arrival. She moved with the grace of a dancer and Jake couldn't help following her with his eyes. He couldn't get over how good looking he found her. Gaby was five five or five six, maybe 125 pounds and perfectly proportioned. Her olive skin appeared to be perfect and blemish free. Jake concluded that she was the best looking woman he'd ever seen.

His ex-wife had been beautiful also, but in a different way; Cathy had been tall, blond and fair. She had what Jake referred to as, "corporate beauty." She looked more at home in business attire, than blue jeans and a flannel shirt. Maybe that was why she was his ex-wife. Their marriage had been a mistake; with the only

saving grace being their son. Jake bore her no ill will, the failed marriage was his fault, not hers. He hoped she and the boy were alright.

Gaby finished tidying the room and went to empty the urinal. As Jake lay there contemplating life, someone opened the door a crack. Jake looked toward the door and saw a young dark haired girl of about 7 years old, peeking into the room. Jake smiled at her and said, "Come on in." The little girl giggled and entered the room; she was wearing brown corduroy bib overalls and pink and white tennis shoes. Her dark hair was pulled back in a pony tail and she had the look of the Langlois women.

The little girl smiled shyly and said "I'm Mary, and momma said to come and get your dishes." Jake smiled back at her and said, "Sure Mary, the tray is on the table." The little girl picked up the tray and turned to Jake and asked, "Are you the man who shot all of those bad men?"

Jake hesitated for a moment, but forged ahead with the truth. "Yes Mary, I shot some of those bad men, the other night." Mary smiled and said, "Good, they killed my uncle James and hurt my sister, I'm glad you shot them. When I get bigger like Tracy, Daddy's going to teach me how to shoot, so I can kill the bad men too."

Jake lamented the fact that a little girl would be exposed to what happened two days ago at this farm. She shouldn't be thinking about things like that. Her only concern should be about dressing her Barbie dolls or having tea parties. Jake shook his head and said, "I hope you never have to shoot anybody Mary." Mary looked Jake straight in the eye and said, "I hope I don't have to either, but if I do, I'll make sure I kill them. I don't want anybody to hurt my family ever again!" With that final statement the little girl left the room carrying Jake's breakfast tray.

Jake lay there contemplating the changes in the world until a short time later, the door to his room opened; a tall, thin, gray haired geezer came in carrying an old fashioned doctor's bag. He sat the bag on the bed and said, "You look chipper this morning son; a helluva lot better than you looked a couple of days ago." Jake laughed and said, "I feel a lot better and you must be Dr. Kincer?" The doctor put out his right hand and shook Jake's. "Yes son, I'm what passes for a doctor in these parts; a couple of years ago I was enjoying my life as a retiree, but circumstances pressed me back into practice. Now let me take a look at you."

As the doctor poked and prodded Jake, Gaby came back into the room and stood by quietly. The doctor finished examining Jake and said to Gaby, "From the looks of things, I don't think you need to immobilize the arm anymore. He is healing nicely and should start using it. The same for the shoulder, no signs of infection and the wounds are healing. The Buttocks is another matter; it's ok to get him up and let him move around some, but keep an eye on things and make him carry a pillow around to sit on. The a\$\$ is a lot trickier place to get shot than most people think." Gaby looked at the old doctor with open affection and said, "Yes doctor, but from what I've seen he is a stubborn man and will try to over do things." Doctor

Kincer looked at Jake and said, “Son, I hear tell you were a soldier, is that correct?” Jake looked at the old geezer and wondered where this was going, “Yes sir, I was a Staff Sergeant in the Army.”

“Well that’s good to hear son, I was a Major in the Army Medical Corps and I’m giving you a direct order.” The doctor pointed at Gaby and continued, “As far as you’re concerned, Gabrielle here is a Colonel and her word is law. If she tells you to do something, you better do it. If I hear you’ve given her any guff, I’ll kick you in the perforated side of you’re a\$\$! Are we clear on that Staff Sergeant?”

Jake had to smile, he liked this geezer’s style and threw him a perfect salute and said, with all seriousness, “Sir, yes sir!” The doctor looked at him sternly and said, “Son, methinks you are being a smart a\$\$, is that the case?”

Before Jake could answer, Gaby chimed in and said, “Doctor, Mr. Craft by his own admission, is a smart a\$\$ of great renown; but not to worry, I can handle him.” The doctor chuckled and said, “I’m sure you can Gabrielle, he don’t look near as tough as you!” They all had a good laugh with that one, when the doctor changed the subject.

“Son, I noticed that your carcass had been invaded by foreign metal objects on previous occasions. Were you in the recent wars?” Jake got a solemn look on his face and said, “Yes doctor, I pulled three tours in the middle east. I got hit a few times, mostly shrapnel and rock fragments, nothing too serious though. By the way doctor, how long will I be laid up?”

“Well son, I’ll give you my best guess; I’d say 6 to 8 weeks at the outside, barring infection, maybe less Which depends on you and how fast you heal” This was very disappointing to Jake. If what the doctor said was true, he wouldn’t be fit before late December, in the midst of winter. At this rate, he wouldn’t be able to get home until spring! Jake asked Dr. Kincer, “Where did you serve, sir?”

“My war was Viet Nam, the land of bad things, as they used to say. I thought I’d seen my last body torn up by metal fragments when I left there in 69, but I guess I was wrong on that count. Anyway son, you listen to this good woman here, she’s the best student I’ve ever had and one day, she’ll inherit my practice. Hopefully soon, I want to spend my golden years fishing.” With that the doctor hefted his bag and motioned Gaby to follow him from the room.

Ten minutes later, Gaby came back carrying what turned out to be a pair of men’s pajama bottoms, a robe and a pair of slippers. She placed them on the foot of the bed and said, “Let’s get you into these so you can get up and move around, if you want too? She made this last a question. Jake sat up and carefully swung his legs out of the bed and put his feet on the floor. He studiously avoided putting any weight on his left butt cheek. He kept his midsection covered with the bedding and said to Gaby, “I’m ready, whenever you are.”

Gaby got the pajama bottoms and knelt in front of Jake; she got them on up to his knees and asked, “Can you stand up?” Jake stood and weaved a bit, from the sharp pain in his rump, but remained standing. Gaby

started pulling the pajamas up over his knees and when she got to the bedding covering Jake's midsection, met resistance. She looked Jake in the eye and said, "Let go of the blanket, so I can get these on you." Jake clutched the bedding and said, "Turn around; I'll get them on the rest of the way."

Gaby shook her head and said, "Ok, have it your way." And turned and faced away from Jake. Jake let go of the blanket and pulled the pajamas all the way up and sat back down on the bed and said, "Alright, you can turn back around." Gaby turned, picked up the robe and handed it to Jake. Jake put the robe on, stood back up and belted it. Gaby put the slippers at his feet and he slipped his feet into them. Jake looked at Gaby and said, "I'm ready, whenever you are." Gaby supported Jake's right arm and walked him from the room into the hallway. Jake didn't know it, but these were the first steps toward his recovery...

67 miles away, at the Crossroads; the Hawk sat in his near deserted warehouse and pondered his downfall. He had returned two days ago and after a short meeting with Jarrett, which ended with Jarrett saying, "Get out of my sight!" The Hawk had slunk back to the warehouse and gotten high with the girls.

Reggie and the Reaver from the ditch, Butchie, were the only two Reavers left. The wounded Reaver, Greg, had died on the way back to Crossroads and they had dumped his body along the road. The Hawk had lost not only his entire fighting force, but the weapons, ammunition and the trucks. This one raid had virtually destroyed him and he was in a deep depression.

He kept replaying over and over, how things had gone bad. He also couldn't get the face of his own personal boogie man, Jake Craft, out of his mind. That guy had destroyed the Reavers! The Hawk was at a loss as to what he should do now. One thing he wanted to do, was go back to Johnsville and make sure that Craft was dead. But, he didn't know where to start. That was the point where Reggie stepped in and gave the Hawk a glimmer of hope.

Reggie assured the Hawk that he and Butchie would stand by him. He also reminded the Hawk that they were not without assets and could recruit more Reavers. There were plenty of guns for hire around the Crossroads and the Hawk had over 30 ounces of gold and a lot of silver to be used in recruitment. They also had a substantial arsenal of weapons and ammunition. Vehicles would be a problem, but if worse came to worse, they could steal what they needed.

The Hawk bounced back from his depression rather quickly after talking to Reggie. He made Reggie his second in command and they put the word out that they were recruiting. Before too long, a steady stream of prospects started showing up at the warehouse and the Hawk and Reggie started building their fighting force back up. With two objectives in mind; revenge and redemption...

Bob Jarrett's mood had improved some since initially hearing about the botched raid. What he had found out, through his network of informants, was that his nephew, Cory Jarrett, was alive and well and being held in Johnsville's small jail annex.

His informants had told him there was some argument about what to do with Cory and the five other captured Reavers. Some people in the community wanted to hang them and another faction wanted to ransom them to Jarrett. Another train of thought was to just let them go, in the hope that Jarrett would look favorably on the gesture and not support any further attacks in the area.

Bob needed Cory back alive, so he wasn't taking any chances. He sent a letter to the community of Johnsville through an informant, stating he would pay 50 ounces of gold for the release of the men and apologizing for any misunderstanding. He ended it with a veiled threat about free trade in the area and not wanting the folks of Johnsville to suffer from ongoing violence or sanctions. Jarrett hoped it would work, he needed Cory back, especially since he was worried about Sweetley's intentions.

What Sweetley didn't know was that Bob had an informant inside his force. The informant had told Bob that Sweetley was gaming out contingencies for taking over the Crossroads. Sweetley was also heavily recruiting and his ranks were steadily swelling.

The informant was one of Sweetley's sergeants who had race issues. The sergeant also wanted to be in charge of the military contingent. It looked like he might get his chance, probably sooner than later.

Bob's position was precarious and he needed to augment his personal security force immediately. He called his clerk downstairs and told him, "Get a message to the Hawk for me. Tell him all is forgiven and to come and see me later this afternoon. Also, get Sweetley and his sergeants too, it's time that investment paid off." Bob placed the receiver back on the phone and lit a Marlboro; for the first time, in a long time, Bob Jarrett was actually frightened. But he had an angle; Big Bob Jarrett always had an angle..."

Ten miles north of Memphis, Tennessee; the red headed woman that Jake Craft had bought the Glock from, was experiencing her first week as a slave. She had been lucky, so far. She had become Greer's woman, which allowed her to keep her two small children with her. Her name was Karen Price and she was very beautiful; she was also a realist.

On the way south from Crossroads, Greer had sprung the big joke on her, but she hadn't reacted in the way he thought she would. Karen had realized instantly that her children's lives depended on how she played the situation. She had apparently played it right, by charming and seducing that toad Greer. By the time they got to Greer's compound, he'd made it known that she was his woman and nobody else could touch her. Greer's dreams had come true; a truly beautiful and refined woman actually seemed to care for him!

Karen wasn't proud of what she was doing, but she was less than thirty miles from her parent's home and that fact gave her hope. If she could get a message to her father, maybe he could get her and the kids out of here. But in the meantime, she had to cater to the toad Greer. She also tried to assert her influence on Greer and make conditions better for the young women and girls that were his other slaves. Karen Price was a

survivor; so she set about surviving, using the only tools at her disposal; her body and her brains...

Five days after the raid on the Markham farm, the temperature dropped drastically and an ice storm, that lasted two days, descended on the region. The storm made traveling the roads almost impossible and was a harbinger of the record cold winter to come. The meeting to determine the fates of the surviving raiders was postponed indefinitely, due to the impassable roads; so life went on.

During the three weeks following the raid, life at the Markham farm settled into a routine of grief over a departed family member, and healing for the survivors; both mentally and in some cases physically. The family and their guests celebrated a somewhat muted Thanksgiving holiday, and set about preparing the farm for winter; along with remaining vigilant for any further attacks.

Jake's wounds were rapidly healing and other than some minor soreness, he was almost back to 100%. He had even been pulling his share of guard duty. He had moved from Gaby's room to the tack room of the barn. The tack room had been Jess's home office and was equipped with a potbellied stove and a small bathroom. A fold out hide-a-bed sofa was also in the room and Jake had all of the comforts of home. On this dreary afternoon, Jake was sitting on the sofa bed, working on his boots with Mink oil and wax in an effort to condition the leather and make them more water resistant.

As he worked on the boots, he took stock of his situation and reasoned that getting home before spring was probably out of the question. If he attempted to head the 500 or so miles home on foot, he probably wouldn't make it. Even with a vehicle, with how hard the winter promised to be, it would probably be a touch and go thing. There were no crews to clear snow and ice covered roads and no one to repair damaged bridges and roadways. No, Jake reasoned, he would have to wait for spring. Even though, worrying about his family was taking its toll.

Jess did make one suggestion that made some sense and offered some hope; he told Jake that he should write a letter to his family and weather permitting; they could send it north along what he called the "Jungle Telegraph." Jess knew that people in the area had heard from distant family and friends in this manner, by the letters passed on from traveler to traveler, until the letter reached its final destination. Jess also suggested that Jake send more than one copy, increasing the chances that his father would receive one of them.

Jake had written one letter and copied it five more times, for a total of six. As soon as the weather broke, he would give them to the police chief, Barry Cuttler, to distribute along the "Jungle Telegraph." Hopefully one of them would reach Jake's dad and he would be able to respond with a letter of his own. It was the not knowing, that was driving Jake crazy. He had been away from home for almost two years and wondered if he still had a home to return to.

Jake worked on the boots and thought about his other dilemma; Gaby. Jake could not figure the woman out. One minute she was concerned about his well being and the next she would seem to get angry at him for no

apparent reason and be openly callous about whether he lived or died. Jake had no experience in dealing with this type of situation and was miserably confused by the whole thing. The fact that he was hopelessly in love with her didn't help matters. But, Jake was a proud man and he gave as good as he got; which, unbeknownst to Jake, confused and frustrated Gaby as well. Jess, Paulette and the other adults at the Markham farm knew what was happening between the two of them and were enjoying the show immensely.

Jake rubbed another coat of mink oil into the boots and was trying to fathom the ways of women, when there was a knock at his door; Jake said, "Come in" and young Will Markham came through the door.

Jake said, "Hello Will, what can I do for you?" Will smiled shyly and looking down at the floor said, "Uncle Jess sent me to see if you could meet him in the basement armory?" Jake stopped rubbing the boot and smiling said, "Sure Will, when does he want to see me?" Will readjusted the sling of the AR-15 on his right shoulder and said, "Uncle Jess said right now, if that's ok?" Jake smiled at Will and said, "Sure, tell Jess I'll be there in a few minutes, I just need to put a coat of wax on these boots. Tell him I'll be along shortly." Will nodded in the affirmative, smiled and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Jake quickly finished treating and polishing his boots, and put them on. He put on the Glock shoulder holster over the flannel shirt he was wearing and put his field jacket on over that. He slung the FR-8 and walked out the door.

As Jake headed for the house he thought how fortunate he was in getting back most of his gear. Mark Webb had found the FR-8, field jacket and his load bearing equipment and brought them to Jess. The only thing that Jake had lost in the fight was the Smith and Wesson .38. He felt bad about that; the model 10 had been a reliable weapon and had saved his life more than once. His jeans and camo shirt had also been unsalvageable. Gaby and the doctor had cut them off when they were treating him. He was just happy they didn't cut up his belt, gaiters and boots.

Jake walked through the mud room into the kitchen of the Markham home. Paulette, Gaby, Chris and the young girl Tracy, were sitting around the kitchen table, talking. As Jake walked in they all ceased in mid conversation and looked at him. Jake said, "Good afternoon ladies, hope I'm not interrupting anything." Paulette laughed and Chris and Tracy joined in; Gaby frowned, crossed her arms and said, "Merde!" Jake expressed no visible emotion at Gaby's outburst, but it did sting a little. Paulette let out another laugh and said, "No Jake, we were just talking about available unmarried men in the area, isn't that right Gabrielle?" Gaby's jaw dropped open and if looks could kill, Paulette would have dropped dead on the spot!

Jake, feeling very uncomfortable, figured it was time to beat a hasty retreat and said, "Hey, I'm just looking for Jess, he wanted to see me about something. Please, if you'll just point me in the right direction I'll be on my way." Paulette burst into laughter and exclaimed, "Well Jacob, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were scared half to death!"

Jake didn't respond, although he could feel himself blushing furiously. Paulette took pity on him and pointed to a door adjacent to the mud room entrance and said, "That door leads downstairs; my husband is in his playroom with our nephew. They have been down there most of the morning working on some mysterious male project." Jake just nodded and with a last look at Gaby, beat a hasty retreat for the stairway door.

As Jake clomped down the stairs, Gaby turned to Paulette and said, "You really enjoy this, don't you? Paulette laughed again and said, "Of course I do; we don't have TV soap operas anymore, so you and Jacob are the next best thing." Gaby crossed her arms and said, "Hah!"

Paulette became serious and said, "Listen Gabrielle, it is obvious for anyone to see, you and that young man have it bad for each other. You living in denial and his awkwardness will not change the facts. Your husband has been dead for two years, its time you stopped mourning and started living again. Besides, I think you and Jacob are a good match."

Gaby gasped and said, "But Paulette, he's a killer, a soldier! He's a violent and frightening man!! How could I be with someone like that?" Paulette looked at her younger sister in pity and said, "My dear sister that is a viewpoint you no longer have the luxury of holding. The new world we live in is a violent world and it will either be men like my Jess and your Jacob who triumph; or it will be the evil ones like those who attacked us. The day of the pacifistic or the weak is over."

Paulette continued, "My husband said it best; Jess says our world is occupied by three types of people; sheep, wolves and sheepdogs. Most people are the sheep and have the flock mentality. They huddle together and hope that the wolf takes some other sheep. The wolves are terrible and feed from the flock, in some cases at will. It is the job of the sheepdogs to defend the flock. Men like my Jess and your Jacob are sheepdogs."

"Yes, they have fangs like the wolf, but they would never harm the sheep. When the wolf comes for the flock, the sheep run away. The sheepdog, no matter the odds, runs toward the wolf and will fight and die for the flock. Whether you realize it or not Gaby, your Jacob is a pure bred sheepdog and he should be put to breeding others. We will need them if we are to survive this new age; and that will be your duty."

Gaby was resistant to what her sister said, but the logic was getting through to her and she realized that no matter how much she didn't want to admit it, her world had changed forever. Gaby couldn't deny that in the present circumstances, her views were not conducive to surviving in this new age. She knew she must change, but knew it would not be easy. Gaby was a liberally educated 21st century woman; she was ill equipped to revisit the 19th century.

Gaby looked at her sister seriously and said, "Paulette, I am struggling, but I can't deny there is some truth in what you say. I am not fool enough to believe that our reality hasn't changed. It is just difficult for me to

accept it, that's all."

Paulette smiled sadly and said, "I know its hard mon petite, it has been hard for all of us. What you need to do is stop being stubborn and begin living your life." At this point Chris, the recent widow, chimed in, "She's right Gaby; if you have feelings for this young man, don't hesitate. You don't know how much time you'll have together, so take what you can get and cherish every moment. I know, I wish I could have one more day or even an hour with Jimmy. I miss him so much!" With that last statement, Chris broke into sobs and fled crying from the room."

Gaby got up from the table and said, "All I can do is try to accept things the way they are. It won't be easy, but I'll try." With that, Gaby left the kitchen to find Chris and try to offer comfort. Paulette turned to her oldest daughter and said, "Tracy dear, do you feel up to helping me with supper?" Tracy gave her a lopsided smile and said, "Sure Mom, I'm bored anyway and it'll give me something to do."

Paulette smiled and got up from the table and started preparing for the supper meal. She marveled at the strength and resilience of her daughter. Young Tracy had been forced to kill a half dozen men and been shot in the head, and her main complaint was being bored! There was iron in this young girl but that didn't keep her mother from worrying about the long term effects of the raid on her daughter. Paulette prayed that young Tracy would never be exposed to anything like that ever again; but she didn't put forth much hope...

Jake's butt twinged a few times going down the basement stairs, but it was getting better. He looked around Jess's basement in an effort to locate the armory and heard voices coming from a doorway to his left. Jake headed for the open door and as he stepped through, he noticed that the door was a vault door.

Jake stepped into the room and saw Jess and Will standing on opposite sides of an 8 foot long table, in the middle of the large room. The table contained twenty or more rifles, of various types and an equal number of handguns. Most of the rifles were AK's and Jake realized they were probably the weaponry of the dead or captured Reavers. The captured M240B machinegun was sitting at one end of the table, on its bipod.

Jake looked around the large room and saw that it contained three large gun safes, several work benches, one of them set up for reloading and six large gray, metal cabinets along one of the walls. There were also several large stacks of ammo cans near one wall and another few stacks of large plastic containers. It was an impressive armory, to say the least.

Jess smiled at Jake and said, "Just the man I want to see. Come over here Jake, I've got something I think you'll be interested in." Jake walked over to the table and nodded a hello to Will. Will smiled and nodded back. Jess turned to one of the benches and picked up a rifle and made to hand it too Jake.

Jake asked, "What's this?" Jess smiled and said, "This is your new rifle, Jake." Jake frowned and said, "Jess, that's not necessary and you know it." Jess smiled and said, "Before you say anything else, hear me out." Jake nodded and said, "Ok Jess, I'll hear you out."

For one thing this isn't, technically, one of my rifles." Jake looked at the rifle in Jess's hands and saw an HK 91 with a wooden butt stock and forearm. The wood glowed with a hand rubbed sheen and the metalwork was dark and bright with oil. Jess continued, "This rifle, along with these others," Jess gestured toward the table, "are the weapons of the raiders. They were all brought here by my neighbors, after the raid and are considered to be the spoils of war."

"This rifle," Jess hefted the gun in his arms, "was found in the woods near the M240B machinegun. It had a shattered butt stock, but other than that was in good working condition. I happened to have some spare wooden stock sets and knowing your fondness for the .308, fixed it for you."

Jake sat aside his FR-8 and Jess handed him the 91. Jake cleared and hefted the weapon, and started examining it. He noted from the receiver that it wasn't an HK 91; it was a Springfield Armory, G-3, manufactured in Greece. Jake looked at Jess in puzzlement and said, "I thought this was an HK 91, what is it?"

Jess smiled and answered, "What that is Jake, is an original Springfield Armory G-3. Back in the 1980's, Springfield imported some semi-automatic, Greek G-3's and marketed them under their name. A couple of years later, HK sued Springfield over the G-3 name and Springfield changed the designation to "SAR-8." For all intents and purposes it's an HK-91, built with HK tooling, under license in Greece. They are good rifles and that one, other than having a shattered butt stock, was in real good shape. They were fine weapons and that one is near pristine. It should give you good service."

Jake racked the bolt again and shouldered the rifle, sighting on one of the steel cabinets in the rear of the room. He started taking up the first stage of the military trigger, to the release point. He continued to squeeze and the trigger broke. He guessed that the trigger broke between 5 and 6 pounds. He smiled at Jess and Jess said, "I also worked on the trigger pack for you; it now breaks on the trigger scale at just over 5 and a half pounds, as opposed to the original 11 pounds. I also gave it a thorough cleaning, it was filthy!"

Jake smiled at Jess and said, "Thanks Jess, I appreciate it." Jess said, "Don't mention it, but there's more and I don't want an argument from you." Jake nodded, but didn't say anything. Jess motioned him over to the work bench where a stack of steel magazines and three alicia ammo pouches were laying, along with a small green plastic box, about the size of a large soap dish.

Jess continued, "Here I've put together 7 magazines, three of these Chinese knock-off ammo pouches, for your web gear and an HK cleaning kit. I've also got a couple of battle packs of South African ammo for you to practice with. If you're up to it, we can go test fire it and get it zeroed before supper. It's up to you?" Jess made this last a question and Jake said, "Sure Jess, I'm dying to shoot this thing!"

Jess laughed and said, "But there's more," Jess opened a drawer in the work bench and removed a holstered

pistol. The holster looked like Jake's drop leg holster, he'd wondered where it had gotten too, and Jess laid it on the bench. Jess also placed four speed loaders and a black nylon cartridge slide, containing twelve cartridge loops, on the bench along side the holster

Jess said, "When Mark couldn't find your .38, I felt the least I could do was replace it. I initially thought to replace it with one of those," Jess gestured toward the 8 foot table, to a pile of handguns, "but, most of that is junk. What I realized is, I had something in my safe that was similar to your model 10, but would give you more versatility."

Jess drew the pistol from the holster and Jake saw that it was a flat dull gray, 4 inch barreled revolver, with black rubber grips and ports drilled into the barrel near the muzzle. Jess opened the cylinder, checked to make sure it was unloaded and gave it to Jake and said, "That's a Taurus 627TT, made of titanium 7 shot, ported .357 magnum. Jake hefted the revolver and said, "Man, that's light!" Jess smiled and said, "Yeah, a little over 24 ounces. I bought it as a light weight carry gun, for when me and the kids went back packing. In other words, that was our black bear insurance. Anyway, I've put about 400 rounds of both full power magnums and .38 specials through it, and it's been dead on accurate and very reliable."

Jess continued, "Taurus, they're made in Brazil by the way, has had a less than stellar reputation for reliability. But, I have never had a problem with that one and it should serve you as well as the Smith did. Besides, it fits your holster, being roughly the same size as the Smith was. I also have four speed loaders and a cartridge loop, for partial reloads, that I'm giving to you. We can take that out and you can shoot it too."

Jake shook his head and said, "You don't have to do this Jess, I can't take your gun." Jess frowned and said, "Jake, I won't take no for an answer; you will take it and you will let me outfit you for your trip home. That's all there is to it, end of discussion."

Jake nodded his head and realized that he was being tedious and looking a gift horse in the mouth. He said, "Thanks Jess, you are being more than generous." Jess laughed and said, "No I'm not, you have to remember Jake, I was pretty well off before things went south. A lot of my wealth went into beans, bullets, guns and this farm before that happened. It is no sacrifice for me to help you; especially after all you've done for me and my family. So, let's leave it at that and go shooting." Jake laughed and said, "Ok, lead on." And the three of them loaded up and went out to Jess's improvised range. Where for the next several hours, they punched holes in paper and Jake got the feel of his new and improved armaments...

Jake, Jess and Will had shot until they heard one of the women furiously ringing the dinner bell, calling them to supper. They had enjoyed a good meal of cubed venison steak and gravy, along with mashed potatoes, biscuits and home canned vegetables, from Paulette's garden. It was an enjoyable meal and the atmosphere was relaxed. Even Gaby seemed relaxed if not uncharacteristically subdued.

After dinner Jake returned to the tack room, cleaned and oiled his new weapons, along with the Glock. He had taken the three point sling from the FR-8 and put it on the G-3. Jess had given him an impromptu history lesson on the FR-8, the Cetme and the G-3, and how they were interrelated. During that lesson, Jess had told Jake that he was sure that the sling on the FR-8 was an aftermarket HK-91 sling and it would work perfectly on the G-3. Which proved to be the case; Jake put it on the G-3 and got it adjusted and was well pleased with the setup. He also reconfigured his LBE and attached the three ammo pouches to it.

He had been impressed with the rifle's performance at the range. Jake had fired it from distances of 20 meters out to 200 meters and found that it shot very well. It wasn't a DMR, but it grouped under 6 inches out at 200 meters, which was close enough for combat. It was a little heavy, but that didn't bother him either; because it worked!

He had also been impressed with the titanium revolver. He had fired several different loads through it, from full power magnums down to .38 +P. The best combination of power and controllability was a mid range, 158grn, JHP, .357 magnum load, that Jess had several cases of. Jess had given him three hundred rounds of the load and Jake had given Jess the 6 shot speed loaders and his remaining ammo for the model 10 Smith. The only drawback to the revolver, he suspected, was in low light firing. The porting emitted quite a blast and could possibly be blinding in low light conditions; he would have to check that out and see for himself.

After cleaning the weapons and taking a shower (Jess had installed an on demand water heater that worked off of the solar battery bank). Jake decided to go to bed, so he could get up early tomorrow and pitch in around the farm. He didn't have guard duty tonight and looked forward to a good nights sleep. He had just settled into bed and was reading a copy of Orwell's, "1984", he had borrowed from Jess's library, when there was a knock at his door. He got up, picked up the Glock from the bed side table and went to unbolt the door.

When he opened the door, Gaby was standing there, in a too large, gray wool, military overcoat and her ubiquitous Ugh boots. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail and she was carrying her medical bag. Jake smiled hesitantly at her, not being able to tell which mood she was in; the Florence Nightingale professional nurse mood or, the I can't stand the sight of Jake mood. He said, "Hello Gaby, what can I do for you?"

Gaby looked at him and said, "I have your antibiotic dose and I need your vitals. I also need to examine your wounds and note their progress." She stepped past Jake and set her medical bag on the work bench, next to the G-3 and said, "That's a great ugly thing, isn't it?"

Jake said in response, "Some people, including me, think that weapons like this have a certain utilitarian beauty." Gaby said, "Hah, you would!" and started pulling items from her medical bag. She pulled a small bottle containing pink liquid from the bag and handed it to Jake and said, "Drink all of it; it's your final dose of the regimen."

Jake grimaced and took the bottle of foul, strawberry flavored, Veterinary Amoxicillin, opened it, and drank it down in a couple of gulps. He made a sour face and said, "God, this stuff really sucks!" Gaby smiled for the first time and said, "Yes, it sucks, but it'll probably allow you to continue being obscenely healthy. Take off your t-shirt and let me examine your wounds."

Jake pulled the OD t-shirt over his head as Gaby took off the overcoat tossing it on a chair; which exposed her thick flannel nightgown. She couldn't help noticing Jake's muscular build and stated uncomfortably, "You keep it too warm in here." Jake just shrugged and didn't apologize for stoking the stove before going to bed.

Gaby examined his arm, shoulder and back, listened to his heart and stepping back from Jake said, "Alright, let me look at your derriere." Jake noticed that Gaby's nipples had hardened through her heavy nightgown while she was examining him and for whatever reason, Jake couldn't resist making a wisecrack. "From the looks of you, you'd think it wasn't warm enough in here." Gaby noticed that Jake was looking at her breasts and turned away rummaging through her medical bag. She appeared more hurt than angry and made no comment regarding Jake's wisecrack. Jake blushed with shame.

Gaby turned back toward Jake and said, "Drop your pajamas and let me see your wounds." Jake turned away from her and lowered the bottoms just enough for Gaby to look at his wounds. She poked and prodded for a few minutes and then of all things, smacked him on the unwounded butt cheek and said, "That's doing nicely, you can pull your pants back up."

Jake did so and turned back toward Gaby. They both stood there for a few moments, just looking at each other, when Jake reached up and gently stroked Gaby's cheek with his left hand and said huskily, "My God, you're so beautiful!" Gaby stood there frozen and Jake taking her silence as a rebuke, dropped his hand and stood there feeling foolish. Anger flared in Gaby's eyes and she said, "If you don't kiss me you fool, I'll lose my nerve!"

Jake took her in his arms and kissed her gently, she kissed him back with more passion and one thing led to another. Before too long, both of them realized all they had been doing was denying the inevitable and wasting precious time. The funny thing was, Jake's wounds didn't bother him one little bit that night, and Gaby's conscience didn't bother her either. It would be a night they would both remember for a very long time...

It was 5:30am, the following morning; Jess and Paulette were sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee from their dwindling supply. Jess had just been relieved at guard/observation post duty by his brother Jeff. Paulette was about to start preparing breakfast, but was enjoying sitting at the table with the man she loved. They both cherished these rare moments together, without anyone else around.

Paulette gave a mischievous smile and said, "My sister's bed was not slept in last night, did you know that?"

Jess chuckled and said, “Yeah, when I relieved Will at guard, he told me that Gaby went to the barn carrying her medical bag, at about ten o’clock last night and never came back out. And I never saw her come back during my shift.”

Paulette became thoughtful and said, “I hope things work out for the best, for those two.” Jess looked at his wife seriously and asked; “It doesn’t bother you that they are living in sin, so to speak?” Paulette smiled wittily and said, “No husband, times have changed and they are adults. Besides, the way things go, they may not have much time together.”

Paulette continued, “It is not my place to judge them and I’m sure they will be discreet. I just hope they will be able to have a life together.” Jess chuckled again and Paulette frowned and said, “What is it husband? Out with it!” Jess leaned back chuckling and said, “You left out the fact that you enjoy watching the show.” Paulette stared hard at Jess and then her look softened and she chuckled herself saying, “You know me better than anyone, don’t you husband? Of course I’ve enjoyed watching those two dancing around each other. It has been as you say, ‘a hoot!’ Jess just shook his head and let out a guffaw of a laugh.

Paulette got up from the table and said, “Come on you lazy oaf, you can help me with breakfast!” Jess drained the last of his coffee and got up from the table; he walked to his wife and put his arms around her and said, “Woman, you are the best thing that ever happened to me, I’m the luckiest man in the world!” With that he gave her a long kiss. When she broke away from him she smiled and slapped his chest saying, “I’m sure there is someone out in the barn, who would dispute that. I’d say Jacob believes he now has rights to that statement...”

Jake lay on his back and snored softly; Gaby was awake, lying on her stomach up on her elbows, watching him. She thought to herself, how he looked like a little boy when he slept. She had been lying there watching him sleep for more than thirty minutes, along with contemplating their future together.

Gaby had resolved one issue; she finally stopped denying that she was in love with Jake. She was convinced she had fallen in love with him the first time she saw him; covered with blood in the Markham’s basement. She didn’t know why it happened that way; all she knew was that it had. Finally admitting this to herself had been a curious emotional release for her. And last night had been a much needed physical and emotional release, for the both of them.

They had not only made love deep into the night, they had also talked incessantly between love making. Gaby was coming to know this man in ways she believed no one else had. Jacob Craft, although intelligent and even witty, did not talk much. Especially to people he didn’t know and trust. He also had no deceit in him; what you saw, was what you got. In a lot of ways they were much alike Gaby and Jake; what you saw, was what you got and neither one of them would suffer fools lightly. Another thing Gaby noticed about her reaction to Jake; was for the first time in her life a man made her feel safe. She couldn’t explain it, but Jake made her feel she had nothing to fear from anyone, as long as he was with her. She snuggled up to him and

put her arms around him and squeezed him hard.

Jake let out a snort and sat up in the bed, taking Gaby with him to a sitting position. She marveled at how strong he was. Gaby was 5 ft 6 inches tall and weighed 132 pounds; she was not a small woman, but Jake could toss her around like a child. He had picked her up and carried her to bed the night before without any effort. She had been intimate with just three men, other than Jake, in her life and none of them had been as fit and strong as Jake Craft. Her late husband, had been a tall slight man and only weighed 20 more pounds than she, and Jerome had to struggle carrying her over the threshold on their wedding night.

Jake was reaching for the Glock, on the bedside table when Gaby said cheerfully, “Good morning!” Jake stopped reaching for the Glock, smiled at her and said, “Good morning to you too! What time is it?” Gaby looked at her watch, the only thing she had on and said, “It’s a little before six, why?” Jake yawned, rubbed his hands through his hair and said, “Hadn’t you better get back, before somebody notices you’re gone?”

Gaby smiled slyly and asked, “Why, are you ashamed of me?” Jake’s jaw dropped open and he blushed and said, “No! I just don’t know how everyone is going to react to us being together. I was thinking of your honor, that’s all girl!!!” With that he leaned over and kissed her passionately. She returned the kiss just as passionately and pushed him away saying with a giggle, “Not now, you beast! We must get up and about, there are things to do!!!” Jake got out of bed and stretched. Gaby marveled at the sinewy muscles of his back and arms, and realized that the scars made him somehow more desirable. She was also curious about his tattoos, he didn’t have many but they were intriguing; she would ask him about them later.

Jake pulled on the pajama bottoms and asked, “Well, what do we have to do?” Gaby smiled and stretched cat like in the bed; which almost drove Jake crazy. He couldn’t take his eyes off of her. She was the most beautiful and graceful creature he’d ever seen. When Gaby stopped stretching, she sat up and her full breasts swayed sensually, and Jake almost lost it again. She said, “If you are going to help me move my things in here, we had better get to it. If I’m not mistaken you have guard duty later this afternoon?” She made the last a question and stretched again.

Jake looked at her from under his brows and asked, “Just like that?” Gaby smiled and said, “Oui, Mon cher, just like that!” as she snapped her fingers. “You don’t want me here?” Jake smiled and said, “Sure, I want you here. I need somebody to do the drudge work and I guess you’ll do!” She picked up a pillow to throw at him, as he beat a hasty retreat for the bathroom. She didn’t throw it though; she called after him, “Hurry up, I need to go too!”

Gaby lay back on the bed and marveled at how her life had changed in the past few hours. She heard the toilet flush and then heard the water in the shower start running. She smiled mischievously, got up from the bed and went to the bathroom and silently opened the door. She crept inside and could see Jake soaping his body behind the partially opaque glass door. She went to the toilet, sat and did her business. She stood up and flushed the toilet, with an evil grin. She heard Jake yell, “What the...Agghhh..sh#*t!” and the shower

stall door flew open and Jake jumped out partially covered with soap.

Gaby was doubled over with laughter and the furious look on Jake's face made her laugh even harder. Jake's look softened and he started laughing too. He stepped over to her and put his soapy arms around her saying, "You are a bad girl, and maybe I ought to wash your mouth out with soap!" Gaby smiled and running her hands over his soap covered, muscular chest said, "I have a better idea; I'll wash yours and you can wash mine; we'll conserve water that way!" With that she pushed him away and darted into the shower stall. Jake went after her and closed the door behind them. She wrapped her arms around him and asked, "What took you so long?"....

Several hours later and after a somewhat strained family breakfast, at least for him. Jake was on his tenth trip from Gaby's room, with another armful of her stuff. He was amazed by how much stuff she had! Jake had been carrying everything he owned on his back for so long, he had forgotten how much stuff people could accumulate. He was reviewing the morning's events, as he acted as a pack mule for his woman. And she was now his woman! He had been stunned by the days events, but in a good way!!

He and Gaby had finished their shower, gotten dressed and went into the main house, where everyone but Jeff, who had guard duty, was sitting down to breakfast in the large kitchen. Everyone, with the exception of the younger children who were more concerned with eating; looked at the hand holding couple with expectation. Gaby said, "Good morning everyone. Jake and I, have an announcement to make." Nobody said anything and Gaby continued matter of factly, "I will be moving into the barn with Jake and we will need some help moving my things..."

Paulette smiled knowingly and said to Jess, "Husband, do we have anything pressing today?" Jess, who appeared somewhat shocked said, "No wife, I was just going to feed the stock and Jake and I were going to walk the perimeter of the farm, so he could get a feel for the size of the place." Paulette smiled and asked, "Can that wait?" Jess shrugged and said, "Sure, we can do that tomorrow."

Paulette said, "Good, after breakfast and when you feed the stock, we will help Gaby and Jake move her things. The children can help too!" And that's the way it went. Everyone pitched in and the fact that Jake and Gaby were sharing a room was taken in stride by the Markham family. And for the first time in a long time, Jake was truly happy...

Several more weeks went by and they were happy days for Gaby and Jake. They settled into the tack room, which was now crowded with Gaby's things; her vanity, an actual bed in place of the fold out couch and a chest of drawers for her clothes. Gaby had also come up with a rug for the floor and pictures for the walls. In short order, she had made her and Jake a comfortable nest.

The happy days consisted of Jake pulling guard and helping Jess, Jeff and Will around the farm. Although, there wasn't that much to do, being winter and all. All of his spare time was spent with Gaby and they were happily in love. Jake was in the barn, feeding Jess's three horses, two mules and the milk cow on this brisk

December afternoon, when Jess found him.

“Hey Jake, how’s it hanging?” Jake stood up from where he was filling a bucket with field corn from a bin and said, “Oh, hey Jess, what’s up?” Jess walked up to the stall of the big bey mule and rubbed her ears and said, “I just spoke to Cuttler, he came by to check in and see how we were doing. I gave him your letters and he said he’d pass them along. Hopefully you’ll get a response, before too long.” Jake got a solemn look on his face and just nodded his head.

Jess continued, “It looks like Jarrett’s been heard from.” That statement got Jake’s attention, for he asked, “How so?” Jess said, “A letter was found nailed to the front door of the city hall, addressed to the town. In it Jarrett offers 50 ounces of gold for the six raiders we’re holding. He said no hard feelings, yada, yada, yada; but at the end, he said give them back, or else ‘Johnsville might suffer further violence, or sanctions.’ Or words to that effect” Jake thought about it for a few moments and asked, “What is the town going to do?”

“Well, that’s what I wanted to see you about. The town council has called a meeting tomorrow afternoon, to discuss what to do. You and I were specifically invited because of the raid on my place. Will you go?” Jake said, “Sure Jess, I’ll go. It sounds like it might be interesting.”

Jess nodded his head and said, “Good, there are some other things we need to talk about.” Jake raised his eyebrows, signaling Jess to continue and Jess said, “I know how stubborn you can be and I was putting off telling you this, but do you realize, you are a rich man? Jake grunted and said, “Yeah right, I’m so rich you have to feed and house me!”

“You don’t get it Jake, just shut up and let me finish. Anyway, the vehicles, the weapons, ammo and other stuff left from the Reavers’ ill fated raid: by rights half of it is yours.” Jake hadn’t thought about it and said, “Wow, but what exactly does that mean?”

“Well, as far as the vehicles go, I already gave the town those two, two and a half ton trucks; I didn’t think you’d mind.” Jake shook his head no and Jess continued. “That leaves five assorted SUV’s and pick-ups, plus two motor cycles for you to choose from, for your trip home. They are parked in the town maintenance yard by the way. Not to mention all of the weapons we captured. I have an idea for those, if you’ll hear me out?”

Jake said, “Sure Jess, go ahead.” Jess continued, “What I’d like to do, and I’ll need your help for this, is donate what we don’t need to the town and help them establish an organized defense and reaction force. I, for one, believe that we are going to have more trouble from Jarrett and we need to use the winter months to prepare for it. That also means we are going to have to conduct training and establish SOP’s (standard operating procedures) and that’s where you come in.”

Jake thought about it for a moment and asked, “How’s that going to work? I’m an outsider, how are these

people going to react to me?” Jess nodded his head and said, “Yeah, I thought about that, but whether you know it or not, you have a certain notoriety around here. You are the only man to stand up to Jarrett in the past two years and lived to tell it. Also, you’ve been instrumental in really hurting Jarrett along with wiping out the Reavers. I think the people around here will listen to you.”

Jake nodded and said, “Ok Jess, for better or worse, I’m in; but there are a few things you need to know. “ Jess nodded and said, “Go on Jake.” Jake nodded and continued, “I’ll help you do this thing but you also need to realize, come spring, even if I don’t hear from my family, I’m going home.”

Jess nodded and asked, “What about Gaby?” Jake replied, “I already mentioned it to her, and asked her to go, but she hasn’t given me an answer yet. I’ll tell you this Jess, I love that girl and I don’t want to leave her, but I gotta know how my family is doing. If that means never seeing her again, then so be it. No matter how much it hurts!” Jess nodded his head again and said, “I understand Jake, I couldn’t stand not knowing if Paulette and my family were alive or dead. I sympathize with you bro, I really do.” Jake nodded his head and went back to feeding the stock. Jess said, “We’ll leave for town a little after breakfast tomorrow, I need to see some people and Gaby has to be at Doc Kincer’s at 9 o’clock for the weekly clinic; I’ll see you at supper.”

Jess left the barn and Jake finished feeding the stock and returned to the tack room. As he walked through the door, he saw Gaby sitting on the bed with her medical bag’s contents spread out before her. She was obviously taking inventory, for she was counting items and occasionally making entries on the notepad in her lap.

As Jake came through the door, she smiled at him; he smiled back at her and she went back to doing her inventory. Jake walked to the work bench and cleared the G-3 and laid it down. He drew the Taurus, cleared it and placed it on the bench next to the rifle. He retrieved his LBE, hanging from a tack peg on the wall and started rummaging through the butt pack. Gaby looked up from her inventory and asked, “What are you doing mon cher?” Jake loved it when she called him that, smiled and answered, “Oh, just getting my gear ready for our trip to town tomorrow.”

Gaby frowned and said, “Why do you need all of that? One would think you were going to war!” Jake looked at her seriously and said, “If there’s one thing I’ve learned babe; it’s better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it.” Gaby shook her head and said, “I’m sorry Jake, what you are and what you do, are hard for me to adjust too.”

Jake didn’t say anything, he got his cleaning equipment from the butt pack and started field stripping the rifle. As he started cleaning the rifle, Gaby got up from the bed and came up behind him and put her arms around his waist, leaning her head against his back. She said, “I am truly sorry Jake, this is a very strange situation for me.” Jake set down the bolt assembly and turned in Gaby’s arms to face her. He put his arms around her, careful not to touch her with his oily hands and said, “I know Babe, this has been pretty strange

for me too.” Gaby laid her head against his chest and said, “I don’t care how strange it is, I just know I love you mon cher. Everything else shouldn’t matter.”

Jake kissed her on top of the head and said, “I love you too Babe, and you’re right, our philosophical differences shouldn’t matter, but I suspect they do. You think of me and men like me, as cold blooded killers. Men like me, tend to consider people like you to be misguided and unrealistic about the dangers of the world.” Jake expected her to take exception to that, but she didn’t, she just hugged him tighter.

Jake continued, “I’ll tell you what I’ve learned, while being with you my little pacifist; you are neither misguided nor unrealistic. You just abhor violence and I understand that, but I’m not sure you understand that there are different kinds of violence and killing, and that I’m not a murderer.” Gaby looked up at him and asked with mischief in her eyes, “Are you going to tell me the story about sheep, wolves and dogs?”

Jake laughed and asked, “Where’d you hear that?” Gaby nuzzled his chest and said, “Paulette told me a story about sheep, wolves and sheepdogs and she said you and Jess were sheepdogs, and you protected us little sheep in the flock. She also said it was my duty to mate with you and make more sheepdog puppies, to keep the flock safe from the wolves for generations to come.”

Jake kissed her upturned lips and said “I bet you’d throw good pups too!” Gaby bit his lower lip and wouldn’t let go until he mumbled his surrender. She laughed and said, “You better watch it Fido, this B#tch has fangs too!” Jake laughed and as he smacked her blue jean clad bottom with his oily hand said, “You’re telling me!”

Gaby pulled away from him saying, “I have to finish my inventory, so I’ll know what I need to draw from the clinics supplies.” She sat on the bed and started working again, but several minutes later she asked, “Jake, how do you kill men without remorse? I mean, you seem so proficient at it and it doesn’t seem to bother you...”

Jake stopped scrubbing the rifle bolt with his G.I. toothbrush. He turned toward Gaby and said, “Gaby, it’s true, with a few exceptions, what I’ve had to do in the past doesn’t bother me. I’ve been a soldier my entire adult life and those I killed were either trying to kill me, or trying to kill my friends. I’ve never had any trouble reconciling that. As my old grand daddy used to say, some people need killin!”

She looked at him with sorrow in her eyes and asked, “What about those few exceptions?” Jake looked down at his boots and then back up at Gaby and said, “There were a couple of incidents in Arkansas, I’m not proud of. I did what I did to survive, let’s leave it at that for now, ok? Gaby nodded her head sadly and returned to her inventory.

Jake resumed cleaning his weapons and thought to himself, “How can I tell the woman I love, about the terrible things I saw and did, in Arkansas?” Jake brooded on this question as he cleaned his weapons, and

searched for the right answer...

Gaby awoke the following morning to Jake doing his “daily 400.” she looked at the alarm clock and saw that it was 10 minutes to 6:00am and realized she had another 40 minutes before she had to be up. She watched Jake doing the push-ups and marveled at the fact he did 200 every morning. She also found it surprising at how fast he had seemed to heal from his wounds. She knew as a medical professional, there were two factors at play here; Jake’s overall excellent physical condition and his determination to get well.

Jake finished the push-ups and rolled on to his back and started doing crunches. Gaby lay there surreptitiously watching him until he collapsed on his back at the 200th. Jake lay on the rug with his eyes closed, breathing hard. Gaby took the opportunity to roll out of bed and straddle his waist. She pinned his wrists down and said, “Hah, what are you going to do now, tough guy?”

Jake opened his eyes, smiling lazily at her and said, “Well, with the way you’re sitting on me, hopefully I’m just going to lay back and enjoy the ride!” Gaby gasped and said, “Oh you.....!” and clamped her thighs tightly together, squeezing Jake hard just below the rib cage. Jake let out a loud grunt and gasped, “Ok, ok, I give! I give!!” Gaby loosened the pressure and leaned down and gave him a long, open mouthed kiss. She broke off the kiss, sat up and hauled her flannel nightgown off over her head and said, “I accept your surrender!!” “And as usual, one thing led to another...

An hour later, Gaby was sitting at her vanity, fixing her long dark hair into a braid reaching halfway down her back. She was thinking, once again, about cutting it all off; it would sure be easier to deal with. But, she knew that Jake loved her long hair and would be disappointed if she hacked it off. So, it looked like she would be keeping it long. As she sat there, she could hear Jake singing some army song, off key of course, in the shower. She had to laugh; Jake had a deep rich voice, but couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket! She couldn’t get over how much this man had come to mean to her.

Jake finished his shower and stepped out and dried himself off. He stepped up to the mirror and wiped the fog from it and wrapped the towel around his waist. Gaby liked him clean shaven and he was going to shave. But shaving this morning was going to be a new adventure.

Jake normally shaved in the shower, but that was with a disposable safety razor; of which his last surviving example was now too dull to cut butter, let alone his heavy stubble. Jess had been kind enough to loan him an old fashioned straight razor, some shaving soap and a brush. And it looked like today was the day; he just hoped he didn’t cut his throat!

Jake carefully shaved, only nicking himself twice; he brushed his teeth, combed his unruly hair and stepped from the small bathroom into the tack room. Gaby was bustling around the room, gathering her things for the short trip into town.

He had to smile at how cute she looked; Gaby was wearing a blue and gold, New Orleans Saint's ball cap and her long braid was hanging out the back. She had on the German Flectarn camo parka, blue jeans and a pair of insulated hunting boots. Jake walked past her and said, "I see you are in the uniform of the day." Gaby threw him a mocking salute and returned to what she was doing.

The Flectarn surplus camo was Jess's idea. It seems that sometime before the collapse, Jess had dabbled in the on-line mail order surplus business. He had purchased several lots of various German and Swiss uniforms at an auction in St. Louis. He had also bought other military surplus items, such as web gear and several lots of Swiss, Russian and Yugoslavian ammunition; with the intent of selling the stuff on the internet and at gun shows. For various reasons, that never happened and now Jess had several pallets of the stuff sitting in his pre-fab steel garage. Being a hopeless packrat, Jess figured the stuff would come in handy and it looked like he was right.

Jake began getting dressed in the gray thermal long underwear, flectarn Bundesheer shirt and blue jeans (all given to him by Jess). He finished the ensemble by putting on his old boots and gaiters. Jake had also been given one of the lined, flectarn mountain parkas, like Gaby's and Jess's; he would also be wearing that today.

Jess's idea was to supply the proposed defense force with the surplus flectarn camo, in order to achieve some uniformity. Along with the uniforms, Jess and Jake were donating the M240B machinegun and eight hundred rounds of belted ammunition, plus 24 AK and SKS rifles, and six thousand rounds of ammunition; some left by the raiders and the rest from Jess's surplus stock. It was a big investment on their part and they were hoping the community would get on board with the idea of a formalized defense force.

Jake couldn't say one way or the other, how it was going to go. He didn't know these people or the politics involved. All he knew was that he was going to back Jess's play. Whether these people knew it or not, Jarrett was not going away and they needed to be ready for what he, or anybody else for that matter, threw at them.

Jake put on his operators belt, the holstered Taurus and his BK-7 combat knife. He also added the 12 loop cartridge slide to the left front of his belt. He finished by putting on the Glock shoulder holster and covered it with the parka. He put two spare speed loaders in the right breast pocket of the parka (he had two more in the pouch on his LBE) and one loaded rifle magazine in each lower front parka pocket. He was closing up the butt pack after checking that he had everything he needed on his LBE; and got an idea. Jake pulled his shemagh from the butt pack, closed the pack and walked over to Gaby, where she was shouldering her medical bag.

As Jake got to Gaby he draped the shemagh around her neck and said, "Babe, I've had this for a long time. It means a lot to me and I want you to have it. It'll keep the wind off of your neck, anyway..." Jake got a little embarrassed and didn't know what else to say.

Gaby smiled warmly up at him and said, "I will cherish it mon cher. Then she got her mischievous look and asked, "Does this mean we are going steady?" Jake got a serious look on his face and said softly, "Yeah Babe, this means you're my girl." Jake wanted to take it further and maybe ask her to marry him, but there were too many complications; too many variables. He just didn't want to hurt her in the end. Gaby smiled again, w****lly and said, "Let's go get some breakfast." Jake just nodded his head, put on his Gortex ball cap and followed her from the room...

After breakfast, Gaby and Jake met with Jess at his steel pre-fab garage. Jake couldn't get over how big the building was. Jess had told him that prior to the collapse, one of his hobbies/businesses had been restoring vintage 4 wheel drive vehicles. He had started out with an old forest service 1956 Dodge Power Wagon 10 years ago and it had grown from there. The blue 1978 Toyota Landcruiser had been one of his uncompleted projects, pressed into service after the collapse. The six cylinder Toyota didn't have a computer, but had a carburetor, which made it less fuel sensitive; in other words it ran just fine on homemade ethanol.

Today they would be taking the beautifully restored, forest green Power Wagon. They needed a pick-up to haul the weapons and ammunition and Jess's contemporary GMC Diesel pick-up was reserved for work around the farm. Besides, he was down to less than 200 gallons of stabilized diesel, in the farm's tank and nobody had been trading any diesel in the past year or so.

Jake and Jess loaded the truck, as Gaby supervised and playfully critiqued them. Jake and Jess bantered back and forth with her until they got the load stowed in the bed of the truck. They all crowded into the cab, with Gaby in the middle and Jake riding shotgun, literally, with the big G-3. Jess turned on the ignition, stepped on the starter button and the big flathead six started right up. Jess said, "I swear, this thing runs better on alcohol than it ever did on gasoline!"

As they drove past the house, Paulette, Chris, Donna (Jeff's wife) and the kids were outside waving goodbye. Paulette cupped her hands over her mouth and shouted, "You have the list?" Jess nodded his head in an exaggerated fashion as he pulled past the vehicle barricade and stopped the truck. Jess and Jake got out and pulled the vehicle barricade into place and made sure it was locked and anchored, blocking the driveway lane. They both waved again and got back in the truck; Jess put it in gear and they headed down the lane to the Rural Route.

As they turned on to the road Jake asked Jess, "What was Paulette asking you about a list?" Jess smiled and said, "She made a list of things she wanted me to see if I could get at the co-op?" Jake looked past Gaby toward Jess and said, "Co-op?" Gaby piped up and said, "It used to be our local Smart Mart, but now everybody calls it the co-op."

Jess continued, "That's right, but it has morphed into something different over the past couple of years." Jess went on to explain that when things started running out and paper money wasn't any good anymore,

Gordon Smith, the Smart Mart manager got the idea for the co-op. People could barter for needed items, for example the farmers would place their grain, produce, ethanol and tobacco with the co-op to sell; and they could draw from an account for needed items. Everybody in the surrounding area participated and it seemed to work fairly well. Although after two years of regional isolation, a lot of things from before the collapse were getting harder and harder to find. Things like toilet paper, medicines, soap and feminine hygiene products, lubricants and ammunition to name just a few.

As they drove the 5 miles into the town of Johnsville, Jake looked at the terrain with the eye of a soldier. What he now noticed, that he didn't see from under a tarp in the back of a bouncing truck, was this area was made up of rugged forested hills and small valleys, cut by rivers and streams, containing very few roads. He now realized why it had taken so long for the Reaver's raiding party to get here. He assumed they had to go way out of their way in order to bypass Johnsville and not tip off the raid.

As they topped a rise and entered a gap into the next valley, Johnsville spread out before them. It was a typical small southern mountain town, spread along the floor of a long, narrow valley. Main Street was just a continuation of the state route they were on with side streets branching off and continuing up the hill sides to the tree line. These side streets were lined with frame houses, pre-fabs and mobile homes, and Jake estimated there were better than 150 of those.

The central business area consisted of a grid of ten streets, in the center of the small valley, containing most of the commerce and municipal buildings. Although, the ubiquitous fast food restaurants (now abandoned) and one chain motel, which appeared to be open, lined the state route on both sides of the town proper. Jake also saw what appeared to be an industrial complex on the far side of the valley, but he couldn't make out what it was for sure. He would ask Jess later.

Jess had told him that prior to the collapse; Johnsville had a population of around 2500 people. In the past few years, due to disease, violence and other factors, the population had been whittled down to somewhere around 1700. He stressed that didn't take into account the rural population, from the outlying areas. Jess estimated there were another 500 to 600 people living on the farms and in the mountains and hollows in this end of the county; all centering their activities in Johnsville; because it was the only town within a 35 mile radius that survived the collapse. Johnsville's survival was partially due to luck, location and the adaptability of the local people; but, according to Jess it was a day today struggle and he accounted himself luckier than most.

Jess stopped in front of a two story, laid up concrete building on the northern edge of downtown. Jake saw the lettering on the building face, which read, "Community Medical Clinic and there was already a long line of people outside, waiting to be treated." Jess said, "Well Gaby, looks like you have your work cut out for you."

Jake got out of the truck to let Gaby out. He reached into the bed of the pick-up and retrieved her medical

bag. As she stepped out, Gaby reached up with both hands and grabbed Jake's face, and planted a long, lingering kiss on him. She pulled away and laughingly said, "That's so you'll miss me today!" Jake shook his head and asked, "Do you get a lunch break?" Gaby smiled and said, "I can take one around one, if you can come back?" Jake smiled and said, "The meeting isn't until two, so I should be able to make it Babe, I'll see you at one." He leaned down and kissed her goodbye and watched her walk into the clinic. She looked back as she got to the door and blew him a kiss. Jake threw her one back and got back in the cab of the truck.

As Jake got back in the truck Jess said, "'Boy, you two got it bad!" Jake laughed and said, "Yeah, I guess we do; now, where to Jess?" Jess put the truck in gear and pulled away from the curb; as he headed south down Main Street he said, "Well, first of all, we'll go by the police station and drop these weapons and ammo off with Cuttler. I have a few stops to make and I don't want to leave all of this stuff in the truck. Then we'll head over to the co-op and see if we can get the stuff on Paulette's list."

Jess drove past a three story, gray stone building that had a clock tower on the near corner. It had a peaked slate roof and looked vaguely like an old church, but turned out to be the city hall building. Jess turned down the next side street, driving under a second story breezeway connecting the old city hall with a more modern, two story building. Jess stated, "That's the county court and jail annex; built with federal grant money in the 90's. It's functional, but God, it's an eyesore. Anyway, the six surviving raiders are being held there."

Jess turned left into a parking lot behind the city hall and backed the Dodge up to a sally port marked "Police" above the ornate stone arch. Jess and Jake got out and entered the building through the sally port. Jess turned left down the cross hallway and they came to a dispatcher's desk manned by a portly elderly man. Jess said, "Hey Marty is Cuttler around?" Marty looked up from what he was typing, on an ancient typewriter and gestured with a thumb over his shoulder to a door marked "Chief of Police."

Jake followed Jess through a half door, adjacent to Marty's dispatch desk and they walked across a desk filled bullpen to Cuttler's door. Jess knocked on the door and a voice said, "Come!" Jess opened the door and Jake followed him inside the office. Inside, Chief Barry Cuttler was sitting behind his desk and a gray haired, barrel chested, police sergeant was standing next to the desk. Jake found it incongruous that Cuttler looked so young for a chief of police. The sergeant looked like he ought to be sitting behind the chief's desk, as opposed to Cuttler.

Jess nodded at Cuttler and said, "Good morning Barry, and you too Sergeant Sutton." Both men acknowledged the greeting and Jess continued, "I'd like you guys to meet Jake Craft, he's finally up and around." Sutton reached out and shook Jake's hand and Cuttler stood up from behind the desk and offered his hand saying, "Mr. Craft it's a great pleasure to meet you and I wanted to commend you for what you did. It took a lot of guts to take on that bunch." The Sergeant smiled and said, "Yeah, you sure threw a monkey wrench into them boy's plans!"

Praise, as it always did, made Jake uncomfortable and all he said was, "I just did what needed doing, that's all..." Jess changed the subject tactfully by saying, "Barry, I got the weapons and ammo out in the back of my truck; you think you boys could help us get it inside?" Cuttler said, "Sure Jess. Sergeant Sutton, could you get a couple of bodies to lend a hand?" Sutton nodded and said, "Sure chief, I'm sure I can find some bodies that need something productive to do." With that, Sutton walked out of the office, in search of some volunteers and Cuttler accompanied Jess and Jake out to their truck.

Jess had given Jake the condensed version of why Johnsville had such a young police chief. Cuttler, born and raised in Johnsville, had been a football star at UK, majoring in criminal justice. Upon graduation, he had got on with the state police and been a rising star at the Paducah barracks, prior to the collapse. After the collapse and the ensuing chaos, Cuttler had brought his wife and children back to Johnsville and volunteered for the local police force. When the old chief got killed in a shootout with a roving band of looters; the city council had appointed Cuttler the chief. It had not been a popular appointment with some of the old timers, but Cuttler had proven to be very competent and absolutely fearless. In the last two years, he had won over most of his detractors, including Sergeant Sutton.

In short order, with the help of two city employees Sutton had rounded up, they got the weapons and ammunition into the road room of the police department. As they finished Cuttler said, "Jess, I'm with you on formalizing a defense force, but you gotta know, some of the council believe it's a waste of time and are against it." Jess looked incredulous and asked, "With all that's been happening! How could they oppose it?"

Cuttler shook his head and said, "Some of these people are deluded to the point they think the Government is going to arrive any day now and turn the lights back on. They just don't get it!" Jess just shook his head and said, "Well, thanks Barry, I appreciate you having my back on this thing. Now, me and Jake are going to head over to the co-op and do some shopping for Paulette, before we meet this afternoon." As they filed out of the road room into the hallway, they heard a police siren start wailing, immediately followed by three booming cracks and what sounded like a vehicle crashing. Sutton asked, "What the hell was that!?" Jake said, "That was a 25 millimeter chain gun, from an armored vehicle. Looks like you folks waited too long to reply to Jarrett's demands..."

The Stryker Scout APC, topped the rise at better than 40 miles per hour, followed by two up-armored Humvees, an infantry Stryker and a mixed convoy of civilian trucks; an old army deuce and a half brought up the rear, loaded with a mixture of Sweetley's troops and the Hawk's men. The deuce and a half dropped off in the mouth of the gap and the troops set up a blocking position, in order to keep their ex-filtration route open.

Sweetley was in the lead Stryker and when they topped the rise, he saw a police car, with its rotator lights on and siren blaring, coming in his direction. Sweetley ordered the gunner, over the headset intercom to take it out. The turret tracked the police car speeding toward them and the gunner fired three quick rounds of high explosive/dual purpose, 25 millimeter into the grill of the police car. The front end of the vehicle

shattered and came apart, scattering pieces of metal and engine block all over the road. What was left of the car, spun off the road into a ditch and sat there smoking; nobody got out.

Sweetley switched from intercom to radio, keyed the push to talk button and said, “Strike leader, to all strike units, blackjack, blackjack. I say again, blackjack!” Blackjack was the code word to start engaging targets of opportunity and for the diversion elements to deploy and start causing chaos. The two Humvee’s and the Stryker behind them were to hit the court annex building and break out Cory and the other five raiders. Sweetley’s turreted Stryker and the rest of the force had two purposes; to provide a diversion for the jail break and to punish the people of Johnsville for defying Jarrett.

Sweetley hadn’t wanted to conduct this operation; Jarrett had not only insisted, but there had been an implied threat. If Sweetley didn’t do it, Jarrett would find someone who would. Sweetley had been not to subtly reminded, he could be replaced. Sweetley had reevaluated his importance in the scheme of things and had come to the realization that Jarrett was on to him. In other words, the jig was up and Jarrett would kill him the minute he didn’t need him anymore. Sweetley didn’t know what he was going to do, but knew he had to figure something out and soon! In the interim, he would pull off this operation and try to gain time to maneuver against Jarrett. The important thing today, was to bring Jarrett’s nephew Cory back alive. If not, Sweetley figured that Jarrett would have him killed on the spot...

Jake and Jess ran out to the truck and got their rifles and load bearing equipment. As Jess put on his Arktis vest they heard all hell break loose in the form of heavy and medium machineguns opening up, interspersed with semi-auto rifle fire. The volume of fire was intense and interspersed with the screams of men, women and children; along with the shattering of glass and the sound of rounds thumping into masonry and tearing through frame construction.

They didn’t say anything, they didn’t need to; they both knew what this meant and that all they could do was try to fight it out. They both realized that Johnsville was hopelessly outgunned and that a lot of people were going to die. Jake and Jess ran back into the building and into the great hall in the front, to see what they were up against. Cuttler and Sutton were both near some front windows that were being shot out by sustained machinegun fire. The building itself was holding up well, because it was made of 24 inch thick blocks of locally quarried limestone. It was probably the best cover available in town.

As the machinegun fire tore through the windows and impacted on the front of the building, Jake and Jess both dropped and high crawled to the front of the hall. As Jake got to a shattered window, he eased up into a kneeling position and peered out of the lower corner of the window frame. What he saw chilled him to the bone.

Two up-armored Humvees were in the middle of the street, on opposite sides of an infantry Stryker, which had backed up to the front of the court/jail annex building and dropped its rear ramp. A squad of ACU clad, helmeted infantry were pouring down the ramp and into the front of the building, firing M-16’s and squad

automatic weapons as they went. Jake heard the booming cracks of a 25 millimeter chain gun from his right front. He moved under the window opening to the opposite corner and was able to see a Scout Stryker several blocks north, firing controlled bursts into buildings on both sides of the street. The building fronts were coming apart and several had caught on fire. Other civilian vehicles were disgorging armed men, who were firing indiscriminately into buildings and at any townspeople unlucky enough to be on the street. There were wounded and dead civilians lying all over the street and sidewalks.

Sutton and Cuttler were firing at the up-armored Humvees with AR-15's and the volume of returning machinegun fire increased. At that point a burst of four 25 millimeter rounds tore through the windows on the north face of the building and impacted high on the southern wall. Shrapnel started pinging around the room and drywall and light fixtures collapsed into the floor. Fortunately, none of them were hit and Jake used his sergeant's voice to yell, "We gotta get outta here, everybody follow me!" He took off and they all three followed him into the rear hallway of the building as more 25 millimeter rounds tore up the main hall.

As they regrouped in the rear hallway, Cuttler asked, "How the hell are we supposed to fight something like that!?" Jake said, "You're not! The best thing we can do is try to get as many people out of the kill zone as we can. From what I could tell, the main reason for this raid is to break their guys out of jail and I think they are making an example of the town. In other words, you are being punished for not playing ball with Jarrett..."

Gaby and one of Dr. Kincer's amateur nurses were splinting the broken arm of an 11 year old girl, when they heard the firing coming from Main Street. Dr. Kincer came out into the main treatment area, from one of the private examination rooms and yelled, "Everybody, in the basement, now!" People started moving toward the stairwell at Kincer's direction, but several men and women were gawking through the front windows trying to see what was going on.

Kincer called out, "Hey get away from there, before you get killed!" As if on cue, several rounds of 25 millimeter slashed through the windows followed by controlled bursts of machinegun fire. The front windows of the clinic started coming apart and people started screaming and running for the stairs.

Three people were left lying motionless in the front part of the building as the waiting area cleared out fast. Dr. Kincer waited at the stairwell for everyone to get downstairs, before he would go down himself. Gaby had gone back for her medical bag and was one of the last to the stairs. As she got there, she stopped and waited for several women and children to go first, when she looked back toward the waiting area and saw the motionless people lying there. She said, "Merde!" and ran to the front of the waiting area. Dr. Kincer called out, Gaby, get in here now!!"

Gaby didn't listen, as she got to the nearest victim, she went down on her belly and started checking the man for signs of life. The man didn't have a pulse and was very torn up, so Gaby started crawling to the next

victim as machinegun fire again raked the front of the building. She got to the middle aged woman and found her covered with shrapnel wounds, but very much alive. Gaby crawled over the woman to the next victim, a middle aged man and she found that he was only slightly wounded and stunned. She smacked his face and said, "Crawl to the stairs, do it now, you can make it!" The man started out crawling for the stairs as Gaby went back to the middle aged woman and started working on her, as more machinegun fire came through the front of the building. Gaby hoped that Jake was alright...

A curious thing happened about five minutes into the raid. The people of Johnsville, without any prior plan or coordination started fighting back effectively. Townspeople came from their homes and places of work and started taking the raid force under fire; from the roofs and windows of the buildings fronting Main Street. Several employees at the city maintenance yard started making Molotov cocktails, with some gasoline they had been saving for hard to start vehicles. One man went to his home several blocks away and brought back a box of laundry detergent, his wife had been hoarding, to use as a thickener. The people of Johnsville were not going down without a fight and their efforts were starting to tell on the raiders.

The Hawk's new Reaver's consisted of 67 men, recruited specifically for this raid. The Hawk had put the word out and they came for the promise of loot and women, from as far away as Memphis! The Hawk was only impressed with a few of them and would not normally have recruited most of this motley crew. They would do for this raid though and help him redeem himself; not only in Jarrett's eyes, but his own.

The Hawk's men had dismounted their vehicles randomly, up and down the main drag and started shooting the place up as Sweetley's men assaulted the jail. The Hawk was having a ball! He had already killed five or six defenseless people, when things turned against them. The townspeople started fighting back and his new Reaver's were starting to drop all around him. The volume of returning rifle, shotgun and handgun fire was intense.

The Hawk called Reggie over to him and said, "Things are starting to heat up; round up as many men as you can and rally everybody near Sweetley's armored car. We'll link up with him and he can cover us on the way back out." Reggie said, "Right boss," and ran for the nearest group of men to get them back to the trucks and moving down the street. At that moment, a man ran from between two buildings and threw a Molotov cocktail into the bed of a five ton truck, five or six Reavers were firing from. The cocktail broke, ignited with a whoosh and engulfed the bed of the truck. As the burning men tried to get out of the truck bed, the man that threw the cocktail was literally shot to pieces as he ran back toward a building for cover. The Hawk turned to Butchie and his two other bodyguards and shouted, "Come on, let's go!" and sprinted toward his Suburban, firing up the building fronts as they went...

Jess and Sutton had retrieved the M240B machinegun from the road room and went to the roof of the city hall, to engage the raiders from the two foot thick parapet. Sutton was a Vietnam vet and knew his way around a firefight. Cuttler had gathered as many people as he could and started passing out weapons and ammo and telling them to fight. The original plan of trying to pull people away from the fight had went out

the window, when they realized that people were fighting back and causing the raiders casualties.

Jake was at the north rear corner of the city hall building, getting ready to sprint across the side street to the next building, when three raiders chased a young woman toward him from Main Street. Jake stepped out and yelled at the woman to get down and she went flat on her stomach. Jake threw up the G-3 and fired three quick traversing rounds, striking each one of the raider's center of mass and they all went down like they were pole axed. As Jake stepped up to the woman and pulled her up by her outstretched arm, he told her, "Get into the city hall and hide, do it now!" The crying woman ran past him and around the corner of the building and disappeared. One of the raiders was moving around and groaning, so Jake put two more rounds into him before he ran across the side street to the next building.

As he ran to the building, rounds started sparking off of the street as raiders from Main Street took him under fire. Jake sprinted behind the corner of the masonry building and stopped. He did a quick peek around the corner of the building and saw eight or nine raiders piling into the back of an open bed cargo truck. Two raiders were still on the ground returning fire down the side street and toward the building fronts as the others were climbing into the back of the truck. Jake went prone and eased his rifle barrel out around the corner of the building. He got a sight picture on the nearest kneeling raider and put a 7.62X51 round into his lower abdomen, just below the belt line. The raider dropped his AK, clutched his stomach and pitched forward on to his face in the street.

Jake looked for the second raider and spotted him just turning to run for the truck. Jake shot him high in the spine and the raider dropped like a sack of grain. The raiders in the back of the truck continued firing at the buildings and one of them shouted at the driver to get moving. As the truck started to pull away, Jake fired the last thirteen rounds in his magazine, as fast as he could pull the trigger into the bed area of the truck. He saw at least two of them go down as the truck pulled away and headed north up the street. Jake got up, changed magazines and continued down the back of the building. He was headed for the clinic; and he prayed as hard as he ever had in his life, that Gaby was alright and he would get there in time...

In the mean time, the jail break had been successful and even though they were taking murderous fire, most of them made it back to the Stryker and the up-armored Humvees. Sweetley, seeing that they were taking heavy fire, got on the radio and told them to rally on him. The sergeant in charge of the raid told Sweetley that they had all five "packages" alive and well, but he had 7 wounded and would be enroute to Sweetley's location.

Sweetley told the medic, the only one they had, to be ready for wounded and looked around for a place to set up a triage and a rally point, in order to organize the ex-filtration. He saw the community clinic and figured that would do. He ordered his security team to dismount and secure the clinic building. He also ordered the medic to go with them and set up his aid station...

Gaby had stabilized the middle aged woman and was dragging her toward the stairway, when armed men

burst through the front door of the clinic. Gaby tried to cover the woman's body with her own and lay still. A few seconds later, a rifle barrel dug painfully into her back and she was told, "Turn over, real slow like and show me your hands!" Gaby turned over and held her bloody, latex gloved hands up and found herself looking into the eyes of a pimply faced, uniformed boy; who was agitated to the point of panic and was probably going to shoot her! She started saying a Hail Mary in preparation for her death.

An arm reached out from beside the boy, pushing the rifle barrel away and someone said, "Stand down Hadley, I think she's a doctor." Another uniformed man, a few years older than Hadley, stepped into her field of view as Hadley backed off. The new soldier asked, "Ma'am, are you a doctor?" Gaby, momentarily flustered said, "N-no, I'm a nurse." The man smiled and said, "That'll do Ma'am. My name is Schmidt, I'm a medic and I'll need your help in treating the wounded." Gaby said, "Yes, of course, but which wounded?" Just as she asked that question, more soldiers and other armed men in civilian clothing, started bringing wounded men into the clinic. Gaby and the medic, Schmidt, got to work...

Jake was behind a decorative fieldstone wall, beside a funeral home across the street from the clinic. He had eight armed local residents with him, who were madder than wet hens and seething with revenge. One of them was a lanky Real Tree camo clad hillbilly with a pony tail, named Nathan Pye. Nathan was cussing a blue streak as he fired of all things, an M16A1 in controlled bursts at the raiders marshaling in front of the clinic. It seems that Nathan's grandfather had been killed on Main Street by the raiders and he was determined to pile up a big body count.

Jake had just shot a machine gunner from the cupola of one of the Humvees when the last of the raiders seeking cover, went through the front door of the clinic. Jake signaled to the men with him to hold their fire at the building. Nathan spat, looked hard at Jake and asked, "Why!?" Jake returned the hard look and said, "Because there's better than thirty townspeople in there and one of them is my woman, is that good enough for you!?" Nathan smiled, spat again and said, "Sure friend, just askin is all." Jake turned to one of the men near him, a uniformed volunteer fireman with a Remington deer rifle and said, "You, yeah you, I need you to get back to the city hall and find either the chief of police or Jess Markham, and tell them to get down here; I believe we got a hostage situation on our hands." The fireman nodded and crawled back from the wall and disappeared around the back of the building.

As the raid force consolidated at the clinic, the armed townspeople surrounded it. Some of them were delayed in getting there because they were tracking down the odd raider left behind in and around the buildings of Main Street. What the townspeople did to them wasn't pretty and none of the stray raiders survived. Most of the townspeople surrounding the clinic knew that friends, neighbors and family members were inside with the raiders, so they slowly ceased firing and waited to see what would happen next...

Sweetley and the Hawk were conferring at the nurse's station of the main clinic area. The bulk of their force was spread out through both floors of the building, holding down the perimeter. Reggie had just given the Hawk a head count of his Reavers and the hawk had lost more than half of his men. Reggie's count of 28

fighters had not included any wounded. The Hawk didn't care about the wounded or the dead for that matter; he could always recruit more shooters.

Sweetley was explaining his change in the plan to the Hawk. They would triage and treat the wounded, load up and shoot their way out. The Hawk responded by saying, "Screw the wounded! Let's leave now and be done with it." Sweetley laughed and shook his head asking, "How would you feel Hawk, if you were one of the wounded and we abandoned you?" The Hawk got a stunned look on his face and didn't say anything. Sweetley continued, "Yeah, I thought so. As soon as we get ready to move the wounded, I'll radio the vehicle crews and they'll cover us with a mad minute of firing up the town. We'll use that to move into the vehicles and be out of here. Any questions?" The Hawk said, "No Sweetley, no questions." With that the Hawk walked over to where Reggie was covering one of the front windows and started talking to him in a low voice.

One of Sweetley's Sergeants came up to him and said, "Commander, we found about forty civilians in the basement; mostly women and children. The town doctor was with them and he's now treating our wounded, along with Schmidt and the nurse." Sweetley nodded and said, "Good, put a guard on them, we may have to use them to get out of here." The Sergeant smiled and said, "Already done commander; by the way did you want the butcher's bill?" Sweetley nodded his head and the Sergeant continued, "We have eleven known KIA (killed in action), no missing and eighteen wounded, only five of them serious. The Hawk's boys got hit harder than we did, better than twenty of them are missing and presumed dead; there are only seven wounded Reavers in the aid station" Sweetley said, "Good report Sergeant, keep me posted on anything new." The Sergeant threw Sweetley a salute and left to check the perimeter.

Sweetley looked at the pretty nurse, as she bandaged the forearm of one of his wounded men. He figured she must be a veteran of the Middle East, because she had a brown and green shemagh around her neck; and then it hit him! That was a shemagh that was specific to the Ranger Regiment. When Sweetley was in Afghanistan, all of the Rangers sported them. The only other time he'd seen one, Jake Craft had been wearing it. This beautiful young woman must have gotten that shemagh from Jake Craft; which meant that Craft was probably outside somewhere, waiting to kill him. Sweetley believed this young woman could prove to be very useful indeed...

They met behind the funeral home to figure out what to do next. Cuttler was there along with Jess and Charlie Stanfield, the town Mayor. Stanfield was a little bald guy, with a pencil thin mustache and a nervous, hand wringing manner. He reminded Jake of a nervous mouse!" There was also a large, mannish female named Becca Sweet, representing the town council and Jake figured she might be the toughest one in the bunch. Jake had remained silent and listened to them argue for more than 10 minutes, at which point he stepped in.

"If you people don't get your sh#t together, all of those people in there are gonna die!" That got their attention and Cuttler asked, "What do you suggest we do, Jake?" Jake stepped forward into the group circle and said, "Give them an out; free passage out of this fire sack in exchange for your people in the clinic.

What have you got to lose?" Becca Sweet said, "He's right Barry, we need those people back, especially Doctor Kincer and we need the raiders to leave, so we can treat our wounded and bury our dead. But most importantly, we need to start making sure this doesn't happen again!"

Cuttler nodded his head, but before he could say anything Stanfield nervously said, "It's not the raiders I'm worried about." He gestured with his small hands out toward Main Street, "It's the townspeople surrounding the clinic, they're out for blood and I don't see how we can control them." Cuttler looked hard at Stanfield and said, "Buck up Charlie. I'll send some of my people around the perimeter and tell them not to fire until I say so. You need to stop underestimating your people; they know what's at stake here."

Cuttler motioned one of his police officers over to the group and told him to round up as many other officers as he could find, make sure they had radios and tell them to spread out among the townspeople and take control of the armed groups. Before the man left, Cutler told him, "Tell them to standby, until they hear from me and not to fire until I say so, clear?" The officer said, "Clear chief," and ran off down the alley, toward city hall.

Cuttler turned to Jess and said, "Jess, people respect you around here; I want you to go get a radio from Marty and I need you to go around and let people know what's going on in that clinic. Try to keep them calm and have them hold their fire!" Jess nodded his head, smiled and said, "Sure Barry, I'll give it a shot." Before leaving, Jess turned to Jake and said, "Jake, don't do anything stupid, we'll get her out of there." Jake nodded his head and Jess left for city hall.

Cuttler pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket, shook it out and said, "I guess I'd better start earning my pay." Becca Sweet said, "I'll go with you Barry." Mayor Stanfield didn't say anything, he just looked down at his shoes and fidgeted. Cuttler pulled his collapsible baton from his Sam Browne belt and tied the handkerchief to the end of it.

As Cuttler stood there waiting for Jess and his police officers to check in on the radio, before going out to parlay, Jake said, "Cuttler, you'll need to negotiate from a position of strength." Cuttler nodded and said, "What do you suggest?" "You need to take a couple of hard looking shooters out there with you, to let them know you mean business, either way this thing goes." Cutler smiled and said, "You and who else Jake?" Jake chuckled and said, "I'll go see if he'll volunteer; I'll be back in a minute." With that, Jake walked over behind the rock wall, knelt down and started moving toward a group of riflemen near the far end.

Jake moved up behind Nathan Pye and said, "Hey Nathan, I need a volunteer." Pye looked back at Jake, spat and said, "My Daddy told me never to volunteer for anything!" Jake smiled savagely and said, "Come on, I think you'll enjoy this." Nathan spat again and followed Jake back down the wall, to the rear of the funeral home.

As they got back, Cuttler was on the radio and Becca was talking to two other men: so Jake took the time to

explain to Nathan that they were going to accompany the white flag party to the clinic as muscle. Nathan grinned and said as he spat yet again, “Sounds like my kind of party.” Jake finished by saying, “Follow my lead and if it goes sideways, start spraying lead and beat feet outta there.” Nathan nodded and said, “You got it pard; you ain’t gotta tell me twice!”

Jake took off his LBE and laid it on the ground. He removed his parka and laid it down next to the LBE. Jake knelt down and transferred the speed loaders from his coat pocket and LBE pouch to his shirt pockets. The last thing he did was take two rifle magazines and slide one each, into the hip pockets of his jeans. While Jake was doing this, Nathan removed the shoulder bag, containing his rifle magazines and the Real Tree hunting jacket. He was wearing a large framed revolver on his right hip and had a large hunting knife on his left. His leather cartridge belt was full of fat, shiny pistol rounds. Nathan put the shoulder bag back on and said, “I’m ready, whenever you are pard.” Jake smiled and said, “Let’s go and see if the local government representatives are as ready.”

Cuttler and Becca Sweet were talking as Jake and Nathan walked up to them. Becca turned to them and said, “Hello Nathan.” Nathan spat and said, “Becca.” Cuttler nodded guardedly at Nathan and Nathan nodded back. Jake said, “I see you both know Nathan; he’ll be going out with us.” Becca spoke up and said, “Just so you both understand, the general consensus is that they don’t leave with any of our people. If they try, we fight; is that understood?”

Jake said, “I understand and just so you’ll know. The military commander is probably a guy named Sweetley. If you make a deal with him, he’ll probably keep it, but don’t underestimate him. He’s a professional soldier and absolutely ruthless. There is a wild card in the mix though. The guys in civilian clothes are probably being led by a guy named Hawk. He’s the one who led the raid on Jess’s farm and I know for a fact, he got away that night. He’s a psychopath and totally unpredictable, but he’s afraid of me; which may give us an edge.”

Cuttler and Becca Sweet nodded taking this information in. Nathan asked, “How do you know this boy’s afraid of you?” Jake looked at Nathan and said, “He’s supposed to be some kind of pistolero and I beat him to the draw one night. He must’ve been wearing a vest and survived that fight. Anyway, during the raid on Jess’s place, I was hit pretty bad and tried to kill him as he was getting into his truck. I missed and he could’ve killed me, but he looked like he sh#t himself, and then ran away instead.” Nathan chuckled and said, “I’ll tell ya pard, you seem like somebody I could ride with!” Jake snorted and said, “I’m getting real fond of you too!”

Cuttler said, “If everybody’s ready, let’s go.” Cuttler and Becca were in the center and Jake and Nathan flanked them; Jake to their right and Nathan to their left. They walked down the side street and out onto Main Street, turning toward the clinic entrance. The turret on the Stryker and the machine gunners in the Humvee’s tracked them. Jake couldn’t resist and said, “Oh Lord, we are truly thankful for what we are about to receive!” Nathan laughed and said, “Amen!”

They stopped on the far side of the street and faced the clinic. Cuttler stepped forward with Becca and called out, "You in the clinic, we represent the town of Johnsville, and we want to talk!" With that statement they waited for a response from the people in the clinic. They didn't have long to wait...

Sweetley was talking to Cory Jarrett, in the doctor's private office when one of his Sergeant's came in and said, "There's a party outside with a white flag and they want to talk." Sweetley got up from his chair and put on his helmet. Cory asked, "What are you gonna do?" Sweetley looked at him, shrugged and said, "I guess I'm going to go talk to them."

Sweetley walked out into the waiting area and looked through the shattered windows toward the street. He saw a man in a blue police uniform with a white flag, a large woman, a camo clad hillbilly and Jake Craft, standing on the opposite side of the street. Sweetley smiled and said, "Well, well Sergeant Craft; looks like we meet again." With that statement, he turned away from the window and looked for the pretty nurse. He saw her sitting on the floor against a back wall, with one of his seriously wounded soldiers. He walked over to her and said, "How's he doing miss?" Gaby looked up and said, "He has a sucking chest wound. We've occluded the perforations, but he is bleeding internally and there isn't much hope."

Sweetley solemnly nodded his head and asked, "Miss, where did you get that scarf you're wearing?" Gaby, not realizing this was about Jake said, "Someone I care very deeply for, gave it to me recently, why?" Sweetley smiled and said, "Let me borrow it for a few minutes; I'll make sure you get it back." Gaby clutched at the shemagh and shrunk away from Sweetley. She realized this must have something to do with Jake, and she didn't want to give it up. But Sweetley was insistant and called over two of his soldier's to hold Gaby, while he took the shemagh from around her neck. When he stepped back with it in his hands, he told the two men, "Stay with her and make sure nothing happens to her. She may be our get out of jail free card." Sweetley stuffed the shemagh into one of his trouser cargo pockets and walked toward the front door of the clinic. Gaby, realizing that this man planned to use her against Jake, sat on the floor next to the dying soldier and cried...

Sweetley walked through the front door accompanied by two of his largest soldier's. One was armed with a SAW (squad automatic weapon) and the other was armed with an M16A2. Sweetley and his bodyguards marched purposefully into the center of Main Street and stopped facing the party from the town. Cuttler led his party up to Sweetley and started the negotiations.

Cuttler said, "My name is Barry Cuttler and I'm the chief of police," he gestured toward Becca and continued, "This is Becca Sweet, Chairperson of the town council. We are here to negotiate the release of the townspeople you are holding." Sweetley smiled, looked Jake dead in the eye and said, "Hello Sergeant Craft, good to see you." This threw Cuttler off balance somewhat and he didn't know how to proceed. Jake solved the problem for him.

Jake smiled and said, "Hello Sweetley; plan fell apart did it?" Sweetley smiled back and said, "Nah, these Rubes just put up more of a fight than we thought they would, that's all." Cuttler, Becca and Nathan all visibly took exception to the "Rubes" comment, but Jake didn't respond to it, he just said, "Look Sweetley, you better talk to these people here, they're the ones that have you surrounded; I'm just a bystander." Sweetley smiled and said, "Sure Jake, I just have one question though; do you play chess?" Jake didn't answer and wondered where this was going.

Sweetley reached into his cargo pocket, pulled out Jake's shemagh and said, "In chess, I believe they call this checkmate in one move!" Sweetley was watching Jake's face for any reaction. Sweetley had to hand it to him, he was in control, but there was just a flicker of emotion in Jake's eyes to tell Sweetley he had figured it right. The nurse was Craft's woman!

It took every bit of Jake's willpower not to kill Sweetley on the spot! Jake realized, too late, what a mistake it had been to give Gaby the shemagh. Sweetley was trying to play her as a trump card against him, and get out of here without incurring anymore casualties. Jake also realized that Sweetley might let the other hostages go, but not Gaby. Jake had caused too much trouble for Sweetley's employer and hurting Jake would get Sweetley a lot of mileage with Jarrett. Jake guessed it was time to make some moves of his own.

"So you found my shemagh, so what Sweetley?" Sweetley smiled wickedly and said, "I've got your girlfriend Craft and if you want her back alive, you better do what I say!" Jake laughed and said, "You don't get it Sweetley, she's just a girl I met; she's nothing to me. Besides, I'm not the one you have to worry about, it's these townspeople that have you in a sack." Sweetley laughed wickedly and said, "What are these people going to do against a force like mine, with armored vehicles, automatic weapons and that chain gun; tell me Craft?"

Jake shook his head and said, "Well Sweetley, I'd say you probably have just enough ammunition to shoot your way out of here, but what then? Some of these people will probably harass and ambush the survivors all the way back to Crossroads; Are you ready to run that gauntlet? If you get out?" Sweetley had to think about that for a moment but then he answered. "We'll have hostages, they won't attack us!"

At this point Becca Sweet spoke up, "That's where you are wrong Mr. Sweetley! You are not leaving here with any hostages. You are surrounded by better than 500 armed local people and more are arriving from the surrounding area every minute; the consensus is that you are not taking our people with you, not one of them! You have two choices here, you let our people walk out of there and you can leave without us firing a shot. Or you can try to take our people with you and there will be a bloodbath you won't survive. Do you understand me!?"

Sweetley was momentarily taken aback. He expected these people to beg and plead for their friends and loved ones. He definitely did not expect this iron willed woman to give him an ultimatum. Cuttler spoke up and said, "Sweetley, you have two hours to give us your answer, no more. In two hours you can leave here

alive, or you can fight your way out; it's that simple.

Sweetley said, "You'll have your answer, in two hours." Before Sweetley and his men could walk away, Jake said, "Sweetley, you better keep the Hawk and his men under control. If he starts raping and killing the hostages, none of you will make it out of here alive." Sweetley smiled again and said, "Don't worry about the Hawk, I can handle him. Besides, he doesn't know I have your woman... Yet." With that Sweetley signaled his men and they turned and walked back toward the clinic.

Jake's group walked back around the funeral home and conferred in the alley. Cuttler asked Jake, "What do you think they'll do?" Jake thought about it for a moment and said, "I think Sweetley's not as bright as I originally thought. He's made a critical mistake in underestimating what he's up against. I think he's just arrogant enough to try to fight his way out of here." Cuttler nodded and said, "I agree, so what we need to do is pin them down at the clinic, so the only option they have is to deal and I think I know a way..."

Over the next forty five minutes, Cuttler and his officer's, Nathan Pye, Jake and Jess, organized the townspeople and had them reinforce their positions around the clinic. Cuttler also put the word out for every deer hunter with a scoped rifle to come to the city hall. Within twenty minutes, thirty four hunters showed up with their scoped rifles and ammunition. Jake, Jess, Nathan and Sergeant Sutton placed them in position throughout the buildings and terrain surrounding the clinic.

Each improvised sniper was assigned a very narrow target zone; for example, two men on the roof of the city hall had been assigned the task of blinding the Scout Stryker by taking out its vision blocks and weapons sighting optics. Another couple of hunters had been assigned to concentrate only on the gunners in the up-armored Humvees. Others were assigned specific windows and doors on the clinic and were told that once the fight started to drop everyone in their respective kill zones. They might not be trained military snipers, but they were mountain men and each one of them put a deer or three in the freezer every year. They could all shoot and they were itching to take out these raiders.

People were filtering in from the surrounding countryside and spoiling for a fight. A Blaster, who had worked for a local mine, started putting together improvised grenades out of quarter pound blocks of TNT and roofing nails. He also built several IED's (improvised explosive devices) out of Semtex, and they were placed strategically along Main Street.

Nathan Pye had organized a group of over forty of his family members and friends into an assault force. They were infiltrating through the woods near the northern gap of the valley and were setting up to take out Sweetley's blocking force.

Jake and Jess put out the word for volunteers with military experience, to make up a force to assault the clinic, if needed; they got nineteen men, including one hard old geezer carrying an M-1 Garand. The old man's name was Harlan Grimes and his daughter and granddaughter were hostages in the clinic. Jess tried to

talk him out of it, but Harlan responded with, “Son, I may be a little long in the tooth, but I spent thirteen months in the Korean War and I ain’t forgot how to kill!” Jess backed down and Harlan was part of the team.

Jake looked at his watch and saw that there was only twenty minutes left until the deadline. He hoped that Sweetley would release the hostages and take the easy out, but he didn’t think so. Jake was pretty sure that Sweetley was too arrogant for that to happen. He just hoped the woman he loved would survive the coming fight. He didn’t give any thought to his survival; he just checked his weapons and equipment again, and prepared for war....

Chapter 8, The Battle of Johnsville

As the deadline approached, Sweetley had the Scout Stryker back up to the clinic's entrance vestibule and lower its ramp, to off load ammo and medical supplies. He had the two up-armored Humvees move to the north and south front corners of the clinic and assigned them fields of fire. The Infantry Stryker was placed in the alley behind the clinic, adjacent to the alley entrance. The raiders in the building used the time to fortify the windows and in some cases knock loopholes in the reinforced concrete walls. The Stryker's were carrying a limited re-supply of small arms ammunition for their rifles and machineguns, and Sweetley had the NCO's distribute it to the troops. Curiously, the townspeople honored the truce and didn't fire at his men during these preparations.

Sweetley was getting worried; he was beginning to believe that he had underestimated these people's will to fight. There had been a lot of activity during the truce on the townspeople's part also. There had been quite a bit of movement in the buildings around the clinic, and they had even put up road blocks at the intersections nearest the clinic. From what he could tell, it looked like they meant to fight it out.

The townspeople fighting it out, posed some serious problems for Sweetley. His heaviest weapon, the 25 millimeter chain gun on the Scout Stryker was down to 42 rounds of ammunition. Sweetley did have six shoulder fired, AT-4 anti-tank rocket launchers, but they would be difficult and dangerous to deploy inside this building. The M-203 (40 millimeter grenade launcher attached to an M-16A2 rifle) gunners had 10 HE/DP (High explosive/Dual purpose) rounds apiece, but they had to fly at least 15 meters before arming and the gunners had to expose themselves in order to fire them; their value was negligible.

They were a little bit better off as far as small arms and ammunition went, but not much; They had six M-240B's (three mounted on the vehicles), with 1200 rounds of ammunition for each gun. 5 SAW's (squad automatic weapons), with 500 rounds apiece and each rifleman had at least 210 rounds each. He wasn't sure how much ammo the Hawk's people had, and that worried him; the Hawk's people made up two thirds of his force, carried a bewildering variety of weapons and they were neither cohesive, nor reliable.

Sweetley had another problem; the Corporal in charge of the mixed force blocking the southern gap into the valley was getting jumpy. He had called on the radio to report they had detected movement in the woods on either side of the gap; the Corporal believed his force was in danger of being surrounded and possibly overrun. He was requesting permission to withdraw from the valley. Sweetley denied his request and ordered him to hold the gap at all costs. The Corporal nervously acknowledged the order and signed off the radio net.

Sweetley did have a couple of hole cards; the forty townspeople in the basement and Jake Craft's girlfriend. If he couldn't execute a fighting withdrawal, he would barter with his hostages. Sweetley spent the last half

hour before the truce expired, inspecting the fighting positions and talking to the men. He had an idea for getting out of this fire sack and called his leadership together in the old doctor's office to plan it out. He would just have to see what the next few hours would bring...

Jake and his assault force had moved into the building housing an insurance office, due south of, and just across the side street from the clinic. Jake was observing the south side of the clinic and the up armored Humvee, from a small basement window. Not much was going on, but there was only twenty minutes left until the deadline was up. Jake knew as soon as the deadline expired, the town's snipers would open up on the armored vehicles, in an effort to blind them, and in the case of the Humvees, kill the machine gunners.

Jake was worried; he thought that the townspeople were probably not ready for this fight. Although, their apparent anger at being attacked and their determination to get their people back could prove him wrong; Jake hoped so, for their sake. This fight promised to be bloody and that equated to a lot of casualties on both sides, and the townspeople would need their anger and resolve to sustain them.

Jake stepped down from the table he'd been standing on to look out the basement window. He surveyed the men lounging around the basement, preparing for war. The old geezer, Harlan Grimes, sat in a corner with his field stripped M-1 Garand laid out on his coat. As Jake made eye contact with him, Harlan grinned and went back to cleaning the trigger group with a tooth brush.

Jake had been supplied with a police radio by Cuttler, and there was a lot of chatter on the net. Most of it had to do with positioning townspeople and keeping a few of them from firing indiscriminately on the clinic. These people were angry and out for blood.

Jake heard someone enter the building's first floor, and then Jess Markham came clattering down the stairway, followed by a short, stocky, middle aged man in a city maintenance uniform, carrying a lever action rifle and a three foot long cardboard tube. Every man in the basement had oriented the muzzles of various weapons toward the stairway, as Jess and his companion started coming down the stairs.

Jess got to the bottom of the stairs, pulled up short and grinning said, "Relax fellas, It's just me and Bobby Green." Safeties clicked on, muzzles were averted and the men went back to what they were doing, as Jake walked up to Jess and asked, "What's up?"

"Jake, this is Bobby Green, the town's maintenance foreman." Jake stuck out his hand and Green gave him a firm handshake and looked Jake in the eye and said, "Pleased to meet ya Jake, heard a lot about ya." Jake grinned tightly and said, "Yeah, seems I have a hard time maintaining a low profile."

Jess laughed and said, "Ain't that the truth! Anyway, Bobby has some information that might just be useful, in case we have to go in after the hostages. Bobby, tell Jake what you told me."

“Well Jake, when I heard these guys was holed up in the clinic; I pulled the blue prints to see if I could come up with anything that could help us.” Bobby leaned his rifle against the wall and opened one end of the cardboard tube, extracting a set of blue prints. Bobby walked over to a six foot folding table in the center of the room and unrolled the blue prints as Jake, Jess and the other men in the room gathered around.

Green shuffled through the several sheets of the blue prints and said, “This is the layout of the clinic basement. The basement is fairly large and contains the heating and cooling system, water and sewer access and such.” Green pointed these out on the blue print and placed another sheet on top and continued. “Here, we have the sub basement equipment room. This is where the sewer and water pipes along with the electrical access enters the building. The emergency generator is also in this room. It’s three feet lower than the basement proper and is located just under the alley to the west. But here’s the interesting part.”

Green shuffled another blue print to the top of the pile and said. “What we have here is the maintenance access tunnel for the storm sewer, sewage and water system. It runs right under the alley and passes next to the clinic sub basement. The only thing separating the tunnel from the equipment room is the brick tunnel wall.” Green looked around the table waiting for a reaction. Everybody in the room knew where this was leading.

The wheels started turning in Jake’s head and he asked, “How hard would it be to break through that wall?” Green nodded and said, “Two men with pick axes could do it in less than five minutes.” Jake contemplated this as one of the other men spoke up and asked, “Wouldn’t that make a helluva racket? I mean, wouldn’t they hear us trying to break in and be waiting on us?”

Jake answered, “Once the fight kicks off and as long as they are not manning the room, I believe we could probably get in there without them noticing. We would be in position to run right up their backsides before they knew it.” Everyone thought about this for a few minutes and Harlan Grimes spoke up first.

“If’n it was me, I would have the hostages and wounded in the basement, where they would be safe, until I needed to move them.” Several men in the group nodded and they all looked to Jake for further guidance.

Jake said, “That makes sense Harlan; Ok, here’s what we’ll do.” He stopped himself and asked Bobby Green, “Can you get us into the tunnel without them noticing?” Green nodded his head in the affirmative and said, “Yeah, it’ll be cold and we’ll get a little wet, there’s about two feet of runoff in the tunnel, but they’ll never know we’re there until we’re inside the clinic.”

Jake nodded his head and continued. “Jess, clear this with Cuttler, but do it in person, don’t use the radio. Our comms are probably compromised.” Jess nodded in the affirmative as Jake continued. Alright, let’s saddle up and follow Mr. Green, we’ll get into the tunnel and get into position. We’ll have to see how it plays out.” Jess left to confer with Cuttler as the assault force saddled up and got ready to move out. Jake retrieved his weapons and gear and went with Green up the stairs. His men followed...

While Jake and his men were moving to the tunnel access near the city maintenance yard, Sweetley was meeting with the Hawk, Corey Jarrett and his NCO's in Dr. Kincer's office. Sweetley was briefing them on his new plan for getting out of Johnsville. The sergeants and corporals were standing around the old oak desk, the Hawk and Reggie were leaning against a wall, Corey Jarrett was sitting in a chair in front of the desk. Sweetley was sitting behind the desk in Dr. Kincer's chair with his feet up on the desk, playing with the green and brown shemagh in his hands. He surveyed the men in the room and thought, "they'll do."

Sweetley cleared his throat and said, "Here's how we are going to do this; first off, in about 11 minutes the deadline will be up. At that time every weapon that can be brought to bear on the townspeople's perimeter will open up for a mad minute." He looked pointedly at his NCO's and continued, "You guys make sure that our people hold back nothing! I want those people to think it's the end of the world. While that is going on, the Scout Stryker followed by the two Humvee's, will crash the makeshift roadblock just south of us, adding their fire to the chaos and taking out anything that moves. Once they've cleared the roadblock, they'll halt and wait for the rest of us to close up with our people and the hostages, before heading out of town. We will pick up Sutter and the blocking force on the way out and beat feet back for the crossroads."

"While the mad minute is going on, Hawk you and half your people will get the hostages and wounded together and prepare to move them to the trucks. I'll need the other half of your people in the perimeter to join in the mad minute." The Hawk nodded and didn't say anything, but he still didn't see the use in taking anybody that couldn't walk. Screw the wounded!

"Once I've determined that the good townspeople are sufficiently suppressed, I'll contact everyone by radio and we'll start moving people out to the trucks, using the hostages as cover." Sweetley looked at a young freckle faced staff sergeant and said, "Rivers, you and your squad will be the last ones out. You'll cover the building perimeter and extract via your Stryker in the alley. Clear?" Rivers looked at Sweetley, nodded and said, "Clear commander."

Corey Jarrett, wearing one of the wounded men's body armor vests and carrying an M16A2, asked Sweetley, "Where do you want me?" Sweetley thought about it for a moment and said, "You stay with me Corey. If anything happens to me, you take charge and get these people back to Crossroads. Also, I want you to keep an eye on someone for me, during the extraction." Corey looked surprised and asked, "Who?" Sweetley smiled, held up the shemagh and said, "Jake Craft's girlfriend."

The Hawk's face flushed, he pushed off the wall and shouted, "What!?" Sweetley chuckled and said, "Just what I said Hawk, I've got Jake Craft's girlfriend. I plan on taking her back to Jarrett, for some quality time."

The Hawk was having a difficult time with his self control. It took several moments for him to muster the will power to speak coherently, "Let me have her Sweetley, just name your price! Whatever it is, I'll pay it."

Sweetley shook his head and smiling said, “No Hawk, that ain’t gonna happen. If you want her, you can take it up with Jarrett, when we get back. In the meantime, she’s a very important hostage, because Craft is out there waiting to gut all of us. But, with this girl as our hostage, I believe Craft will do what we tell him to.”

Corey Jarrett took this all in and thought to himself, “Don’t bet on it Sweetley.” Corey had never had any interaction with Jake Craft, other than being fragged by him. But, he had seen the results of Craft’s work first hand and figured he was the kind of guy that would take a lot of killing! From what Corey had seen, Sweetley and the Hawk were probably not up to the task of handling this guy, but they didn’t seem to know it. Well, some people never learned from experience. Corey decided he would do as Sweetley asked and see how things worked out. What else could he do, If he wanted to get back to his wife and kids?

Jake and his men were in the maintenance tunnel, walking through 24 inches of frigid water, following Green and one of his maintenance workers. The tunnel had a dank smell and there were pipes and conduit running along the walls. At intervals, the pipes and conduit would “T” off through the wall into buildings along the alley. It was a specific “T” they were looking for, which led into the clinic sub basement. They had five flashlights of various types and a handful of green chemical lights. Jake had told the men to save the chem lights, in case the flashlights gave out.

Green and his man stopped and started playing their lights over the wall to their right. Jake halted his war party and waited, and took comfort in the fact that his men were being quiet. This was a good bunch and didn’t seem like they would spook easily. They all had military experience and most were combat vets. They would need that fortitude and experience if things went the way Jake thought they would.

Green made his way to Jake through the frigid water and said, “This is it! As soon as the firing starts upstairs, we can go at the wall.” Jake nodded his head, looked at the luminous dial of his old Seiko and said, “Good Mr. Green, it looks like things should start in less than 10 minutes.” Just as Jake said this, they could hear a five round burst from the 25 millimeter chain gun and then the popcorn crackle of small arms fire start to build. It had a distant echoing sound to it in the tunnel, but there was no mistaking it. The battle of Johnsville had begun in earnest...

Jess had just finished briefing Cuttler and Becca Sweet on Jake’s plan, when the Stryker opened fire on the roadblock, just south of the clinic. They were in the police road room, of the city hall, where a command post had been set up. They all instinctively ducked when the chain gun let go with a five round burst. Immediately followed by heavy small arms fire from the clinic, interspersed with the sharp cracks of 40mm grenades going off. Jess and Cuttler looked pointedly at each other as their respective radios exploded with frantic chatter.

Becca Sweet nodded her head once and said to them, “You’d better get out there, and see what can be done.” They both nodded and headed for the door, as Becca turned picking up her radio and tried to cut

through the chatter and calm her people down. She had never felt so alone and helpless in her life...

Jess and Cuttler left through the rear of the building, going in opposite directions in an effort to determine what was going on. The first thing that both of them noticed, was very few of the townspeople were returning fire. Most of them were hunkered down and trying to stay alive. Jess ran toward the Northwest corner of the city hall and shouted at the nearest men to return fire. Which several of them did, behind their makeshift barricade. Jess joined them and started firing at the muzzle flashes coming from the clinic. Just as the Stryker collided with the smoking cars comprising the vehicle barricade on Main street, attempting to clear the smoking wreckage from the roadway.

Small arms rounds were sparking and ricocheting all over the Stryker, as it pushed the smoking obstacles out of the road. Returning fire from the townspeople was starting to pick up, as they got hold of themselves and started to fight. Several bodies were strewn in and around the wreckage, and Jess noted that his friends and neighbors were again dying. Jess put that out of his mind, and went back to working his rifle over the front of the clinic. What else could he do?

Gary Welsh was on the roof of the former Rightco pharmacy, 46 yards away, when the Stryker started taking out the road block. 36 year old Welsh, a former coal miner, snugged into a good cheek weld on the pre 1964, Winchester model seventy and got the reticle of the 4 power scope into the proper eye relief. He sighted onto the optics package just to the left of the 25 millimeter chain gun, on the turret of the Stryker. Welch touched off his first 30 06, 185 grain, softpoint, as the Stryker collided with the barricade. He missed. He saw his round strike four inches high and adjusted accordingly. His next round hit the largest of the three lenses, and shattered it. He readjusted to the next lens and started his trigger squeeze, as the other designated snipers and townspeople started returning fire in earnest on the clinic and the armored vehicles.

The gunner in the Stryker was just taking aim at the muzzle flashes, coming from a store front 20 yards away, when his sight picture seemed to explode and then disappeared. He got on the intercom to the vehicle commander, sitting behind and above him, and said, "Corporal, I just lost my sight!" The corporal went to his sight extension and as he put his eye to the scope, his sight picture disappeared also. He grabbed the commander's override and started swinging the turret back and forth in short arcs, to throw off the aim of whoever was targeting their optics package.

The vehicle commander pressed the intercom PTT and frantically shouted at the driver to backup. The driver threw the Stryker into reverse and started backing north up the street, where it collided with one of the up-armored Humvees, crumpling the front end of the Humvee and shattering the radiator. The Humvee effectively becoming a pillbox, as the Stryker driver shouted at the commander, "I can't see, their taking out my vision blocks!" The young corporal commanding the Stryker, for the first time on this raid, became truly afraid.

The machine gunner of the wrecked Humvee, picked himself from the back seat, where he had fallen when

the Stryker collided with them. He shook his head and stood back up in the hatch, and grabbed the machinegun's pistol grip. Just as he started to fire wildly at the building fronts around him, a 150 grain .270 soft point bullet, entered his forehead, just above his right eye.

The bullet penetrated the gunner's forehead, mushroomed out and fragmented through his skull killing him instantly. His body jerked back violently against the turret ring, and the chin strap of his Kevlar helmet came unsnapped. The helmet flew from his shattered head and clattered off the vehicle and rolled into the street. His lifeless body slid down into the Humvee pumping arterial blood, from the shattered skull all over the driver and soldier in the passenger seat. The passenger panicked and bailed out of the vehicle, trying to run for the front of the clinic. He didn't make it. He was hit at least a dozen times, in various parts of his body and rolled against the curb in front of the clinic. Where he slowly bled out over the next 10 minutes, and wondered how his young life could end this way. His buddy, the driver slumped down in his seat and prayed as hard as he ever had in his life, that he would survive...

The townspeople were settling down and returning effective fire. Especially the men designated as snipers. They were in good positions and were causing Sweetley casualties, he could ill afford to lose. But the dying had started again, in earnest for the people of Johnsville.

At about this time in the fight, Nathan Pye and his ad hoc force opened fire on the blocking position, in the southern mouth of the valley. These hillbillies Sweetley held so much contempt for, didn't miss their targets and there were no survivors. As Nathan and his boys assaulted through the objective, they secured the weapons and ammo of the men they had killed. Nathan smiled when one of his cousins showed him the two AT-4 antitank weapons he found. Nathan got on the radio and told Becca and Cuttler the outcome of his attack. Nathan left half of his force in the mouth of the valley in a good ambush/blocking position and took his new toys back into town. He didn't want to miss the rest of the party!

Things were not going according to Sweetley's plan! He was taking casualties and could not reach the blocking position, in the southern mouth of the valley on the radio. He had also just been informed that the Scout Stryker, was effectively blind and he had lost one Humvee, and it's crew. Sweetley was having a hard time believing these townspeople were fighting so effectively. But it wasn't over yet! He knew that no plan ever survived contact with the enemy. He would just have to figure something else out.

Sweetley had moved his command post into the basement stairwell of the clinic, when bullets started bouncing and ricocheting through the building. Wounded men, who could, were leaving their positions on the building perimeter and trying to get down to the basement for treatment. Sweetley pulled out his Kimber Warrior, .45 ACP and forced them back to their positions with the admonishment to slap a dressing on it and fight for their lives!

He turned to Corey Jarrett and said, "I'm going upstairs and see if I can put some backbone in the troops. You stay here and don't let the Hawk near the girl, we may need her." Corey said, "Gotcha Sweetley," and threw him a mocking salute as Sweetley ran up the stairs and out into the clinic. Corey, sitting next to the

girl on the stairs, looked down into the basement and saw the Hawk, near the bottom of the stairs, with Reggie, his number two man. The Hawk was saying something to Reggie, Corey couldn't hear, but the Hawk never took his eyes from the pretty young woman sitting next to Corey. The hate, coupled with lust, was evident in the Hawk's eyes. Which Corey knew boded ill for this young woman and possibly, himself...

When the battle of Johnsville started in earnest, Bobby Green and his man started in on the bricks of the tunnel, with pickaxes and a pry bar. They were taking their time and trying not to make too much noise, even with the shooting going on. When they had pried out three bricks from around the water supply pipe, Jake stopped them and stepped up to the hole they had made. Jake peered inside, but it was pitch black and he couldn't see a thing. Jake motioned to the man next to him to give him a flashlight. The man did so and Jake played the beam through the hole into the subbasement. What Jake saw, was a room approximately 20 feet square; containing pipes, conduit, electrical panels and a large diesel generator (Green told him the generator was only used when the doctor was performing surgery, because of a shortage of diesel fuel). Jake played the light around the room and saw four steps and a handrail, leading up to a heavy steel door in the opposite wall. Most importantly, the room wasn't occupied.

Jake stepped back from the hole and told Green, "Go ahead and take it down, there's nobody in there." Green and his man started going at the wall in earnest as Jake pulled his men further down the tunnel to brief them. Jake looked at the gaggle of 19 men and thought he could be leading these men to their deaths, but put the thought aside. Gabby was in there, that's all that mattered.

Jake addressed the men, "Alright gentlemen, here's what we're gonna do. Once Bobby Green gets through that wall, we will quietly get into the room. Once inside, Harlan you and Brooks will cover the door, while the rest of us dump our coats and get ready to enter the basement. When we get done you and Brooks can dump your coats." Harlan grimes and Curtis Brooks, a Navy veteran, both nodded their heads in agreement as Jake continued.

"Once everybody is ready, I'll go through the door first and you guys will filter out behind me. What I want you to do is run the walls of the room." The men looked at him in confusion. Jake sighed and said, "Look, what I mean is as you get out of the door spread out around the walls of the room looking for targets. Stay at least a foot away from the walls because of ricochets and only shoot if you have a clear armed threat. If what we speculate is true, the basement is probably full of the hostages and their wounded. From the sound of things, most of their able, armed people are upstairs shooting it out with your neighbors. And, one more thing; try not to shoot each other, or me, will ya?" Jake said this with a lopsided grin, and most of the men laughed nervously at that one.

Bobby Green walked up behind Jake and said, "We're through Jake." Jake turned and said to Green, "Well, let's go then." He turned back to his men, lining the tunnel and said, "Come on girls, let's get in there and see about starting this dance!" There were some chuckles at this one, but as the men followed him through the makeshift door to the sub basement, their overall mood was more somber and thoughtful. Most of these

men had very few illusions about going to war...

The Hawk, standing at the bottom of the stairs, saw Sweetley leave the stairwell to go back up to the fight. He turned to Reggie and said, "Get the men together and half the hostages, we're getting out of here with the girl." Reggie smiled and said, "Sure boss." And faded into the dark basement, to gather the eight men the Hawk had kept with him ostensibly, to move the wounded to the trucks. What these eight men were; were the best armed, most loyal and effective shooters left of the Reavers. The men he had released to Sweetley were mostly the dregs of his latest recruitment efforts.

The Hawk had several vehicles in front of the clinic. He had been developing a plan with Reggie, to bail out of this fight at the first opportunity and run back for Crossroads. But, he needed some hostages to cover their movement to the vehicles and he wanted the most important hostage, for himself, Craft's girlfriend. The Hawk had to admit she was pretty, but a little old for his tastes. He liked them much younger and easily impressed. This woman had looked at him, from her seat on the stairs, with loathing and superior contempt. He would fix that though. Before it was over with, she would look at him in abject terror. It was a promise he had made to himself, he fully intended to deliver on.

Reggie walked back up to the Hawk, just as several female hostages started to scream and a commotion broke out at the back of the basement. The medic, Schmidt, confronted one of the Reavers, who was attempting to drag a young woman toward the stairs. Schmidt tried to stop the Reaver and was butt stroked across the jaw for his trouble. Schmidt collapsed, semi-conscious at the Reavers' feet and groaned.

The Reavers rapidly gathered 18 hostages, women and young girls and herded them toward the stairs. Dr. Kincer in the far corner of the basement, performing surgery on a young soldier with a perforated bowel, could only watch in shock, as the women and girls were taken toward the stairs.

Corey Jarrett stood up and headed down the stairs to find out what the Hawk was up to. As he got to the bottom, he confronted the Hawk and demanded, "Hawk, what the hell are you doing?" The Hawk smiled savagely, drew his Glock and backhanded Cory across the face with it. Corey dropped his rifle and crumpled to the floor. The Hawk turned to Reggie and said, "Tie his hands and bring him to, I'll sell him back to Jarrett, along with these other *****es!" Reggie grinned and knelt to disarm Corey and tie his hands. He had to smile because the Hawk he knew and loved was back!

The Hawk looked up the stairs, at Craft's woman and started climbing the stairs toward her. Gaby shrunk back against the stairwell wall, with a frightened look on her face. As he got to her, he grabbed her chin and forcing her to look at him said, "*****! I've got so many things planned for you. By the time I'm through with you, you and your boyfriend are going to wish he'd never crossed me!!"

Gaby finally realized who this freak was! This was the leader of the raiders, Jake had told her about. Gaby's look of terror transformed itself into a wicked smile as she looked the Hawk in the eyes and said, "I doubt it.

The next time you face my man, I will venture to say, you will not survive it!” Rage welled up in the Hawk, as he grabbed Gaby by her arm and pulled her to her feet saying, “Shut up *****! I’ll kill him shortly and then I’m going to make you wish you were dead!” Gaby, although fearing for her and Jake’s lives, mustered enough gumption to give the Hawk another wicked smile in reply. The Hawk let out a primal howl and backhanded her viciously. Gaby fell to the stairs and as blood started from her lips, she took comfort in the fact that she had gotten to this psychotic freak. For the first time in her life, she looked forward to watching a man die. She finally realized that Jake had been right, some people needed killing!!

The battle for Johnsville had settled into a desultory siege, punctuated with flurries of wild firing whenever someone, on either side, exposed themselves. Both sides were taking casualties, but the townspeople were getting the worst of it. There were over a hundred wounded being triaged in the city hall building. By a husband and wife team of veterinarians, augmented by volunteers. Nobody knew how many were dead, but there were bodies all up and down Main street, and more in and around the buildings. It was a sad day for Johnsville, but there was no other choice! It was either fight on your feet, or die on your knees! The people of Johnsville chose the former.

The people of Johnsville were frustrated though. They were frustrated because they didn’t seem to be having much of an effect on the invaders. They could not see that they were producing any casualties and whenever they did fire at the clinic, they were met with withering return fire. Some of the townspeople took out their frustration on the Hawk’s remaining vehicles in front of the clinic. The windows were shot out, the tires flattened, radiators and engines were perforated. The vehicles were rendered hors de combat, but the Hawk didn’t know this and it would have a telling effect on his escape plan...

Jake and his team had entered the sub basement of the clinic. Where they shed their coats and readjusted their combat loads. Mark Webb, Jake’s buddy from the Crossroads fire was covering the door with Harlan Grimes and Brooks the ex sailor. Jake walked up to them and asked, “Can you hear anything?” Mark turned to him and said, “No Jake, this is a solid steel fire door and I can’t hear a damn thing!” Jake turned to survey his men in the light of several flashlights, some of them were holding. They had been briefed and knew what to do. He gripped the big G-3 and told Mark, “When I say go, open the door and hold it open until everyone gets through. You’ll be tail end Charlie, like we planned.” Mark said, “Sure Jake.” Jake placed his foot on the first step and got ready to go through another door. It seemed he spent his entire adult life going through doors, into hard places. He seriously doubted this would be any different...

Sweetley was on the second floor of the clinic, overlooking Main Street. His heaviest piece of armament, the scout Stryker, was sitting below him on the street like a wounded water buffalo. He had been in contact with the vehicle commander, by radio and found out that the driver had cracked his hatch in order to see, when he had been hit in the face by bullet fragments. He had lost his left eye for his efforts and the gunner had taken over driving duties. The Stryker was effectively blind, having had its optics and vision blocks shot out and was no longer combat effective. The commander, a young corporal, was staying buttoned up and told Sweetley in no uncertain terms, he wasn’t going to crack another hatch or “do a damned thing” until

Sweetley did something to take out the snipers. Sweetley was frustrated, but he was also frightened. This thing had bogged down into a siege and he had no clue as to what he could do to break it! Other than committing a suicidal charge to the still operable vehicles and hoping for the best.

It might just come down to that though. He was taking steady casualties, he could ill afford to lose. These “rubes” were whittling his force down, minute by minute and it was looking desperate for them. He had already come to the conclusion he would have to abandon the seriously wounded, if he wanted to pull out of here alive. Sweetley called his remaining NCO’s into the main hallway and told them to get ready to do a fighting withdrawal to the vehicles. One of his young buck Sergeants asked, “How the hell are we gonna do that? Those people out there will murder us!” Sweetley looked the young Sergeant in the eyes and asked, “Do you have a better idea?” The young Sergeant just shook his head and moved to comply with his orders. Sweetley headed toward the stairs to get Hawk and the hostages together for the move. What else could he do?

The Hawk and his Reavers had tied the hands of their hostages behind their backs. Some of the women and girls were weeping; some of them were openly defiant. But, they were all complying with the Reavers commands, for they had been told anything else would result in their immediate deaths!

The Hawk had everybody assembled at the bottom of the stairs and was telling them what he planned, “We’ll get everybody upstairs and push several hostages out the front door. That should cause the people outside to call a cease fire. Once the firing stops, we’ll use the remaining hostages as cover to get to the vehicles. We will then load up and head north, out of town. Any questions?”

There were none, so the Hawk grabbed Gaby by the arm and said, “Let’s go *****!” and then they moved everybody upstairs into the reception/waiting area. Dr. Kincer was so focused on what he was doing inside a young man’s abdomen, he didn’t even notice them head upstairs. If he had, he may have done something foolish to stop them, because of Gaby. It was probably a good thing he didn’t! For Johnsville would have great need for him, before this day was finally through...

Jake adjusted his grip on the G-3, looked at Mark Webb and said, “Alright Mark, go for it!” Mark Webb pulled the door open and held it against the stair rail, as Jake and the others filed rapidly up into the basement. Mark clicked off the safety of his Mossberg shotgun and followed. He found it reassuring to hear no firing coming from the basement.

As Jake cleared the fatal funnel of the doorway, he bore right toward the center of the basement, in order to allow his men to fan out behind him. What Jake saw in the basement was a makeshift field hospital, with wounded laid out in rows on the floor. There were men and women (presumably the hostages) caring for the wounded. The first person Jake was confronted by, was a young barrel chested man in Army ACU’s, with a bruised and swollen jaw. The young man was unarmed and had on bloody surgical gloves and a stethoscope draped around his neck. The bloody gloves and stethoscope saved his life as Jake immediately deduced he

was a medic and observed he was unarmed.

What the medic, Schmidt, saw was a group of armed men boil out of what he thought was a locked closet. Led by a tall, hard looking young man in a camouflaged shirt, carrying a big ugly rifle, that was now pointing at him! Schmidt held up his bloody hands and said in a panicky voice, "Take it easy, there is nobody here to fight!"

Jake lowered the G-3 a few inches and said, "Well if that's the case Doc, I guess you're my prisoner." Schmidt was about to verbally surrender as Dr. Kincer walked up to Jake and said, "Jake! Am I glad to see you, do you know what's happening?" Jake had to smile and said, "Hell Doc, this is a rescue! Are all of the hostages down here?"

Dr. Craft shook his head and answered, "No Jake, about five minutes ago young Schmidt here came and told me that Hawk character and some of his goons, took Gaby and about half the hostages upstairs. Schmidt tried to stop them and got butt stroked for his trouble. I was in the middle of a perforated lower bowel and barely noticed they were gone." Old Dr. Kincer said this last with some obvious self disgust.

Jake, visibly worried about the Hawk's motives, frowned and said, "Don't worry about it Doc, we'll get them back safe." Jake took a few seconds to look around the large basement and saw that his men were searching the wounded for weapons and had secured the basement. There were also one or two reunions between his men and some of the hostages. Jake looked toward the stairwell and saw Harlan Grimes and Mark Webb had taken up positions with their weapons oriented up the stairs.

Jake, satisfied with what he saw, turned back to the two men and said, "You guys just keep doing what you're doing. I'll leave some men to provide you security and to guard the prisoners. The rest of us are going to go after the other hostages."

Jake walked over the stairs and couldn't help but notice the stricken, if determined look on Harlan's face. Harlan Grimes looked at him and said, "Looks like they took my daughter and granddaughter with them, Jake." Jake patted Harlan on the shoulder and said, "We'll get em back, Harlan." Jake turned to Mark Webb and said, "Mark, detail five men to hold the basement and help the Doc." Jake motioned Green over to the stairs and said, "Mr. Green, get on the radio and tell Cuttler, or whoever, we've secured the basement and are going to clear the rest of the building. Tell them to have the people to stop shooting until they hear from me. They might also want to send us reinforcements."

Bobby Green acknowledged with a head shake and said, "I'll tell them to start pushing people through the tunnel. Do you think you have enough people with you, to take the building?" Jake thought about it for a moment and said, "Probably not, but I can sure shake them up upstairs and take some of the heat off of the perimeter. Besides, The Hawk took half the hostages upstairs and we have to get them back somehow!" Green nodded in agreement and walked off toward the sub basement, trying to cut through the wild clutter

on the radio net.

Mark Webb had detailed five men to secure the basement and brought the remaining men to the stairwell, where Jake addressed them, "Listen up, This is going to be the tricky part. What we have to do is head upstairs, locate the hostages, secure them if we can, and cause the bad guys as much trouble as we can. At least until reinforcements arrive." The men took this in without comment as Jake continued, "We have about ten of those improvised grenades (1/2 pound blocks of TNT, wrapped with duct tape and roofing nails, fused with 7 second time fuses). We need to hold off on fragging any rooms, until we locate the hostages." There was a chorus of "ok's" and head nods in acknowledgement. Jake said, "Alright, I'll lead up the stairs. First we secure the reception area and play it by ear from there. The most important thing is to try and secure the hostages."

Harlan Grimes spoke up and said, "If it's all the same to you, I'll go first." Jake momentarily speechless, could only frown in reply. Harlan said, "Look Jake, I know the layout of this place, been here more times than I'd like to remember and you haven't!" Jake nodded and said, "You have a point Harlan, anybody else know the layout of this place?" Several men chorused in and Jake pointed out four of them and said, "Good, you all work for Harlan now, follow his lead." Harlan Grimes gave a vicious smile, displaying his pearly white dentures and said, "Thanks Jake, I owe you." Jake smiled viciously back and said, "No you don't Harlan, lead out and let's skin this cat!" Harlan mounted the stairs and his new squad followed him. Jake fell in behind the fifth man, and made his way up the stairs. In preparation to yet again, go through another door...

The Hawk had a dilemma; in preparation to throw several of their hostages out the front door, they noticed that all of the vehicles had pretty well been shot to pieces! It was time to work out a different plan! The Hawk and Reggie had everyone down in the hallway adjacent to the Nurse's station, pretty much out of the line of fire. Three of Sweetley's soldiers were in the reception area, ostensibly to hold down the main entrance, but all three were staying low behind the nurse's station. They didn't seem to be too motivated about continuing this fight.

The Hawk glanced around the area and saw a hallway leading toward the back of the building, next to the nurse's station. He sent Reggie and Wilkes, to see if it led to a possible escape route. The Hawk then had the other men get the hostages down in the floor of the hallway to wait. He spoke to the nervous appearing PFC crouching behind the nurse's station counter, "Hey, how would you and your guys like to get out of here?" The PFC licked his lips, looked at his two men expectantly and they both nodded at him. The PFC turned back to the Hawk and said, "Yeah, I think that's a good idea." The Hawk grinned and said, "Hang loose, I'll tell you when we're going to leave."

With that the Hawk walked over to where Corey Jarrett was sitting groggily against the hallway wall, with the hostages. When the Hawk got to him he knelt down and grabbed Corey by the chin and started shaking it, "Hey Corey, come on out of it, wake up man!" Corey shook off the Hawk's hand and said, "I'm awake

*****, what do you want!” The Hawk grinned and said, “Hey man, I only slugged you for your own good.” Corey looked at him with pure venom and said, “Yeah, right!” The Hawk smiled, looked around conspiratorially and then said, “Look Corey, Sweetley’s already lost this fight. The best thing we can do is bluff our way out of here with these hostages.”

Corey thought about this for a few seconds and with no better plan of his own calmly said, “Ok Hawk, I’ll follow your play. Do you have a plan for getting us out of here?” The Hawk grinned and said, “Well not exactly, I’m making it up as I go. But I’ll keep you apprised of what I’m doing. Fair enough?” Corey nodded and said, “Cut me loose.” The Hawk motioned one of his men over and had him cut Corey loose. The Hawk gave Corey back the M16A2, which he’d had slung across his back. Corey grinned, checked the action and wondered if he was backing the right horse in this race. All he knew was, he agreed with Hawk that Sweetley was losing this fight and he wanted to get home to his wife and kids. If that meant allying himself with the Hawk, then so be it....

Moments later, Reggie and Wilkes came back from the rear of the building. Wilkes, the element leader from the raid on the Markham farm, who had been recently broken out of the jail annex, had equipped himself from the wounded. Wilkes was carrying an M16A2 and wearing a Molle vest covered in pouches. He looked a little pale and drawn from his incarceration, but other than that, had performed well in this fight. The Hawk was glad to have him back!

Reggie started briefing the Hawk, “Boss, there’s a shipping and receiving area and a back entrance, back there.” Reggie said as he motioned behind himself, with his thumb. He then continued, “There’s three of Sweetley’s men back there and two of them are dead and the other’s badly wounded. Outside the back door, there’s one of them armored cars with the ramp down with a dead gunner on top and I think there may be another guy inside, but I don’t know.”

The Hawk took this in, as the firefight ebbed and flowed in the background, he then turned to the cowering PFC behind the nurse’s station and asked, “Hey, can you drive one of those armored cars?” The PFC grinned nervously and said, “Sure, there’s nothing much to it, its like driving a big truck.” The Hawk nodded and said, “Good, get ready, we’re getting out of here.

The Hawk turned back to Reggie and asked, “Can we get everybody inside that thing?” Reggie thought about it and said, “Probably not, but we can put the hostages on top. That will give us some cover from the hillbillies out there. And we should be able to get everybody else inside.” The Hawk said, “Good idea! Here’s what we’ll do; we will trot about half the hostages out the back door, when the townspeople stop shooting, we’ll get us and the rest of the hostages inside the armored car. Then we get the hell out of here!! Don’t think they’ll shoot at us if they know we have their people with us.” Reggie and Wilkes were both in agreement with him and went to choose which hostages were staying, and which were going with them.

The Hawk walked over the where Gaby was sitting against the wall and roughly pulled her to her feet and

said, “Come on *****! We’re going for a little ride and I don’t think you’ll like the final destination!!” Gaby, couldn’t help herself, she started pleading with the Hawk to release the other hostages, “Please, leave the others here. You have me, I’ll do whatever you want. These people have nothing to do with Jake. Please don’t endanger them too!!!”

The Hawk laughed and said, “I don’t care what you do, *****! I would prefer you to resist me. I like it that way. Besides, I need these other *****es to provide cover. Why should I leave them here?” Gaby was momentarily speechless. She had seen what she had thought were evil men in her life, but she was absolutely shocked by the heartlessness of this Hawk. She was finally able to ask, “Do you have no decency? No remorse?” The Hawk laughed and said, “Not one little bit, now come on!” With that he pulled her down the hallway, to where Reggie and Wilkes were organizing the men and hostages for their breakout.

Reggie and Wilkes had chosen the youngest and prettiest women to go into the Stryker. They were having trouble with one woman, who would not leave her little girl. The child had a splinted, broken arm and was crying, and hanging on to her mother. The Hawk walked up with Gaby and pulled out his Glock. He put the pistol to the child’s head and the mother froze. The Hawk said, “Look, I’ll kill her if you don’t cooperate.” The woman nodded her head in fear and knelt by her daughter and said, “Its ok baby, mommy has to go with these men. You stay here and wait for mommy, alright baby?” The woman looked pointedly at the Hawk who nodded his head in agreement and pulled the Glock away from the child’s head.

The woman took her daughter to the nurse’s station and told her to wait. She then tearfully returned to where the second group of hostages stood in the hallway. The Reavers had untied the women’s hands, so they could hang on to the top of the Stryker, with the admonishment that they would kill them if they tried to escape.

The other half of the women, to be used as cover were, being prodded at gunpoint into the receiving area at the rear of the clinic. Once they got back there, the Hawk noticed that there was one of Sweetley’s soldiers lying there bleeding out from a lower abdominal wound and two others that were very obviously dead. There was not much fire coming at this side of the building, so the Hawk took a peek out the receiving doors and saw the Stryker sitting adjacent to the loading dock, with the ramp down.

The Hawk took the time to examine the open rear troop area of the Stryker, and realized they were not going to be able to get everyone inside. He could probably get his men and a few hostages inside, but could not take the rest, even on top of the vehicle. He quickly decided what they would do, and turned to Reggie and the corporal from the lobby.

“Reggie, when I give you the word, push all of the hostages out the rear door, with the exception of the four prettiest and Craft’s girlfriend. We’ll cram everybody else in that thing, button up and head north out of this burg!” Reggie smiled and said, “Right boss,” and headed off to make it happen.

Reggie and Wilkes got things organized relatively quickly. The receiving doors were thrown open and twelve women were prodded out the door at gun point. As the crying women streamed on to the loading dock, several men were heard to yell cease fire from the buildings across the alley. As the women stood there crying and hanging on to each other, the Reavers and Sweetley's three men piled into the rear of the Stryker. Taking Gaby and the four remaining young women with them. It was a tight fit inside the Stryker but they squeezed everyone inside.

The young private maneuvered his way into the driver's compartment, started the vehicle and raised the ramp. The Hawk and Reggie pushed the dead gunner up through the hatch, rolling his lifeless body on to the top deck of the Stryker. Reggie pulled the gunner's hatch closed and the Hawk smacked the driver on the back of the helmet and told him to go. As the Stryker moved out, turning north up the alley, gunfire starting sparking off of it's armored skin.

But, small arms fire could not stop it and the Stryker sped northward up the alley, toward the edge of town and escape. As it reached the next cross street, it crashed through the makeshift barricade and headed out beyond the townspeople's perimeter. Once again, the Hawk was able to get away to plan new mischief, and fight another day. He also had Craft's woman and the only thing he regretted was not being able to see the look on Jake's face, when he found out the Hawk had her! That would have been rich, but the Hawk would see Craft again and the next time, he had something very precious to use against him.....

As Harlan's men filed up the stairs and spread out into the reception area, Jake was once again surprised at not hearing any gunfire. Jake stepped out of the stairwell and saw Harlan's men spread out covering the adjacent hallways and the stairwell leading up to the second floor. Jake looked around for Harlan and found him behind the nurse's station comforting a crying little girl. Harlan looked up at Jake with pain filled eyes and said, "They've taken my daughter Jake!"

Jake looked around, his own fears about Gaby churning in his gut and asked, "Taken her where Harlan?" Harlan pointed toward the rear of the building and said, "My granddaughter says they took them back there." Jake moved past the nurse's station and headed toward the receiving area as the rest of his men moved out of the stairs and took up positions around the reception/waiting area. Mark Webb caught up with Jake and followed him to the receiving area.

Jake eased open the door and scanned the receiving area. What he saw were three dead soldiers and a set of open double doors, leading out to a loading dock. Jake could also see several women embracing and crying on the loading dock. There was also a spirited firefight going on between Sweetley's men on the second floor of the clinic and some townspeople across the alley.

Jake turned to Mark and said, "Come on, let's get those women out of the line of fire! Jake and Mark ran to the open doors and started yelling at the women to get back inside. The women saw Jake first and not knowing him, took him to be one of the raiders. The women froze on the loading dock, as gunfire from across the alley started tearing up the masonry around Jake. Jake ducked back into the doorway with a curse,

as Mark Webb stepped out on to the loading dock waving his arms over his head. Fortunately, some of the men across the street recognized him and ceased firing. Sweetley's men, on the second floor, ceased firing to conserve ammunition. Not being aware of the drama playing out below them.

Jake and Mark were able to get the women back inside the building, as firing toward the second floor, from across the alley resumed. Jake was visibly disappointed when Gaby was not one of the twelve women on the loading dock. He did learn from one of the women, that Gaby had been a hostage in the escaping Stryker. He also learned that it was the Hawk that had her! Impotence and rage welled up in him, upon learning that his bitter enemy had the woman he loved.

Jake didn't know what he was going to do about the situation, but he knew that he had to take out Sweetley and his remaining men, in order to concentrate on tracking down the Hawk and Gaby. Jake turned to Mark Webb and said, "Mark, keep these women here, I'm going to see about finishing this fight." With that statement, Jake headed back toward the front of the clinic.

As Jake entered the reception/waiting area, he found that his men had rapidly cleared the remaining ground floor of the clinic. They had six of Sweetley's men, sitting in the hallway, disarmed and with their hands on their heads. Jake went up to Harlan and asked, "What's happening?"

Harlan turned to Jake and said, "We've cleared the rest of the first floor and these guys gave up without too much trouble." Harlan gestured at the six prisoners and continued, "We did lose one man killed and two wounded, clearing the first floor." Who? Jake asked. "We lost Brooks, he took one through the throat and bled out, the other two are walking wounded and can still fight!"

Harlan continued "These boys told us the rest of the invaders are all on the second floor. These are all that's left of the people he had down here. It looks like they are taking heavier casualties than we thought. But, they ain't saying much of anything else."

Jake's tactical mindset kicked in and he started to assess the situation. The way Jake had it figured, Sweetley probably did not know he no longer held the basement or the first floor. Which gave Jake the advantage. Jake pulled out his radio and attempted to contact Cuttler through the chatter on the net. Jake finally got Cuttler on the radio and told him that they held the basement and the first floor. He also told Cuttler to keep the people on the perimeter from firing at the first floor, until he had set up his assault on the second floor. Jake figured that whether or not their communications were being monitored was moot, as he was pretty sure that Sweetley had every available body defending his second floor perimeter. Cuttler acknowledged Jake's instructions and started passing the word.

Jake knew, from examining Green's blueprints of the clinic, there were only two stairwells leading to the second floor. The one near the lobby and one at the north end of the building's main hallway. Jake told the two walking wounded and one other man to cover the stairwell to the north. And admonished them that

anyone coming down was enemy and to be engaged. The men acknowledged his instructions and headed up the hallway to the stairwell.

Jake organized his remaining men and explained what he was going to do. First he told Bobby Green and his man to guard the prisoners. He then explained that he was going to use their improvised grenades to shake the guys up, upstairs, prior to starting a clearing operation. He intended on using the first grenade to blow the second floor stairwell door off of its hinges and then tossing a few more into the second floor hallway, to shake things up.

The men in the assault force, lined up to enter the stairwell and waited for Jake's commands. Jake, Harlan Grimes and one other man crept into the stairwell and slowly moved up the first flight of stairs to the switchback. Jake peered upward around the turn of the switchback and could see the stairwell door. Fortunately, Sweetley had nobody posted in the stairwell.

Jake took the improvised ½ pound grenade and held it out for Harlan to light the fuse. Harlan lit the fuse, with a butane lighter and Jake bounded up the last flight of stairs and laid the grenade against the door leading into the second floor hallway. Jake bounded back down the stairs, following Harlan and the other man back into the reception area. As the Door closed behind him, Jake shouted, "Fire in the hole!" The improvised grenade went off with a powerful crack and ceiling tiles and dust fell on to the men near the nurse's station. Jake was impressed with the power of the half pound TNT grenades performance. Jake got to the head of the assault group and entered the smoking stairwell.

Sweetley was down to less than a dozen effectives. He had been moving from position to position, encouraging his men and directing their fire. He had just directed one of the machine gunners, at the north end of the building to shift his fire to the city hall building; when a violent explosion went off somewhere behind him, on the second floor. Sweetley knew at that point his goose was cooked! He realized that the townspeople were in the building and that surviving this fight was very unlikely. But, he resolved to sell his precious hide for a very high price, before it was over with...

Nathan Pye and his group had rejoined the fight at the perimeter. Nathan's group reinforced the eastern perimeter, near the fieldstone wall, where he had first met Jake. Nathan and one of his cousins, who had been a soldier, had the two AT-4 rocket launchers and were about to use them against the Scout Stryker, sitting in the middle of Main street. The Stryker was sitting there idling and every few minutes, the turret would swing a quarter of a turn and fire two or three rounds. The fire seemed to be un-aimed, as it was passing over the perimeter and impacting further into the town. Which led Nathan to believe that Jake's plan to blind it with the snipers had worked.

Nathan's cousin placed the launcher on his shoulder and said, "Watch this Nate!" The cousin then looked behind him and said, "Backblast area clear!" He then sighted the AT-4, above the third wheel from the front of the vehicle and pressed the trigger. The rocket sped from the launcher with a cracking whoosh and

impacted on the hull of the Stryker, 30 yards away. The 84 millimeter shaped charge went off, penetrating the hull and delivered a jet of molten copper and steel into the crew compartment of the vehicle. The wounded driver and the commander were killed instantly, by the burning and spalling metal. The force of the overpressure blew the commanders hatch open and white smoke started billowing from the hatch.

The gunner, now occupying the driver's compartment, lived long enough to open his hatch, before expiring from the poisonous, burning metal. The few remaining rounds of 25mm ammo started cooking off, and the remaining machinegun ammo started to crackle like popcorn. Within a few seconds, bright flames were boiling out of the hatches and the vehicle was being rapidly consumed by the brightly burning fire.

Nathan Pye grinned at his cousin and sighted his own AT-4, near the middle of the second floor of the clinic and pressed the trigger. The rocket sped across the street and impacted on the concrete face of the building, below one of the windows. The shaped charge detonated with a bang and molten copper and shattered concrete, spalled into the second floor of the clinic. Two of Sweetley's men were killed instantly and three more were wounded and burned badly. The two rooms affected by the explosion started to burn, as the survivors fled into the hallway.

Sweetley picked himself up from the hallway floor, where he had been felled by the concussion of the rocket detonating on the outer wall. As men from the eastern rooms stumbled into the hallway, Sweetley shook off the concussion and started rallying his men, to defend the stairwells. For Sweetley knew with certainty, they were about to be assaulted. He had just started sorting things out when two smoking objects flew into the hallway, from the southern stairwell. Sweetley screamed, "Grenade!"

Sweetley immediately dove into one of the western rooms to his left, just as the two improvised grenades exploded less than a second apart. There were five men in the second floor hallway. Only one of them survived the exploding grenades. He wouldn't live much longer...

Jake led his eight remaining men into the stairwell, stopping the file as they reached the switchback. Jake could hear that the townspeople, on the perimeter were starting to cease fire on the second floor of the clinic, as the plan called for. As the assault force climbed the first flight of stairs, all firing from outside the clinic ceased.

The stairwell was full of smoke and the smell of high explosives. Jake and Harlan eased around the switchback and discovered that the stairwell door had been blown into the second floor hallway. Jake held an improvised grenade in each hand, the big G-3 slung across his back. He nodded at Harlan, who lit them simultaneously, with the butane lighter. Jake bounded up the last flight of stairs, counting under his breath, cooking off the grenades for four seconds. As he reached the door, Jake flung the first grenade as far as he could into the hallway. The second sputtering grenade, he tossed underhanded a short distance into the hallway. Jake turned and bounded back down the stairs to the switchback. As his left foot hit the landing, the grenades went off on the floor above him, with two thunderous cracks, less than a second apart. The

concussion hit Jake and he lost his balance and started to fall.

Jake hit the landing wall, rebounded and fell down the switchback. Harlan and another man caught him and eased him into a sitting position on the stairs. Jake sat there shaking his head, trying to regain his addled wits as the assault force rapidly filed up the stairs past him. The assault force, led by Harlan Grimes entered the second floor of the clinic and started clearing the nearest rooms. Jake shook off the concussion of the grenades. Got up and pulled the G-3 to his front on the sling. He shook his head one more time and headed up after his men, to finish this fight, once and for all!

Sweetley was amazed that he was still alive! As he pulled himself from under a pile of two by four framing and ceiling tiles, he shook his head to clear it and got to his feet. Sweetley looked around the smoky room and noticed that the SAW gunner (the only man he had in this room), was lying behind his gun, either dead or seriously wounded. Sweetley stumbled over to the man and fell to his knees beside him. As he pulled the man back from the gun, the soldier's face left a blood smear on the floor. Sweetley also noticed a bullet hole on the front of the helmet.

Sweetley let go of the man's body and pulled the squad automatic weapon away from the loophole and picked it up. He checked the action and from the heft of the weapon, figured that the 200 round plastic ammo box was nearly full. Just as he stood up, firing and shouting started coming from the hallway and the rooms to his south. Sweetley dropped back to his belly as bullets started cutting through the drywall and framing around him. The shell of the clinic was concrete, along with the floors, but the interior rooms were nothing more than wood framing, covered with drywall. Sweetley crawled to the door leading into the hallway, in order to break up the assault on this floor and maybe buy some time. At this point, there wasn't anything else he could do...

Harlan Grimes followed by three other men were working north down the hallway, as other men behind them started clearing the second floor rooms. Harlan didn't realize he was making a serious tactical error, by passing the fatal funnels of un-cleared rooms but, all he could think of was getting to the end of the building, where he could hear a machinegun firing in controlled bursts.

As Harlan got about halfway down the hallway, Sweetley eased the SAW out around the doorjamb and let off a long burst down the hallway, toward the charging men. Harlan Grimes was struck in the lower legs and went down with a clatter, falling into the next burst from the SAW. Harlan was struck multiple times through the head and torso, dying instantly. The three men behind Harlan also went down in the hallway, two of them dying with Harlan, with the third seriously wounded in the legs and abdomen.

Sweetley grinned evilly and shifted his fire further down the hallway and raked the hallway and open stairwell door. The five men left in the clearing force went to ground in the first three rooms in the hallway and tried to return fire through the drywall. But they were firing high and didn't come near Sweetley. Besides, they had other problems to deal with. The few survivors of Sweetleys attacking force were

surrendering to them. So, they were trying to watch them and fight Sweetley at the same time.

Sweetley took a moment to call for the machine gunner, in the last room to help cover the hallway, but got no answer. All Sweetley could figure was that he was dead too. It looked like he was on his own as he snugged behind the SAW and fired another controlled burst down the hallway. Just as he started to trigger another burst, heavy semi-automatic fire started tearing up the door frame and the walls around him. Something hit his helmet hard, as Sweetley rapidly pulled back into the room, dragging the SAW with him. Whoever was shooting at him, had him nailed! He had no choice but to move...

Jake Craft was three steps from the second floor stairwell landing, when Sweetley's SAW opened up on the hallway and rounds started tearing into the stairwell door. Jake went prone on the steps, just below the level of the second floor, as two more bursts tore into the hallway and the stairwell. Jake eased up to the landing and crawled on his belly to the doorway opening. As he started to peek out into the hallway, he heard what he thought might be Sweetley's voice, shouting for help.

Jake took a quick peek out into the hallway and saw the tangle of bodies halfway down the hall. He eased up into a kneeling position and could see the smoking barrel and bipod of a SAW sticking out into the hallway, a few feet beyond the tangle of bodies. He also saw the top of a helmet sticking out of the door, at floor level. Jake brought the G-3 up to his shoulder, got a good sight picture on the helmet and emptied a twenty round magazine as fast as he could, at the helmet. His rounds impacted at the base of the door, causing a cloud of wood splinters and drywall dust to explode into the hallway. As Jake pulled back into the stairwell, to change magazines, the helmet and the SAW disappeared into the room.

Jake slammed a fresh magazine into his rifle and quick peeked into the hallway again. All firing had ceased both inside and outside of the building, and the silence was deafening! Jake heard someone enter the stairwell below him and turned to see armed men, led by Jess Markham, coming up the stairs. Jake held up his hand and mouthed the word "wait," to Jess, and Jess halted his group on the stairs.

Jake said in a loud clear voice, "Hey you! At the end of the hallway!! You have one opportunity to come out of this alive. Give up now, or you won't get another chance!!!" Jake heard an ironic chuckle and then a voice asked, "Is that you Sergeant Craft?" Jake gave a tight grin and said, "Yeah Sweetley, the one and only! Are you ready to give up?" Sweetley gave another chuckle and said, "No Jake, you gotta come and get me. I can't see it any other way!" Jake eased up next to the doorjamb and said, "It won't be long now Sweetley, I'm coming for you." With that Jake cleared the doorway and dove into the first room on his right, landing flat on his belly and low crawled deeper into the room. As he started crawling, automatic fire from Sweetley's SAW, started chewing up the hallway and the stairwell door once again. But Jake was already in the first room and he was banking on Sweetley still believing him to be in the stairwell.

Jake found two of his men, holding three of Sweetley's men at gunpoint. They were all lying prone among at least five more of Sweetley's men, all apparently dead. Jake looked around the room and found that his

hunch had been correct. These rooms were just framed in and drywalled. Jake's plan was to flank Sweetley by going through the walls, but he needed a diversion and covering fire.

Jake pulled his radio from his LBE and keyed the mike, "Jess, do you copy me Jess?" Jess Markham came up on the net and said, "I've got you Lima Charlie Jake, go ahead." "Jake grinned and said, "Jess, I need you to put as much fire as you can down that hallway, for as long as you can, until you hear from me. Your right limit line will be the hallway wall, you got it?" Jess keyed the mike and said, "Wilco, standby, out."

Jake lifted the rifle sling over his head and tossed the G-3 toward one of his men. The guy asked, "What are you doing!?" Jake smiled as he stripped off his LBE and tossed that at the man also. He stuck the police radio in a hip pocket of his jeans, drew the Glock and did a press check, to ensure a round was chambered. He said, by way of response, "What I'm gonna do is pistol work, that rifle will only get in my way. With that statement he crawled over to the north wall of the room and waited....

He didn't have long to wait, as Jess Markham and two of his men started firing down the hallway. As one emptied a magazine, another of the force took his place and fired down the hallway, maintaining a steady rate of fire. At that point, Jake stood, estimated a distance of sixteen inches, from the window side of the wall and threw his shoulder into the drywall, breaking through the wall. Jake punched and ripped his way into the next room, and came through that wall, and collided with an examination table. He quickly climbed over it and went at the opposite wall. There were only dead men in the room, which he noticed as he started crashing through the second wall. He figured he'd better be more careful and visually clear the next couple of rooms before entering. He was close to ending this and he needed to be alive to go after Gaby...

Sweetley had run out of ammo for the SAW and he pulled further back into the room after Jess's element started firing down the hallway. Sweetley drew his Kimber Warrior, did a press check and leaned back against the concrete wall below the western windows. He removed his Kevlar helmet and noticed that the top of the helmet had been shattered by a bullet. It had missed the top of his head by less than 2 inches! Sweetley threw the helmet into the middle of the room and resumed his wait to kill, or be killed...

Jake was in the room next to Sweetley's. He knew this because he had heard Sweetley's last two bursts from the SAW. This was the tricky part. Jake had learned how much force it took to break completely through the drywall into the previous rooms. What he had to do now, was break through this last wall into the room and take Sweetley out, before Sweetley took him out. There was also the unknown factor of whether or not anyone was in the room to back Sweetley's play. Oh well, he would just have to see what he would see. With that, Jake gripped the Glock in his right hand and ran at the wall. "Here goes nuthin!"

Sweetley was sitting against the concrete wall wondering how Craft was going to come at him when the drywall to his left exploded outward and a body landed on top of him. As he started fighting for his life, Sweetley finally had his answer...

As Jake crashed through the wall, he literally tripped over Sweetley and fell on top of him. Somewhere in the process, Jake lost the Glock and had no other choice but to grapple with Sweetley. As Sweetley used Jake's momentum to throw him over on to his back, Jake saw the .45 in Sweetley's hand. Jake grabbed the .45 with his left hand and smashed Sweetley in the face with his right. As Sweetley recoiled from the blow, Jake continued the roll and got Sweetley on to his back. Sweetley retaliated by reflexively firing the .45. The round missed Jake but, in recoiling, the front sight ripped Jake's palm open, causing him to lose his grip on the gun. Sweetley tried to punch Jake in the throat. He missed but the punch to the upper chest, did knock Jake off of him.

Sweetley scuttled back toward the outer wall and raised the .45 to kill Craft, as Craft gained his feet and drew his revolver. Sweetley attempted to fire the .45, but it didn't go off! Sweetley glanced at the weapon and realized it had stove piped when he had fired it. In desperation, Sweetley threw the .45, as hard as he could at Craft and it struck him in the forehead. Craft dropped the revolver and went down in a heap. Sweetley charged Craft and as Craft was getting to his knees kicked him hard in the ribs. Craft grunted and rolled away from Sweetley and got to his feet. He drew a large knife from behind his back and again charged Sweetley.

As he crashed into Sweetley, Jake attempted to gut him with the BK-7, but encountered the ceramic rifle plates of his Interceptor molle vest. Sweetley was pummeling him hard and Jake was getting the worst of it. Jake slashed low with the knife, raking it across Sweetley's thighs as he disengaged and pulled back to his feet. Sweetley also got to his feet panting hard. As Jake again lunged toward him with the big knife . Sweetley backed against the window and drew his bayonet from the sheath on his vest, and took up a knife fighter's stance.

Sweetley gave Jake an ironic smile and said, "I guess we get to find out if that **** they taught us in Infantry school really works, huh? Jake spat out a mouthful of blood and shaking the blood from his left hand said, "Yeah, I guess we will. Lets get to it!" With that statement Jake lunged toward Sweetley. Sweetley gave a wild swipe with the bayonet and Jake stepped back. The two men started circling each other looking for an opening to exploit. Sweetley was amazed at Craft's speed and was starting to fear that he would die in this fight.

Sweetley knew he was in trouble. He was larger and probably stronger than Jake, but he was also older and slower. His slashed thighs were also freely bleeding and he knew that was sapping his strength. He knew what Craft's reflexes were like and knew he only had one real chance to win this. He had to overwhelm Craft, by brute force and he had to do it quickly, while he still had the strength.

With that, he bellowed and charged Craft, swinging the bayonet wildly. Curiously Craft didn't seem to move out of the way and Sweetley smiled as he continued his charge. As he reached Craft and tried to grapple with him, Craft suddenly disappeared and Randall Sweetley experienced what felt like fire rip

across his throat. He continued past Craft, but he felt a sudden nausea and weakness settle over him and he crashed to his knees. Randall Sweetley was dying and knew it, but as he blacked out, the greatest disappointment, was in not knowing what had happened to cause his death. Randall Sweetley crashed to his face on the dust covered floor and died confused.

As Sweetley charged Jake like a maddened bull, Jake stepped under the powerful swing of the bayonet, sidestepped to his left and speared the clip point of the BK-7 into Sweetley's neck, just below the jaw line. The big knife sunk 3 inches into Sweetley's neck, ripping veins, arteries and the windpipe. As Sweetley continued his lunge, Jake ripped the big knife from his neck. Arterial blood spewed from the ripped neck and Sweetley went to his knees and collapsed on to his face. Jake spat out a gob of blood and said, "I guess that **** they taught us really works, huh Sweetley?"

A battered Jake Craft retrieved his police radio from the floor and told Jess to cease fire. The battle of Johnsville was apparently over and it looked like they had won. As Jake waited for Jess to arrive, he policed up his weapons. In the process, he picked up Sweetley's Kimber Warrior, cleared the stove pipe and admired it for the obviously fine weapon it was. He engaged the safety and shoved it into the belt, behind his back. He then went to Randall Sweetley's body and stripped the drop leg holster from his belt and took the 4 spare magazines from his Molle vest. Jake figured he might be able to put this custom 1911A1 to some good work, sometime real soon. He had a woman to rescue and several people to kill, that needed killing!!!!!!!!

Chapter 9, Combat Attrition

Two miles northwest of Crossroads, 4:06pm

Jake Craft shouldered the M72A2 LAW (66mm, light antitank weapon), and hoped that the ancient, disposable rocket launcher would work. Jake had never seen one before a few days ago and the only thing he knew about them, was from what his father had said many years ago. Jake's dad told him they were great, when they worked! In other words, the weapon's reliability in Viet Nam, had been less than stellar.

One piece of good news was that the LAW's they were using were the post Viet Nam, improved version. And those they had test fired had all worked as advertised. The LAW's along with their other newly acquired weaponry, were a product of The Pye clan's criminal connections. Nathan Pye and his clan had impressed Jake over the last three weeks, since the battle of Johnsville. The Pye's were a close knit, hard bunch of borderers, who had long memories and lived by the blood feud.

Big Bob Jarrett was now firmly in their sights, and would be held to pay for the clan's beloved patriarch, Bertram Pye, killed in the first few minutes of the battle of Johnsville. The considerable resources of the clan had been put toward prosecuting the war against Jarrett, in an effort to get the women hostages back and make Jarrett pay with his life!

Part of those substantial resources, were spent on weaponry and ammunition. Nathan had contacts with a criminal organization outside of Lexington, Kentucky he had done business with before. This group controlled the large former Army Depot located near there. Nathan Pye had spent a substantial amount of his clan's fortune, on the acquisition of the LAW's, M-60 machineguns, M16A1 rifles, grenades, claymore mines, military grade explosives, field gear and a staggering amount of ammunition. They had even acquired four M-2 .50 caliber machineguns and four 60mm mortars.

Granted, a lot of the weaponry was near obsolete by modern military standards, but it was all brand new and had been meticulously maintained at the depot. The M16A1's even came with the comic book like operators manuals, from the Viet Nam era.

Jake Craft and thirty men, a mixture of the Pye clan and volunteers from in and around Johnsville, comprised the ambush force. Jake and these men were in an "L" shaped ambush position on a gradual left hand curve of the state route, a couple of miles northwest of the Crossroads. They were about to ambush a convoy being escorted by two up-armored Humvees, from Jarrett's security force.

In the three weeks since the battle of Johnsville, the Crossroads had experienced a serious decline in business. When the word got out over the jungle telegraph, that Jarrett had attacked Johnsville, business fell off by a third. When Nathan Pye and Jake Craft started interdicting the roads in and out of the big former

truck stop, business fell to a trickle. This was accomplished by random road blocks and getting the word out. Also, Jarrett did not have the combat resources to do anything about it. The attack on Johnsville had cost him half of his military force, a lot of his heavy weaponry, and most of his armored vehicles. Not to mention the best soldier and tactician he had, Randall Sweetley.

The interdiction operation had been simple; Jake and Nathan's men would set up random roadblocks, stop vehicles going to and from the Crossroads and explain things to the occupants. The standard spiel was that they were at war with Jarrett and being in or around Crossroads was going to start becoming unhealthy. It seemed that a lot of folks listened and the word was spread, causing a serious decline in Jarrett's business. But obviously, not everybody listened. Nor did Jake expect them too. The Crossroads was the trade hub for the area and people had to trade to eat!

In order to keep the trickle of commerce going, Jarrett had been forced to provide escorts to and from the Crossroads, for people that wanted to trade. He had also been forced to start delivering ethanol, bio-diesel and other commodities to bulk customers, hence the convoys.

The convoys would meet up at a pre-appointed location and run the gauntlet to and from Crossroads. Jarrett's people had done a fairly good job of running the convoys but they should have known better. None of the convoys had been attacked, other than intermittent sniper fire. But that was about to change.

Jake, Nathan and a machinegun team were on the short leg of the "L," and the lead Humvee was rapidly approaching their position. The rest of the ambush party was in well concealed positions, for 80 meters south on the west side of the road. It was Jake's job to initiate the ambush, by taking out the lead Humvee, when he determined that the entire twelve vehicle convoy was in the kill zone. Jake took off the safety, made sure he was clear to the rear and lined up the rudimentary sights, on the grill of the approaching Humvee. Nathan Pye had his own LAW ready to fire, but wouldn't use it unless Jake missed.

As the Humvee closed to within 30 yards, Jake depressed the firing button. The LAW went off with a whoosh and the rocket almost immediately impacted on the front grill of the Humvee. The shaped charge in the rocket's warhead ignited with a booming crack and the front end of the up-armored Humvee came apart. The Humvee careened right, off into the ditch where it nosed in with a thump.

The vehicle immediately behind the lead Humvee, tried to accelerate past the wreck, but the M-60 machinegun, next to Nate, started firing controlled bursts into the stake bed truck's cab and engine compartment, which caused the 4 ton truck to careen across the oncoming lane and crash into the opposite ditch.

As Jake's LAW went off and the machineguns started to chatter, the remaining men of the ambush party, started firing up the vehicles and dismounting personnel in the kill zone. It was absolute chaos, as the drivers made the cardinal mistake in a vehicle ambush. They stopped as opposed to trying to accelerate out

of the kill zone. The combination of over 20 rifles and three machineguns were wreaking havoc in the kill zone.

The crew of the trail Humvee did try to break the ambush, by accelerating into the oncoming lane and passing the stalled and confused convoy. It was really the only thing they could do. As Jake started engaging the rapidly approaching Humvee with his M16A1, he had to admire their quick thinking. But, it would do them no good.

As the Humvee accelerated down the length of the convoy, the machine gunner in the cupola was wildly raking the hillside to his left, in a desperate effort to break up the ambush. The armored front shield of his cupola did not protect him as he was hit by numerous rifle and machinegun rounds. The ring mounted M240B swung wildly as his mortally wounded body fell down into the passenger compartment.

The Humvee commander, a 22 year old corporal from New York City, tried to climb into the back seat to man the machinegun, but at that point 66 millimeter rockets, from three laws started streaking around the Humvee. The first rocket went high, and streaked in front of the windshield, causing the driver to reflexively jerk the wheel to the left, causing the vehicle to go beyond its center of gravity. The Humvee tipped and landed on its right side in the roadway, and slid screeching into the off side ditch as another LAW rocket screamed past and impacted into the back of a cargo truck. The stake bed truck was carrying 55 gallon barrels of ethanol and bio-diesel. The shaped charge ignited several barrels and the fuel truck started to burn intensely. Several moments later, another barrel cooked off in the intense heat of the fire and exploded, launching itself 15 feet into the air. The third LAW ricocheted off of the roadway and corkscrewed over the trucks in the kill zone. It landed in the field beyond the trucks without exploding.

Jake emptied another 30 round magazine into the kill zone and as he reloaded observed the carnage. Jake figured that was about enough, if they wanted to salvage anything from the convoy. He picked up the red star cluster flare lying beside him and smacked the palm of his right hand on the cap. The flare flew out above the kill zone with a whoosh and the flare ignited into falling red stars 150 feet above the roadway. This was the signal to his men, to cease firing and observe their assigned sector of the kill zone.

Jake waited for another 30 seconds, observing the kill zone and then nodded at Nathan. Nathan Pye put a whistle to his lips and blew three sharp blasts. This was the signal for the ambush party to assault through the kill zone and consolidate on the far side of the trucks. The only members of the ambush party to stay in place were the machinegun teams and the rear, and flank security elements.

Jake and Nathan stood up and Nathan said, "Well pard, it went just like you said it would." Jake gave an ironic grin and said, "Yeah, well don't get too used to it. No matter how much you plan and train, these things have a tendency to take twists and turns you can't anticipate. Besides, it ain't over yet." Jake motioned with a jerk of his head and stepped out onto the blacktopped roadway.

The ambush party moved cautiously down to the road and crossed to the vehicles on line. Four men dropped out and cautiously approached the Humvee lying on its side in the western ditch. Several more men cautiously approached the lead Humvee, smoking in the eastern ditch. The bulk of the men rapidly cleared the trucks and came to the eastern ditch, where survivors from the convoy were cowering. Some of the men fell out to take them prisoner while the rest consolidated on the far side of the ditch and set up far side security on the field.

Jake visually surveyed the kill zone and then shouted, "Search and POW teams, out!" The men assigned these duties, there were six of them, fell back from the far side security position and started methodically searching the vehicles for other survivors. They had also been instructed to see if any of the vehicles were still operable.

As the search and POW team went to work, led by Nathan Pye, Jake surveyed the nine frightened survivors in the ditch, being guarded by two of the ambush party. There were seven men and two women cowering in the ditch, at least half of them had minor wounds. One of the women was sobbing and rocking back and forth, holding a small, lifeless boy in her arms. The other woman was trying to comfort her, to no avail. A sharp pang of regret came over Jake, but he couldn't let himself think about this child's death now. This was war! A war he didn't start!! But, a war he meant to finish. A lot of innocent's had already been killed in this conflict. He would mourn them when it was over.

Jake thought if he had done this ambush in the text book manner, none of them would be alive now. If Jake had done this by the book, the ditch would have been laced with det chord and claymore mines, to be detonated before the ambush party assaulted through the kill zone. Jake didn't set it up that way, because he wanted to insure there were some survivors. Jake had plans for the survivors.

A few minutes later Nathan Pye walked up to Jake and said, "It's clear Jake." Jake looked past Nathan and saw the POW and search team prodding four men in ACU's and one man in civilian clothes toward the ditch, where the other prisoners were cowering. The man in civilian clothes was limping and one of the men in ACU's was semi-conscious and being supported by two others. The last man in ACU's, the corporal from New York, was bleeding from his forehead and his left arm was hanging uselessly at his side. The arm was either broken or the shoulder was dislocated, Jake couldn't tell.

Jake pulled the FRS radio from his LBE and said, "Mark, this is Jake, come in." A few seconds later squelch broke and a tinny voice came over the radio and said, "Go ahead Jake." Jake keyed his radio and said, "Bring up the trucks, the kill zone is secure." Mark Webb was a quarter mile away on a side road, with 15 assorted vehicles and 22 more men. Webb's job was to bring up the trucks, load up anything useful from the convoy and provide transport back to their forward base.

Nathan had stepped away toward the ditch and was supervising an additional search of the prisoners. He had just instructed the guys in ACU's to strip off their body armor, which they were complying with, as Jake

came up behind him. Jake surveyed the frightened group in the ditch and said, "Listen up!" The eyes of all the prisoners in the ditch were now on him.

It appeared Jake had their undivided attention, with the exception of the distraught woman and the semi-conscious guy, so he continued. "First of all, my name is Jake Craft and you are not going to be killed, so you can relax. Second of all, if you work for Jarrett, or do business with him, consider yourself our enemy." Jake motioned to one of his men who stepped up with a digital camera in his hands. "This is Chris, he's going to take your picture. If we encounter you again, on one of these convoys or in any capacity involving Crossroads or Jarrett, you will be summarily shot on sight!"

Jake took a moment to scan the people in the ditch and then continued, "Jarrett is a liar, murderer, kidnapper and a thief! He is holding five women hostage from Johnsville and we want them back, unharmed! If Jarrett harms these women, or mysteriously loses them, we intend to raze Crossroads to the ground. You can tell him if he releases them, we will cease prosecuting this war against him and go away. It is up to him and one more thing." Jake said with a fierce grin, "Tell him I said to release the women unharmed, or I'm coming for him, personally." With that last statement, Jake turned and started to walk between the vehicles, back to the roadway.

This was when the distraught woman holding her dead child stood up and shouted, "Murderer! Child killer!! You are worse than Jarrett ever was. You killed my baby!!!!" With these last words the woman collapsed to her knees and started rocking back and forth, and sobbing uncontrollably once again. The only reaction Nathan Pye saw from Jake was a slight hesitation and a stiffening of his posture, as Jake walked away. Nathan shook his head, looked down at his boots and followed Jake out on to the roadway.

As Nathan followed Jake and as Chris started taking pictures of the prisoners, Nathan said, "Don't let it get you down Jake, that boy's death couldn't be helped." Jake just solemnly nodded his head and said, "You're right Nathan, but I'm getting tired of the killing and it looks like there ain't no end in sight." Nathan shook his head, spat in the road and said, "I ain't got no easy answers for you pard. At this point its outta our hands. We either kill them, or they eventually kill us." Jake gave an ironic chuckle, looked at Nathan and said, "Yeah, in for a penny, in for a pound. It still doesn't get any easier when you've had to kill a child."

Nathan prudently decided to change the subject by asking, "Hey, you mean to tell me, you plan on letting Jarrett live, if he gives the women back!?" Jake turned to Nathan, gave his fierce grin again and said, "No Nathan, I lied. Neither Jarrett nor that scumbag Hawk are getting out of this alive. Don't you worry, we're still gonna settle their hash! Besides, I don't believe he'll give the women back, no matter what we do." Nathan shook his head and chuckled saying, "Just checkin pard. It's hard to tell what's goin through that head of yours."

Just then, they both heard vehicles in the distance, coming south down the state route. Jake's radio broke squelch and Mark Webb's voice said, "Jake, we're coming in" Jake keyed his radio and responded with,

“Roger that Mark, we’re waiting on you. Break. North flank security element, our transport is coming in, hold your fire.” The security element leader came back on the radio and said, “Roger that Jake, I have a visual on them now.”

Several moments later Webb’s convoy arrived and stopped on the curve of the road, just beyond the ambush kill zone. Mark Webb climbed down from the top hatch of the lead vehicle, a bullet scarred Humvee salvaged from the battle of Johnsville and walked toward Jake and Nathan. Before he got to them, he turned back to his dismounting men and shouted, “Some of you guys grab a couple of fire extinguishers and see if you can put that fire out, we need that fuel!” Two men ran back to the trucks to comply as Mark continued toward Jake and Nathan.

As Webb got to them he asked, “You figure Jarrett will send out the cavalry? You know they heard all the fireworks back at Crossroads.” Jake shook his head and said, “I doubt it, besides, we haven’t heard any mortar rounds going off or any machinegun fire yet. Marty’s people are set up in a good position and have the road leading out zeroed in.”

Jake was referring to Marty Pye, Nathan’s cousin and the 15 man force set up on the state route coming out of Crossroads. Marty’s reinforced squad had two 60 mm mortars, two machineguns and a good supply of LAW’s, to deter any reaction force coming in response to the ambush. Besides, Jarrett didn’t really have the men or resources to send out. The battle of Johnsville had seriously diminished Jarrett’s ability to wage war, let alone defend the Crossroads.

Jake turned to Mark Webb and said, “Ok Mark, let’s get this show on the road and get outta here.” Webb gave a curt nod and said, “Right Jake.” And went to where his men were surveying the contents of the trucks to personally supervise the looting of the convoy.

As Mark walked away, Jake tried to raise Marty Pye on the radio. He figured it was a long shot being more than two miles away, but Marty surprisingly came up on the net. “Go ahead Jake.” Jake keyed the mike and asked, “Any response from Jarrett, over?” Marty came back and said, “Negative Jake, there was some scurrying around over there when they heard the firing, but no reaction force as of yet, over.” Jake thought about it for a minute re-keyed the mike and said “Marty, can you put about a half a dozen air delivered packages (60mm HE mortar rounds), inside the compound? Over.”

Marty came back after a few seconds and said, “Sure Jake, can do, over!” Jake said, “Alright Marty, I’m not looking for casualties. I’m looking for psychological effect, over.” Marty came back and said, “Wilco Jake, it’ll take a few to adjust. Standby, out.”

Jake turned to Nathan and said, “Let’s get those people on their way, so they can give Jarrett a firsthand account of what we’ve done and the fact that it was us who did it. Then we can RTB (return to base) and get some rest. I think we all need it...”

Bob Jarrett's legendary temper was at full tilt as he paced behind his desk, in his second floor office at the Crossroads truck stop. Jarrett, along with everyone else at the Crossroads, had heard the firing and explosions off to the north, twenty minutes after his latest convoy had departed. Jarrett's instinctive response was to send a force out to try and rescue the convoy but, his new military commander talked him out of it. His new military commander was his nephew, Corey Jarrett.

Corey, along with the Hawk, Reggie and Senator James Carrington were in Jarrett's office trying to figure out what to do about this latest development. Jarrett for one knew he was in a tenuous position at best. Sweetley was reportedly dead and the entire force, with the exception of the Hawk and a few of his men were either dead or captured. This was not how it was supposed to have gone! Jarrett truly regretted forcing Sweetley into making that ill fated attack on Johnsville. Jarrett's entire operation was now in jeopardy because of it.

Jarrett had been receiving reports that he not only had to contend with Jake Craft and the people of Johnsville. He had been informed that the entire Pye clan was now out for his blood. Jarrett had been doing business with the Pye's for years and knew that they were not a bunch to be crossed. He was almost as afraid of their leader, Nathan Pye, as he was of that lunatic Jake Craft. Bob Jarrett had never been afraid of much, but he was very afraid now.

As Jarrett plopped down resignedly in his leather chair, he heard and felt three muffled, concussive bangs off to the northeast, followed almost immediately by three more. He asked no one in particular, "What was that?" The only one to say anything was Corey, who said, "****!" and immediately dove for the floor. Bob, the Hawk and Carrington were looking at each other in confusion when three loud explosions went off near the southeast gate, followed immediately by three more explosions somewhere behind the truck stop buildings, which were so loud they could hear glass breaking and people screaming. They all three dove to the floor and froze!

Jarrett screamed, "Corey, what the hell was that!?" Corey Jarrett said, "Uncle Bob, they are mortaring us. I'd say sixties, but I'm not sure. Everybody stay down!" Nobody moved for a few minutes, until Corey Jarrett stood up.

Corey moved to a front window and peered out toward the southeast gate. Corey saw quite a bit of smoke and confusion near the gate. He also saw that one of the bunkers flanking the gate was partially collapsed and burning. The adjacent gate bunker's fifty caliber machinegun started firing wildly to the southeast. There was also panic and confusion among people in the market area. The few remaining vendors were starting to pack up and their customers were heading for the nearest way out of the Crossroads. Corey couldn't tell if there were any casualties from the mortar attack, but he figured there would be some from the ensuing panic.

Corey turned to his uncle and the other men lying on the floor and said, "It's probably safe now, you can all get up." As the men came to their feet, Bob Jarrett asked nervously, "How do you know it's safe Corey?" Corey said, "That was H and I fire, the mortar crews are probably tearing down and displacing after firing those rounds." Bob Jarrett looked further confused and asked, "'H and I, what the hell is that!?"

Corey let out a sigh, shook his head and said, "H and I, means harassment and interdiction fire. It's meant to cause fear and keep us on edge. We are also meant to react to it by either counter fire, which we don't have the ready capability of doing. Or they want us to send out a reaction force, so they can ambush it, which we can't afford to do either."

Bob Jarrett slammed his fist down on the oak desk and asked, "Well, what the hell can we do?" Corey Jarrett looked his uncle straight in the eye and said, "You can give those women back as an act of good faith and try to negotiate some kind of peace treaty. I don't see any other way out of this." Before a dumbfounded Bob Jarrett could say anything the Hawk said, "That is not going to happen!" Corey sneered at the Hawk and said, "It was your incompetence that got us in this mess in the first place." The Hawk snarled and reached for his Glock as Reggie grabbed his right arm and said, "Easy boss, this ain't the way." The Hawk relaxed slightly and took his hand from the Glock. Corey Jarrett also took his hand from his holstered pistol and just stared at the Hawk, with venom in his eyes.

At this point, James Carrington said, "Gentlemen, gentlemen, fighting amongst ourselves plays us into our enemies hands. Let's all calm down and work on finding a solution we can all live with. I will tell you, I believe Corey is on the right track."

They all looked at Carrington and surprisingly waited for him to continue. This newfound respect for Carrington was partially due to his recent physical transformation and also because he had predicted a week ago, that Jarrett was in a war he would have great difficulty in winning.

Instead of taking the \$25.00 in silver Jarrett had paid him for the location of the Markham farm and blowing it on drugs and prostitutes. Carrington had used the lion's share of the money to clean himself up, buy some new clothes and take a more active role in the goings on at the Crossroads. He had also utilized his political skill and insight, to get in the good graces of Corey Jarrett. Corey had initially had some rough ground to get over as the new military commander at the Crossroads. Morale had been bad amongst the remaining troops and Corey didn't have a whole lot of experience leading men. The highest rank he had attained in the Army had been corporal and Carrington's counsel had been a big help in negotiating that rough terrain. That was one of the reasons Carrington was now in this high level meeting.

"Gentlemen, I propose that we adjourn this meeting and sort out any casualties and damage to the operation. We also need to show the people that we are doing something proactive in the wake of these setbacks. I suggest we meet back here in a few hours, once things settle down and discuss how to go forward." Carrington surveyed the room and saw thoughtful looks on all of their faces, even the Hawk's. Carrington

thought to himself, “so far, so good.”

Jarrett had to give it to Carrington, he was right, ranting and arguing wasn't doing any good. He said, “Jimmy's right, let's go see what needs to be done and we will meet back here in a couple of hours to see where we go from here.” All of the men present agreed and the meeting broke up. Corey left first with Carrington fast on his heels. Bob, never the fool, realized the new and improved James Carrington bore watching.

As the Hawk and Reggie were about to leave, the Hawk said, “I'm going to go see about my people. I'm also going to squeeze Charlie Jenkins for what he knows. Send word of when you want to meet.” With that statement Hawk and Reggie filed out of the office and down the stairs. Bob just shook his head and lit a cigarette. He wondered how things had gone so wrong. But in reality he knew. He knew that if it hadn't been for Jake Craft none of this would have happened. Bob swore to himself, that he would make Craft pay. He wasn't sure how but he had a good place to start, he had Craft's woman. Bob Jarrett was sure that fact was his ace in the hole. He just needed to figure the best time and place to play it and of course he had to keep the Hawk from hurting or killing her until then...

Gabrielle Langlois-Parker's captivity had not been what she had thought it would be. The women hostages from Johnsville had not been raped or beaten, which had surprised all of them. Gaby's experience was a little different from the other hostages. Rape had been attempted and she was savagely beaten by the Hawk, but no one else had touched her.

The first night in captivity at the Crossroads the Hawk had drunkenly attempted to rape her. But, he had been unable to perform sexually, which only seemed to enrage him and caused him to beat her savagely. He had beaten her so badly; Gaby had been hospitalized in the crossroads infirmary for three days with a concussion and two cracked ribs. When the Jarrett's had gotten word of this, Gaby and the other women had been placed under the guard of Corey Jarrett's men, in a wing of the bordello above the Crazy 8 nightclub. They had been well treated ever since. Gaby had even been allowed to work, under guard, with Dr. Jacobs in the Crossroads infirmary.

Gaby was working in the infirmary when she heard firing and explosions off in the distance. Twenty minutes later the mortar attack occurred and Gaby and the other medical staff were dealing with broken glass and the few casualties of the attack. Only one person had been killed, one of the guards near the bunker and a few people had some minor shrapnel wounds, which they set about treating. As Gaby worked she took comfort in the fact that these attacks were probably about her and the other women. She took this turmoil at the Crossroads as a sign that the man she loved was coming to rescue her. Gaby smiled thoughtfully as she treated the leg wounds of one of Corey Jarrett's men and thought about the man she loved. Gaby prayed Jake was alright, but knowing him, he was in the thick of the fighting, which only made her pray harder....

Jake was once again marveling at the resourcefulness of Nathan Pye. The forward operating base they were using was ideal. It was a former Boy Scout camp, deep in the mountains of far western Kentucky, three miles from the nearest paved road. It was in a small, partially wooded valley and there was only one way in and out. The caretaker, Tom Philpot, was another cousin of the Pye's. Since the collapse, the Pye organization had been using the camp as a storage and distributing area for their marijuana business. Now it was a near perfect forward operating base for their war against Jarrett.

The camp consisted of the caretaker's large cabin, a large dormitory/activities lodge, eight small staff cabins and a fairly large warehouse/storage building. There was also a spring fed reservoir, a swimming pool, a fifty yard rifle range and a baseball diamond. Electricity was a problem, but they had brought several small generators for lighting and battery charging.

Jake shared one of the small staff cabins with Nathan Pye. This was where he was, cleaning his weapons when there was a knock at his door a little before midnight. As Jake picked up his Kimber Warrior and flicked off the safety he thought, "What now?"

It had been an eventful and very busy day and Jake was tired. They had returned to base a little after dark and sorted out the loot from the convoy and debriefed the ambush party. Marty Pye's crew had also returned and they were debriefed on their actions at the Crossroads. The men had been fed and released from their busy day to get some much deserved rest. Nathan was in conference with some of his family and Jake thought to clean his weapons and try to get some sleep. But, the insistent knocking at his door was defeating that best laid plan.

Jake stepped to the knob side of the door, gripped the Kimber in both hands and asked, "Who is it?" Mark Webb answered from the other side of the door, "Jake, it's Mark Webb, open up!" Jake sighed, placed the .45 on safe and shoved it into the rear waistband of his jeans. He said, "Alright Mark." With that, Jake threw the bolt on the door and opened it.

Jake, in no mood for visitors started to ask, "Mark, what the hell...?" Jake's question trailed off when he saw who was with Mark Webb. A disheveled and frightened looking Charlie Jenkins was standing next to Webb, on Jake's front porch. Jake stuck out his right hand and said, "My God Charlie, come in, come in!" Charlie Jenkins walked into the cabin followed by Mark. They sat down around the small table as Jake got them a cup of coffee (looted from the convoy), from the pot on the small pot bellied stove. As Jake sat down at the table he thought to himself, "How the hell did Charlie find us?"

He didn't have long to wait, as Webb said, "Well Jake, Charlie and his family were picked up leaving the Crossroads area by one of our roadblocks. He had a hard time doing it, but he convinced them to bring him here, especially after they heard what he had to say."

Jake's eyebrows rose and he asked Charlie, "Are Katie and the kids ok?" Charlie took a sip of his coffee and said, "Sure Jake, some of your people are feeding them and setting us up a place to sleep for the night. The

only reason I'm here is I felt I had to fill you in on what I knew immediately!" Instead of bombarding Charlie with questions, Jake decided to let him talk, "Go ahead Charlie, I'm all ears."

Charlie put down the cup of coffee and began his story, "Well, as you probably know, the Crossroads has been in turmoil since you guys beat Sweetley at Johnsville. Also, what you guys have been doing since has really shaken them up. Business is down and everybody is nervous. Also, some of the people speaking out against the violence and Jarrett have been killed or have disappeared."

Charlie took another sip of his coffee and continued, "Katie and I were debating whether or not to leave the refugee camp, for the safety of the kids when Harold Beane came by the shack. You know him Jake, the old motel clerk?" Jake nodded and said, "Yeah, I know Harold." Charlie continued, "Well Harold told me that it was no longer safe for me or my family in the refugee camp. He told me that the Hawk put out he was coming for me, to see what I knew about you and your plans. I figured it was time to leave, so we packed up what we could carry and ran. Within an hour or so, we ran into your roadblock and now we're here. I hope it ain't a problem Jake." Jake shook his head and said, "Hell No Charlie, you are more than welcome here."

Charlie nodded and said, "Thanks Jake, but there's more." Jake nodded and said, "Go ahead Charlie." Charlie cleared his throat and continued, "Well, Katie and I have been paying close attention to the happenings at Crossroads, just in case we had the opportunity to help you Jake. We found out about the women hostages and we also found out that one of them was your woman." Jake nodded and made a come on motion with his hand.

Charlie nodded and said, "Here is what I know; when they brought the women back, the Hawk was holding them at his warehouse. On that first night, he attempted to rape your woman, but couldn't perform. I guess he went a little crazy and he beat her so badly, she spent the next three days in the infirmary." Jake had a hard time controlling his emotions, but he kept himself under control and said in a measured voice, "Go ahead Charlie."

Charlie continued, "When Corey Jarrett got word of what had happened, he went to the Hawk's place and removed the other hostages at gunpoint. He also put your woman under guard and she hasn't been bothered since. As a matter of fact, she has been working in the infirmary with Doc Jacobs, since then." Jake had to ask, "How is she Charlie?" Charlie said, "She seems to be ok Jake. The Hawk cracked some of her ribs and banged her up pretty good, but I've seen her a couple of times and she seems to have recovered. She's beautiful Jake and she also seems like she's pretty tough. I've heard that she is doing a good job at the infirmary and in holding the other women hostages together."

Jake had to chuckle, "Yeah Charlie, she is beautiful and she is tough. But I don't think she's tough enough to survive unless I can get her away from Jarrett and the Hawk." Charlie nodded and said, "I think I may be able to help you do that Jake." Jake looked at Charlie intently and asked, "How Charlie?"

Charlie looked back just as intently and said, "The women, to include your girl are being kept in the *****"

house on the second floor of the Crazy 8. Corey keeps one guard on their rooms, 24 hours a day. I know what rooms they are in and I know basically what their daily routine is. I also know if you plan on getting them out, now is probably the time.” Jake asked, “How so, Charlie?”

Jenkins took another sip of his coffee and said, “You hurt them really bad at Johnsville. The Reavers are down to less than 10 men and Jarrett is down to just 22 men. Probably less since you ambushed that convoy today.” Jake nodded as Charlie continued, “Jarrett and the Hawk have been trying to recruit new men. They are offering lots of perks and payment in gold. They only started spreading the word a couple of days ago, but before too long, they will start getting all the recruits they need.”

Jake nodded and said, “Yeah, you’re right Charlie. Times are hard and there are a lot of hungry good old boys, vets and people just desperate enough to do anything to make it. Even make a deal with a devil like Jarrett or the Hawk.”

Jake turned to Mark Webb and said, “Mark, find Nathan and the element leaders, and tell them we are meeting here right now.” Mark said, “Alright Jake,” and got up from the table. As he put his coat on and picked up his rifle he asked, “Anything else I should tell them Jake?” Jake appeared to be deep in thought as he stared into his coffee cup, but he looked up, grinned savagely and said, “Yeah Mark, tell them we are gonna hit the Crossroads in the next 48 hours. That should stir up the anthill!” Mark chuckled and headed for the door.

Jake looked at Charlie Jenkins and said, “Thanks Charlie, you head back to Katie and the kids. Get something to eat and rest for awhile. I’ll probably need to pick your brain in more depth over the next day or so.” Charlie nodded and as he got up from the table said, “Anything I can do Jake, just let me know.”

Jake just nodded absently and stared into his coffee cup as Charlie made his way to the door and left the cabin. The wheels were turning in Jake’s head and he was starting to put the pieces of a plan together for raiding the Crossroads. He figured they had the combat power to do it, but there were other variables that could spell failure. An attack on a fortified compound was a lot more complicated than a linear road ambush and he was concerned about his force’s ability to carry it off.

Most of these men were not soldiers. They also had minimal time training together and Jake had been surprised at how well their first ambush had been pulled off. But, Jake wasn’t fooling himself, a raid was a whole different animal and he feared he might get a lot of these men killed in pursuing it. Along with getting Gaby and the other women killed.

He knew it had to be done though. He had to get Gaby back and Jarrett and the Hawk had to be dealt with, once and for all. Jake saw no other way of doing it. So, former Ranger Staff Sergeant Jake Craft, put his fears aside and started planning what would hopefully be the final battle in their war against the Crossroads...

Jarrett and the Hawk were in Jarrett's office alone. It was a little before midnight and Corey and Carrington had left when the meeting had adjourned. The only real conclusion reached in the meeting, was that they were in serious trouble!

Corey Jarrett had let them know in no uncertain terms that they were in an untenable position. Corey told them the mortar attack had just been a demonstration of their opponent's power over them. He pointed out that the mortar rounds had been placed where they would demonstrate that power and produce the least casualties; the bunker flanking the gate and the empty swimming pool behind the motel. There had only been one man killed and five more injured all of them near the gate. There had also been substantial damage to the bunker and some broken glass in some of the buildings. All in all, they had gotten off lightly and Corey emphasized that fact! Corey had also made it plain, with their current manpower; he would not be able to mount a serious defense of the Crossroads. The Hawk balked at this statement, but Bob Jarrett cut him off before an argument could ensue.

Corey went on to explain that the survivors from the convoy ambush had come in a few hours ago and the news was not good. Both Humvees had been lost and three of his men killed, along with several truck drivers and passengers. The corporal in charge said it was a well executed ambush and they had some serious weaponry, to include machineguns and rocket launchers. Corey closed by saying, "Uncle Bob, what we've been doing ain't working! We need to try something else, before we get wiped out!!"

James Carrington took that opportunity to offer a plan to try to negotiate a settlement with their enemies and Corey backed him up on it. Before things degenerated into an argument, Jarrett adjourned the meeting and told everybody to go get some rest. He would see them tomorrow.

As Corey and Carrington made to leave the room Jarrett asked the Hawk to stay and have a drink with him. The Hawk came back to his chair in front of the desk and plopped down into it, as Bob poured Bourbon into two glasses. Bob handed the Hawk a glass and said, "I think it's time we made some get the hell outta Dodge plans, don't you Hawk?"

As Jarrett sat back down behind his desk, Hawk took a sip of his Bourbon and contemplated what Jarrett had asked. The Hawk had done some foolish and immature things in the past. And to his credit, he recognized it! He had come to the realization that he had to play things a lot smarter in the future, if he planned on living much longer. He knew Jarrett was right. It was probably time to cut their losses and run, and with Jarrett's connections he probably had someplace safe in mind, to hide out in for awhile.

On that note the Hawk asked, "What did you have in mind?" Jarrett smiled and said, "Well, I figured if things go bad we could light out to Greer's place down near Memphis. Greer owes me a few favors and besides, he won't have any problem taking my money for a safe place to hunker down. If it comes down to it, Greer's place would be a good place to get outfitted to take this place back. If it comes down to it, that is"

The Hawk nodded and said, "Ok, I'm with you Bob but I have one requirement." Bob sat back in his chair and asked, "What's that Hawk?" The Hawk sat his Bourbon glass on the table and said, "I want Craft's woman. If we go, she goes with us. Do we have a deal?"

Bob Jarrett chuckled and said, "Sure Hawk, I figured she would be part of the deal and here's the rest." Bob Jarrett reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a large cloth bag and tossed it heavily on to the desk. The Hawk's eyebrows rose and Jarrett said, "That's a lot of gold Hawk. Use it to buy your men's loyalty and buy whatever you think we may need for the trip. And remember, there's a lot more where that came from." The Hawk smiled wickedly and pulled the heavy bag into his lap.

Jarrett said, "One more thing. You need to be very discreet about our plans. If Corey or Carrington get wind of it, or if it gets out generally, there will be a panic. That's something we don't need." The Hawk nodded thoughtfully and said, "I understand Bob, we'll keep it low key."

Jarrett smiled and stood up. He came around his desk and walked Hawk to the door. As he got to the door he said to the Hawk, "I believe we don't have much time, so put things in place as fast as you can." The Hawk smiled and said, "Don't worry Bob, I had already started to make plans before you mentioned it." Jarrett looked momentarily surprised and then he laughed, slapped Hawk on the back and said, "I should have known Hawk, I should have known!"

With that, the Hawk left the office carrying the heavy bag and Jarrett headed for his suite of rooms to get some sleep. He was frightened, but plans for cutting out if needed, seemed to be coming together. He just had to make sure to keep an eye on the Hawk. He by no means trusted Hawk but believed he knew how to handle him. He hoped so at least...

Jake Craft was bone tired. He lowered the binoculars and rubbed his beard stubbled face. Jake and his leader's recon element were on the military crest of a hill, a quarter mile away from the Crossroads. It was a chilly early morning, less than 15 hours since the convoy ambush. This was the same hilltop Jake had used several months ago, after the shootout at the Crazy 8 and he knew the terrain well.

Jake glassed the Crossroads compound one more time and turned to his mortar team leader and asked, "Well Tony, what do you thing?" Tony Gardener, a former Johnsville insurance agent and Marine Corps veteran lowered his binoculars and said, "No problem Jake, we can take down that gate and suppress the flanking bunkers with two of the tubes," (60mm mortars), "the other two tubes can interdict their barracks and any other point targets you need suppressed."

Jake was impressed with Tony Gardener. Tony had been a peacetime marine mortar man and hadn't laid a gun tube in over twenty years. But, he hadn't lost his skill. He had trained his four mortar teams in a remarkably short time and with Tony laying the guns, they were deadly accurate with the 60's, at least on

line of sight targets. Tony had been adamant that in order to effectively employ the mortars, he needed to be able to see the targets. This was due to Tony pretty much having to do everything. He said he needed a lot more time to train up the crews and a fire direction element, before they could exploit the full potential of the mortars' range. But, for what Jake had in mind for this assault, Tony was confident he could deliver from this hilltop.

Jake glassed the truck stop one more time and said, "Good, let's get down off this hill and exfil back to the vehicles, we have a lot of work to do." Jake, Tony, Marty Pye and the security element moved stealthily down the backside of the hill to the shallow, tree lined creek bed. They followed the creek bed for approximately two and a half miles to a heavily wooded area, where their three vehicles were hidden.

They were passed through by the two man vehicle security element without incident. Jake tiredly got into the lead pick-up Marty Pye was driving and the other men disbursed to the other pick-up and Tony Gardener's old Chevy Blazer, bringing up the rear. The second pick-up was what Jake referred to as one of their "technical's," it was a beat up old Ford, with a pintle mounted 50 caliber M-2 machinegun in the middle of the bed area. Jake didn't want to bring it but Nathan had insisted they go with enough firepower to put up a good fight, if needed. It would turn out Nathan had been right in insisting...

Basilio "Tuco" Chavez was desperate. The former resident of Southbend, Indiana, by way of San Salvador, El Salvador had found the life of a "bandito" to be very hard in Kentucky. Tuco had illegally emigrated from El Salvador, to Southbend, to establish a "Set" of the MS-13 gang three years before the collapse. Tuco had violently taken over the local meth trade and established a weigh station on the route to move drugs north.

Business was good and local law enforcement nor the "wanna be" local gangs had been prepared for the violence of "Mara Salvatrucha." Things had been even better after the collapse, until Tuco let things get out of hand. With the collapse of the local and national infrastructure, Tuco had attempted to violently fill the void. But, the killing, kidnapping, slavery and rape had gotten out of hand. So, a local militia of the mostly rural farmers and townspeople formed and took Southbend back from Tuco, and the MS-13.

Tuco had been shocked at how violent and effective those gringo's had been. Tuco had held the view that they were sheep to be fleeced and didn't expect what happened next. The gringo's, with admirable skill and ruthlessness, took down Tuco's set in a little over three days of pitched battles and ruthless summary executions. Tuco and less than thirty of his followers had escaped by the skin of their teeth.

Tuco and his set had then embarked on the life of nomadic bandits. It was not like anything he had imagined. He had imagined that he could rape and pillage to his heart's content, without too much resistance. But he had learned that these rural "Southrons" or "Hillbilly's" as they called themselves were just as ruthless as he was and almost insanely brave. He had had few successes since being run out of Southbend and their situation grew grimmer day by day.

Now, here he was in western Kentucky on his last legs. Tuco had 14 followers left and they were in a bad way. They hadn't eaten anything in three days and they were down to their last few hundred rounds of ammunition for their assorted weaponry, and no fuel for their vehicles. One area of success they had had in the past was in ambushing vehicles.

Tuco would use vehicles to establish roadblocks by staging traffic accidents on two lane, well traveled roads. Tuco had moved into this area to ply his trade because he had heard of this Crossroads place and that there was a lot of movement and trade activity because of it. So, Tuco was playing his remaining cards on being able to make it work for them. Besides, his luck had to change sometime, didn't it?

Ten minutes later, Tuco and his people heard a vehicle coming from the south, on this cold Kentucky morning. Tuco grinned savagely, crossed himself and prayed to a God he never believed in that they would be successful. Tuco finished his prayer, crossed himself again and gripped the gold plated Desert Eagle and said to himself, "Come to papa gringos, come to papa...."

Jake had nodded out in the front seat of the Pick-up as they headed back to the FOB. Marty had decided, against Jake's instructions to let him sleep. That was why Marty unwittingly rounded a right hand bend in the road and ran into Tuco's kill zone. Not only had Marty let Jake sleep, he was driving too fast in an effort to get back to the FOB. Marty was tired too!

As Marty rounded the bend, he instinctively slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the press of vehicles entirely blocking the road. As the rear of Marty's pick-up started skidding to the left, gunfire erupted from behind the vehicle barricade and from the hillsides to their left and right. The windshield and driver's side window shattered and Marty Pye was struck several times in the head, neck and chest. Marty Pye died instantly as the truck went into a 180 degree skid into the right hand ditch, where it crashed with a thump facing away from the vehicles blocking the road.

Being sound asleep had saved Jake Craft's life. When Marty had stood on the brakes, Jake had fallen into the passenger side floor of the truck. Jake's head painfully struck the padded dash on the way into the floor and he came instantly awake, as the truck careened into the ditch. Jake shook off the confusion, spat out a mouthful of blood from his bitten tongue and pulled Marty's lifeless body down toward him as more rounds impacted into the truck. Jake felt for a pulse at Marty's bloody neck, but couldn't find one. Jake pulled his tangled web gear from the floor and put it on, careful to stay as low in the floor as he could. He also retrieved his M16A1 from the driver's side floor where it had fallen. Holding the M16 at the balance point in his left hand, Jake drew the Kimber warrior with his right and waited...

The follow on "Technical", with the mounted 50 caliber machinegun had maintained the proper 50 yard interval on which Jake had insisted. As the driver heard the gunfire erupt beyond the right hand bend, he stopped and waited for the following bronco to catch up. This too was a tactical mistake, but Jake wasn't

there to berate him for it.

The old Blazer stopped ten yards behind the technical and Tony Gardener and his four men dismounted and ran to the technical. As Tony got to the driver's side of the truck, he demanded, "What the hell are you doing!?" The driver looked at him wide eyed and asked incredulously, "Can't you hear that!?" They got hit!!" As the gunfire crackled beyond the bend in the road.

Tony said, "Alright, calm down! What I want you to do is ease your truck around the bend, until your gunner can engage the ambush. While you are doing that, me and these guys are going to work down the hillside over there and see what we can do. You got it?" The driver nodded and said, "Yeah I got it." Tony looked up at the gunner in the back of the technical. The gunner nervously, worked the charging handle of the big machinegun twice and got a determined look on his face as the driver started inching the truck forward. Tony motioned to the other four men and he led them across the ditch and started climbing the hillside to the right. Tony hoped these guys didn't have flank security out. If they did he and his men were probably screwed...

Tony didn't know it, but he didn't need to worry. Tuco had no concept of security, or of basic tactics. Tuco's ambush although deadly, was amateurish at best. He had two riflemen on each hillside flanking the road. Tuco and his other nine shooters were all behind the vehicle barricade which blocked the road. As the truck crashed into the ditch, Tuco stood up and started waving his arms and shouting for his people to cease firing. He then put his fingers in his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. The two men on the hillside to his left stood and started making their way down the hillside to the wrecked truck. The men on the hillside to his right also started moving down to the road. They were standing in the roadway laughing and slapping each other on the back when the 50 caliber rounds tore them to pieces.

As the technical eased around the bend the gunner saw the two gangbangers whooping it up in the roadway. He told the driver "Keep going!" and sighted in on the two bangers and unleashed a ten round burst from the M-2. The two men started coming apart and doing a short death dance in the roadway, as the vehicle barricade came into the gunners view. The gunner smiled tightly and started unleashing controlled bursts into the vehicle barricade...

The ambushers had ceased firing and Jake heard a loud voice in what he thought was Spanish shouting something. He then heard a shrill whistle and heard men chattering in Spanish coming down the hillside, outside the passenger side of the truck. Jake gripped the Kimber and waited. A few seconds later, one of the ugliest faces Jake had ever seen laughingly filled the driver's side window. The face was covered in blue tattooed writing and strange symbols. The strange faced apparition saw Jake, looked somewhat shocked and opened its mouth to shout something. That was when Jake shot the apparition through the mouth with the Kimber...

Tuco was hoping that there was some food in the truck, when things started to go horribly wrong. Spanky,

one of his men ran laughingly down the hillside to the truck. As Spanky got to the truck he stopped said something Tuco couldn't hear, and then his head exploded all over Ramone, coming down the hill behind him. Ramone fell on to his back and slid out of sight into the ditch.

Tuco was trying to determine what had happened when heavy automatic fire came from further down the road and his men dapping in the roadway, started being horribly torn apart. By the time Tuco figured that things were going terribly wrong, heavy machinegun fire started ripping through his vehicle barricade. As heavy bullets started tearing through the vehicles and sparking from the roadway, all Tuco could think to do was to get as low in the roadway as he could and cower in fear. Tuco didn't know it, but that was the absolutely wrong thing to do!

As Jake shot the apparition with the screwy face, he heard a fifty caliber machinegun firing off to his right. Jake eased up into the seat and peered out the driver's side window. What he saw was the very dead apparition, with a curiously deflated head and a blood covered, hysterical, gibbering individual in the ditch, trying to work the action of some kind of pump rifle. Jake raised the Kimber and shot the blood covered individual four times center of mass and watched the man die frothing foamy blood. Jake then tossed his M16 out the window and dove out after it.

Jake landed in the ditch on top of the first guy he shot, holstered the Kimber and retrieved his M16. Jake then crawled to the rear of the truck and popped his head up to look at the vehicle obstacle in the roadway. Jake saw that the vehicles were being torn apart by 50 caliber fire, from what he rightly concluded was the technical. He also faintly heard a curious chorus of screams coming from behind the vehicle barricade.

Jake grinned, pulled an M67 fragmentation grenade from his LBE and flicked off the safety clip with his thumb. Jake then inserted his left index finger into the ring and pulled it out and dropped it. Jake got up on his knees behind the driver's side rear tire, took a quick peak toward the vehicle barricade and released the safety lever on the grenade. The lever or "spoon," as it is commonly known flew off the fuse assembly with a ping and the time fuse ignited with a splutter. Jake cooked off the grenade for three seconds and flung it side armed under the vehicle barricade ten yards away. Within a few seconds, the grenade went off with an explosive crack, lifting a small sub-compact's rear end two feet into the air.

The 50 caliber machinegun ceased firing when the grenade went off and Jake could hear screams and moans coming from behind the vehicle barricade. Jake shouldered the M16, flicked the selector to full automatic and waited. He heard sounds behind him and spun around with his rifle at the ready. He had to grin as he saw Tony Gardener and four men crawling down the ditch toward him. Jake motioned to Tony to come up to his position and had to chuckle at the men's appalled looks as they crawled over the two bloody corpses in the ditch. Jake turned back to the carnage at the vehicle barricade and waited...

Tuco had been lucky. None of the machinegun rounds had struck him and he was only slightly wounded by grenade fragments. The rest of his people were not so fortunate. At least four of them were dead and the rest

were wounded, several of them severely. Tuco's mind worked feverishly to try to figure some way out of this. The only thing he could come up with was to offer to surrender and then try to make a break for it, if the opportunity presented itself. Tuco didn't know what else to do. Tuco got up on his knees behind his vehicle and shouted, "Hey! Hey gringo, we want to give up!!"

Jake Craft smiled savagely as Tony asked, "What now Jake?" Jake looked at Tony and said, "Nothin now, that's what. These clowns are not going to become prisoners. Everybody get a grenade ready and standby. When I tell you too, toss them over the barricade." The five men got their grenades ready and waited for Jake's command.

Tuco tried again, he was trying to play on the usual decency of the Gringo's. "Hey Gringo, we are all hurt real bad, we want to give up por favor?" Tuco got his answer, but it wasn't the one he was hoping for...

Jake instructed his men to pull the pins on the grenades. They all complied and looked at him for direction. Jake nodded and they all stood and lobbed their grenades over the vehicle barricade, and ducked down behind the wrecked truck. They heard screams and one, "Madre De Dios!" From behind the truck as the six grenades, along with a short burst of the 50 caliber machinegun went off in rapid succession.

Tuco saw the grenades landing all around him, shouted "Madre de Dios!" and got up and ran north down the road. As Tuco ran in panic, the 50 caliber machinegun fired four or five rounds over his head and then abruptly stopped. Tuco continued to run in panic; holding his baggy pants up with his left hand and carrying the large golden pistol in his right. Tuco had always thought of himself as a hard, tough man, but his current panic belied this delusion as he continued to run for his life...

Jake stood up and looked back at the technical sitting in the roadway. It had stopped firing because the gunner was obviously struggling with a jam. Jake told off one of the men with him, "Head back to the technical and tell them to hold their fire we're going to clear the barricade." The man said, "Right Jake!" and headed back down the ditch toward the technical. Jake turned to the remaining four men and said, "Follow me down the ditch. If anything moves behind that barricade kill it!" Jake carried his rifle at high point and oriented it on the vehicles as he headed down the ditch.

Jake got to the near edge of the barricade and sliced the pie until he could see behind it. What he saw was the smoking bodies of eight or nine people, none of them moving and probably all dead. That was when he caught movement out of the corner of his right eye and traversed toward the movement. What Jake saw was a comical character, running north up the road about 50 yards away. The character was holding up his baggy pants with his left hand and had a large gold pistol in his right. Jake got a good sight picture low on the running figure and touched off two three to four round bursts. The character staggered, let go of his pants which fell down around his ankles as he toppled into the roadway.

Jake turned to the other men and as he changed magazines said, "Check these bodies and make sure none of

them are alive.” Tony said, “Ok Jake.” And they set about checking the bodies as Jake continued toward the man down in the roadway. Jake approached the man cautiously and noticed he was still alive. The character with his pants around his ankles was trying to pull himself along the road using only his hands. As Jake approached the man, he noticed two things; the man had dropped the golden pistol, which Jake picked up and threw into the ditch, and that the man had been hit several times in the buttocks and lower back, which explained the now useless legs.

As Jake stepped up to the sobbing gasping man he said, “Hey *****, the party’s over.” The man lowered his head to the pavement and in between sobs said, “Por favor signor, I surrender, I need help, it hurts so bad! Please help me!!”

Jake put his right foot under the man’s left shoulder and rolled him screaming on to his back. The man gasped and cursed Jake in Spanish, “Chinga Su Madre, Maricone!” Jake chuckled and said, “Looks like you’ll never screw anybody’s mother again there slick. Too bad for you huh?”

Tuco, not able to feel anything below the waist sobbed and again started begging for help, “Please signor, help me, I am dying!” Jake chuckled again and said, “No slick, I’d say that you may just live for another day or two, if the dogs don’t get you first.” Jake then reached down, grabbed Tuco’s coat collar and dragged him into the nearside ditch and up on to the hillside. Tuco gasped and screamed the whole way. Tuco gave one final gasp as Jake deposited him next to the ditch. Tuco started sobbing and pleading, “Por favor, por favor, please help me?”

Jake shook his head and said, “The only help for you slick is to contemplate your sins and make peace with whatever God you may believe in.” Tuco got a defiant look in his eyes, spat at Jake and shouted, “Go to hell gringo!” Jake smiled again and as he started walking away said, “You first slick!”

Jake walked away from the sobbing gangbanger and went to help sort things out and to clear the roadway. He spat in the road, which caused his tongue to start bleeding again and thanked God that these clowns had been so inept. Jake was exhausted in body and spirit, but he had more important things worry about. He could rest later, he had to get the woman he loved back. And he had a few more scumbags to kill before this would be over...