

THE END OF DAYS

a Novel

By
Stephen C. and
Eric C. Johnson

PROLOGUE

The following is a fictional story which takes place during the Third American Civil War. The First American civil war began in 1775. The bloody division between American Revolutionaries and Americans still loyal to the Crown was finally settled after eight years of fighting and bitter hardship. When it ended, one hundred thousand loyalists left their homes in the colonies for Canada, the British West Indies or England. The Second American Civil War disintegrated into armed conflict with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Before it was over, virtually every family had lost a son, a brother, a father or an uncle. Battles like Vicksburg, the advance on Richmond, and Sherman's March to the Sea left death and destruction upon the earth as if God, Himself had smitten it.

These first two civil wars resulted from a bitter disagreement over what powers government should, or should not have. Both wars also had money at their root. Whether it was taxation without representation, or the ill gotten gains of a society based on slavery; it was money at the bottom of the dung heap. And for those who had eyes to see, it was impossible to miss the shadows preceding both bloody wars. No doubt the same will be true of the third.

* * * * *

I started this book over 20 years ago, yet is not complete. Although it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, there is much polishing I would like to have done before it is presented to the reader. Several challenges and difficulties have arisen over the years, which made it difficult to complete this work that I am so passionate about. But often my time is not my own, and my children came before my other desires, including this book. Eventually I hope to complete this work, but current events dictate that ready or not, I have to make this available to the world now.

Although much of the beginning of this book will sound prophetic considering I started the book long before our current world wide financial struggles, I am not a prophet. The reason I could see our current disaster coming when so many others could not is simple. "There are none so blind as those who will not see." I am not the only one who saw this coming. To many of us, we could see it coming like a freight train. I originally intended this book as an enticing way to warn America of what it will face if it does not change. I do not present it as what will happen, but it is an illustration of how cruel events can be to a nation that has been as foolish as we have been.

I present this book free of charge to any who wish to read it. I invite you to share it with any who are willing to read it.

Stephen C. Johnson
Ridgecrest, CA

Chapter 1

John Ray Scott reached across the glass display case and took the Remington 870, 12 gauge shotgun from the hands of the woman working in the gun shop. She was probably less than thirty, thin, attractive, and quite knowledgeable about firearms. There were several other employees in the store along with dozens of perspective gun owners. John was almost oblivious to all of this. John was buying a gun to fight back with, and that consumed every grain of his attention.

As he held the shotgun, his minds eye could see a very different scene. A scene of ghastly horror played out in all its hellish cruelty. Doors smashed open with the butts of assault rifles. He could see woman and children running to hind, screaming, yelling, bullets flying, ripping though doors, windows and walls. He could see the burned out hulks of a two police cars with the charred remains of four officers frozen in a death. And he could hear laughter, the most sadistic laughter possible. Like children of the pit, laughing over their perverted work of destruction.

In the last thirty-six hours John had suddenly come to realize that his life, and that of his family, could be smashed in a few short minutes. Everything John worked for, and counted on, might very well blow away, like sand in the hot desert wind. John worked to control his emotions and think clearly. He knew he was on the verge of slipping over the edge into irrationality. Whatever he did, he had to remain rational. Irrationality and emotion run wild could well be his ruin. John had to be in control. He had to be in control of his thoughts, his emotions, and in control of his aim.

John received a .22 caliber bolt action rifle for his twelfth birthday thirty one years ago. He enjoyed it but by the time he was fifteen he had lost interest in shooting and eventually his father gave it to his younger cousin.

When his own son Allen turned twelve he bought another .22 rifle for his birthday. As he taught Allen how to shoot, his own interest in target shooting returned and he bought a 30-06' with a scope. The first year he owned the gun he went shooting several times, but soon he lost interest again and eventually it never left his gun safe in the back of his closet.

One day John had a coincidental conversation with the owner of a gas station where he was filling his car with gas. The owner described with anger how he had recently been robbed at gunpoint by three teenage thugs. Soon after that John bought a pistol. John didn't particularly like pistols because they were not as accurate as rifles. But John had to admit that a high power rifle with a scope, or a small target rifle were not very effective in most self defense situations. If he was forced to defend himself, or his family, he decided he would need a pistol.

John selected a 9mm semiautomatic. The pistol came with a clip capacity of only seven rounds. The current California law had reduced the clip capacity from ten rounds to seven, but there were still plenty of pre-statute ten round clips available for a price. John picked up two ten round clips latter from an avid gun owner he knew at work. John practiced until he could shoot a pattern the size of his fist on a stationary target at fifty feet, then he stuffed the pistol with the clips on the top shelf of his closet.

Two months later, seven gang bangers held up a bank in Rancho Palos Verdes with fully automatic assault rifles. Seven people died and thirteen people were injured in the botched robbery. For months the national news and talk shows buzzed with, "How did we let this happen?" Photos of blood stained bodies lying on the finely polished floor of the bank became the constant backdrop of ever more heated demands for more laws. As a result, the sale of all guns with removable clips, and the sale of all clips was band in the State of California. A couple of months later it became Federal law.

John held the 12 gauge toward the ceiling as he examined the weapon. It was longer than he would have liked, but that wasn't a major issue. The minimum length for a shotgun had been increased to 42 inches. This shotgun was 46 inches and was fitted with a standard chock. It was unmistakably a bird killer, but it would do fine against people too if used properly.

John pressed the release on the trigger guard and pumped the shotgun once. The distinctive chink, chink was familiar. Had there been a round in the magazine the pumping action would have chambered the round. Then, all he would need to do was press the safety button and he would be ready to fight. A shell of 00 buckshot contains nine pellets .33 inches in diameter. One shot was comparable to firing nine rounds from a .32 caliber pistol in a single blast. The shotgun John held in his hands may have been designated a politically correct weapon, but it was still a very deadly gun.

"Excuse me. If you don't have any questions, I'll be waiting on another customer. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask." The woman behind the counter turned her attention to the next in line behind John as he continued to fondle the shotgun. "May I help you?" she asked to the lady behind John.

John was unaware of those around him as he turned the shotgun in his hands. The gun shop was crowded with others who evidently had the same fears as John. They weren't going to be caught without weapons if there was another shoot out in Moreno Hills, California.

John had decided he needed a lot more firepower after the firefight that had occurred yesterday morning. Thirty or forty gang bangers cordoned off a cul-de-sac, then systematically looted the street. They simply burst into one house after another, bashed open the door and demanded the keys to the cars or anything else that caught their attention. Anyone who resisted was shot on the spot. As the residents cowered in their houses and handed over the keys to their cars, the gang bangers grabbed anything else that caught their fancy. They spent no more than two or three minutes per house.

The attack came at dawn; five thirty in the morning. They wanted to hit when everybody was home. Two hours latter they would have found an almost empty street. Only two police cars made it there before the gang bangers were through plundering. They arrived just in time to be massacred in a blast of automatic gunfire. All four policemen were riddled with bullets. The ambush had been carefully planed and executed. Then, just before they left, like a dog leaving it's mark, the gang bangers torched the two cars and sprayed the houses with automatic fire. They drove off laughing. John Scott wasn't laughing. John Scott lived five short blocks away.

John heard the shots that morning, but it was distant, and he didn't realize what it was. When he climbed out of the shower, dripping wet, he heard the sound of more sirens, and it started to concern him when connected with the popping sound he had heard twenty minutes before. As John ate his breakfast he glanced at the paper and then finally headed out the front door. A short drive and he found himself confronted with a police roadblock. He had to double back and detour to work. He turned the radio on that was already tuned to an all news channel. Before he got to work he got his first account of the breaking story.

On his way home from work he stopped by the street that had been looted. There was still a police tape across the street. The detectives were through talking to witnesses, but they were still collecting evidence. The two Police vehicles had been towed away, but not before news cameras had recorded the striking visual effect. It would have made great copy if grisly spectacles like this hadn't become so common.

John had seen plenty of shootings and violence on the news before, some of it quit bazaar. But the television made it distant, and reduced it to only twenty-seven inches measured diagonally. Also, as soon as it became too distasteful, John could simply change the channel or turn it off. But this wasn't on television. This was real, and it was five blocks from his home. Five short blocks from his family. This he could not turn off. This he had to deal with.

"Excuse me ma'am. How many rounds does this gun carry?" John asked.

The girl behind the counter had paused from explaining the revolver she had just presented to the woman next to him. "It holds three rounds in the magazine. If you remove the plug you can add two more rounds for a total of five. It's not legal to hunt without the plug, but if you want it for home protection, you can leave the plug out. Is there anything else I can show you?"

"No. Just give me one more minute to think about it." John replied.

John gave the shotgun one more looking over. His experience as an engineer gave him an appreciation for the simplicity of the rugged, time-tested design. John had changed jobs a year earlier to a small company called Securitec. They specialized in building and installing security systems for those who had huge sums of money and a reason to fear. Los Angeles had plenty with both. John half smiled at the thought of an engineer who designed high tech security systems for a living, resorting to a plain old shotgun for security. The smile quickly faded.

John had another reason for buying a weapon that no one else in the gun shop could possibly know. The fact that he worked at Securitec gave him access to information about clients that was privileged. Yesterday, the same day the shootout had occurred, John put two and two together and realized that some of the most influential and wealthy people in Los Angeles had just lost faith in the United States providing for their security and had left the country. Something big was about to happen, a lot more than a riot, and they were going to read about it in a foreign paper. Unfortunately for John, and 310 million other Americans, that option was not available. John would have to stand and fight.

The question that he thought he had already answered starred him in the face again.

Could John Ray Scott protect his family with force? John could buy a gun. He could buy five guns. But would he be able to cope with a catastrophic failure of civilization? Would he be able, through wits and stamina, be able to survive whatever it was that was coming?

John actioned the shotgun again twice in succession. The motion was crisp. The oiled steel parts slid smoothly. The barrel and chamber were coated with a black mat finish. The stained wooden stock was simple, but attractive. "There is something very seductive about weapons" John thought. "Yes, very seductive indeed." A 12 gauge shotgun, a high powered rifle, or a handgun all had the feel of something powerful. There is an alluring power that they possess because they are a representation of power itself. The power to have it your way. But was it just an illusion? What if he was faced with fifty gang bangers and he was alone, the only one standing between them and his family? What would happen then?

John took a deep breath and then answered in his mind. "Well then I guess forty-five of them will get to my family over my dead, bleeding body." With that he handed the shotgun to the clerk and declared out loud "I'll take it. And could I have one hundred rounds of 00 buck?"

* * * * *

One glance at John Scott and Sarah knew that it was more than just another hard day at the office. His eyes gave him away.

"Sorry I'm so late again." John lamely excused himself to his wife.

"That's O.K., I saved you some dinner. Did you have a bad day at the office?" she reassured.

"I bought the shotgun." John simply stated. "And 100 rounds of ammo too."

Sarah stopped washing the dishes and dried her hands. As soon as her hands were dry, she came over to John and laced her arms around him. She laid her head on his chest and spoke softly. "You really worried, aren't you John?"

"Yes I am." John took another deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sarah..." John hesitated not yet willing to commit his thoughts to the record. "I'm afraid that shotgun may get a lot of use before we see the end of this."

Sarah pulled herself back so she could see John's face. She looked into his eyes, which seemed older than she remembered. "You really think so?" It was as much a statement as a question.

"I don't know. I woke up yesterday and went to work not realizing that there was a shootout blazing, just a few blocks away. My neighbors were being robbed and killed while I was taking a shower.

“If it were just one bloody fight it would be amazing, but that's all it would be. It would be just an aberration in the data. But it's not amazing. This happens all the time. Look at the trend. We've had three riots in the last two years. Saint Louis last year, and Detroit and Miami the year before that. And how about the big shoot out they had in Livingston Montana the year before that? Over one hundred and fifty Militia and thirty-four ATF agents killed. And how about that anthrax lab they discovered in Michigan last year? Who outside of the Vietnamese community ever heard of Hoa Hoa before that?

“There's something else I haven't told you.” John hesitated. For John to tell anyone, anything about one of the clients was not only grounds for dismissal, it could even lead to civil charges. He had signed a document when he was hired, clearly stating that he would never discuss any specifics of his job with anyone, even his wife.

John thought about the high level executives working for banks and other financial institutions that had suddenly purchased extensive, top of the line security systems for their houses, only to have most of their belongs packed up in storage or shipped. Not only that, they had left for the Caribbean or elsewhere. A few wealthy California politicians had also skipped town, leaving behind houses protected by guards and the best that technology could buy.

Then there was the comment of Senator Ralston of Arizona. What does “The perilous situation we find ourselves in.” mean? One comment said once than never repeated. Ever since then he has insisted his comment was taken out of context. What context? There was no context! Why did he suddenly fall in with the party line?

Leading up to yesterday, the facts were not as obvious as they now seemed. Now the pieces fell together into a more complete picture. Individually they were isolated incidents and coincidences until he finally stopped to connect the pieces. Perhaps John was becoming paranoid. Perhaps they were becoming paranoid. However, just perhaps, they knew something they weren't sharing.

What could it be? Were the banks about to collapse? The stock market tumble? Was there about to be a chemical or biological terrorist attack? Perhaps it was HezbAllah, Earth First, or the IRA threatening massive kidnappings. Why just bankers, and a few politicians? What ever it was, he couldn't tell Sarah without violating his word.

“Sarah.” She stood, arms around his chest patiently waiting for John to say whatever it was that held him on the brink. “I can't tell you why, but I have some reason to believe that...” John hesitated. “I think there may be a terrorist attack on specific important people, or something worse, with the intent to destabilize the United States Government and ferment civil strife. If they are successful the result could be the worst civil strife since the American Civil War”

“Are you sure?” Sarah said in disbelief.

“Of course I'm not sure, but this much I do know. It is one possible explanation for some pretty weird behavior by some fairly influential people who likely know much more than we know. I could be dead wrong, but I think we need to assume the worst. We have to be ready for

whatever comes. If I'm wrong, life goes on. If not, we're ready. As ready as we can be.”

“What do we do that we haven't already done?” Sarah asked?

“I don't know. We need to rethink our situation and see what we're missing.” John paused and his face grew hard before he continued.

“I'll tell you what. Whatever happens, if lawless gangs come down my street, guns blazing, they're not going home without casualties. Today I was thinking about the riots these last two years. The burning, looting, robbing, killing. The whole world on fire. I can still see those M113 fighting vehicles rolling down the streets just to protect the firefighters. Tanks stationed at the freeway intersections.”

“Not so loud. You don't want the kids to hear, do you?” Her voice was a loud whisper, admonishing restraint, yet encouraging him to go on.

“No I don't” John answered more softly.

“Do you think there will be another riot here in Los Angeles, bigger than before?”

John had been speaking rapidly, but as soon as Sarah stated the obvious, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he continued. John was usually a fairly calm person, but when he got excited, he would start to speak faster and louder. “Yes, but that is not really the point. What I'm afraid of is a total breakdown of law and order, everywhere, a total collapse of civil order.”

“Do you really think so?” Sarah's face as filled with concern.

“Last week I would have said it was unlikely. Today, I have to say I see the world in a whole new light. I guess I thought I could avoid it. Maybe I was wrong. In any case, I bought a shotgun for whatever comes.” John finished with a certain lack of confidence in his words.

“Do you think it will do any good? Will guns really make any difference? Some of the people on that cul-de-sac had guns.”

“I don't know. I honestly don't know.” John's voice was calm now and he seemed to drift away in thought. For a moment he contemplated the possibilities as his wife studied his face. When he came back from his thoughts he continued, “In any case, it may be too late.”

“Too late? What do you mean?” Sarah spoke with even more concern.

“Well, there is a one month waiting period in California to buy a gun. I can't pick it up for thirty days.” John spoke with resigned acceptance.

Sarah's memory was jogged. “Oh yeah. That's right. Will we need it? I mean, what if we need the shotgun before the thirty days are over?”

“Well, I guess it all depends on what and where something happens. Well at least we have six month's food storage, that will be helpful.”

“Darling, have you looked in our pantry lately? We haven't been as good at replenishing as we should have.”

“Sarah, we agreed after the Miami and Detroit riots never to be without a full six months of food. I bought a bunch of food just last month!”

“That was three months ago, John, not last month. And Miami was two years ago. It's hard to keep a sense of urgency all the time. Kids, school and things keep me busy. We are almost out of corn and beef soup, and we're also low on raisins. But the rest of our food storage is in fair shape. We just need to get certain things replenished.”

“Well, we'd better get them now. Go to the store tomorrow and get what we need.”

“Tomorrow is the day I do my volunteer work at Natalie's school.”

“Make me a list and I'll do it tonight.” John persisted, “Darling, we may need it tomorrow.”

“You eat your dinner. I'll find time to get to the store tomorrow.” Sarah ended the subject.

John sat down, then looked back at Sarah. “Sarah, what if we are about to slide into civil disintegration? I'll bet not one in a thousand Americans knew the stock market was in trouble in September of 1929. How many people in America knew that terrorist would hijack commercial planes and fly them into buildings on 9/11/01? I'll bet not more than a dozen people in America had any idea we were on the brink of war with Japan on December first, 1941. What if we knew that Pearl Harbor was going to be bombed, but there was nothing we could do about it? Nothing!”

Just then Michael walked into the kitchen with the nonchalance of an old pair of 501 Levis. “What are you guys talking about? Say, is there something to eat?” Michael opened the refrigerator and surveyed the contents before he decided on the OJ and finished off half a quart in five consecutive gulps.

“Your father was just telling me about work. Would you please get a glass next time?”

“But this way I don't get a glass dirty.”

“I know, but would you please get a glass next time, anyway.”

“Sure Mom. But I thought I heard Dad say something about Pearl Harbor.”

John stood up and faced Michael, “Oh I was just saying, it must have been a very traumatic thing to have lived then. I was wondering, what if someone had the capability to see

into the future and knew what was going to happen. Suppose someone knew that the Japanese were going to bomb Pearl Harbor, but had no power to change it.”

“Yeah, man. Ya' know I watched a show just the other day over at Sam's house that was kind of like that, except it was about a riot that was about to happen. There was this guy that got some kind of mental powers that when he held an object he could see into the future. So he touches his girlfriend's ring and he sees her dead in the street during a riot. He spends the next two days trying to get her to leave town, but the more he tries to save her, the more he makes her real fate happen. It was kind of a bumner movie, actually. Too depressing. I kept thinking he was going to get her out just in time, but at the end of the movie, she dies. I didn't really like the movie all that much.”

“Michael.” his mother spoke, “Is your homework done?”

“No. I finished my math and science, but I still have English.”

“It's late. This is the first week of school. We need to make sure you don't get behind again like last year. Would you please go in and start on it? When you get stuck, call me and I will help you. I know it's hard, but I want you to try the best you can before I help you.”

“O.K., I'll work on it.” Michael turned and walked out a little more slowly than he had came in. His shoulders were weighted down with an invisible, but no less real load. He knew the English would be hard, but he was resigned to it. It would take him at least two hours to do what took his classmates thirty minutes. Michael was deep in thought about how hard it was going to be, entirely oblivious to the looks his parents were shooting at each other, behind his back.

Chapter 2

John Scott didn't like to borrow other people's tools. Whenever he borrowed a tool, John felt beholden to the lender, and John disliked owing anything to anyone. John liked lending tools even less than he liked borrowing them. If they ever came back, they were often much worse for the wear. When it came to garden tools John preferred the concept of privet property. It seems that it is human nature to take better care of your own things rather than someone else's. Apparently, that is particularly true of people who borrow tools.

Therefore, for John to borrow a tool from Frank, his neighbor across the street, was a bit out of character. Of course John didn't need the tool. That was just an excuse. At least the sudden urgency was a fabrication. The tap on the back porch had been slightly dripping for months without John feeling the urgency to fix it. What John was really interested in was Frank's guns, and hopefully a cooperative arrangement with Frank.

"Hi John. What can I do for you?" Frank was dressed in his Saturday cloths, as was John. He had apparently been working in the shop behind the house doing woodwork from the looks of the sawdust clinging to his shirt, pants and hair.

"Hi Frank. I have a leaky tap, and I wondered if you had a large pipe wrench I could borrow?"

"Sure. Come in." John followed Frank through the kitchen, out the back door, and into the shop. The wrench was hanging on a carefully organized pegboard above the workbench. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Well, the tap on the back porch has a leak, and I was planning to replace it. I have an adjustable wrench, but I need a pipe wench to hold the pipe connecting to the tap. If I don't, the pipe may unscrew out of the T it's threaded into."

"Does it leak out of the top of the valve when it is turned on, and not when it is turned off?" Frank asked.

"Yes." responded John.

"You don't need a new spigot, you just need to tighten the valve. On top of the spigot just below the handle there is a cover which the stem of the valve sticks through."

"Yea." John responded indicating understanding of what Frank was saying.

"If you give that an eighth of a turn, the valve will tighten up and it won't leak any more."

"Really?" John was surprised at the simplicity of the solution. If he had known it was that easy, he wouldn't have put off fixing it. John was no stranger to mechanical devices, but his specialty had never been household plumbing. John's professional experience was in stress analysis, materials selection, and precision mounting of optics. With his new job he was

becoming familiar with the ins and outs of household wiring and various types of sensors. His practical experience generally resulted from keeping the family cars running. Plumbing had yet to be a frequent problem.

“If it leaked all of the time I would say that it probably needed to be replaced, but I bet it just needs tightening. If that doesn’t work I’ll come over and take a closer look.”

“Thanks. That will save me a lot of time. Now I don’t have to go to the hardware store, buy a tap, shut off the water to the house, all that stuff.” John was about to change the subject when Frank beat him too it.

“You want to see what I’ve been working on?” Frank turned around and gestured with both hands toward a solid wood dining room table, which was largely assembled, but not yet finished. Frank launched into a long oration about the meticulous effort that went into the crafting of the table. John was genuinely impressed, and even felt a little envious.

Of course John couldn’t even entertain the thought of embarking on a similar project, even though Frank offered to help him. Frank was divorced, his children grown, and the demands on Frank’s free time were considerably less than John’s. “Maybe someday.” John responded without believing himself.

As Frank went on about how difficult it is to get good cherry wood, and how time consuming it was to inlay the pattern of various different woods into the center of the table, John kept looking for a way to change the subject. Finally Frank seemed to wind down and concluded with “...Well, I better get back to work on it.”

Before Frank had a chance to show him out, John spoke up. “Say, did you hear about that shoot-out they had down a few blocks?”

Frank half smiled and let out a feeble laugh, which was little more than a sarcastic snort. “You mean the one on Cimarron Court?”

“I guess so. It happened last Wednesday morning about six o’clock.”

“Yea, that was Cimarron Court.”

John wasn’t sure how to take Frank’s apparent disdain. Frank was a bit gruff, but John expected at least a token expression of condolence for the victims. John pressed on to get to the point. “Have you ever thought it would happen here?”

“Of course I have, haven’t you?” Frank stated his opinion as fact.

John was puzzled. “You have?”

“Of course! The slab stone that I added to the front of the house when I moved in, you didn’t think that was just for looks did you?”

“Slab stone?” John was struggling to figure what a decorative stone front had to do with a gunfight when slowly it dawned on him.

Frank began to smile as he saw that John was catching on. “It won’t touch large rounds like a .50 caliber, but there isn’t a pistol round made that can penetrate six inches of stone and mortar, and it will just about stop most rifle rounds. Notice I also added a planter in front of the living room window. If I were to shoot out of the front window, I would be kneeling behind a two and a half foot thick berm. Here look at this.” Frank stepped to the front door and opened it.

Immediately John noticed there was something peculiar about it. It was heavier than a normal front door. It was a steel door that had been covered with a thin veneer of wood. Only on closer inspection did John notice it’s unusual construction. “It’s filled with alternating layers of Kevlar mesh and wood. It will protect eight times better than a solid wood door.” Frank smiled as he showed off his ingenuity.

John finally came to the point. “You’ve buttressed your house against an attack. But any defense can be defeated. It wouldn’t take long to get around to a window unless you strike back. You said something about shooting out of the window. I assume you own guns?” John didn’t need to deduce gun ownership by Frank. He had seen Frank loading the car to go shooting before, but he kept a few cards off the table.

Frank’s smile widened. “I’d have to be a fool not to have guns, wouldn’t I?” Frank’s technical evasion of John’s question was all but transparent. He admitted the obvious without disclosing anything. Frank continued to smile, obviously enjoying John’s line of reasoning waiting to see what his next move would be.

John rubbed his chin. “You have this all figured out, don’t you Frank?”

“You could say that, I guess?” Frank smiled self-assured.

“What are you planning to do, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I plan on blowing their stinking heads off. That’s what I plan on doing.” Frank took the initiative. “Let me ask you one. If you lived on Cimarron Court and they came storming up your street stealing and shooting what would you do?”

John stared Frank in the eye for a moment and then answered flatly. “I guess I’d blow their stinking heads off.”

“Well, you better be sure before they get here, because it’s too late to be philosophical when the bullets start flying.”

“But Frank, if people start taking the law into their own hands...”

“Law into their own hands.” Frank mocked John. “The law has either gone over to their side, or they’re so out gunned, out manned, and out maneuvered, it’s a joke. There is no law! That’s the point. We think there is still law because we have a police station and some men in

blue uniforms. If we had law, we wouldn't have them."

Frank pointed down the street to a house that was referred to as "The Galliger's old house." It still held the title because nothing resembling a family had occupied the dwelling since the Galliger's moved out the previous year. The landlord had been subsidized for renting to "low income" renters and had taken the bait. Apparently the state of California had trouble distinguishing between low income, and low life. A group of drugies had rented it, and it had degenerated rapidly to its present state. They hadn't reached the point of parking a car on the brown patch that used to be a lawn and cannibalizing it for parts, but that seemed to be the next logical step of social decomposition. The dominant occupant of the house was known as Terry L. Blumfield at the police department, but his friends called him Spider. The landlord had tried to evict them, but so far had been unsuccessful in meeting the state's requirements for patience.

John knew exactly what Frank was referring to as soon as he pointed. The fact that the police department had not been able to effect a legal search leading to a drug conviction was not proof to John that the police were virtually non-existent, but the point was well taken. What was particularly stinging to John was that the drug den as a social norm had become the scourge of every suburb in America.

Frank left a pause before he continued. "We're not taking the law into our own hands. We're killing varmints. People shouldn't kill people. There used to be a law against it." Frank sarcastically added. "I don't believe in God, but I do believe in two of the Ten Commandments. Thou shalt not kill, and thou shalt not steal. The way I see it, if they act like animals, they get what they have coming. Blast them, then and there. Anything less is capitulation to the law of the jungle. They have no right to attack my society. An attack on Cimarron Court is an attack on all of us. If we let them, they will take everything we have, including our lives."

John contemplated what Frank had espoused but made no comment. Finally Frank added. "I guess you prefer the liberal dribble about how they're just misunderstood kids who had a bad childhood?"

"No, but I don't relish the thought of killing somebody."

"Good. That proves you're civilized. If you liked killing people, I'd say you need a lethal injection. But if you surrender your community to animals, civilization ends, plain and simple."

John pondered Frank's adamant declaration, then moved on to the next point without comment. "OK, so what would you do if the same thing happens here, on our street?"

Frank's eyes narrowed as he carefully considered John's expression. "John, you've got a hunting rifle, don't you?" Apparently Frank had been as observant of John, as John had been of Frank. "You also have a smaller rifle that your son shoots, perhaps a .22?"

"Yes. I have a 30-'06 and Michael has a .22 rifle."

Frank's weathered face wrinkled near his eyes as he scrutinized John for a moment. "I'll

tell you what I think, John. I think you're scared. I think you have realized that you could be the next victim, and your scared. Not terrified, just scared. All of your life you've been told that shooting bad guys is what cops do. But you're beginning to realize you could die waiting for the cops. You really want to be able to shoot to protect yourself, but you're afraid of what the neighbors might think. You want to know if it's still politically incorrect to shoot back when you're being shot at. In other words, you want to know if the rules have changed while you weren't looking. I'm I right?"

John was amazed at how transparent his intentions were. "Yes, I guess that about sums it up."

"Let me ask you again. If they come up our street, are you going to stand and fight, or are you going to run out the back door and hope they don't hurt you?"

John carefully considered Frank's question and decided to answer as honestly as possible, in spite of the bias inferred. "Frank, Thursday I bought a 12 gauge pump shotgun on the way home from work. Yes, I have no intention of running out the back door. I intend on defending what is mine. I was just wondering what your intentions were, and if we could agree to cover each other in the case of a fight."

"Good. Let me show you what I have up my sleeve."

Frank turned and walked out the back door again. This time he turned left and headed for the corner of the house. There at the corner was a ladder leaning up against the roof. Frank climbed up the ladder and then extended a hand to John who was following. Once on the roof, Frank proceeded up to near the crest of the roof and leaned against the brick chimney. John stood next to him waiting for Frank to continue, but Frank just smiled.

After a moment John began to glance around looking for, he did not know what. Suddenly it appeared out of nowhere. Frank was standing behind two feet of masonry with a perfect line of fire on the street in both directions. The Chimney was just the right height for Frank to provide the maximum protection without interfering with his firing. Frank had built a small platform and placed it on the roof just behind the chimney to give him a flat surface to stand on. John noticed for the first time that the chimney had been extended. Three layers of bricks had been added to its height.

Frank mimicked holding a rifle over the top of the chimney. "The high ground always holds the advantage, you know." Frank craned his neck to study John's expression. "I'm in a perfect position to cover your house. There is no way they can approach your house without me plugging them in the back. How about you? Are you going to cover me? If you lay down a line of fire from your house, they would have fire coming from both sides. What do you think?"

John smiled. "I think we have a plan."

John and Frank considered the possibilities from their vantage on top of Frank's roof. John decided that laying on the roof of the garage, just behind the crest, would be the best location. This all assumed he had time to get into position. If not, he would have to shoot out of

the kitchen window.

As John spoke he considered the fact that Frank's line of fire was only a few degrees below John's house. "You will be careful what you shoot at. I have a family living in that house, you know. One stray bullet is all it takes to kill."

"Don't worry. I'll be sure of my targets before I shoot. Shooting down will give me a target with a backdrop of your front yard, not your house. If any of my bullets pass through your house, you will be in emanate danger anyway. If I am responsible for any collateral damage it won't be in your house. It will be down the street.

Frank gestured toward the "Galliger's" house with his eyes. "If I were them, I wouldn't be here when the shooting starts. I would bet money that I'm not the only person on this block that would like to see them gone."

John stared in the direction of the beat up rental. As if on queue, a car pulled up and a shirtless teenager jumped out and ran to the front door. He was in the house for only a second before he came back out stuffing something in his front pants pocket. A second latter the car raced off. "Yea, you might be right." John admitted reluctantly. "You might be right."

Chapter 3

After disabling the security system, six shadows with blackened faces and dark clothing crept through the rear window. The electronic security system was a formidable and sophisticated one, but any man made defense can be defeated given enough skill, patience, and training. The assault on the residence of the chief of the Los Angeles Police Department was executed with absolute precision. The six men were professionals, the best. They were proud of their profession, meticulous in every detail. Chief Gridley would recognize their pictures without any trouble. They all worked for the Los Angeles Police Department.

The six crept past the big screen TV and other expensive entertainment equipment, and down the hall decorated with his plaques and memorabilia. They then turned up the stairway leading to the bedrooms. Chief Gridley slept alone in the house because his wife was visiting relatives, and his two daughters were off to college. On Fridays, Gridley usually had a couple of drinks after work and steps were taken to ensure that this Friday was no exception.

Chief Gridley never knew what hit him. Before he heard a sound, a pillow was thrown over his head and a pair of hands grasped each limb of his body. In a flash one arm was jabbed and injected with a syringe containing rahypnol. Within seconds the drug found its way to his brain and rendered him unconscious.

* * * * *

Chief Gridley started to regain consciousness as a police officer uncuffed him. Though he blinked and struggled to make sense of his surroundings, he could not. He was seated in a chair on the catwalk in front of a billboard overlooking the Golden State freeway. The handcuffs could not reach anything substantial, so the cuffs were looped through a length of chain that was locked to the catwalk. His pajama top was spray painted with gang graffiti. Pinned to his lapel was a note reading "No deals with gangs!" The news reporters were first on the scene, thanks to carefully timed phone calls from anonymous sources.

Later that day, a hastily called news conference was held to try to control the political damage, but there was no hope of success at this point. The pseudo-secret negotiations with the major gangs to partition the city would have to be scrapped. Power sharing between the gangs and the LAPD, to end the reign of gang warfare, would have to be scrapped for now.

Chapter 4

Life couldn't be better for Allen C. Scott. He was driving his Camaro, which looked almost new with its' meticulously buffed coat of wax glistening as it passed under the street lights along Sunset Boulevard. The car was seven years old, but hours of labor with his father and younger brother had restored its original factory brilliance. At his side, en route to a concert, was a really nice looking babe named Cindy. The night was young and warm. This was only his second weekend at college, a freshman at USC, and he was on top of the world.

Allen was mildly aware of Cindy's roommate Roxanne who was seated behind Cindy in the tiny back seat, and virtually oblivious of Randy who was crammed in the seat directly behind Allen. Allen's attention was very much centered on Cindy Crandon. Cindy was all smiles and laughter. Her delicate dress lay as light as a silk scarf over her tan legs. The hem of her dress ended half way between her knees and her waist. Her hair was long, blond and beautiful. It played teasingly in the air blowing through her open window. Her bare arm was resting lightly on the car door. Her eyes danced and shined as they flirted with Allen's. Cindy was definitely what Allen had on his mind.

Perhaps if Allen had been paying just a little more attention to where he was going instead of Cindy's locks of gorgeous blond hair he wouldn't have missed the turn, and everything would have been completely different. But how could he have known that this one tiny error would affect his whole life, both for better and for worse.

"Say. I think you were supposed to turn left there." Randy spoke from behind Allen, pointing out of the open window at the street they had just passed. His black hand and wrist were just visible out of the corner of Allen's eye.

Allen recognized his mistake at once. Making light of his mistake he responded casually. "Don't worry. We'll find a new way there." Allen's smile hardly dimmed as he glanced at Cindy who was enjoying the ride without a care in the world.

At the next corner Allen made a left turn on a side street instead of a u-turn. He did it to make light of the fact that he had missed the turn. The street was narrow and not well lit. One more left and a right and then he would be back on the street he should have turned on. With no working street lights, and only an occasional porch light from a row of post World War II houses to light the way, the Camaro sailed on through the night.

"Say. Don't you think you should turn around and go back?" Randy's voice betrayed a trace of concern.

"This will be quicker." No sooner had Allen spoken than a left turn came into view. They rounded the corner. If the NOT A THROUGH STREET sign had not been torn down, Allen would have taken Randy's advice and retraced his route back to the main road, swallowing his pride. Instead he proceeded on, hoping his decision would now be vindicated. But they quickly came to a sharp left turn only and he took it.

As soon as they rounded the corner Randy demanded, "Get us out of here! Just shove it

in reverse, and do it now! Do it! Do It! Do It!"

Allen was beginning to see the danger he had driven into, but his reactions were not fast enough. By the time he had realized what he had done, he had driven past a gang of about twenty, mostly black, teenage thugs who were building a barricade behind them as they drove into a cul-de-sac.

Allen jammed on the accelerator, then slammed on the brakes. As he frantically executed a jerky three point turn, wide-open eyes replaced Cindy's fluffy chatter. She was not even able to process what was happening, or why. Roxanne, unable to see much of anything kept crying, "What's happening! What's happening!" Randy craned his neck to keep his eyes on the dark figures building the barricade the Camaro would have to pass through to escape. The jerking motions of the car made it difficult to see, but he saw enough.

When Allen finished the awkward three-point turn, the hood of the car pointed at the hastily built barricade. He hesitated. "Hold it!" Randy demanded from the back seat. Randy could distinctly see the silhouette of at least three shotguns, a couple of rifles, and half a dozen handguns. The swagger of the unruly small army made no secret of how they were armed. Randy glanced around at the closed apartment garage doors and graffiti covered fences to confirm his fear that there was only one way out, even on foot. Randy started to formulate a plan of escape.

"Listen up, everybody just do what I say, keep your mouths shut, and let me do the talking. No matter what happens, follow my lead and do what I say. Now let me out. "Randy spoke with an authority that transcended his twenty-six years of age. He spoke as if he had been here before.

Allen felt the urge to rely on Randy's apparent ability, but because of pride he resisted relinquishing control, partly because he could see that it was his stupidity that had put them in this predicament in the first place. "Don't you think we should bust through? Those trash cans won't stop this car."

"If you try it, the chances are at least one of us is going to die. Are you willing to let one of these girl's die to see how good you are?"

Allen sucked in a large breath of air and let it out. His knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. He looked at Roxanne's dark eyes and light mahogany skin in the rearview mirror. Then he glanced over at Cindy's desperate expression. "No." he finally admitted.

"All right, let me out." As he spoke Randy took three things out of his wallet and put them in his sock.

Allen released the seat back and opened the car door leaning forward to make room for Randy. Randy squeezed out of the back seat and stepped out onto the street, then bent down to be heard in the car. "Everything is negotiable, except we leave together." Not waiting for their concurrence he straightened and turned toward the barricade.

Randy walked forward with a confidence in his step, and a bit of "blackness" in his stride. He was a shade under six feet, and well proportioned. He wore the clothes and haircut of middle class America, but his skin was very black. He walked up to the mob as if he was hoping to join in a friendly game of B-ball. "Say, Man. Like what's going down?"

A tall young male of mixed blood stepped forward with a shortened 12 gauge shotgun in his right hand pointing at the sky. He wore a flashy black leather jacket that reached almost to his knees. Several gold necklaces hung around his neck. He was the government on this blind ally and he was always delighted to exercise his dominion. "You be on our street!" he proclaimed.

"Hey, like, we didn't know."

"I be King Izzy. You be trespassing. You hear what I'm saying. There be a law against trespassing." The tall King Izzy, short for Ishmael, spoke with an arrogance that came easily when backed by overwhelming firepower. "You be paying the fine."

"Say, King, we're real sorry. It won't happen again." As he spoke Randy fumbled for his wallet. When he produced the wallet he reluctantly opened it showing a few bills and glanced around as if to ask how much was the standard fine for trespassing.

King Izzy stepped forward with his shotgun held high as his scepter, grabbed the wallet with his left hand and without looking at it, flicked it back to someone else behind him. "That, ain't, enough!" He spoke each word as if it were a separate and complete thought.

"Well, hey Man. That's all the money I got. Let me see what the others have." Randy hurried back to the car.

When Randy reached the car he stuck his hand through the window and demanded. "Give me all your money. Everybody, give me what you have." Cindy didn't have a wallet or purse, but Roxanne handed over about twenty dollars in fives and ones. Allen fumed, but pulled out his wallet and produced over sixty dollars, mostly in twenties and shoved it at Randy.

"Listen, Allen." Randy's voice was calm but firm. His gaze rested straight on Allen's eyes. "The next thing they are going to demand is the car, and we're going to give it to them, after I go through the proper negotiations."

"No, this car is mine! They're not getting my car!"

"Listen, Allen, we have no choice! I'm going to act like it is some big surprise when I talk to them, but you need to know, we aren't leaving here with this car. They are toying with us. They can kill us any time they want. Do you understand? The car is not leaving this street, but we are, alive and together."

Allen stared straight ahead; locked jaw and clenched teeth. The veins on his neck bulged.

"Allen, we leave the car or we die!"

"Allen!" Cindy pleaded.

Allen released his grip on the steering wheel. Randy had pushed Allen up to the brink of relenting, but Cindy shoved him over the edge.

"All right." Allen finally admitted. After receiving Allen's consent, Randy's eyes met each one in turn, then he resumed playing his part. He returned to the captors with a fist full of dollars.

"Here it is. This is all the money. It's all we have." Randy wore a genuine smile like he knew he was now in full compliance with the law, and it was only a formality to grant release.

"It ain't enough." The King spoke softly, but with a cutting edge on his words.

"We don't have any more money. You have it all."

"I want, the car." Izzy was looking down at Randy, and shifted his eyes from Randy's face to the Camaro.

Randy paused for a moment to mimic the time it would take to understand the words King Izzy had just said. "Oh Man, I don't know. The car? You want us to walk out of here? I don't know if he'll go for it."

"Get it!" The gang leader demanded.

"O.K. I'll see what I can do."

Randy scurried back to the car. "O.K. Everybody out. Allen, give me the keys to the car. Take the other keys off the key chain and stick them in your pocket before you get out where they can see you. Everybody out now. Cindy, don't let go of Allen's hand and Roxanne, don't let go of mine. Allen, if they throw a punch just take it and don't look them in the eyes. Always keep your eyes at about waist level. All right, let's go. Everybody stay close together and don't let go of each other."

They reluctantly emerged from the car and followed Randy over to the barricade. Randy handed the car keys to King Izzy with his eyes cast down. "Here's the keys to the car, can we go now?" Randy's head was slightly bowed, his left hand clasping Roxanne's as he started to pass through the crowd. Allen right behind him mimicked his every move.

Just as Cindy came abreast of King Izzy he flipped the shotgun from his right hand to his left, and in the same motion grabbed her arm in his right hand. "I didn't say you could go yet." Izzy considered his prey a moment while she squirmed in his grip, then called over his shoulder. "The girls want to stay and party." His big powerful hand held her fast as a sinister smile spread over his face. "Don't-cha?"

"No!" was her emphatic answer.

Taking their cue from their leader, two others started to make advances toward Roxanne. Randy turned and confronted King Izzy. "You have our money. You have the car. Let us go." His voice was firm, but not demanding.

The gang leader turned toward Randy. "You and this white boy can go. The girls stay."

Randy looked straight at Izzy's gold chains avoiding eye contact as he spoke in an even and firm voice. "We all need to leave together."

"Sez who?" King Izzy challenged, as he lowered the shotgun down until it rested on his right arm pointing right at Randy's nose.

Randy spoke calmly but firmly as if he did not feel the gaping three quarter inch muzzle that brushed him across the face. "If you take the money and the car the pigs will come around, ask a few questions, and by tomorrow this case will be buried in a thousand other crimes. If you kill us and molest the girls you're going to have the heat all over you like flies on dog crap. You won't be able to move. You won't even be able to sell the car for fear of it being traced back to you. You'll have to dump it somewhere and burn it to get rid of any evidence. You're not stupid. You're a man, not a moron. Be smart, let us go. Let us go and prove how generous you can be when you choose to."

Izzy was arrogant; he was self-centered; he was nasty and ruthless. But he was also an entrepreneur. He sold drugs and hijacked cars, because it was a way for a high school dropout to come into a lot of money, fast. Izzy knew a smart deal when he saw one. He also knew Randy was right about screwing up the works by pushing his advantage too far. Izzy shook his head up and down gently then let go of his grip on Cindy's arm. Immediately she recoiled and pressed past Randy, Allen pulling her hand.

Roxanne grabbed onto Allen's other hand as they passed. The three retreated beyond the barricade. Randy finally allowed his eyes to meet Izzy's for one brief moment then looked down at the barrel of the gun as he started to back away.

"Hold it!" Izzy demanded. Randy suddenly stopped as Izzy spoke. The King closed the short gap between them until they were close enough to shake hands. Izzy stared at Randy for a moment, then suddenly, without warning, swung the gun sideways hitting Randy in the side of the head sending him sprawling on the street. Blood started to trickle from the side of Randy's head and the pain overpowered his mind. Randy shook his head and then looked back up to see the barrel of the 12 gauge staring down at him. After a long pause the tall gang leader finally spoke. "Get out of here, Nigger!"

Randy slowly rolled over onto his hands and knees then straightened until he was standing. He walked slowly at first then quickened his pace as the distance between him and the mob widened. He could see Allen, Cindy and Roxanne calling for him to hurry and waving for him to follow. As he reached the corner where they waited for him, he heard a chorus of laughter behind him. Randy heard one voice above the rest. "Run Nigger, Run!"

Chapter 5

"Hello, police. Yes, I'd like to report a carjacking. We were..."

"No, but there is a guy here who was hit in the head with a gun, and he is bleeding."

"No."

"No."

"Yes, I'll hold." Allen looked over his shoulder and shrugged at the other three who were huddled around the phone booth. All they could hear was his half of the conversation, but it didn't take much imagination to infer what was happening.

The three things Randy had pulled from his wallet and stuck in his sock were his driver's license, his only credit card, and a twenty-dollar bill. He took his license to keep the creeps from knowing where he lived. The twenty dollars was to subsist on until he got home. The credit card he didn't want to have to cancel as soon as he got home. They cashed the twenty in order to get change to make the phone call.

"Yes, I'm still here."

"We're outside a conveyance store near the corner of..." Allen put the phone to his chest as he turned to his three companions. Before he had a chance to ask, Randy answered his question.

"We're near the corner of Bataan and Sunset. The address is 1457 Sunset."

Allen put the phone back to his ear. "We're at 1457 Sunset. It's near Bataan."

"Yes, Bataan is the nearest cross street."

"Yes."

"Yes, we'll stay right here. Thank you."

Allen took a deep breath and let it out as he emerged from the blue plastic bubble perched on a steel pole that served as a minimum effort phone booth. "They said they would send around a squad car in a few minutes." Cindy looked around at the stores with bars on the windows, people milling around and the trash scattered about with an expression of disgust. Allen couldn't imagine how he could feel more inept and inadequate.

"They expect us to just hang around here and get mugged, while we wait for some cops to show up?!" Cindy was incredulous. Allen knew that Cindy's question was partly directed at the city of Los Angeles, but it was also obvious that an unspoken message was directed at him. She considered the situation to be completely unacceptable, and further she expected him to do something about it. Allen could think of nothing he hadn't already done. His mind raced

headlong into a tortured frenzy of activity, but it was without direction and led toward nothing but frustration. In spite of the furious pace of his brain all he managed to do was stand in the night, speechless.

"Well," Cindy declared. "I'm not going to just stand around here all night. I'm going to call somebody. May I have some quarters please?" She stretched out her hand to Randy.

"Sure." Randy reached into his pocket and pulled out three quarters and handed her two.

Cindy popped them in the slot and then cuddled up to the phone for a tet-ta-tae with someone on the other end of the line. Allen couldn't hear a word she said, only a low mummer drowned by the sounds of the street. After a moment she hung up the phone and pronounced to Roxanne, "Jack will be here in a few minutes." Cindy never even glanced at Allen.

Utter frustration and anger boiled in Allen's brain. It burned like a forest fire. Was he responsible for the fact that they had been mugged? Yes, he was! The answer came back clearly and cruelly from his own clouded conscience. He was inept and impotent. He didn't belong here. He was on someone else's turf, and he got what he had coming. What's worse, he led Cindy into a dangerous situation. It was his job to be her protector, and he was completely incapable of doing anything at all to provide that protection. He was a total and complete jerk. In fact, just asking Cindy to come with him tonight proved he was a jerk!

Suddenly Allen turned and threw a punch at the blue plastic bubble that covered the phone. It was a wide roundhouse blow that hit the bubble broadside. The plastic bent a little but didn't break. Allen's right hand didn't fare as well, but Allen didn't care. Little trickles of blood started to ooze from his knuckles. He just stood there in the warm night air with his brain convulsing in seizure.

Randy carefully watched Allen, but he wasn't particularly impressed. A fit of rage at a time like this was quite understandable, but completely useless. Worse than useless, it was counter productive. Randy had been trained how to inflict the maximum damage on an enemy, and blind rage is never the way to do it. No, this kid was real green all right, and Randy had no need for a loose cannon. Even though Randy had written Allen off as a liability, Randy still studied his actions, evaluating every move like a judge at a skating event.

Allen's jaw was set like it was made of granite and his breathing was fast and shallow. His fists were clenched, rigid at his side. He had moved further away from the others and was facing the empty night. Randy could no longer see his full face, but he could still see his profile. Then as Randy watched, a change came over Allen, as if a different soul entered his body. The rigidity left him. The hate in his eyes departed and a more thoughtful expression replaced it. He gazed off into the night not seeing anything, yet seeing everything. Allen lifted his fist, examined it thoughtfully, and then shook his head as a trace of a smile crept across his lips.

After a moment his expression hardened again. Finally he spoke. He spoke quietly, paying no attention to anyone who might overhear; yet intent on every word he spoke. What he spoke came like the words of an oath. "I will never let this happen to me again. I will do whatever it takes to make sure that those I am responsible for are never threatened at gunpoint

again. Never!"

Randy was suddenly taken back seven years to an oath he swore to himself. The persona of Allen, which he was studying was transformed before his eyes. Maybe his judgment was a bit premature. Maybe he ought not to be so harsh. Randy wondered whether he would have lived up to his own criteria at age nineteen. Probably not, Randy thought. In any case, Randy was intrigued by this new image of a man.

Randy's attention was interrupted by Roxanne who was snuggling up to him. It was not cold, but she felt comfort in being close. Randy put his arms around her and let her rest her head on his shoulder. Randy next glanced at Cindy who was standing several feet away, arms folded, waiting for the world to apologize. Then his gaze fell back at Allen who had recovered from his self-scrutiny, and was about to speak to the others.

"Why don't you three go in the store so you're not standing around, and I'll wait for the police. It may be a while."

"You don't exactly fit the neighborhood." Randy responded. "Why don't you go in, and I'll stay outside and look for the police?"

"You've done enough for me tonight. It's true I look out of place, but the cops will spot me a mile off. You might blend in too well. I'll be right by the door and if anything happens I'll duck inside. I just thought the girls would rather wait inside."

"I'm OK." Roxanne interjected. "Why don't we all stay together." Cindy didn't respond, as if she couldn't hear anything. Instead she just kept looking into the night air with disinterested conceit.

Allen considered the situation for a moment then concluded. "OK, let's stay together."

The four stood silently together in front of the convenience store each in their own world. The lights of the street illuminated them with their cold unnatural light. Finally Cindy spoke, breaking the silence. "There's Jack!"

A late model black Porsche abruptly pulled up to the curb. Jack jumped out. He wore Levi cut offs, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes with no socks. He had the appearance of a surfer, right down to the mass of curly blond hair and suntan. "Is everybody OK?" Jack's question seemed mostly directly toward Randy.

Allen had a wave of jealousy crash over him as soon as he saw the car and Jack's obvious good looks, but amazingly, as fast as it came, it washed away again. Immediately, Allen liked Jack.

In spite of his worldly appearance, Jack seemed not at all self-consumed, as Allen would have expected. Jack made a polite acknowledgement to Cindy then addressed his attention toward Randy's head injury. He made his best assessment agreeing with Randy that it looked worse than it really was. Not surprisingly he used a surfing accident as his reference of

comparison. Then he turned his attention to Allen's loss of his car. "Man, that's a real bummer! How about if I take the girls home and come back for you two?"

"Sure." Allen responded. In another minute Allen and Randy were alone on the sidewalk watching the Porsche speed away with both girls jammed in the passenger seat. Allen was a bit perplexed at how amicably he felt about Jack. After all, Jack just drove off with his date. As he thought about it, he realized that he felt very relieved to have Cindy not only out of danger, but, to put it bluntly, just plain gone. Allen wished Cindy and Jack the very best.

When the black sports car disappeared into the traffic Allen turned to Randy who was looking back at him. Both smiled without a word being said then headed into the store to get a snack and wait for the police.

Allen was downing a fruit pie and Randy was working on a bottle of fruit juice when the black and white pulled up in front of them. A tall black cop stepped out and asked, "Is one of you Allen Scott?"

"I'm Allen Scott. And this is Randy... say I forgot your last name." As Allen spoke the policeman pushed a button on a miniature tape recorder protruding from his right pocket. The recorder was extremely flat with a clip on the side specifically designed to fit in a policeman's shirt pocket. The policeman's partner was circling in front of the police car keeping his right hand near his holster as he was trained.

"I'm sorry, I didn't get that on tape. Would you please repeat your name for the record."

"Yes. My name is Allen Scott."

"And you called to report your car being stolen?"

"That's right."

"And you are?"

"Randall G. Martin, sir. I usually go by Randy."

"OK, Randy. Now Allen was it your car that was stolen?"

"Yes it was."

"And Randy, you were hit during the confrontation, is that correct?" As he spoke he quickly inspected the wound on Randy's scalp.

"Yes sir."

"Could you two come with me in the car and identify the location where this took place."

"Sure." answered Allen as Randy nodded his head in agreement.

The two climbed in the back seat of the squad car as the police officer explained that there were no door handles on the inside for the back seat in order to keep prisoners in. As they drove Allen continued to describe the assault as the tape recorder recorded what he said. The policeman drove quickly and only seemed to be partially listening to the story Allen was telling, yet he would occasionally ask a critical question to clarify what Allen said. When they rounded the corner Allen was a bit apprehensive, half expecting the assailants to still be there. There was not a trace. The car was gone, the garbage cans were gone, and there was not a soul in sight. The street was empty.

"It happened right here!" Allen exclaimed.

"They were gone before you reached the phone." the policeman explained. As he spoke he swung the car around and headed back toward the convenience store where they had made the call.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to give you a packet when we get out of the car which has some paperwork for you to fill out and send back as soon as possible. Be sure to be as accurate about the information as you can. We will put that information into the computer, and if we find your car, we will contact you. If we apprehend any suspects we will contact you to help us identify them. Monday morning I would contact your insurance company and make out a claim." As he finished his sentence he pulled into the parking lot of the convenience store.

"And if it doesn't show up?" Allen pressed.

"We will do the best we can to apprehend the culprits and return your car." As soon as he finished the sentence he stopped the recorder and turned to talk through the Plexiglas and wire mesh that separated the front seat from the back. His partner turned around as well.

"Look, you want me to give it to you straight?" The officer's demeanor changed as soon as he turned off the recorder.

"Sure."

"I'm sorry about your car, and if I were you I'd be as mad as heck about it. But the fact is there just isn't a whole lot I can do about it. You hear that?" He pointed to the car radio.

"I hear it." Randy interjected, speaking for the first time since they made their introductions.

Allen turned toward Randy surprised and still clueless.

Randy explained. "Since we got in this car there has been a reporting of a liquor store robbery in progress, some lady was trying to cut up her husband, some other guy is chasing around in back yards naked, and there is a small riot starting in front of a theater about five

blocks from here."

"You understand. Say, are you one of the blue?"

"No. Green. 82nd Airborne, Special Forces. I got out of the regulars this spring and enlisted in the reserves. I starting school this semester at USC. I thought I'd try a different profession for a while."

"No kidding. I knew you wore some color of uniform when I first saw you. Well, I wish we could spend a little more time, but as I said, I've got places to go, people to see, perverts to arrest. Frankly we're just flooded with crime."

"It's getting that bad?" Randy asked.

"It's gotten that bad. There are whole sections of town we don't do much more than pick up the bodies. Police work in the classic sense is basically impossible." the police officer replied.

The four exchanged glances for a moment then the officer climbed out and opened the door for them. A moment later the car was gone and they were alone again on the sidewalk, Allen holding a beige folder with the police station's address printed in the center of one side. Allen seemed quite intent on the address as if he were trying to memorize it until finally he spoke. "So, tell me about Special Forces."

Chapter 6

Fortunately for Allen and Randy, when Jack returned he brought a borrowed pickup truck rather than his Porsche. Roxanne and Cindy were a very tight fit, and they were considerably smaller than their dates. Randy stood a smart 5' 11" and weighed 185 pounds. Even in a long sleeve shirt it was fairly obvious that he had spent at least two hours each day working out. Allen stood 6' 3" but barely broke 170 pounds. Allen had the look of a basketball player, but in high school PE he never put forth enough effort to be much better than average.

Allen replayed the saga in detail to Jack as they drove to Randy's apartment. Randy filled in a few details from time to time, but he volunteered less than he knew. When they reached the apartment, Randy invited Allen up to see his place and suggested that he would give Allen a ride home on his motorcycle later. Allen immediately accepted, and they both thanked Jack for the ride and watched Jack drive away.

Randy's apartment was small, neat and decorated by a Spartan. The furniture was adequate, but minimal. A stereo, a TV and a picture on the wall seemed the only nonessentials Randy had allowed himself. The picture showed a middle-aged man leaning against the Vietnam Memorial, and his reflection in the black marble. Suddenly Allen did a double take as he realized that there was more than one reflection in the memorial.

As he studied the poignant scene he immediately realized that the reflections were in fact the ghosts of the middle-aged man's past, still fighting a war long since ended. The reflections were haggard young men, reaching from the past to clasp hands with the living. The contact was one of love and the brotherhood of battle, an eternal camaraderie of shared hardship. They had a tender, understanding look as they faced the older one, the one who survived.

The man leaning on the wall was no warrior. He wore a business suit and tie. His waist showed twenty years of comfortable living since coming home from the war. There was nothing about his appearance to betray where he had been two decades before. Yet here he stood, head bowed, tears in his eyes, still unable to bury his bloody memories; not willing to forsake his war buddies. The surface of the marble memorial -- the contact point between the present and the past, between peace and the destruction of war.

"I always liked that picture." Randy spoke as he peeled off his windbreaker. After dropping it on the couch he turned back toward Allen and continued, "I think it says a lot." The statement begged a response.

Allen had never given much thought to war. It was a striking picture, obviously filled with deeper meaning, but Allen was pretty sure he was not getting all of what the picture had to say, or for that matter, Randy either. "I've never seen a picture like this before."

"Follow me. I need to take a look at this scratch on my head. Everybody else has seen it, I think it's about time I did too." Randy headed into the bathroom unbuttoning his shirt as he walked. Allen followed. "Good grief." Randy exclaimed, half mocking himself, as he caught the first glimpse of his wound in the mirror. "This isn't worth wasting a bandage on." he continued.

Randy took a washcloth, wet it and started cleaning the wound gingerly. As he worked, he started to speak casually, as if he were making small talk. "Back there on the street I heard you say you never want to let yourself be put in a situation like that again. I think you said you never want to have people who depend on you in danger. Were you serious, or just blowing hot air?"

Allen was a little taken back. At the time he swore his oath he had no expectation that anyone cared what he might say, let alone pay enough attention to remember. Suddenly Allen could see in his mind that row of dark shapes holding guns in the air. When he didn't answer, Randy stopped tending his cut and turned toward Allen. "Well, are you going to do something about it or not?"

"I wish I had had a gun." Allen's jaw became firm and his eyes were suddenly filled with determination.

Randy looked back at the bathroom mirror and continued dabbing the wound with the washcloth. "So you think a gun would have been a good idea?"

"It might have made them think twice."

"You mean one like this?" As if by magic, Randy reached behind his back and pulled a small .32 caliber semi-automatic pistol out of nowhere. He held the gun loosely in the palm of his hand as he pointed it skyward. Allen could not have been more surprised if he had pulled a million dollars out of his ear. Randy twisted his torso so that Allen could see a tiny metal clip in the back of his pants and just the top of a miniature gun holster stuffed between his pants and his underwear. When he slipped the pistol back in its holster it fit smoothly inside.

"My shirt doesn't cover it because I tuck it in, so I always wear at least a wind breaker to cover it up."

"You mean you had a gun all along?"

"Sure." Allen slumped back against the bathroom wall, his mouth parted in astonishment, his fists clenching, and then going limp. Randy noted his response, and turned back to the mirror. "So why didn't I use it, you ask? Simple. There is no way I'm going to kill ten or twelve hoods armed with rifles, shotguns, and machine pistols with a six shot ladies pistol. This is a very useful tool in the right situation, but that defiantly wasn't it.

"Let me put it this way. The first mistake we made was in going there. Never put yourself in harms way unnecessarily. The second mistake we made was in going there without sufficient strength. Give me my M-16, a base load of ammo, five of my buddies, a mission to accomplish, and those guys would have been dead before they knew we were there. The last, and worst mistake we made was in going there with the girls. Guard whatever you value the most, the best. If you can't afford to lose it, you can't afford to risk it.

"If that overgrown moron, what did he call himself, King Izzy, tried to rape the girls, I

would have made sure he was a dead man first. He would never have seen it coming. I would have killed two or three of them, before they got me. Of course we would have died, but they would have paid a price, starting at the top. The girls would have been raped anyway, but it would have been over my dead body, literally. It was better to suck up some pride, get the girls safely out of there, and then drive on. And you have to admit that diplomacy is usually better than suicide. Wouldn't you say?"

Allen cracked a bit of a smile. "Yeah. I guess you could say that."

"So, what would you do over?"

"I wouldn't miss my turn when driving my car."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"I'm going to pay attention to where I am going." Allen was beginning to feel stupid. Again.

"Bingo! The best way to never screw up is to pay attention to details. Do sweat the small stuff. Sounds easy, but few have their head out of the sand long enough to see where they're going. But guess what? Sometimes you just can't avoid certain situations. What are you going to do then? Are you ready for when the war reaches us?"

"The war?"

"Yes. The war." Randy went back to tending his wound to allow Allen time to let the thought sink in.

After a few moments of contemplation Allen finally asked, "What war?"

"The war that has already started here in America."

Randy spread the washcloth neatly over the side of the hamper to dry and then pressed past Allen heading toward the dresser. He pulled out a clean shirt and slipped it on. "Would you like something to eat?" he asked as if that were the most obvious next thing to say.

"If you're hungry, I'll have whatever you have."

"Let's see what the fridge has to offer."

Allen followed Randy back to the front of the apartment, expecting from Randy the punch line at any moment.

"How does a ham and turkey hoagie sound to you?"

"Sounds fine."

"As you know I was in the Special Forces before I left the Army. One of the things they trained me to do in the Special Forces was to infiltrate into a hostile nation during, or in anticipation of conflict. Once in the threat nation, the mission was to contact certain sub-populations, usually disaffected ethnicities, or religious factions and ferment revolution. The last thing a nation needs during a major armed conflict is a revolution within its own borders. It can bleed the country's resources dry trying to stop the mischief at a time it can least afford to divert those resources." As Randy spoke he fixed the sandwiches as if he did this every day.

"This concept had its initiation in Special Forces during the Cold War. We would have penetrated someplace like Estonia or Soviet Georgia and help them rebel against the Soviet Union. The Soviets considered us so dangerous that they planned to send a whole division to hunt down one operational detachment. Do you know how many men a division or an SFOD have?" Randy paused from unwrapping the cheese with a large cutting knife in his hand.

"No."

"An A team is usually 12 men. A Russian division has about 10,000 men. We could have caused all kinds of havoc, way out of proportion of our numbers by organizing and instigating hate and discontent." Randy thought for a moment as if contemplating his next move. "If I were to plan an insurgency against the United States Government it would be a piece of cake. There are so many disaffected groups in America that are so furious at the status quo that starting another American Civil War would be child's play. I could do it in my sleep. Revolution has been fermenting for a long time, but few want to believe their own eyes. They would prefer to believe everything is under control."

"So how did you become a Green Beret?" Allen asked.

"I'm not a Green Beret, I'm a Special Forces soldier. A Green Beret is a Faggot-looking hat." Randy's response shattered Allen's feeble attempt to display any knowledge of the subject. Randy had firmly put Allen back in the student role. Randy's deliberate put down was intended to see how much abuse Allen would put up with. If Allen quit, there would be other recruiting prospects.

"So how did you become a Special Forces soldier?"

"The same way as you will." Randy answered with a knowing glance.

"The same as I will? I'm joining the Army?"

"Not exactly. You're being drafted. Events will force you. Go back to your original question?"

Allen was becoming frustrated with Randy for not giving him a straight answer. "So, back to my original question. I take it that you wound up on a blind alley facing a street gang?" Allen's voice had more than a trace of sarcasm in it. "If so, your Special Forces training didn't help me much. I don't have a car any more. You don't care about my car because you didn't have to pay for it. You don't know how hard I had to work to make the payments on that car.

That car may not have been new, but it was my car. Do you know how many hours I had to spend working nights and weekends in a video store to make the payments?"

Randy restrained the urge to slap Allen or laugh in his face. "My Special Forces training got Allen Scott out of that alley alive. The alley Allen Scott drove down because he wasn't watching where he was going." Although the tangents Randy was taking Allen on tried his patience, he clearly recognized that he had Allen where he wanted him. Allen did have some toughness in him. Others would have lost patience with the deliberate putdowns, and walked away. The objective Randy had was to remove Allen's preoccupation with the loss of a Camaro, which was acceptable, and put it squarely on matters of life and death where no losses would be acceptable.

Randy and Allen stared eye to eye with neither flinching for several seconds before Randy continued. "I wasn't watching where I was going and I made a wrong turn... in life."

"Are you telling me that I'm all screwed up?"

Randy left the kitchen and sat down on the floor directly in front of Allen. Leaning forward, arms resting on his knees, Allen's eyes were still fixed on Randy's. Randy's voice was calm, quiet, but firm. "You decide. Listen to your spirit. What is your heart telling you?"

The sandwiches were forgotten. Allen thought for a moment, glanced at his watch and took a deep breath before replying. "My Dad used to tell me that the lives of other people served as road maps for us. If they did well, we should follow. But if we made the same mistakes they did, it was our fault. So tell me, what wrong turns made you a Special Forces soldier?"

Randy stood up, walked over to the window, stopped, turned and walked to the couch considering how to begin. Finally he sat down on the end of the couch.

"I was born in Compton, California twenty-six years ago. My Father worked at the Van Nuys Chevrolet plant until it closed. He used to make Camaros. Then he got a job at Long Beach Naval Ship Yard until it closed. Now he works at Boeing. My mother worked for the Post Office. When I was a kid, I never had to worry because my Mom and Dad were always hustling.

"I did well in school. I always got a B average, so that my Mom and Dad would let me play baseball. I was a pitcher, but in my junior year my coach made me a third baseman, so I could play every day. He had noticed that I could hit in pressure situations. Like bottom of the ninth, two men on, two men out, and down two runs. Baseball was my life.

"I got picked up by Arizona State University on a baseball scholarship my Senior year. Did well, batted .453, and got drafted by the San Francisco Giants. I went to their A club in San Jose, batted .195 and got cut. I then couldn't get back into ASU. I couldn't play baseball because I had been a pro. My grades weren't good enough for me to make it on my own academics. The fifty thousand dollar signing bonus lasted me seven months.

"I couldn't go home to Mom and Dad. They told me education was more important than

temporary athletic skills, and I didn't listen. I wasn't humble enough yet to admit to my parents that I had made a mistake, so I walked into a recruiter's office. Air Force and Navy didn't want me because I didn't have any technical skills they could use. In other words, they didn't have baseball teams. After two rejections I was ready to go Army, and I was willing to do anything.

"They had a signing bonus, so I selected infantry. There was an extra two hundred and twenty dollars a month for parachute training, so I went Airborne. More than money, I wanted discipline. I wanted to master my mind, my passions, my spirit, and to learn to overcome obstacles once I reached the limits of my natural abilities. I swore I would never get cut again.

"I spent three years in the 82nd Airborne Division. I never turned down a school. I learned about nuclear, biological, chemical defense, and I went to Pathfinder and Ranger Schools. I then extended two more years, and went to the Special Forces Qualification Course. We called it the Q course. I then went to Germany to serve in the 10th Special Forces Group. I spent two years in combat in Iraq and was wounded. I spent six months in rehab and I used that time to take college courses out of the USC extension center. When they offered me twenty percent disability I took the discharge.

I got solid A's at USC extension in Germany, so getting a scholarship here was a piece of cake. I use my disability and my GI bill for living expenses and to make sure my savings account stays up. No reason to pay for something someone else will pay for." Randy returned to the kitchen, resuming work on the sandwiches.

Suddenly Randy looked back at Allen, "Who pays for your tuition, books, housing, meals?"

"My parents. Why?"

"You don't pay for any of it?"

"I'm paying for my transportation and I have a scholarship that covers books."

"What are your parents doing to put you through school? What would your parents be able to do with the money if they had decided to spend any way they wish, instead of on your schooling costs?"

"I don't know?"

"Think about it. I bet they could go to Europe for three weeks on what you cost each quarter. I bet you have some pretty cool parents. What do you think?"

Allen looked away, "Yeah, I guess your right. They are pretty cool."

Randy placed the completed sandwiches on the coffee table. Allen noted carrots and celery instead of BBQ chips and fruit juice instead of cokes. The meal was high in protein and carbohydrates, low in fats. He looked at Randy, the incarnation of every mother's dream son. His thoughts wandered freely, pausing at both the vital and the trivial as they ate in silence.

Randy's thoughts were a marked contrast to Allen's. He coolly assessed that Allen was 80 percent recruited; the downhill stretch would follow in due course. He mentally formed a spreadsheet in which he listed Allen's desirable qualities, loyalty to family, desire for law and order, physical fitness, mental toughness and agility, and willingness to learn. Some qualities were given two or three times the importance of others, and after completion of the analysis, Randy decided Allen was an acceptable recruit.

Allen was still pre-occupied with his sandwich, so Randy continued to allow an old Army habit to run its course. He was conducting an after-action review of the evening's events. After all, tonight had just been an unscheduled and unrehearsed combat reconnaissance patrol, one that would reveal considerable intelligence vital to an understanding of the challenges Randy would face.

He systematically and critically reviewed each event sequentially. He gave a bit of thought to King Izzy before changing his initial assessment labeling him as an overgrown moron. After all, Izzy came out ahead in the deal. He reviewed his own action and concluded that while not perfect, his performance was acceptable.

He then compared his recruitment of Allen to the first two recruiting attempts. The first was another black veteran he had met at the USC Financial Aid building. The conversation had gone well on the "been there, done that, brother soldier level", but then ran amuck. When Randy began steering the discussion to a serious tone of politics, economics and the condition of American Society, he got a shock. His new acquaintance turned hostile, angry --Palpably violent. He began reciting from sermons of Minister Louis Fakhrahan from memory. Then it disintegrated into "Whitey this, cracker that brother soldier" and Randy got nervous. He stayed polite through the part of being a martyr on earth and passing straight to the paradisaical presence of God who promptly rewarded him with 72 virgins and a glorious kingdom. But when Minister Fakhrahan was introduced as the second coming of Christ, return of Muhammad and reincarnation of Buddha all rolled up into one, Randy made a lame excuse and split.

His second recruit had been Randy's roommate. Nicknamed "Chewy" after a hairstyle somewhat similar to Chewbacca in the film *Star Wars*. This easy-going kid was intellectually a soul-brother of Randy. Chewy could brilliantly articulate the signs and reasons leading up to the demise of modern American society. But when Randy suggested that they work out or go for an early morning run, Chewy always begged off. The hours of bravado, of spirited insistence that only the strong would survive began to ring ever more hollow. Chewy joined a fraternity, and Randy knew that for Chewy the intellectual camaraderie with Randy had no translation into action. Only yesterday Randy helped him move to the frat house. Two weeks had proven that Chewy would have to be discarded.

Allen had emerged as a passable replacement. Randy had concluded that most other veterans would have already developed too many pre-conceived notions, and that intellectuals like Chewy acted as if it was just an intellectual exercise. Even though they were only in their 20's, they were apparently already too old to be recruits. Allen was younger, more impressionable. Besides, Allen loved material possessions, at least he loved his car, enough to fight to retain it.

The irony struck Randy and he chuckled out loud. The basis of his planned recruiting pitch to Allen, his Camaro was gone. However, Allen would fight for the principle of private property, even though he had none left worth fighting for. Allen's voice broke through Randy's thoughts.

"What's so funny?"

Randy didn't realize his thoughts had become audible. He quickly recovered and formulated a plausible explanation. "I was just laughing because as traumatic as tonight has been, life goes on, life doesn't care. Monday morning I've got a quiz, and so do you."

"Quiz?" Allen responded not having a clue.

"Political Science 201, Theory of Modern Nations, Mr. Witzenbaum, room 322 at 12:10 pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday. You sit in the second row from the door, half way back from the front of the room. Have you studied for the quiz?"

"How did you know that I was... You sit three seats to my right and one row back." Allen finally connected with Randy.

"Good work Sherlock. So, are you ready for the quiz? The old professor doesn't like lame excuses."

"Well I looked at it for a few minutes in the library, but I was planning on studying more tomorrow."

Randy stood up and returned to the kitchen and started cleaning up after the sandwiches. Allen broke the silence with a question. "Randy, there is something I really don't understand."

Randy kept working on the kitchen. "Yeah, what's that?"

"That guy back there, King Izzy, he wasn't white."

"Yeah, so?"

"Why did he call you Nigger?"

Randy's face broke into a broad toothy smile, the whiteness of his teeth a stark contrast to his black face. Randy turned back toward Allen who was also smiling. Finally Randy answered. "Since when did racism ever make sense?" With that, they both broke into laughter.

After laughing Randy continued. "When you are at the bottom of the totem pool it's a real crummy place to be. There are two ways to move up that totem pool. One way is to pull your self up. The other is to push someone else down. It's a lot harder to do the first than the second. His skin is darker than yours, but lighter than mine. I didn't let him have everything he wanted. To keep from losing face, he calls me a Nigger which somehow proves he isn't. It

really makes perfect sense. It's just twisted that's all. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"I'll give you that ride home now. I have a spare helmet."

Allen waved him off. "It's only about a mile and a half. I'll walk it. You've given me a lot to think about." Allen stood and brushed the crumbs from his lap. "Thanks for the sandwich."

"My pleasure." Randy answered.

"See you in class Monday." Allen spoke as he headed for the door.

"Later." Randy casually bid farewell as Allen left. He closed the door, and leaned his forehead against it. "This is going to work." he said aloud to himself. "Maybe I'll be a platoon leader. I can train Allen to be a platoon sergeant, and we can recruit, train and equip a couple of squads. This is going to work."

No sooner had he finished the announcement to his empty apartment than the question returned. Silently he asked himself, what is the mission? Is it to protect USC, the center of learning, the books, libraries and computer disks until the world returns to its normal state of controlled, rational civility? Is it to protect the defenseless? Hold the fort until a new government emerges from the ashes and a new social compact is agreed upon? Or is it to save my own precious hide, achievable only by helping others save theirs?

He got ready for bed, but never did the burning question leave him. What is the mission?

Chapter 7

Randy looked up from his newspaper. As usual he was early for class. Allen came in and looked around. For once he had his pick of almost anywhere in the auditorium. He glanced at Randy then sat in his usual seat. Randy unobtrusively nodded approval then turned the page of the paper.

Allen was surprised to see the class filled to less than one quarter of capacity. The auditorium could seat about 250 students, and was usually almost entirely filled. However, the previous Friday well over two thirds of the students had walked out in protest. Today, the first Monday in October, was the annual Nude Olympics sponsored by the USC Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Uncertain Union. A "spontaneous" but well-orchestrated demonstration had erupted in Professor Witzenbaum's class on Friday. The protesting students demanded that midterms be canceled in solidarity with the "silent suffering" of the "proudly sexually liberated, labeled through time as abnormal and deviant". Professor Witzenbaum calmly refused whereupon he was ridiculed and jeered. Several times he tried to respond but he could not be heard above the shouts and taunts. Finally the noisy crowd determined they could stand his "repression" no longer and stormed out.

Many had gone to guidance counselors where they received eager assistance in filling out discrimination complaints against their instructor. Roxanne, Randy's date the night Allen lost his car worked as a receptionist for the guidance counselors. She wondered what was up when all the counselors were in their offices on a Friday, an unheard of event during the two years she had worked there. She later described to Randy how every student received an "A" on the spot with full course credit. It was "obvious that it would be impossible to receive a fair grade from such a homophobic fascist professor." Roxanne, who was taught from her earliest memories a strict work ethic, was horrified at the ease with which the integrity of a great institution was compromised.

Two minutes prior to the beginning of class, a small group of students, some wearing buttons that Allen found deeply offensive, assembled at the podium and began exhorting the students to boycott the upcoming test. Most of the students who stormed out of the building the previous Friday were simply opportunists who saw an easy way to skip studying and indulge in some pleasantries instead. Those who returned this Monday were the core revolutionaries, or serious students.

Several agitators fanned out among the thin showing of students to persuade the masses. One pretty blonde singled out Allen for persuading. Allen looked back at Randy who mouthed the words "Be cool." Allen opened his book and pretended to read. The blonde, observing Allen's actions and the source, turned toward Randy and moved down the row of seats until she was standing directly in front of him and began urging him to strike a blow for justice.

Randy, politely, and gently shook his head whereupon her demeanor abruptly changed. In sharp, aggressive, accusatory terms the blond demanded that Randy fulfill his moral obligations to his slave ancestors and strike a blow for the liberation of the sexually enslaved. Allen, listening carefully, was at first amazed, then annoyed as the personal attacks became more heated and provocative. Finally Randy had had enough and moved a few rows back, stepping

over the seats.

The blonde followed stepping on the seats as she continued her verbal attack. Randy's passive refusal to respond was accepted as implied admission of guilt. She concluded that his silence verified his belief in the violent persecution of the enslaved. Randy's mind was subconsciously counteracting the attack. It vaguely reminded him of the brainwashing tactics he had been subjected to in his Army training. The trainers took the part of enemy captors trying to toughen him against the event of his actual capture in combat. As he was trained to do, he mentally countered her verbal attack by reminding himself of who was doing the talking, and why they were doing it.

He couldn't fathom how a society, which had so indulged itself in every imaginable sexual contrivance, and furthermore had been so constantly obsessed with the subject of sex could possibly be condemned as repressive. In fact, the fringe had indulged itself in so much lewdness and depravity, that it had lost the ability to shock or titillate. The problem was not intolerance or repression, but rather boredom. The liberation movement no longer warranted any attention because it was old news.

By now two others had joined the blonde, another female with the left half of her head shaved, and covered with tattoos and a male with a large gold ring hanging from his nose. Having failed to move Randy in their initial assault, they regrouped with a single question posed by the half-bald female.

"If you're not here to have your social consciousness raised, then why are you wasting your time here at USC?"

Randy knew he was being set up, and he considered side stepping the question with a "none-of-your-business" dismissal. It would be easier, but he felt an inner need to express a moral position, regardless of it's certain rejection and intense ridicule that would accompany it. "I came to USC to get an education, in other words to gather knowledge, both for my personal benefit and the benefit of my country and community."

They were hardly deterred by the simple sincerity of his message and sureness of his voice; instead they quickly launched a new attack. Several rhetorical questions were launched at Randy in a massive salvo. Neither they nor Randy were ignorant of the fact that there was no pretense of intellectual honesty in their assault. It was preplanned that whomever they met which posed a threat to their plans would be quickly outnumbered and out shouted. Randy's words would be twisted against him, but never given honest consideration. Their impassioned verbal attacks came so fast Allen could not track who was saying what. The three self-appointed judges carried on the inquisition at once as they pummeled Randy with questions.

"School boy! What country? What community? America the beautiful? The Beautiful example of imperialism, genocide, world conquest, death and destruction! Do you pretend to defend the Pentagon war machine? Don't you realize America is the West's bastion of evil, the oppressor of the rightful aspirations of the masses? Don't you realize America is suffocating all of us? America is the source of all sorrow and suffering..."

Randy interrupted "What a crock of bull. I've lived outside of the United States. This is one of the few countries in the world that allows its citizens to publicly criticize..."

"Liar! Liar! Liar!" The chant came in unison. "Look at the brutalizing of the Latinos who come across the border into California, only trying to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. The land that was stolen from them. They are forced to work in the fields that should rightfully be theirs, not owned by huge money hungry corporations! They are beaten, denied medical care, and raped by the border police. As a black man, how can you possibly be ignorant or uncaring of the suffering inflicted on the migrant worker?"

"They came to America voluntarily, we didn't force them to come." Randy retorted speaking loudly to be heard. "We built the fence on the border not like the Berlin wall to keep them in, but to keep them out. They chose to come. What they fear most is that they will be expelled from the country you choose to denounce. Some are abused. History has never been clean. But most work hard so they can send their kids to school and have the same opportunities we all have."

"Liar! The children of illegals are banned from the schools. They will be forced to work in the fields for generations."

"Children of illegals are not American citizens. They are breaking the law unless they immigrate legally, and they aren't citizens of the United States unless they apply for, and are granted citizenship."

"But this **is** their country! The white man stole it from them."

"You mean to tell me that a descendant of Mayan Indians and Spanish Conquistadors owns the dirt I'm standing on. None of his ancestors ever lived within a thousand miles of here. What you say makes no sense at all. How on earth would you ever make sense of who owns what? It would be immoral to confiscate real estate from rightful owners who have worked to acquire possessions and give it to who knows who? What you are really saying is that you don't believe in the concept of personal property."

"You are so stupid! Can't you see that you have just espoused the European myth that you can own anything? Land of opportunity! Opportunity to rape the Earth you mean. We are only one of millions of species on this globe, except for one difference. Humans are amoral by nature. Morality was invented only to mask the hypocrisy of all societies. It does not exist. The greatest crime of mankind is the use of morality to justify all immoral acts, particularly to repress the normal instincts of humans."

"Garbage" responded Randy, keeping his voice as even as possible and still be heard. He noted that Allen was still listening, but not confronted and that suited Randy's purposes. He therefore deliberately chose not to disengage. "Morality does exist, and it is absolute. Furthermore, there is a big difference between mankind and the other animals. Man has the unique ability to reason, to question, and even to feel guilty."

"No wonder you're so stupid. You're a Specieist! The greatest crime mankind has

indulged in has been the oppression of innocent animals, and their ruthless exploitation..."

"What, another greatest crime." interrupted Randy. "How many greatest crimes are there? It seems to me that I ought to be guilty of only one greatest crime."

They were visibly angry. "Another lie. We are intellectually pure. You are not. Once we have reached our goals it will become obvious to all that we were right. In a state of anarchy there are no boundaries and we are devoted to a world without order, structure, or stability. But you are only diverting attention away from your own crimes. You fail to support any of the just causes we have presented. If we were to continue to waste our time with you, we could prove what a guilty mind you have. What have you personally done to save the rain forest, prevent global warming, support abortion to prevent over reproduction of our evil species. What have you done to insure our government provides for the hungry and the homeless? You are a criminal!

"Wait one minute." responded Randy. "Let me get this straight. I am a criminal, because I do not feed the hungry and shelter the homeless, thereby prolonging their lives. Yet you believe mankind must be destroyed as a species? So why do you care about the homeless, or for that matter, my crimes toward them? The way you see it, they are just a drain on society and Darwin should weed them out, survival of the fittest?"

"You need to support them, **because they are** a drain on society!" replied the blonde. "They produce nothing, and their care drains the coffers of the corporate elite, hence hastening the destruction of capitalism, fascism, all "isms", and man's relentless scourging of the earth. They are useful, in fact essential. We will use the bile byproduct of relentless civilization to rid the earth of mankind's evil. It is your moral duty to demand, force through protest and violence, the government to support the unwanted waste resulting from society's existence."

"Moral duty?" Randy's furrowed brow betrayed skepticism. "I thought you said there are no morals?"

"You have morals, we do not. You need them, we don't."

"Obviously" interrupted Allen, his first comment.

"You will fail, we can not."

"I don't buy that." insisted Randy.

"Then you have no right to exist, no right to breathe." hissed the half bald female. "We will destroy you, as we are entitled to. We will eradicate your traitor Uncle Tom class."

"And you call me intolerant?" replied Randy, slowly making his way to Allen. Most of those who bothered to show up had already left. A few lingered for the spectacle of the event as individual arguments, scattered around the auditorium, burned themselves out. As Randy reached Allen and they turned to leave, an explosion of loud profanities erupted at the podium. They both turned to see the cause.

Professor Witzenbaum had just entered the stage and was making his way to the podium. Defiantly he pushed his way through the crowd. Before he made it to the podium someone batted the papers he carried under his left arm out of his clutch. They landed on the floor and scattered everywhere. The old professor glowered at the female who had knocked the papers out of his grasp. In response to his stare she puckered up and spit in his face. A hellish laughter applauded her. After a moment, the saliva rolled down his cheek a strand hanging from his nose. He suddenly swung his cane, which was more of a trademark than a necessity, up into the air, and then down on her head. It made a cracking sound, but the cane did not break. Instantly everyone started to scatter as he raised the cane again, looking for a second target. As the crowd scattered, the girl who had disappeared from view crawled on all fours toward the steps. Blood stained her hair and ran down her face.

No one stopped to help the girl or continue the confrontation with the professor. They had what they had come for. They had their martyr, and now they were going to use her. The more pitiful the sacrificial lamb, the better.

A young man near Randy and Allen muttered in disgust, "Everybody's lost it." and gathered his books to leave. Allen stared in disbelief. Randy seized Allen's arm and pointed with his eyes. He was fixed on the retreating protesters.

"We'll have your job for this," threatened one of the revolutionaries from a safe distance swinging a video camera over his head. "We'll see you in court. We'll take your job, your house, every worthless dime you ever stole!!!"

Witzenbaum laughed, "Oh you will, will you?" He charged shouting "And how will you do that with my cane shoved down your throat?"

"Oh we've got you now old man. We'll, we'll..." words failed him and they fled the auditorium.

"Or you'll do what?" Screamed Witzenbaum. "Or you'll do what!!! Call campus security? They're worthless. Take me to the University Senate? Have my salary docked? I haven't been paid in two months. I'll never see my retirement no matter what you do. So what are you going to do to me that isn't going to happen anyway? Take me to court? I'll do what you would do. I'll appeal and stall until the day I die. That's assuming you can find a judge who will to show his face in court. Or you'll do what?"

The main body of the protest had already left missing the end of the professor's tirade. Among those left behind was the bloodied girl whose tears and blood dripped on her shirt. A girl near Allen and Randy turned toward her male companion. "What about the poor girl?"

"Yeah, that's a real bummer. Come on, let's get out of here." He turned to leave.

"But we can't just leave her."

"Look, Kelly, she could have AIDS. If you're that worried, we'll call 911 when we leave.

So like, let's go."

"Joshua! That could take forever. She needs help now!"

"Forget her. If it was you or me, do you think she would give a care? Let somebody else worry about her, she's not our problem!"

Randy got up and walked to the back of the classroom, where a large blue and white first aid kit was bolted to the wall. He opened it and removed a pair of off-yellow rubber gloves. Marching wordlessly down the aisle he tossed them to Kelly who smiled and put them on. Kelly then made her way to the bloody blonde as her boyfriend shouted in an irritable voice "It's your health, not mine."

The blonde was now recovering from her shock, and she shoved Kelly aside before Kelly had a chance to help her. She turned and shuffled out. Kelly shrugged, and managed a smile for Randy's sake, then turned and left as well.

"Well what are you two still doing here? What do you want?" Witzenbaum's voice was strong, a solid baritone. Allen suddenly noticed they were alone in the auditorium.

"We want to learn." replied Randy. "We want wisdom and knowledge." As he spoke he moved forward up the aisle.

"Wisdom?" the professor lifted his bloody cane and examined it for a moment. "Sorry, all out of wisdom today. The world's gone mad and I have decided to go along as well." Lowering his cane to his side he continued. "Knowledge, now that I can give you. The world is dying! Western civilization is about to eat its young. Its young, by the way, are you. We are living a lie! They have lied and lied until the lie has come to life and will destroy us all. You wanted knowledge? Now you know. Leave me alone."

"Explain that." asked Allen.

"Explain what? The test is canceled, class dismissed. You may go."

"You complain about lies." Randy interjected. "We paid tuition to USC to be taught. You are paid by USC to teach us. Isn't it dishonest for you to take our money, and then deprive us of what we paid for? Isn't that a lie?"

Witzenbaum's voice cracked with anger. "Didn't you hear me a moment ago? What, are you calling me a thief? USC collected your tuition; let them provide a teacher for you. I am fifty-nine years old. I have 28 years as a tenured professor, seven years of teaching before that. Three fifths of my life I have devoted to the intellectual care of others, the progression of mankind, a caretaker of Western cultural tradition." He shook his head in bitterness. "And what do I have to show for it?"

Randy and Allen glanced at each other and then returned a blank look. "I have nothing. For forty years I paid FICA taxes into social security, but now I cannot collect social security

because the government will not pay benefits to those who have any private retirement. Since 1986 I have paid Medicare taxes, yet I cannot receive Medicare as long as I have my University Health care plan. By the way, that used to be worth something. I planned to retire at age 60, but last year USC raised the retirement age to 65. Before I make 65 they'll raise it to 70! Why you ask?"

The professor turned and began to leave the auditorium heading towards his office. His new disciples dutifully tagged along. "Why you ask? Because a very large portion of USC's investment portfolio is in US government securities, bonds and treasuries, and everyone knows they can't be sold for more than one third of their face value. And the other half is in stocks that keep falling ever since they raised the maximum capital gains tax to eighty percent, and the minimum, the **minimum** rate to forty-five percent." Witzenbaum scanned their faces for comprehension. Satisfied he continued. "So with a seventeen billion dollar endowment, USC has no money, they can't pay me to teach. Thus I have no salary for the last two months, and dubious prospects for the future, to say nothing of my retirement. So how old do you think I'll be when I can escape this abuse from the sorriest excuse of students I've ever seen?" He stared both in the eye, first Randy, then Allen as if he expected them to answer. Both stood speechless.

Witzenbaum stepped forward and jabbed his finger into Randy's chest. "You dare call me dishonest? If you feel you have been robbed, go complain to the administration. I **refuse** to be responsible for all the world's problems. **Especially** those that are self-inflicted through gross stupidity.

"And what do I get for efforts in maintaining the sacraments of scholarship? I get THEM!!!" He jabbed his cane towards the empty hallway as if it were still filled with crowds of activists. "They have no money to pay professors, but they have money to pay subsidies to Them!!! Gay pride is more important than LEARNING!!!" He caught his breath. "So my friends, your problem is you're not recognized victims. You need to organize. Stage a protest. Orchestrate a riot. Express your outrage with outrageousness; your moral superiority through immoral conduct. If you do, I promise the University will shower you with millions. You will win!

"You see, it's the new capitalism, and you will be the new robber barons." Witzenbaum unlocked his office and stepped inside. "Good day, gentleman."

Randy pushed the door back open. "A very powerful and convincing defense of your integrity." Pointing at Allen he continued. "But he asked you to explain what you mean about the lie that is going to consume its young. I am sure he would like to hear your explanation, and I would as well."

Witzenbaum brushed them away with a wave of his hand. "Some other day."

"Someday never comes" replied Allen softly. "If you will not serve the sacraments of learning, at least administer the last rites to those who are condemned to die."

Professor Witzenbaum turned and saw Allen for the first time. Until this point he cared nothing for his two unsolicited disciples. As far as he was concerned he might as well be talking

to himself in the shower. Suddenly Allen became an intellect. He was no longer another persistent student striving for a grade, rather than understanding. Besides, he really didn't want to be alone. He just wanted peace.

"Have a seat." He waved to the two chairs in his office. One a small hard chair obviously meant for the occasional student visitor, and a big comfortable swivel chair, reserved for himself. Both politely declined. Turning he opened a small refrigerator hidden behind an impressive stack of books and retrieved a pair of diet sodas. They both accepted only to see that their host declined to imbibe.

Professor Wizenbaum dropped into his seat and began to speak. His voice droned on as he traced the demise of the American dream. He began by describing the grim era of the Great Depression, then the huge sacrifice of the Second World War, and on down through the dawn of the atomic age. He brought to life a generation willing to sacrifice and overcome all. With a singleness of mind and pride in their nation, they not only fought and won, but built an economy that was the envy of the world. Magnificent as their achievements were, they sowed the seeds that would eventually destroy what they had built.

Having witnessed twenty-five percent unemployment and fifteen percent homelessness, they swore that no one thereafter would fall through a social welfare safety net, regardless of the cost. Having endured Bataan and Bastogne, they were determined to sustain fifty years of constant vigilance against the Communist threat, regardless of the cost. A generation often forced out of high school to find work created the GI Bill and an education establishment that created a wealth of educational opportunities. And they did it regardless of the cost. Everyone needs doctors when they are sick, and they were not going to let people just suffer while science kept inventing new cures at an ever-increasing rate. So they subsidized health care, regardless of the cost. How could the richest nation on earth have so many poor? They declared war on poverty as well, regardless of the cost.

But what about the cost? Taxes rose in the 1950's and became more numerous, often out of view of those who ultimately paid it. They fooled them into thinking that taxes on big corporations didn't affect the cost of goods and services. A new wave of attorneys assaulted the courts and lobbied congress to ensure that their client's special needs were exempted. Everyone was a special case. Increasingly it became easier to borrow against past accomplishments and a generation yet unborn. The generation that created the richest nation on earth was not wise enough to calculate future costs and manage that wealth wisely.

Disciplined by poverty and war, they were unwilling to discipline their children. What had been bought with blood and sweat was viewed by the baby boomers as the natural state of man, an entitlement. Unable to understand the rebellion of their children, the older generation threw their hands up. Greed found a new playground as people demanded more and more of their government.

The invisible hand of greed, a tempter experienced in tormenting man since the dawn of creation, has never been more successful than with political leaders. Bribery has always been the means whereby domestic peace is bought. The general population is promised a better life, more wealth, an escape from life's drudgeries. The Roman Colosseum was built to placate the poor in

Rome. But the builder must be paid, the services rendered must be bought, and inevitably it was paid for with taxes, excessive borrowing, or confiscation of property. In Roman times it was often paid for with plunder from newly conquered nations or the plunder of its own citizens. Roman soldiers returning home from years in far off lands came home to find they were homeless. Their country was proud of their achievements, but unwilling to preserve their farms from large landholders in their absence. Modern times evolved more convoluted means by shifting the burden of payment. Whether in democracy or dictatorship, leaders are almost always chosen because of what they promise. It was no different in the United States during the 20th Century.

The promises included government assistance for everything. The individual was left free from any responsibility, from cradle to grave. Government supplemented prenatal care, birth health care, child care, primary and secondary education, school lunch programs, job seeking assistance, loans for homes and small business, food stamps and welfare benefits, subsidies to farmers, subsidies for the disabled even if the disability was a self-inflicted one such as alcohol or drugs. Even prisoners in jail collected benefits through Social Security. Entertainment on television and radio became ever more supported by government. Finally the government sent a check to the loved ones of the deceased to help with burial costs.

Government programs multiplied beyond rational comprehension. There were programs for all occupations from advertising to zoology. Medical care, psychological counseling, cosmetic surgery, sex change operations; all became expected of federal, state, and local governments. Retirement in comfort, companionship during lonely twilight years, funeral and burial were responsibilities transferred from children and friends to bureaucrats. Intergenerational love and kindness became a paid service rather than a natural function of families and communities. When combined with the traditional functions of government, the cost became staggering.

At first it was faced forthrightly. Traditional income, property, sales, conveyance and luxury taxes were joined by new companions. Highway, gasoline, Medicare, social security and new excise taxes were created. Visible and invisible they multiplied until the tax burden reached fifty percent of total earnings in the 1970's. They even resorted to legalizing gambling in the form of a state run lottery which produced nothing, merely so it could be taxed. The economy staggered and the population called for relief from this heavy burden. Taxes were relabeled fees, and the ever-increasing rate of borrowing continued upward.

Governments on all levels borrowed from the public through interest-bearing savings bonds. They borrowed from banks, issuing securities and promissory notes. But most grievously, they borrowed from themselves, and from future generations. Social security surplus collected during the maximum earning years of the baby boomers was in turn invested in government securities to reduce the apparent size of the deficit. The money counted twice obscured the depth of the problem.

Other items were simply swept under the carpet by placing them "off budget". Practices that would send a corporate CEO to jail were standard fare for the government. It was not all the fault of the public leaders. The public desired, even demanded to be deceived. Dishonesty was the cost of producing the government we wished. The cost.

The party could not go on forever. By the 1980's cheating on taxes became common among business and individuals alike. Within a decade, the government's ability to borrow from itself dwindled. As baby boomers began to retire, they expected the government to deliver on its promises. The succeeding Generation X, smaller in numbers, could not possibly fund the massive edifice. Congress started to play the shell game by shifting responsibilities from one level of government to another through block grants and unfunded mandates. Predictably it did not work. Foreign and domestic lenders began to lose confidence in the good faith of the government and expected higher and higher rates of interest to compensate for the higher risk. Many lenders simply refused the risk after they were burned by defaults of other governments. Especially damaging was the collapse of Mexico. The Euro became the currency of choice where the dollar had been king for a century.

The Federal Reserve Board received increasing pressure to inflate the money supply, but they stubbornly resisted. Serious talk floated around Washington about dissolving the Fed and seizing control of the money supply. Even without inflationary policy, the dollar dropped in value as fewer international entities wished to hold it. The empty vaults of Ft. Knox became a national secret.

Cracks in the edifice began to make their way to the surface as the new century began. A series of defaults in services, now expected, was met with confrontation. Subsidies to agriculture, corporations, and transportation were significantly cut. Welfare was shifted to the states and counties which were not able to absorb the increased burden. Eligibility for social security was raised from 60 to 62 then 65 and finally 69 years of age. Medicare and Medicaid were reduced and federal aid to states was finally abolished. But like any addiction, withdrawal is painful. Like a man left destitute by gambling, the taxpayers left to fend for themselves after supporting the generation before, went away, but went away angry. The government managed not to default on its loans, but the people had lost faith. And the debt remained in the trillions and interest on it still increased at an unaffordable rate.

Protests raged in both liberal and conservative camps. "Peoples liberation Armies", "Coalition for Justice" and other left-wing groups competed with right-wing militias for the time and attention of the government. As their strength ebbed and flowed, leaflets, propaganda and demonstrations gave way to ambushes, sabotage, defiance of laws and edicts, and increasingly, full scale riots. Each instance brought more and more involvement of the military for insuring the domestic tranquility. Initially they functioned in an advisory role, later complete integration became normal. Posse Commetatis barred the military from being used for police functions was drafted to prevent military abuses, such as those endured by Southerners after the Civil War. Although it remained on the books, effectively it ceased to exist. Not only did this drain the military of increasingly scarce manpower, material, and morale, it also alienated both the left and the right. Again the cost.

Eventually, the president declared a state of national emergency. The raising of revenue was enhanced without congressional authorization, through surcharges, surtaxes and imposition fees. The military deepened its already heavy role in civilian law enforcement, a logical result of the federalization of even minor crimes. The 4th, 5th, 6th, and 8th amendments were further muzzled in order to suppress the 2nd. The mainstream press became blander as the radical press

became more inflammatory. The elections became more fluff and hype and less substance as disinterest dwindled to discontent, and finally disdain.

Amazingly, as the crisis drew on a strange sense of normalcy continued. Couples were still married, babies were either born or aborted, business still opened and closed, and people still worked. Television and movies churned out an unending stream of escapism. Old people shook their heads and talked about the good old days.

Apathy settled on the people like a fog. Crimes often went unreported. The police were viewed as inept, or bought off. Schools literally fell apart either from disrepair, or vandalism. Teachers who used to bring supplies, purchased with their own salary, became overwhelmed and simply gave up. Those who could, escaped to private schools, the rest endured. Certain counties in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming unofficially became off limits to federal authority. Anarchy slowly grew like some undiscovered virus.

After three hours of nonstop lecture, Professor Witzenbaum paused to consider his students. Both were dead silent staring back at him wondering if he would go on.

He looked around the room as if to consider what he might say to end his lecture. At last his eyes rested on the blood stained cane. He hefted it as if to consider another victim. "I once saw a movie, I think it came out in the mid 1980's. I can't recall the title, but it was about time travel. You see H. G. Wells makes his time machine and was about to use it, but his doctor friend, who of course is Jack the Ripper, steals it and travels to the future San Francisco. The machine travels both in time and space. The machine has a key which returns it to its origin if the key isn't installed. Wells chases the doctor and in the process finds a young woman and falls in love. Very convenient sort of thing to happen in such movies. At one point the girl asks Wells if he is going to carry a gun. He responds 'Violence is the last resort of the incompetent'. Later in the movie, after the Ripper has kidnapped his girlfriend, you see Wells shoving shells into a revolver and stuffing it in his pocket." Witzenbaum considered the cane a few more moments. "I guess I just proved I'm incompetent." With that he tossed the cane into the waste paper basket.

"Still there is one thing I'm glad of." He looked at his two students to see if they would ask him what. They didn't, but they indicated with their attention that they were curious what it could be. "My parents are both dead. I'm glad they won't have to pay again."

Chapter 8

Michael Scott's gaze wandered around the classroom, wondering about the other students, observing the general confusion and disinterest before the teacher's monologue ended in a question that snared his attention again.

"Who watched the News last night?"

Michael counted four reluctantly raised hands.

"What happened yesterday?" Mr. Jones question held an air of urgency about it. "Since the beginning of the year I've told you I wanted you to watch the news every night. Well, what happened!?"

Michael instinctively lowered his head and slouched lower in his chair knowing the teacher would soon call on someone. He had watched the news, but like most others in the class, he didn't want to appear too willing to admit obedience to the teacher's instructions.

The teacher scanned his class roll book, which lay open on his desk. "Ben, Ben Maynard." Mr. Jones turned toward Ben. Michael shuddered at the thought of Ben Maynard. Michael and Ben were as different as a Robert Frost poem and a Van Halen rock video. And in this case, opposites didn't attract. "Ben, do you know what happened yesterday?"

"The Dodgers beat the Giants?" Ben smiled a brainless grin as he basked in the praise of his equally brainless cohorts.

Michael didn't bother to look at Ben. He could envision from past experience the smug smile on Ben's face covered with unattended acne and wispy whiskers. Behind the neglected face was a wasted intellect, focused incessantly on mischief and contempt for everyone. Michael could see Mr. Jones' face harden at the lack of seriousness. Slowly Mr. Jones muttered under his breath "Are these kids seventeen, or seven?" His eyes wandered around the room looking for any signs of intelligent life.

"Come on people! Your world is about to come to an end and apparently you don't have a clue! We're not talking hundreds of thousands of people out of work; we're talking millions! People going hungry! Riots in the streets! Something very significant happened yesterday in the financial world that is symptomatic of forces that eventually will affect everyone, including you.

"And I'm not talking about feeling sorry for the poor and needy. I'm talking about the very real possibility of YOUR parents being out of work! I'm talking about YOU going hungry! And I'm talking about riots in YOUR neighborhoods! Now what happened?"

Michael slouched lower for fear that he would be called on. In spite of his defensive position, Michael had a fairly good view of most of the class, at least the backs of their heads. After a long awkward pause, a slender, feminine hand was reluctantly raised like a white flag after a long battle.

"Yes, Sharon. Since I don't believe the Dodgers beat the Giants last night, tell me, what happened yesterday?"

"Something to do with, ah, T-bills or something the Government was selling that made the interest rate go up or something?"

"Right on target! The interest rate set by the Federal Reserve Bank on Federal Reserve Notes, not to be confused with T-Bills, rose to seventeen percent yesterday. So, what's so bad about that? Who doesn't want seventeen percent return on their money. Who in here gets seventeen percent return on their passbook account at the bank? Anyone in here have a bank account?"

If anyone in the class had any financial assets at all, they did not admit it.

"O.K., so suppose one of you had about ten thousand dollars and wanted to invest it. Wouldn't seventeen percent annual return be great news?"

"Where am I gonna get ten thousand dollars?" someone asked.

"Jerry White, you and I go back a long ways. Judging from last year, you will never earn ten grand, unless you change your study habits. But to answer your question, a lot of people do," Mr. Jones answered. "Besides, pension plans or mutual funds make it easy to get a piece of the action for the little guy. Why isn't this great news?"

If anyone had any idea, they weren't about to disgrace themselves by proving they knew anything.

"Why did they offer seventeen percent, instead of fifteen percent?" Silence. "It's because there just weren't enough investors willing to buy at fifteen percent. They couldn't get enough people or institutions to buy notes, to cover the debt the government had to create in order to keep itself going! Why couldn't they get investors to buy the notes?"

"Who cares?" Jerry demanded in an impertinent voice.

Mr. Jones contemplated the question for two score seconds which seemed a very long time. Finally he spoke "He sat right there, I think." Mr. Jones pointed to the chair Chelsey Bell was seated in. "His name was Justin Combs." At the mention of Justin's name a couple of the students visibly stiffened.

Chelsey started asking those around her who Justin was, and beginning to act as if he may have contaminated the chair she was sitting in.

"Who is Justin Combs, you ask? Better to ask who Justin Combs was. Justin Combs was a student of mine three years ago. He was a very good student, always turned his homework in on time. A fine young man with a bright future, I thought. Justin Combs was drafted into the Army just last year, and soon thereafter was deployed to the Mexico border. Justin Combs died from a bullet wound to the face less than three months ago." Mr. Jones paused and could see that

he had captured most of the class.

Three or four of the students knew Justin Combs, or his younger sister Sherry. A couple of others had known other young unfortunate soldiers. All had seen at least some death and carnage on the television or in print. Even for teenagers it was becoming difficult to escape the thought that the black caped reaper could pass near them some day soon. Mr. Jones could see he was finally getting through and pushed his advantage.

"Who cares, you ask." Mr. Jones started at one end of the class and worked his way around until he had made eye contact with each student in turn, saying nothing as he did. Finally he continued. "Allow me to illuminate the empty caverns behind your eyes."

Mister Jones surveyed the class as he carefully considered how to take them to the next level of understanding. "It was a beautiful day in July. The ladies were all dressed up in their finest dresses and hats, and the men were equally dressed up to enjoy the spectacle. It was a little too hot to be comfortable, but the gentry didn't have to worry to much about that with their horse drawn carriages, and the ladies under their beautiful lace parasols. A fine lunch with a bottle of wine to top things off made just a smashing day for all. You see they had all come out from Washington to enjoy a terribly exciting event. They came to watch a battle -- the First Battle of Bull Run.

"They were about to witness the beginning of the bloodiest war this continent has seen in recorded history, and they thought it was a party." Mr. Jones paused then continued in a stronger voice. "Anybody here think men hacked to pieces, or dying of dysentery is a party?" No one answered as Mr. Jones paused, his eyes scanning the youthful faces.

"The day started off splendidly for a war. The soldiers were all dressed up in their colorful uniforms of every description depending on their regiment, each marching in formation. There were canons and muskets, horses and sabers. Oh, what a wonderful spectacle to enjoy.

"The Union soldiers attacked, and although the soldiers were tired from marching all the way from Washington, the confederates nearly broke in confusion. For a moment it looked like the general consensus was right, two weeks and the Union soldiers would whip those Rebels and teach them a thing or two. Then things started to go wrong -- terribly, terribly wrong.

"First, there was this general by the name of Johnston. You see he was supposed to be up in the Shenandoah Valley, but he had bugged out and showed up at the battle unexpectedly to the Union Army. Second, the Confederates brought along a fine Southern gentleman by the name of General Thomas J. Jackson. He was so immovable under attack that he was called Stonewall Jackson thereafter. He was one of the finest and most fearless generals this country has ever known. Anyway, unfortunately for the North, things got a little mixed up.

"The Northern army had beautiful uniforms, but they hadn't trained enough and they got all mixed up. Eventually it disintegrated into a full retreat back to Washington. When the civilians realized the Union Army was leaving without them, they decided that the picnic was over and they left without finishing the wine. The problem was there was only one road to Washington, and the road crossed several streams over narrow bridges. As rumors flew that the

Southerners were about to attack on the retreating horde, panic set in.

"By the time the tangled mass of humanity made it back to Washington it was obvious to soldier and civilian alike that this was going to be a whole lot harder and messier than they had thought it would be. But in their wildest dreams they had no idea how bad it would get. More Americans died in the American Civil War than in every other war we have ever fought, including, the War of Independence, World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnamese War, Desert Storm, the Bosnian War and the war in Iraq combined."

Mr. Jones surveyed the crowd, which was resting in the palm of his hand.

"Let me give you a second example of what I'm talking about. On the day the French Revolution began, the aristocrats didn't have a clue what was about to burst upon them. Do you know what King Louis XVI wrote in his diary the first day of the Revolution? He wrote 'Nothing happened today.' And he was right. In the palace of Versailles nothing happened. Even though he had eyes, he could not see beyond the gardens and fountains and manicured lawns. All he could see was the glittering chandeliers, gilded mirrors, and sumptuous meals served on the finest china money could buy. And it was, a boring day.

"But outside the gates of his palace there were hungry people with few clothes and shabby hovels. The Government was bankrupt from gross mismanagement and corruption. Outside..." Mr. Jones's voice hushed to almost a whisper. "...there was revolution. And revolution meant riots, and looting, and aristocrats thrown in prison until they were brought before the guillotine and beheaded. It meant the end of the world as the aristocracy had known it." He ended the sentence with a crescendo.

Valerie Schweitzer raised her hand. "Yes Valerie."

"Well, what's gonna happen then? How do we stop it? Whose fault is this? I mean, we're just kids. We don't even vote." The hint of a cry in her voice betrayed a serious interest in the subject.

"Ah, my dear Valerie. Could the Revolutionary War have been avoided after the Boston Tea Party? Could Hitler have been stopped in 1938? Was Korea bound to self-destruct? If each of you stays tuned for the next eight months you will be able to answer those and many more questions about world history. And you will discover one more thing my little Munchkins. We are making history, and someday people will read about how we wrestled with horrendous problems, which we are forced to live through. We live during an absolutely incredible moment in time. It is almost as if a whole century of history is trying to cram itself into the first few years of this millennium."

Just then the bell rang. The class that had quieted with unprecedented attention suddenly awoke from their collective trance and started a noisy stampede for the door.

"Your homework for tomorrow... Listen up Flower Children! For tomorrow I want you... C'mon, Zippo el Lippo. For tomorrow I want you to finish reading chapter 5. I want you to read that chapter, and as you do, ask yourself how the war currently raging between Russia,

Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and the Caucasus is similar yet different from the first civil war they had in 1917, and; Quiet Class! Watch the news tonight. I'm serious about watching the news; there will be a quiz on it. See you tomorrow."

Michael didn't leave his seat to join the rush. It was almost as if he hadn't noticed that Mr. Jones had stopped talking, as he still stared at the same spot where he had stood. Michael thought back to the first day of school. Mr. Jones spent the entire 30-minute period explaining two quotes. The first was "Those who fail to learn from History are condemned to repeat it." The second was more blunt and direct "The only thing we learn from History, is that no one learns a thing from History." Using the fall of the Roman Empire and the looting of the City of Rome first by the Goth's then latter by the Vandals Mr. Jones had argued that every great catastrophe in history was entirely predictable, and yet apparently, painfully inevitable.

Slowly Michael stood and moved over to the chair Chelsey had been seated in and stared at the empty seat. Finally he spoke in barely a whisper. "The Goths are at the gates of Rome. Alas, lets go to the Colosseum and watch the gladiators. Let the games begin."

Chapter 9

"John, I just got off the phone with Mr. Laurence and he just ripped me up one side and down the other. You know Mr. Laurence, the lawyer."

As soon as John heard the word "lawyer", the blank expression left his face and he rolled his eyes. "Not Mr. Laurence again. I thought we were through with him."

"Nope, sorry John. The honorable Mr. Laurence was just on the phone complaining that we do unbelievably shoddy work, and if we don't have it fixed immediately, he will sue the company, the company owners, and my yet unborn grandchildren for every penny we have, ever had, or ever expect to have." John chuckled as he stood up from behind the computer workstation and reached for his tie. "Take Rafael with you and see what the problem is. Do whatever it takes to make him happy."

"Rafael doesn't need me. He knows installation better than I ever will. I don't have time for this. I'm already a week behind. Why do I need to go?"

"To make it look good. If I don't send two men he'll think it isn't good enough. You know in our business perception is more important than reality. That is especially true for Mr. Laurence."

"OK. I'm on my way."

John met Rafael downstairs in the enclosed and gaited basement garage next to the truck. Rafael kept his tools in an old toolbox, which he threw in the bed. John climbed into the passenger side of as Rafael got in on the other.

Rafael was a craftsman. He worked slowly, meticulously, and he never made mistakes. John liked him better than some of the younger technicians, because if Rafael did it, John didn't have to check it. Unlike many other Californians of Mexican origin he didn't start working in the fields after crossing the border at night. He had done well in the construction industry building condominiums for rich Americans, Europeans, and Japanese. He had made a decent living until the Mexican Civil War spilled over from the state of Chiapas into the rest of southern Mexico. When the war scared off too many of the potential investors, the work dried up.

Rafael entered the country with his family legally due to his skills as an electrician and a brother-in-law who offered to sponsor him. Under the present immigration rules, Rafael would not be able to immigrate legally. Almost no one could now. As the war intensified, the flow of immigrants turned into a flood. The requirements for legal immigration grew tighter, and ever tighter. As controls on immigration grew more stringent, the flood of humanity grew wider and deeper.

When the truck pulled through the large remotely controlled iron gates and drove up the long driveway of the Laurence estate toward the grandiose southern plantation style mansion, John was struck anew with the tremendous show of conspicuous consumption. If a shack in Beverly Hills cost a million dollars, John couldn't begin to guess what an estate like this must

cost. They were met at the door by a woman of Mexican descent in her mid forties dressed in a uniform with a carefully practiced greeting.

She led them through the house and out to the pool which was surrounded by patios, lawns and rose gardens. If you were to take away the pool, and trade the half dozen Mexican gardeners for darkies picking cotton, John could easily imagine that he was in the Deep South before the war. Rhett or Scarlet could be just around the next turn. Instead, they approached a balding man in his early sixties seated sideways on a lounge chair with an array of papers spread before him on a short table. As they approached he pulled the cigar from his mouth with his left hand as he inserted his pen behind his ear with his right hand.

"Let me tell you, I plan to bill you for the time and inconvenience this is causing me, to say nothing of the trauma knowing I am sitting here with absolutely no security that I paid a bundle for!" Mr. Laurence spread his arms in a grand gesture that came naturally to him from decades of practiced courtroom theatrics.

John ignored the rhetoric and started to attack the problem like any other engineering challenge. "What seems to be the problem Mr. Laurence?"

"I'll tell you what the problem is. You're over priced security system is a pile of junk. It's not worth the dynamite it would take to blow it to kingdom come and back!"

"Mr. Laurence, could you please explain to me what the exact nature of the malfunction is?"

"Your system doesn't work! The panel doesn't even light up, nothing. I tell you, this system hasn't been installed three weeks and already the entire thing is shot. I'll bet if I took the time to investigate, I would find that shoddy materials were used right from the start. I wouldn't be surprised if several city codes weren't broken during the installation as well. I wonder what the City will say about this when they investigate."

"Rafael, you check the power box. I'll start with the control panel inside." John was beginning to get more than a little irritated with Mr. Laurence but he avoided even the hint of insubordination.

"Manuel." Mr. Laurence yelled over his shoulder. "You show them around. I've wasted too much time with this nonsense already."

One of the workers, presumably the head gardener, stood up from the work he was doing. Manuel led Rafael around the side of the house speaking in Spanish as they went; the woman who greeted them at the door led John back inside the house. They wandered seemingly endlessly through the house. One room that particularly struck John for its opulence was the kitchen. The fact that it was almost as big as his own house was striking, but the long stretches of marble counters that no one but the hired help would ever see added a sense of the bizarre gone mad. Finally they came to the control panel on the wall of a utility room.

John surveyed the panel before commenting, "Well, Mr. Laurence is right about one

thing, the master control panel is dead." Just then all the lights blinked on then off as the panel went through its boot up procedure. The lights blinked on twice more then remained off with the exception of the red power light witch stayed on, signifying that the power was on. No error lights remained on and everything seemed to be functioning as designed. At first John was surprised since he wasn't touching anything. Then he realized that Rafael must have found the problem. "Well, It looks O.K. now." The woman said nothing, but led him back out to meet Rafael and Manuel.

"The circuit breaker had tripped." Rafael simply explained. "We wired it to a fifteen amp, GFI breaker which sometimes is pretty sensitive. Manuel thinks probably one of his workers tripped it accidentally when he was in here earlier. A breaker tripped when they were doing the hedges with the electric clippers. It wasn't all the way tripped, just half way, you know. I turned it all the way off and then all the on and I think that will fix it. He doesn't want us to say anything about it because Mr. Laurence gets very angry some times."

John chuckled out loud. "Yea, I'll bet he does."

"Senior." Manuel entreated, "Senior Laurence can get very, very angry, and we could loose our jobs if he gets too angry at us."

John lost his smile and his forehead became furrowed. "You can't fire somebody just because an extra sensitive circuit breaker trips accidentally. Besides, if he does, why not get a real job somewhere else where you don't have to work for a plantation overseer."

Rafael explained. "John, you don't understand. Most of these are illegals. He can threaten them with deportation. They don't even make minimum wage. They have families. Be careful what you say."

John stuffed his hands into his pants pockets with his thumbs sticking out. He glanced back and forth at the two men then surveyed the vast fortune that the estate represented. Then he looked long and hard at the workers tending the flowerbeds. Last he examined the ends of his shoes. "Thanks for telling me. Manuel, are you familiar with the breaker box, so if something happens again you can cycle the breaker. Turn it off and then on again?"

"Si Senior."

John looked at Rafael for confirmation. He shook his head in the affirmative. "OK, lets go talk to Mr. Laurence."

The three headed back toward the pool area. Manuel returned to the rose beds, and the other two approached the lawyer. "Everything checks out Mr. Laurence. There was a little problem, but we've taken care of it and you shouldn't have any more problems."

"What was wrong?" he spoke without removing the cigar this time.

"The circuit breaker tripped. No real problem. We just cycled it and everything is fine."

"I'll bet you put in one that is too small, didn't you? Trying to save ten cents at my expense. I'll bet a fire could happen which would burn down the whole house just so you could save ten cents."

"Mr. Laurence, small fuses are more sensitive than larger fuses. You have more protection against fire with a small fuse than larger ones. A small fuse may accidentally trip on occasion, but they do provide more factor of safety."

"Listen here. I wasn't born yesterday. You might be able to pull that kind of crap on some poor old lady, but you can't pull it on me. I paid for the best security system money can buy, and I want the best system money can buy!"

John stared down at the end of the cigar butt burning in the fat lawyer's mouth and the smoke curling up into the clear afternoon air. "Rafael, go to the truck and get a 100 amp fuse." As he spoke his eyes never left the snarled face of the lawyer sneering back up at him.

"But John...?"

"Just do it!" John knew Rafael was going to try to tell him that there was no such thing as a 100 amp GFI fuse, and if there was, it would require two slots in the breaker box not one. The box was not set up to allow for a double wide fuse where the fuse was, and they would have to rewire the whole box over if they needed to do it.

The two stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, neither willing to show their hand. The lawyer's eyes shifted back and forth between the two witnesses as he evaluated his chances for a miscalculation. Finally he asked, "What happens if you put in a circuit breaker that is too big?"

"If there is a short in the wiring, your house will burn to the ground."

"Is 100 amps too big?"

"Way too big."

"Well what are you putting that in for?"

"The customer is always right. We will be happy to put in any size fuse you wish, completely at our expense; upon your request of course."

The lawyer continued evaluating his two witnesses before him, both the almost cocky firmness of John and also the concern on Rafael's face before he decided it was time to change the plea.

"Well, you're the engineer. If you say it needs a fifteen amp fuse leave it."

"Thank you sir. If you ever change your mind, please give us a call. And if you have any other problems, please ask for me and I will take care of it personally."

With that John turned and departed, Rafael right by his side.

* * * * *

John left the office late again, barely in time to get to the gun shop and pick up his shotgun. He made it through the door just as they were locking up. After serving him, they unlocked the door to let him out so that no new customers could enter after closing.

After picking up the shotgun he headed over to the mall to get some things for Sarah. He hated getting things for his wife unless he knew exactly what it was she wanted. It like he always got it wrong. One time she put on her list peanut butter/crackers. After an exhaustive search of the snack section he finally found peanut butter sandwiched crackers. When he got home she looked in the paper sack, pulled out the box and asked, "Why did you buy this?"

"You said you wanted it. It was on the list." As proof he pulled the list from his pocket.

She looked at the list quizzically for a moment then began to laugh.

"What's so funny? What did I do this time?"

She cuddled up to him as if to ask what he was doing tonight. "Darling. The next time you happen to go to the store, would you mind buying some peanut butter, and some soda crackers, please?"

This time his list included band aids, that was easy, kids shampoo, no problem, the one with the purple swirl on the front, and a piece of beige poster board. Twenty-four by thirty-six inch beige poster board. John was standing in front of the poster board display, and he had the right size, but the problem was the color. They had white, yellow, pink, green, blue, red, brown and black, but no beige. Should he get white, yellow, or try again tomorrow. Tomorrow was out. She needed to have the poster done for tomorrow night, and there just wouldn't be time. She would have to make a special trip and John didn't want her to have to do that.

John hated guessing what decision someone else would make, even someone he knew as well as his wife. He much preferred a simple computational problem with a closed form solution as opposed to the random nature of human desires. John was more than an engineer by profession; he was an engineer when he didn't need to be.

If he were buying the poster board for someone besides his wife, actually it would have been much easier. All he would have to do is grab the white one and tell them, that was the best he could do. If they weren't happy, next time they wouldn't send him. The fact that he loved his wife, and wanted her to have just what she asked for, made her complete satisfaction a hard requirement.

John pulled out the white poster board and then the yellow one. The white was obviously too white, and the yellow was likewise too yellow. He could buy both, but that would violate another inviolate rule, never waste money. Besides, then he would have two poster

boards with the possibility that neither would be usable. Finally, John decided, he would buy both. Hopefully one would be close enough, and the other would have to be stuffed behind the couch, until she needed it some other day.

* * * * *

"Sarah. Sarah. I'm home. I couldn't find the color of poster board you asked for, but I got white and yellow. Will that do?"

Sarah stood in the hallway studying the two colors of poster board.

"What's wrong? Did you really want a beige post or board?"

Sarah smiled. "No that's fine. I guess I'll use the white. Thank you for getting it. Are you hungry?"

"Yes I am. But I'm mostly tired."

"I'll get your dinner out of the fridge and heat it up."

Kevin came in and attacked his father while he seated himself for dinner. Sarah begged Kevin to have mercy on the breadwinner of the family, but that didn't elicit much mercy from the young attacker. Before he was through with his dinner Natalie bounced in with an account of her doings of the day.

Finally after he finished his dinner both adult Scotts banded together to herd the junior members of the family to bed. It took a while before the shorter Scotts were finally in bed, teeth brushed, homework finished, clothes picked up, a drink of water for each, and the dog in for the night.

Once the younger two were in bed, John slipped into Michael's room to see how he was doing. He was bent over his desk with a single light shining on his homework. "Are you having trouble with homework, Michael?"

Michael looked up from the book he was studying. "I'm working on it."

"What are you studying?"

"History."

"Do you have much more to do?"

"I have to finish reading this chapter and write a page on what I read."

"If you need help, call me or your mother."

" I will."

Finally John settled into the living room with the paper as Sarah folded some clothes. On the front page over to the side of the headline a particular column caught his attention.

LA CITY, COUNTY, AND WASHINGTON SUED

A class action suit valued at 200 billion dollars was filed on behalf of what may grow to be four million defendants yesterday in federal court. The suit alleges that the city of Los Angeles, the county of Los Angeles, as well as the federal government are all liable for not providing minimum housing for children of undocumented workers living in the U.S. Samuel T. Laurence, the attorney filling the suit, claims that this is only the beginning, and that the case will be broadened to include another thirty cities and six other counties.

Samuel Laurence was quoted as he left Federal court yesterday, "It is shameful the way that these children have been treated by our government. I intend to win for my clients the constitutional rights that any person should have that lives in these United States..."

John threw down the paper in the middle of the room as he stood in rage. "What a bunch of... That guy no more cares about the poor in America than he cares about the mud on his Mercedes. He's the biggest..."

"Darling, what's the matter?!"

"Augh this guy Laurence, what a scum bag lawyer, on one hand he is employing illegal aliens at below minimum wage, and on the other he sues the government for not giving more of our tax dollars to children of illegals. He just smells big bucks and figures the government is good for it. He'll sue the government for 200 billion dollars, settle for 3 billion keep 1 billion, and I'll bet when all is said and done, the kids get nothing! And I pick up the tab for his self-righteousness. I'm going to bed, how about you?"

"I will if you can settle down enough to not wake up the kids."

"I'm sorry." John headed toward the bedroom grabbing the paper off the floor as he walked.

* * * * *

As John was about to drift off, Sarah rolled over and quietly spoke. "John, did you remember to get your gun?"

John's eyes widened. "Da-gon-it, I forgot. No wait. I got it. It's in the trunk of the car. I'll get it out in the morning."

"Don't you think you should get it now, darling."

"It's locked in the trunk of the car, which is locked in the garage. It will be O.K. until morning."

"Are you sure?"

"Believe me it will be fine."

"O.K." Sarah rolled back over as if to go to sleep.

John closed his eyes, but he kept being nagged by the thought that he might forget to take the gun out in the morning and drive to work, leaving it in the trunk. While at work his car gets stolen and the thieves find the gun in the trunk and use it to rob a bank. Then he gets arrested for being the owner of the gun that was used to rob a bank in which two people were killed and...

"John, where are you going?"

"I'm getting the gun out of the trunk of the car and locking it in the gun safe."

Chapter 10

"Wash your hands and come to dinner," was his mother's greeting the moment Michael burst through the front door.

"O.K., Mom." he yelled back as he headed down the hall toward his room. He no longer shared it with his little brother since Allen left for college. He dropped his books on his bed, splashed his hands with water, and then headed for the dinner table. "What's for dinner?"

"Tuna casserole!" his eleven-year-old sister groaned.

Tuna casserole wasn't Michael's favorite, but it sounded fine to him. That meant he could eat all he wanted, and as a seventeen-year-old male, he was always ready to eat. The last time he could remember not being hungry at mealtime was on a particular scouting trip about six years previous. When he woke up that morning he was really looking forward to breakfast, especially because it was pancakes. That is, he was anxious until he saw them. "What are those?" he asked with incredulity.

"Pancakes." The Second Class Scout he shared a tent with answered as if no explanation was necessary.

"Pancakes?" When Michael thought of pancakes, little white round balls with black specks on them was not what came to mind. Michael was only a Tenderfoot, and didn't know much about outdoor cooking. Michael was hoping Tim's greater experience would prove to be an asset when he was teamed with Tim for his first over night camp out.

"Scrambled pancakes, ahh." Mr. McKinnon spoke. Michael noticed for the first time the Scoutmaster looking down, as he said the words. The Scout leader spoke with the air of an assay officer evaluating an ore sample.

"Scrambled pancakes?" Michael asked bewildered.

"Yep. Tim here makes the best scrambled pancakes I know of. You hungry? They're best eaten hot." A trace of a smile danced across the scoutmaster's lips.

Michael looked at the marble like morsels. "Naa," Michael replied "I'm not too hungry right now." Michael wondered how long it would be until lunch.

"If you prefer, I have a few extra pancakes up at my camp. Of course they're the plain old flat kind. I never have gotten the hang of making scrambled pancakes." Michael looked up into the deeply lined, leathery face of his scoutmaster. He was a mechanic by trade. A hundred and fifty years earlier he might of been a ranch hand. He didn't talk much, but he knew a lot about outdoor living. The trace of a smile broadened over his face as he looked down into those tender eyes.

"Maybe just one or two."

"Tim, you keep working on those pancakes. Michael, you come with me."

Michael ate six golden, light, fluffy, flat pancakes that morning. He never complained once that they were not scrambled.

Michael's Dad was sitting at the end of the dinner table reading a weekly magazine. His eleven-year-old sister, Natalie was setting dinner glasses on the table. Michael could hear, Kevin, now five years old, watching cartoons on TV in the family room.

"Allen called today." Sarah stated.

"Does he need money already?" John joked. At least he hoped it was a joke.

"No, he just called."

"Well, if he doesn't need money, why did he call?"

"He just called. I think he was feeling a little homesick, so he wanted to call home. He said he wanted to talk to you too, and he would call back later."

"I never heard from the kid when he lived in my house, and now that it's long distance, he phones!"

"It's not a long distance call!" Sarah brushed the hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand and continued working.

"Well, I'll see what he has to say when he calls. How's dinner?"

"It's almost done. Michael would you ask your little brother to come to dinner?" Michael's mother did not look up from the carrots she was grating.

"Sure, Mom."

Once the family had assembled and were seated, and a blessing said over the food, Michael began to consume the most copious quantity of food on any plate at the table. If Allen had been there, Michael would have come in a close second place, Allen being first. Sarah often wondered out loud, half joking, where they managed to put all that food in such skinny bodies.

"How was your day at school, Michael?" Sarah spoke with a hopeful tone of voice.

"Oh, it was OK."

"Do you have any homework?" Sarah continued.

"Do you know what Sean did today at school?" Natalie interrupted. "He dropped the teacher's car keys down the toilet!"

"What did he do?" Sarah questioned in disbelief.

"He swiped the teacher's keys out of her purse when she wasn't watching. Then on his way out to recess, he threw them in the toilet."

"Are you sure? Maybe your teacher just misplaced them." her mother suggested, hoping for the best.

"Ryan saw him do it, and the janitor used a wire thing to get them back out."

"Well, I'll bet Sean is going to have some explaining to do when he gets home!" commented John with a smile on his face.

"Sean's parents won't do anything to him! He never gets in trouble. All they ever do is talk to him a little. He never gets grounded or nothing!"

"Or anything." her mother corrected.

"Or anything. One time he sprayed the neighbor's cat with spray paint, and he didn't have to be grounded or nothing...or anything." her self-correction in anticipating her mother's admonition.

"Well, I hope you kids know what would happen to you if you pulled a stunt like that!" John sternly declared.

"We would be grounded for life, or longer." Natalie answered.

"At least!" John agreed, the sternness in his expression fading to a smile.

"Can we talk about something else during dinner please?" Sarah asked.

John picked up on the not too subtle cue. "So, have you heard anything from Grandpa and Grandma Marshall?"

"Not today." Sarah answered. "I told you what the doctor said about Dad?"

"That he has to be careful and not exert himself too much, and keep taking his medicine?"

"Yes."

"Are they still thinking about moving him from Bishop to be closer to the specialists?" John inquired.

"They're still talking about it, but I think both of them are in no shape to try to move. Especially as sick as Dad is."

"Well, I don't think it's a very good idea either, but if you need to go up there for a while,

we'll figure a way to do that. It may be that he hasn't got much... Well, I mean if he has another stroke like last June... Anyway, if you want to go back up to your parents, we can do it."

"Are we going back to Grandma's house?" Kevin asked with great interest.

"We'll see Kevin. We'll see." Sarah ended with a whisper.

Sarah's eyes got a little misty and she blinked a lot. Then looked out the window, as if she was interested in something in the front yard.

Kevin looked back and forth between his mother and father trying to fathom what was happening.

John watched his wife carefully for a moment then looked down at his dinner and started to poke at his carrot salad. He wished he had not been so careless, but it was too late now.

Just then the phone rang. Natalie jumped up and grabbed for the receiver. "Hello." she responded in a cheerful voice. Her expression dulled immediately. She held the phone toward her father and simply declared, "It's Allen."

John walked to the kitchen phone as he cleared his throat. "Hello, Allen. How is school?"

"Just fine. Dad, I didn't want to tell Mom, and I don't want you to worry, I'm fine, but I had some trouble last Saturday night. My car was stolen. In fact it was carjacked."

John turned to face away from the table. "Ah yeah, just a minute Allen."

Turning back to the dinner table John put the receiver to his chest. "Natalie. Would you please hang up this phone when I get into the bedroom?"

Sarah turned and gave a quizzical glance at her husband, her composure recovering.

"Man talk." John explained and Sarah went back to eating, apparently satisfied with the explanation.

When John picked up the receiver in the bedroom he called over his shoulder, "Thank you Natalie." Before speaking on the phone, he listened, but could still hear the background noises from the dinning area. Through the phone he spoke, "You can hang up now, Natalie." Finally there was a click and the sound of dinner was abruptly silenced.

"Tell me that again Allen." John asked.

"Last Saturday night I went out with another guy and our dates. I took a wrong turn and ran into an ambush on a blind ally. We all got out OK, but I lost my car."

"No one was hurt?"

"Randy, the guy I was with, he was hit in the head, but not too bad. Other than that we're fine."

"You mean he was shot in the head!" John's eyes widened.

"No, Dad. He was struck in the head with the barrel of a gun. It bled a little, but he's fine. Really!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Did you call the police?"

"Sure, but they gave me little chance of ever seeing my car again."

"I understand. Have you talked to the insurance agent about it?"

"Yes, I reported it today."

"Well at least everybody is OK. They took your car at gunpoint, and everybody is all right? Gosh we're lucky. Really, no one was badly hurt?"

"Dad, I've never been so afraid or mad in my life, but we got out fine. But I'm afraid I'll never see that Camaro again."

"You know, Allen, insurance will only pay the balance over the eight thousand dollar theft deductible. On that car, having only paid on it for a year, we probably owe more than we will get. Insurance against theft is so expensive that a high deductible is all we could afford. I don't see how we can get you another car without cutting into your schooling."

"Dad, I'm not getting another car." Allen interrupted. "I'll buy a used bicycle, and I'll be bumming rides off friends when I need to. I'll pay off what I owe on the car and worry about another car when I can afford it."

John was taken back, expecting Allen to ask for a loan to replace the car he had just lost. "You will?"

"Yes Dad, and I'll be paying more of my schooling too."

There was silence for a second while John absorbed what his son had just said. "That's fine, Allen, but don't let your studies suffer."

"They won't"

After another pause John continued. "What happened? How did they steal your car?"

"Like I said, I took a wrong turn down a blind ally and before I knew it, we were surrounded by a gang with guns. We had no choice. We were lucky to get out alive."

"They had guns?"

"They sure did. Shotguns, rifles, pistols, you name it. It was real scary, but Randy got us out OK."

"Who's Randy?"

"A guy I know from school."

"How did he get you out without anybody being shot?"

It suddenly occurred to Allen that he wasn't sure. "I don't know, but he did. He knows a lot. He used to be Special Forces in the Army. He's a pretty sharp guy."

"I'll bet he is."

"Well, I better go Dad, I have homework to do. Don't tell Mom. She would worry too much."

John smiled a little at his son's condescension toward his Mother. "I'll be careful how I tell your mother." John didn't think Sarah was too fragile to hear the truth, but he was touched at his son's concern for his mother.

"Thanks Dad."

"Sure Allen."

"Say Dad."

"Yes."

"Allen wanted to tell his Father that he loved him, but he was still not old enough to say it. He substituted. "Thanks for everything."

"Your welcome."

"See you Dad."

"Be careful."

"I will. Bye."

John paused and then responded after he heard the click and the start of the dial tone. "Take good care, son."

After John hung up the phone he sat on the bed staring at the dresser. Finally he rose, walked to the closet. Then he removed a key from his pocket and opened a sheet metal gun case

tucked behind his clothes inside his closet. On his top shelf he removed his 9mm pistol. He popped the magazine out and examined the gun and loaded clip. After a cursory check he replaced the clip and placed the pistol back on the shelf in the gun case. Next he removed the 30-06 from the lower section of the gun safe and examined it, without actioning the bolt. He was still looking at the gun's craftsmanship and feeling its weight when Sarah entered the room.

"John, your dinner is getting cold. What did Allen want?"

John turned toward Sarah and she noticed that her husband was holding his rifle. Her eyes met his and she began to start conjuring up the worst. "Is Allen all right?"

"Allen is fine, but his car was stolen by a gang at gunpoint. A gang of armed robbers surrounded him, a friend and their dates. They might have been killed, but they are all OK. No one was hurt. I guess I should be happy. I guess I should be just tickled pink. But I'm not. I'm as mad as I can be." His tone of voice revealed the true feelings underscoring his deliberate understatement.

Sarah put her hand to her mouth and made an involuntary gasp when John started to speak, then slowly let her hand drop as she heard the facts, but the deep look of concern never left her face. John looked down at the high-powered hunting rifle held lightly in his hands.

"You're not thinking of going after them are you, John?"

"Heavens no! I'm mad. Oh I'm real mad! But I'm not stupid. But when I stop and think about my son being robbed at the point of a gun on any old Saturday evening, and it happens to other people just minding their own business all the time, how far can we be from total anarchy?"

"You really think it's really come to that don't you."

"I don't know. But the way things are going, it may not be far away."

"Are you worried?"

"Yes and no. Not for me anyway. I just wish I didn't feel so helpless, that's all. When we sent Allen to college I worried about him being beyond our influence; who he might hang out with, would he hang around with a bunch of beer drinkers, druggies, things like that. You can't help but worry about your kids when they're out on their own. But I didn't worry about him being carjacked at gunpoint. I guess I should have.

"Maybe America forgot how to be civilized. It didn't used to be like this. I know it wasn't, I can remember. But it just seems like the world has grown cold; hostile. If you don't take care of a car, it quits running. And civilization is much more fragile than a car. More than land or buildings or machines, a country is made up of people. When I was a boy, my grandfather used to tell me that it only takes one generation for a country to lose its' liberty, and once lost, that liberty can only be repurchased with blood. I always believed those words, but I never really thought I'd see it happen before my eyes.

"I try to hope the world is made up of good people, but days like this make it hard to believe. Today I believe more in demons than angels."

Chapter 11

Clay Wilson studied his new partner with tired eyes. Clay had trained many partners during his seventeen years with the LAPD, and after that, eight years working for the Bishop PD. Clay could tell volumes about a rookie by the way he walked, how he laughed. Even by how he chewed gum. Clay could already tell this rookie could be a good cop with the right training. He was as green as the apples in grandma's pies, but he would probably do fine if he didn't quit.

It was important to Clay that he train his rookies right, even though it was hard for Clay to say why. Clay had become disillusioned years ago. It was the reason he left Los Angeles. Even though he was counting the days to retirement, he still couldn't give up certain habits. He was sure it was futile, but he still kept trying anyway.

Clay had joined the LAPD twenty-seven years ago just as determined to make a difference as any. It lasted about six years. One day it dawned on him that he had given up. It occurred to him when a drug bust seized seventy thousand dollars and five thousand was turned in as evidence. Clay looked the other way, again, and it galled him that he did. He had heard all the excuses. "It's drug money anyway." "This is the retirement the city says they will pay me, but never will." "They don't pay me enough to do this job, so I'm collecting a supplementary salary with off budget revenue." It was all true, of course, but the problem was that Clay knew it wasn't honest. He knew that if you can't trust a cop, you can't trust anyone?

There were cops Clay would go to coffee shops with after hours. Officers that he enjoyed being with. They built a brotherhood that was as tight as death with those they trusted. It was tight, but not tight enough to turn in a bad cop. They all occasionally griped about how one bad cop gives the rest of them a bad name, but they all knew it wasn't just one bad cop. They also knew there was no fighting City Hall. Particularly not from inside City Hall.

Clay suffered the usual scars of police work in the City of Angles. Shanna, his first wife, finally left him when he came home one time too many, full of bourbon and anger. He staggered in the door at three in the morning. The shouting reached a crescendo with a shattered mirror, a torn nightgown and a backhand across the mouth. Tears and threats flowed freely before the door slammed shut as Shanna packing the kids in the car. By the time the sun came up the next morning on the wreckage of a bombed out family, there was nothing left but rubble, and Clay knew it.

His second marriage lasted less than a year. After that Clay swore off both brandy and woman. He couldn't afford either, and both left a bitter taste in his mouth. What he did do was spend more time with his friends. His friends all drove police cars.

Then he accidentally uncovered a department store heist by some of his fellow officers. Clay had had enough. He almost gave up police work altogether, but something held him. He started looking for a small town in hopes of finding a department he could believe in. Finally he found Bishop.

Bishop was a breath of fresh air after LAPD. For one thing, there was only a fraction of the crime he had grown used to. The whole population of Bishop, California was only a few

thousand. His primary duties consisted of tagging speeders as they come into town, responding to domestics, an occasional burglary, and a little drug work now and then. Unfortunately it didn't last.

The Chief that hired Clay retired the very next year, and the new Chief saw Bishop as nothing more than another step in his political career. Then they got Officer Sly. His name was really officer Slider, but Clay liked "Officer Sly" better.

Officer Sly could bust a driver for a two month out of date license plate tag or not wearing a seat belt like he was justice himself. He chewed his gum with the arrogance of a teenager. Sly thought he was toughest cop there was. But Officer Sly was selective about who he leaned on.

Sly also had an inexplicably large disposable income for a cop. Sly loved fast boats, big trucks, and lots of guns. Almost every year Sly had a new truck or boat, and he was always showing off some new weapon. Clay kept his distance and one eye on Officer Sly.

Officer Doug Levitt walked up to Clay as sharp and clean as a shiny new penny. Clay studied the way he walked as Clay sipping his coffee from a Styrofoam cup.

"You ready to go to work?" Clay asked between sips of coffee.

"Yes Sir." Officer Levitt responded.

"You drive." Clay stated matter-of-factly.

"Yes Sir."

"My name is Clay. Clay Wilson."

"Yes Sir. Ah, Sure, Clay."

"That's better. Let's go."

* * * * *

Clay sat in the passenger side of the marked police car and as he sipped a new cup of coffee. He had purchased it at the AM/PM on their way to where they had half concealed the car behind a row of trees on a small dirt road. It was strategically located in the middle of nowhere, two miles outside of town. As they silently sat, a car finally approached from the left. Clay finally spoke. "Watch that car."

The car was a late model Chevy whirling toward the intersection at a slightly higher than legal speed. Levitt watched the car with intent and interest. The car slowed as if it intended to stop, then increased speed passing through the intersection and past the stop sign. Levitt put his

hand on the switch for the lights and asked "Should I pull her over?" expecting the answer to be yes.

"Nay. That's Mrs. Stevens. She's on her way to school. She's late again." Clay spoke as he started to study something out of his side of the car.

Officer Levitt was bewildered. "You don't want me to cite her?"

"Nope."

"Not even a warning?"

"Nope."

"Then why did you point her out to me?"

"So you would see her."

"See her what?"

"See her pull a California yield at a stop sign."

"I don't get it."

"Doug, have you ever eased through a stop sign without stopping?"

"Well, I guess I must have at some time."

"In the last month have you pulled a California yield?"

"Yea, probably so?"

"Is that a dangerous intersection? Was her vision blocked so that she could not see? Was there anyone, anywhere in the remotest danger?"

"No."

"Your darn tooten. There is nothing out here but cow pastures for miles around. Why is there a stop sign there instead of a yield sign?" Clay pointed emphatically at the octagonal sign.

"I don't know."

"I'll tell you why. It's because some moron put a sign there." Clay had delivered his speech and settled back to savor his cheep coffee again. "Now, would you like to catch some bad guys?"

"Sure."

"Good, let's go over to the high school. And drive slowly, were in no hurry."

Chapter 12

"OK, here is the road, going up through here." Randy drew in the sand with a stick. "This, is that hill over there." Randy pointed with his stick to a particular spot in some carefully hand formed mounds and carved depressions, than at a distant mountain. The mounds and gouges in the dirt were a scale model of the actual topography that surrounded them. "A convoy of, let's say, ten vehicles is coming up this direction." Randy pointed again at the scale model in the dirt. "You have a squad of twelve men to ambush it with. How would you do it?"

"Is it a military convoy?" Allen asked.

"Yes."

"What kinds of vehicles are in the convoy?"

"There is an armored personnel carrier in the lead, followed by eight large trucks, with canvas covered beds. In the rear is a gun jeep."

"Well, let's see." Allen paused to contemplate his answer, "I guess I would put,... I would put three rifleman here, three here, and three here, my anti-tank weapon there, and my radio and I would observe from here."

"OK, and what happens when just before the convoy rounds the bend here, they stop and form a defensive herring bone, and a helicopter comes over that ridge conducting an aerial reconnaissance. And let's suppose further that the helicopter, which has infrared vision, radios these troops hidden in the third and forth trucks and directs them to dismount and cut around here to pin you down and chop you up. What then?"

Allen considered the predicament for a moment. "Then me and my men die."

"Right, and what else?"

"And what else? What else is there besides I'm dead?"

"Just before you die on that rocky ridge line, what are you going to think?"

"I'm going to think that whoever picked this spot for an ambush was a jackass."

"Right. Even if it is me that gives you the order, if it doesn't make sense, question and demand an explanation. While we are planning an engagement, question what you are told and demand explanation. Once you're in position, it is a too late to decide that you're in a bad way. Constantly observe your surroundings. Never leave your rear unprotected. Be sure you have a covered and concealed withdrawal rout, and if possible a rear security element of at least two men. Have you ever heard of a place called Galipoli?"

"No." Allen answered.

"It's a place in Turkey, where the Allies tried to attack to secure access to the Black Sea during the First World War. Tens of thousands of British and Australian soldiers died in a badly botched operation. They died largely because of bad leadership. You are going to be part of our leadership. You can't afford to make stupid mistakes. What was wrong with picking this particular bend for staging an ambush?" Randy continued.

"There is no cover, and no way out if something goes wrong."

"Exactly. Where would you put the ambush?"

"Well," Allen looked around. His eyes followed the road as it hugged the hill. "I would pick over there at that creek." He pointed to the batch of small twigs Randy had carefully pressed into the ground.

"Why would you pick there?"

"There are trees and brush to hide in, so they can't see us from the air, and we could escape up that creek bed if we need to, and because there's no way vehicles could follow us."

"What about infrared? They can see right through the brush."

"Animals hide in the brush as well as people. We might be able to fool them."

"Right. And they can see through leaves, but not through tree trunks. If you can keep out of direct line of sight, all they know is that some large warm blooded animals have been there, not necessary people." Randy congratulated Allen.

Randy looked at his watch. "We better start packing up and getting out of here if we're going to make it to your parent's house for dinner by eighteen-thirty."

Randy slipped the XM-15, a civilian version of the military M-16 assault rifle, into a gun case and slid it behind the seat of the truck. The XM-15 was one of the banned assault rifles, but Randy wasn't particularly worried as long as he didn't flash it around. The police made no actual effort to round up the banned weapons, for fear of facing all out war with three quarters of a million Californians who bought them legally before the ban. But if the police happened to see one, it was usually confiscated.

Often it would inexplicably disappear from the evidence room and no one was actually prosecuted. The rifle just changed ownership without compensation. Complaints were seldom filed. There were other legal rifles that did not appear as militaristic as weapons derived from the M-16 but fired the same .223 ammunition, so buying ammunition was still not a problem for Randy. If he saw anybody coming, he would just put it away and go on shooting with his .22 rifle instead.

Randy had just exchanged his motorcycle for a ten-year-old pickup truck. The motorcycle would be an excellent light reconnaissance vehicle to Randy in the event of armed conflict, but Randy could not afford both, and the truck was more important. Randy was moving

quickly to bring things together. He had no idea how long he had to prepare. He was hoping for a couple of years, but as a result of the conversation with professor Witzenbaum, he figured six months was a more prudent estimate.

Randy fashioned Allen's instruction after the training he had received from the Army. But he had to economize dramatically due to lack of time and resources. Randy skipped over a lot, relying on Allen's basic good physical conditioning, his experience with guns with his father and brother Michael, and his camping skills from the Boy Scouts and family outings. He concentrated on tactics, and the unique use of weapons in combat. Allen was deadly when the opponent was a tin can, but now Randy had to train Allen how to kill a target that was both moving and returning fire.

Randy wondered how well Allen would do in actual combat. Against well trained soldiers or Marines he didn't have a chance. But against mobs, self-appointed militias or even poorly trained troops, he would probably do OK given a little more experience. This was only their first Saturday out, there would be many more. The problem was, it may not be good enough.

"Allen, I want you to join the National Guard."

"What?"

"If you join the National Guard, they can teach you a lot of the stuff better than I can. They have the equipment to do it right. It's pretty hard to recreate the facilities necessary for basic training out here."

"But what if civil order breaks down and they call me up. I would have to go, who knows where. That doesn't fit into our plan, does it?"

"If society really does crash and burn, as we both expect, the military will fall apart. The very reason we will have to mobilize our little fighting unit is because they have ceased to function. As long as law and order prevail, we don't have to worry. If you do get deployed it will be very realistic training."

"Well, I'll think about it." Allen didn't take well to the idea, but Randy was usually pretty hard to dissuade once he got an idea.

Randy and Allen quickly finished picking up their trash and headed back to LA. Their trip down from the high desert took more than two hours. As they drove Randy kept thinking how inefficient this was going to be to provide realistic training for Allen when the military had already provided the solution. They arrived for dinner a few minutes after six thirty and made the introductions.

John was a little taken back by the fact that Randy was black. It's not that he minded associating with black people, but when Allen described Randy on the phone the color of his skin never came up. John's mental picture was that of a white person, and he suddenly realized that there was no reason to assume that.

Often John felt uneasy with black people he didn't know, not because he was prejudiced, or disliked them, but he was always fearful of being called a racist. Many little things that would pass as the usual give and take in John's basically white or sometimes Hispanic contacts world could be instantly branded racist if scrutinized by a black with a chip on his shoulder. John actually was pleased that he had been successful in teaching his son to be racially colorblind, but now he wanted to see how Randy handled the race card.

When they sat down at the table, John became a little nervous when he noticed that Kevin was staring at Randy. Kevin had a reputation of speaking his mind, and John hoped Kevin wouldn't pick now to say something embarrassing. John could see that Sarah had noticed before he had, and was trying to get Kevin interested in his food. Kevin would not be diverted. Finally Randy acknowledged the situation and spoke to Kevin.

"Have you ever seen anybody that looks like me before?" Kevin shook his head in the negative. "Come here, get a better look." Both Sarah and John were relieved that Randy was handling the situation in a non-threatening way. John was a little puzzled at Kevin's interest in Randy's skin color. He was sure Kevin had seen black people at school daily.

"Here touch it. How does it feel?" Randy offered his hand to touch. Kevin kept looking at Randy's head not interested in the extended hand. When Kevin ignored the offer and continued to stare at his head, the adults began to exchange quizzical glances including Randy.

Finally Kevin asked as matter-of-factly as can be. "Why do you have such short hair? Were you born that way?"

Randy burst out in a belly laugh and everyone else except Kevin and Natalie joined in. Kevin kept asking why they were laughing, but that just made the laughter roll on louder. Finally Sarah answered, "Yes Kevin, most babies are bald when they are born, but his hair is short because he was in the Army, and that's the way they do it in the Army."

Satisfied, Kevin returned to his seat wondering what the joke was all about. With that, the evening casually rolled on. Randy was at ease, and what's more, so were the Scotts.

Dinner finished, the adults moved to the living room where they continued to make small talk. Sarah was particularly interested in Randy's family, and where he was from. John was inquisitive about his future. Randy gave a sanitized version of himself and both John and Sarah were pleased and impressed. Sarah asked if Randy had any lady friends. Roxanne's picture was produced from Randy's wallet. Sarah was interested and pleased.

After about half an hour, Allen asked if Randy and he could talk to John in private. John suggested they adjourn to the back porch. As soon as they had seated them selves in lawn chairs Allen and Randy began to explain their agenda to build a small private army. John was immediately taken back and resistant to the idea, but he listened without comment until they were through. The cherry on the cake was the idea of Allen joining the National Guard.

John rolled the idea around in his mind trying to formulate his objections and he wasn't

sure he could explain what they were. John prided himself on his ability to think logically. Since he didn't know how to express himself, he just sat there and thought it over.

Allen didn't quite know what to make of it. He always remembered his father to be opinionated about many things, and quite willing, in fact very insistent on sharing his thoughts with his children. Randy sat quietly like a poker player waiting to see if he had overplayed his hand. He knew he was pushing into someone else's family affairs, but he could see no other way than to lay his cards on the table.

John did not consider their description of the possible impending civil disorder as being in the least overblown or melodramatic. John considered America to be locked on an unavoidable collision course leading over the precipice of violent disaster. If anything, John was impressed with their ability to pay attention to what was happening around them, and come to a logical conclusion. John certainly could not find fault with using guns to defend themselves, after all, he was planning on doing the same. As John studied his thoughts he realized there were two things that bothered him.

Randy had charisma, a man's man, but he was awful sure of himself. John knew that it was cultured in the military. Military training gave young men the ability to charge a hill with bullets flying, because they were so sure of themselves, their training, and because their buddies depended on them. Boot camp was not an environment that encouraged pontification and platonic thought. Deep reflection in battle, about the meaning of life or the morality of war would get yourself, and your buddy killed. Randy was a take charge and move out kind of guy.

The problem was, Randy was taking charge of his son. If Allen had decided to join the military on his own, John would still have to relinquish his son's destiny to someone else, but it would be to a recognized, sanctioned authority. John knew enough about inept leadership to know that blindly trusting authority was foolish, but he still believed in the concept of a government of the people, by the people, for the people. He believed it could serve the people only if they collectively placed their faith and trust in it. He was not about to abandon it for who knows what without good reason.

The second thing that bothered John was that the plan didn't include John, or the Scott family. They were just going to be off defending, John wasn't sure what. The fact is, John assumed that if worst came to worst, Allen would be there, part of the family.

"So where exactly are you planning to go? Do you have somewhere in particular that you plan to defend?"

"That depends on how events unfold" Randy replied. Different scenarios would dictate different plans of action. One of the things we would do is scout out deep in the high desert to see if there is a logical place there that we could fall back to."

"How about Bishop, California?"

Randy drew a blank, but tried not to look like he didn't know. "Bishop, no I hadn't considered it yet. We haven't reached that part of the planning phase. We've really only started.

Before we can attempt to execute anything, we have to be well-trained first."

"My in-laws, Allen's grandparents live there. Allen, would you please get me a map of California out of my desk drawer?"

Both Randy and John silently sized up the other, neither one very sure how to proceed as they sat in the gently cooling evening air. Randy wanted John to give Allen his blessing to be a part of Randy's private army. John wanted to test Randy to see if he would allow himself to be less than top dog, and if his plans could be incorporated into John's. Both realized that if things could be worked out, they had something important to gain from the other.

Not able to remain silent too long, for fear of the silence becoming awkward, Randy spoke before Allen returned. "Have your in-laws lived long in Bishop?"

"Yes, Sarah grew up in Bishop. They have a nice little house there that they built,... gosh it must have been in the 1960's."

Just then Allen walked out with the map. "Say, it's dark out here." John observed the obvious. "Let's go inside to look at it."

They moved to the Kitchen table and spread the map out. John made sure the little ones were watching TV, and Michael was in his room. John didn't care to have too many ears around listening to the discussion.

Randy showed no sign of the fact that he had thought Bishop was somewhere near Fresno. The slightest omission of knowledge in the military was grounds for absolute public humiliation. Randy suddenly felt vulnerable for presenting a plan in which John knew some particular detail about that he didn't. John didn't care that Randy didn't know everything, he was more concerned with whether Randy was open to suggestions or not.

As soon as he pointed to Bishop on the map, John started his sales pitch. "The Sierras are virtually impenetrable to the West, and after you climb the White Mountains, there is nothing but desert to the East. To the North there is Reno and Carson City, but I don't consider that a major threat. To the South is Southern California, in other words, the Los Angeles basin and twelve million people, not including San Diego and other surrounding cities.

"The area around Bishop is agricultural country, mostly farming and ranching. Beyond that is Federal land; National forest, BLM, stuff like that. My guess is that most people who conclude that staying in the city is suicide would head North up Interstate 5. If people have lost their jobs and are looking for somewhere to find work, I would expect them to go toward the farming land of the Central Valley. But your guess is as good as mine, when it comes to trying to figure mass hysteria.

"For those who do head up US-395 the locals will probably usher them right through town, if they let them in at all. They may block the road and not let anybody through that doesn't have a local address on their license. Of course if we are already there, or at least have someone to vouch for us, that would be fortunate for us wouldn't it?"

Randy picked up where John left off. "And if we had important services to render, like military training, that might be fortunate for us as well."

"Yes it would," John agreed. "The question is, how well do your plans, my plans, and our mutual resources work together? What do you think?"

Randy evaluated the implied offer as John studied Randy's face. Randy was a little surprised that John had thought about this already. His basic assumption was that all civilians were either asleep or stupid. John had put thought into areas of the problem that Randy hadn't yet considered. However, the reason he hadn't considered Bishop was quite understandable. He had never been to Bishop, and he didn't know anybody in Bishop. It's kind of hard to just walk into a rural community and just invite yourself to dinner if you're black. In times of civil unrest, it's difficult regardless of color. The places he had considered were so far off the beaten path, that there was virtually no one there to care. "Is there water in Bishop?"

"Rolls right out of the mountains. Pure, clean and gravity fed. Of course just a bit down stream, the city of Los Angeles takes it all, but that shouldn't be a problem, especially after everybody leaves LA for destinations unknown."

John was starting to believe that Randy was the right kind of guy. If he was too stubborn, conceited and self important to deal with, Randy would have already blasted the whole idea for some concocted reason by now. Of course the real reason would have been that Randy hadn't thought of it, it wasn't "his" idea.

Randy was also becoming more comfortable with John. John didn't cut him out; in fact he seemed to be trying to recruit Randy into his own plan. Besides that, the option of having a place in Bishop had its definite possibilities. In terms of a get-away, it was closer to LA than Randy would have preferred. Originally he was thinking more like Ashland, Grants Pass or Klamath Falls, Oregon. Better than that would be somewhere fifty miles off the road in that general vicinity. But on the other hand, traveling one thousand miles, the length of California, during the collapse of civil order may not be possible. Of course the question arose again, 'what is the mission?' If it was to save his own hide, and the hides of a few friends, this might do just fine.

Randy had considered several places in the high desert and made a list of spots on the map between Interstate 10 in South, and 15 in the North. The spots had names like Cima, Kelso, Baghdad, and Amboy. He hadn't visited any of them yet, so they were still just spots on a map to Randy. Once he visited them they would be places, not just spots. Now suddenly Randy had something much better than a spot on a map or even a place he had visited. If Randy could hook up with John and his family, he had connections.

"Yes, I think we have a lot to offer each other, and collectively we could possibly have a lot to offer the town of Bishop." As Randy spoke, the words had a nice ring to them. He liked the idea of forming of a coalition with John Scott. It was 'out of the box' thinking for Randy. The military didn't include families in their thinking, strategically. Families were baggage which enlisted men and officers happened to have that needed taking care of. Maybe Allen's family

was as much of an asset to Randy's plans as Allen was.

Randy paused for a moment at the thought. He was still in the hospital in Germany when his father had his heart attack, and there after his mother had no will to live. Randy glanced over at Allen. Randy thought again, Allen didn't know how lucky he was to still have his parents. Randy looked back at John. Maybe the mission was to preserve a small sliver of America in a little town called Bishop.

"Mr. Scott..."

"Call me John."

"John, Allen tells me you have some familiarity with guns."

"I have a 30-'06, a 9mm pistol and a 12 gage pump shotgun. Michael has Allen's .22 rifle."

"Is the 30-'06 a hunting rifle with a scope?"

"Yes. It has a bolt action and a nine power scope."

"Do you hunt?" Randy continued.

"No. I just put holes in gallon milk jugs filled with water at 200 yards."

"How about Michael, can he shoot?"

"Yes. He's about as good as I am with the 30-'06 and the 9mm. He's better than I am with the .22 rifle. Of course he has spent more time with it than I have. There is nothing like hundreds of hours of shooting to get good at it."

"He doesn't shoot the shotgun?"

"I just bought it. I figured if there was a riot, a shotgun would be the weapon of choice."

"Shotguns are deadly up close, but personally, I don't like getting that close, if I can help it."

"Yes, that's true, but if I'm defending my home, I probably wouldn't have the luxury of fighting at long distance."

"True, but if we are part of the Bishop Defense Force, we would be fighting a long way down the road from Bishop."

"I'll give you that, But that's what the high powered rifle is for."

"John, let me suggest this to you. A fighting force has several assets which it needs to

draw on to operate. But there are certain assets that are needed in large quantities, and others that are only needed in small quantities. The 30-'06 is fine for long range, but its rate of fire is slow. Each time you fire you have to action the bolt. The pump shotgun is fine for using at a barricade or for home defense. Further than one hundred feet it's worthless. The 9mm is a fine choice for a side arm, and I highly recommend a pistol for a back up. It's something you can strap on and carry around with you, even if both hands are being used, like chopping wood, or digging a foxhole. The 9mm is a little small, I prefer the .45 or even the .40 Smith and Wesson, but 9mm is real common, and if you shot straight you can kill someone in one or two shots. The .22 is fine for shooting game or killing rats. Every gun you have has its place, but Allen needs a gun beyond those you have.

"What Allen needs is a semi-automatic rifle with a removable magazine which carries at least twenty rounds." Randy continued. "Today he fired my XM-15, which is similar to the M-16, which you are probably familiar with. The M-16 has been the standard assault rifle of the US Army for fifty years. In the right hands it is accurate out to 460 meters. The XM-15 is semi-automatic which means it can fire as fast as you can pull the trigger. It's not fully automatic like the M-16, but I could convert it if I choose to. With a bolt action rifle, every time you fire you have to take your eyes off what your doing long enough to cock the bolt, and then reacquire the target. That takes several seconds. Also, a five round magazine is just too small. Most members of an effective defense force would need something similar to the equipment they are going to be fighting against."

"What you're talking about, Randy, is an assault rifle. Those weapons are banned. We can't legally buy assault rifles."

"Fully automatic weapons have been illegal without a special license since the 1930's. Semi-automatic rifles with removable magazines were perfectly legal to buy up until just a few years ago. They're not legal to buy, and they're not easy to buy, but they can be bought."

John considered what Randy had said without responding.

"John, there are two types of laws. There are laws which are a result of the direct impact person's actions have on others. Murder is an obvious example of a law of this type. When someone murders someone else, they destroy that person's freedom, in this case the freedom to live. If someone steals, or rapes, the same thing is true. Even traffic laws often fall into this category. If someone runs a red light, they run the risk of hitting another car causing damage or injury.

"The second type of laws is not a direct result of damage to others. They basically are for the convenience of the government. If it is too hard to catch criminals, they ban guns so that crimes can't be committed. Of course it doesn't work, but it makes voters feel good. The possession of a gun does not in any way adversely affect anybody until it is used in an inappropriate way. But the same could be said of gasoline. Arsonists use gas to burn down buildings. We don't ban gasoline, not yet anyway, because it is too widely used, not because it is any less dangerous. If we are correct in assuming that we are headed for a major civil collapse, an effective weapon will be every bit as essential as gasoline."

John rubbed his chin and contemplated what Randy had just said. Then he lowered his head, closed his eyes, and rubbed his forehead. John knew what Randy said was true, but he didn't like the choices it left him with. Randy didn't have to tell John that having guns could be the difference between life and death. After a while he lifted his head and opened his eyes. He took a deep breath and let it out. "Randy, what you say is true, but for forty years I have been taught, thought and lived by a belief that laws, good ones and bad ones, must be obeyed. As long as there is a duly elected government, which represents the people of this country, I must obey it's laws, misguided though some of those laws may be.

"The only reason we will need guns is because others will decide to choose which laws they will obey, and which they will ignore. I can't play that game. Once people start picking and choosing which laws they will obey, anarchy will be their constant companion.

"I'll tell you what I will do. I'm going to loan you some money. What you do with it is your concern. If you buy another XM-15 and a thousand rounds of ammunition, that's up to you. If you get caught, I still want my money back when you get out of prison. Should such a time come that law and order fails, you would have another weapon to share with Allen. If law and order completely fails, we will need to impose order at the point of a gun, and the more weapons we have the better.

"I am going to go down to the gun dealer tomorrow and buy a Mini-14C. The Mini-14C is approximately the same gun you describe, except it doesn't have a removable magazine and it only holds eight rounds of ammunition. The old Mini-14 would be better, but it had a removable magazine so it falls under the Third Assault Weapons Ban. How does that set with you?"

Randy was impressed with the John's cleverness to stay within the letter of the law and still formulate a plan to achieve their eventual needs. He was also impressed with John's integrity. Would that there were more men like him. "That sound's very fair." Randy responded.

"What about Allen joining the National Guard?" Randy ventured further.

"Can you guarantee me that there won't be a period of time in which law and order survives just long enough for him to be called up, sent to fight in San Diego and die before the real war starts? If he is called, I will tell him that he has an obligation that he must fulfill. Now can you guarantee me that that won't happen?"

"No I can't." Randy responded.

"Well," John turned his attention toward Allen, "You are an adult. You're old enough to make your own decisions. But you know full well what I think of someone who won't keep his word."

Allen turned toward Randy without saying anything. Randy shook his head up and down. "We'll find another way of training you." Randy turned back toward John, "What about you? Do you want to be a part of the training?"

John smiled and gave a half laugh. "Training? Boy, I don't know if you can teach an old

dog like me new tricks."

Randy countered. "When faced with a crisis we either adapt, run away or die. Which will you do?"

"Well, probably some of each of the first two. I sure know I don't care for the third option. What did you have in mind for training?"

"Some military tactics, exercises in the desert with simulated conflict..."

"Well if anybody sees me, I'm going to feel real stupid crawling around in the dirt in camos. But I have a feeling that being a little embarrassed is not the worst that is going to happen before this is all over. Yeah, sure, count me in."

"Great," Randy smiled. "We'll all get together, next Saturday, and go through some simple techniques of tactical training."

"Sure." John agreed.

"We'll meet here at, let's say, six thirty? We'll have to take two vehicles because my truck will only seat three."

"Two vehicles?" John was confused. "Who else is going?"

"Isn't Michael coming? When you taught him to shoot, that wasn't just for fun was it?"

"No, it wasn't. I just didn't figure on it happening when he was still this young, that's all."

"He's seventeen, Dad." Allen interjected. "He'd be old enough to enlist next year if he wanted to."

"And one other thing" Allen added. "Everyone has to understand that this is strictly confidential. Michael can't tell any of his friends at school. The last thing we need is for someone to start blabbing around what we are doing."

John nodded in agreement. "Let's talk to him now. If we talk to him, the three of us together, it will impress upon him the seriousness of the trust we're placing in him."

John looked at Randy who nodded. Randy leaned back in his chair and looked at Allen. He smiled as he realized that Allen was now fully recruited. Randy didn't have full faith in Allen's abilities as a warrior, but he was a part of the unit. He was recruited enough to recruit his own brother. Faith in his fighting skills would come later.

John tapped his fingers against his lips as he considered the idea of recruiting Michael into their plans. A bit of resistance still remained. "Yes, what you say is true. I just didn't count on Michael being a soldier. I figured he would only use his shooting skills in a last desperate act, only if he was forced to defend himself."

Randy leaned forward and his face took on the most sober look it ever had. "John, this is a desperate act, it could very well be our last, and we are being forced by powers beyond our control."

* * * * *

John watched Randy's truck tail lights go down the street until they passed out of sight. The night air was that perfect temperature that comes at the end of the day in Southern California. John couldn't see the stars, but he knew they were there twinkling in the night. The bushes on the side of John's house needed trimming. He hadn't cut them today as he had planned. He had been too busy, but they could wait until next week. A car pulled out of the driveway up the street from John and drove slowly away.

John looked across at Frank's house. The bulletproof planter under the front window looked very nice. The flowers were spilling out of the top of it and covered the top half of the slab stones. Some kind of climbing plant was making its way up the side of the wall, and over the beam in front of the bullet resistant front door. The stone and plants gave Frank's house a very charming country cottage look.

John could hear the sound of music coming over the fences from a pool party somewhere nearby. The laughter of teenagers was inviting. Out of the corner of his eye John saw a house cat making its inspection of his yard. He often saw the cat sniffing his plants and other objects of interest. The cat was gray with white mittens and a white nose.

"I must be out of my mind." John spoke softly to himself. "If this isn't normal what is?" John contemplated visions of civil collapse, fighting, and armed struggle, and compared them to what he saw. "I must be a fool! I need to quit ignoring the obvious. Nothing is going to happen." With that John turned and walked into the house. The cat stopped at the sound of the closing door, she sniffed the air, then went on her usual way wandering through the garden.

Chapter 13

As soon as John came through the door Sarah turned toward him and spoke before he had a chance. "Have you been listening to the news?"

"I heard some on the radio on the way home from work. Is it on the T.V.?"

"I have the T.V. on, but they haven't interrupted their regular schedule. The news should be starting in just a minute."

"Shall we watch it and then eat dinner?"

"The kids already ate, and yours is in the microwave. You go in and sit down in front of the T.V. As soon as it is through in the microwave, I'll bring it to you."

"Do you need any help?"

"No, you just go in and I'll bring you your dinner in just a minute."

Michael followed John into the family room. "What's happening, Dad?"

"Come in and you'll find out."

John sat in "his" chair, which he only shared with everyone else in the family including the dog, except not when he watched T.V. Michael flopped down on a pillow chair on the floor. The overstated musical introduction was just ending as the camera moved in for the talking head shot. The anchorwoman looked up from her notes, used only as a prop, and began to read from the teleprompter exactly as the music ended.

"Interest rates at the Fed are up and Wall Street is down, more violence in the Big Apple, and the war in the Russia. These and more of what's happening today, but first our top story." The camera angle changed and a Monopoly like depiction of a bank appeared over her left shoulder. As the scene changed on the T.V., Sarah came in with a dish on a hot pad and a glass of cold apple juice. After John took the hot plate of food, Sarah sat down on the couch.

"The Fed again struggled to control America's borrowing this afternoon. Interest rates on short term Treasury Securities closed yesterday at 21 and one half percent. Immediately after opening this morning, despite efforts by the Fed to keep a lid on, rates continued marching upward. Federal Reserve Chairman, Stephen Otto was quoted at noon as saying that he thinks the worst is finally behind us, but when pressed for details, the source quoting Otto would not elaborate. At closing, the rate was an even 24 percent. For the latest on the impact this will have on the Nation we will go to Tom Matier in Washington." The screen suddenly changed to a view of a man standing in front of the massive columns of the White House. "Tom, What's the sense there in the White House and on Capital Hill?"

"Well, publicly they are sticking to the statement made yesterday that this is just a glitch in the curve, but privately more than one source says that there is complete disarray behind

closed doors. What they are afraid of is that panic will spread through the market if they do something drastic, but if they don't do something big, what little confidence there is in the administration's ability to handle this crisis, will evaporate, completely."

"Tom, What are their options?"

"Well, Jane, they don't have many. The Fed can keep a tight money policy to keep inflation under control, but then interest rates may continue spiraling up. Or they can inflate the money supply and risk double-digit inflation. Of course, high inflation, in other words a weak dollar, is precisely why Europe and Japan have lost confidence in the dollar. For decades the U.S. has been considered a safe investment, but that international confidence seems to be evaporating. As long as the Europeans and Japanese continue to divest themselves, both in the market and in government securities, the rest of the world is likely to follow suit, which spells even more bad news, just when we can least afford it."

"How about cutting the budget? Wouldn't that restore foreign confidence?"

"Well, they don't have much leeway there either. You might say it's a case of too little too late. Discretionary spending is pretty much gutted, and no president or congress is likely to do more than tinker with the entitlements after the pounding incumbents took in the last election. That leaves only defense to cut.

"A lot of defense hawks in both the House and Senate are calling for restoring some of the cutbacks that have already been implemented. We have aircraft carriers that can't put to sea because they haven't been overhauled or even refueled, we have tanks that haven't been driven because of lack of skilled crews, fuel and spare parts, retaining skilled soldiers with poor living conditions and low pay keeps getting worse; the list goes on, Jane.

"With U.S. troops stationed in hot spots all over the globe on peace keeping missions, war raging between Russia and Ukraine, and conflict looking imminent in the Middle East, many experts are saying we just don't have the military capacity to handle any other contingency, especially if we have to deploy forces deep into Mexico to settle the civil war there. They also point out that if we canceled the entire military budget, it would only cover about a third of the interest on the debt.

"There are rumors constantly circulating that the entire social safety net may have to be scrapped and replaced with something else, but what that might be is hard to get a handle on. There are adamant denials from all official sources, but the more they deny it, the more the experts we talked to seem to believe the rumors. Credibility seems to be in short supply."

"What about on the Hill, Tom, what is the mood there?"

"Jane, there you have no lack of voices or opinions. Senator Greene of Idaho is saying we should scrap the whole health care plan, which still isn't completely in place, but it's already costing far more than the architects of the plan said it would. Congressman Bill Whether of New Mexico and Jack Pace of Florida started a screaming match on the floor of the House over cutbacks in Social Security Benefits. Congressman Pace was calling Congressman Whether a

Scrooge who would throw old ladies and children out into the cold, and Whether was saying Pace was, and I quote, 'displaying the fiscal irresponsibility of a drunken sailor'. The division of opinions couldn't be wider and tempers are really flaring. With things this hot, it's hard to see how any kind of a deal can be forged. It is not expected that any significant legislation will come out of this session.

"How about taxes?"

"After the flood of demands to roll back the tax bill passed last year, it is not expected that anyone is going to be talking about raising taxes again. There may be some reshuffling, but no new major revenue enhancements this year."

"Thanks Tom. Now we go to New York with Susan Cress. Susan, how did things end on Wall Street today?"

"Terrible, to put it lightly. Today it started off like yesterday's free fall. Automatic controls on computer selling kicked in after only sixteen minutes of trading this morning. Jane, the Dow had fallen two hundred points in only sixteen minutes of trading! Just after ten thirty they suspended all trading for thirty minutes because the Dow had fallen a total of a thousand points. When they opened trading again, bargain hunters were cherry picking what they considered deals in large numbers, pulling the Dow back up almost two hundred points, but that lasted less than thirty minutes. By noon the rally had lost steam, and by one thirty the trading was suspended for the rest of the day. Technically it should have only been closed for one hour because the Dow was down two thousand points from the opening, but resuming trading for the last half hour of trading was pointless by then."

"Coming on the heels of a seven hundred and eighty two point drop yesterday, what are the analysts predicting for tomorrow?"

"Most seem to be looking for the fire exits, Jane. No one has confidence that this can be turned around by sleeping on it. Everybody seems to just be trying to cut their losses. Of course, that just fuels the fires of panic."

"Is that the word you would use to describe it; Panic?"

"They prefer to call it a technical retreat, but if dropping your gun and running is a technical retreat, then I guess this is a technical retreat. In 1987 the selling was intense, but short lived and the market quickly pushed back into positive territory. In 2000 through 2003 the selling was measured, but relentless. This time it seems like the market has a death wish. It just wants to die."

"When you talk to traders on the floor, do they question the loosening of the trading restrictions that happened three years ago?"

"Are they ever! Just three years ago the conventional wisdom was that the market had outgrown the old curbs again. Now we hear most traders wanting to tighten up the curbs before there is nothing left to save. Some are even calling for a return to the initial curbs implemented

way back in 1987 of fifty, two fifty, and four fifty points and the longer suspension times.

"But you know, Jane, there seems to be a gloomy, almost fatalistic mood down here that I don't think I've ever seen before. When I pressed one trader about reducing the trading curbs, he just shrugged and said that even though he was in favor of going back to more conservative curbs, he didn't think it would change much. He said, 'The fundamental forces of nature and the market are unstoppable. Nothing will stop an avalanche once it has started, and this market wants to fall.'"

"What about the claims that this is an 8.0 earthquake in the stock market as some are calling it?"

"For sheer volume it is easily the biggest drop ever, but as a percentage of market loss is about equal the crash in 1987. The big question is, of course, what will it do tomorrow? Will it continue to drop, or has it run its' course. One more day like today and it will surpass anything any of us have seen in our lifetime. If that happens, we start comparing it to the crash of 1929."

"Any sense as to which way it might go?"

"Everyone is waiting for Washington to send some clear message, but few traders can agree on what that message should be. There is a lot of edginess, but most are expressing at least a hope that the worst is over."

"What about the rumors that Standard Bank, the second largest bank in America, is about to file for bankruptcy? "

"Well, you can imagine what that did to their stock, dropping a full sixteen and five-eighths in one session, and they were already pretty battered. But at least the depositors have the assurance that the U.S. Government will insure all depositors. As long as depositors don't panic, the value of the stock can still recover. The question is, how many large banks can be propped up by the government, at the same time? If they close Standard Bank, this will be the third large bank to fail this year, and the largest ever!

"Also on the critical list are Global Dynamics and Northern Aircraft Company. Both are companies that got squeezed in the military downsizing. Harry's, the giant food chain, and Nostels, the department store chain are also in critical condition. The list goes on and on."

"What happened? Just a few years ago the economy wasn't exactly booming, but interest rates were at a twenty year low, inflation was almost nonexistent and bank failures were few. What went wrong?"

"There is a lot of disagreement about the details, but conventional wisdom has it that the U.S. is finally feeling the pain for exorbitant spending and borrowing on every level. It's like when you fall out of a window on a fifty-story building. You don't feel any pain for quit a while. In fact, if you like the wind in your face, it can be quite exhilarating, as long as you keep your eyes closed. I think the consequences of fiscal irresponsibility on the part of the government, corporations, and private individuals is finally hitting home hard."

"Thanks, Susan. When we come back, unrest in the Big Apple, and the war in the Urals."

During the commercial break John Scott muted the sound so they saw a surrealistic pool and a breathtaking drive on a windy, deserted road. Worth the sound off they did not hear that they should "Live the fantasy", and that "We build excitement".

John spoke first. "Sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it?"

"Dad." Michael paused. "Do you think it will start a civil war?" Michael asked.

John looked at Sarah who returned his stare, but said nothing. Finally John spoke, "Michael, I really don't know, but I know this. A country can't put off paying its bills forever. I think the bill collector is banging on the door. I think it is going to get very ugly before it gets better, but we as a country should have thought of that before we spent way beyond our means."

"But will it cause a war?"

"I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine. But you know what we're planning. If we're preparing for the possibility of leaving our home and fleeing to Grandpa and Grandma's house, and defend it with guns, what does that tell you? I think a lot of people are going to die before this is over. But we have seen some very hard times in America before and we always found a way through. The Great Depression, the Civil War, the Second World War, they all were terrible, but we survived as a country."

"A couple of weeks ago, on the way home from school, I was talking to Sam and he doesn't think it will get all that bad?"

"What does his father do for a living?"

"Umm, stocks and stuff?"

"That's right. He works for a stockbroker. And what does his mother do?"

"She sells real estate."

"Right again. Both of those professions have a vested interest in everything going pretty well. Sometimes people have a tendency to believe what they hope will happen. I work for a company that makes security systems. When times get tough, people have to worry more about holding on to what is theirs. I'm kind of like an undertaker. After a gunfight, he does great business. Michael, the company I work for has never been this busy since they were formed twenty years ago.

Just then the commercial ended. The news went on to describe the state police being called out to subdue rock throwing crowds that surrounded the New York City Mayor's office because the banks still refused to honor the IOUs issued by the city; the bloody war between Russia and the Ukraine; the strikes in France and Germany which were getting more bloody; the

continuing tensions between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan; and more saber rattling between the Koreans. The bloody Civil War in South Africa didn't even get honorable mention because it was becoming old news. The half hour ended with a human interest story about a Cat Boutique in Hollywood where cat lovers could buy fragrances for their cat ranging up to seven hundred dollars an ounce.

"Michael, do you have any homework?" Sarah spoke softly.

"Yeah, some."

"I suggest you get started."

As he walked down the hall, he could hear his parents talking about the stock market, and something about a semi-automatic rifle. They no longer bothered to lower their voices around Michael.

Michael whipped out his math without any trouble. He wished all his subjects were that easy. As he started to read his history, his mind kept wandering back to the news. Finally he started on a paper for English. He had saved the worst for last. The dictionary was flipped through at least three times per sentence. Some words he couldn't find. If he couldn't think of a substitute word, his mother would help him in the morning, and it would end up on his list of words to learn. He always had a list of words to work on. After ten o'clock, he called it good enough and climbed into bed. As he drifted off to sleep he mumbled to himself, "I wonder if spelling will still matter tomorrow?"

Chapter 14

Michael snarfed down his lunch while he talked to Sam and Rick. Sam and Rick went off to hang around the cafeteria while Michael picked up his history book and started to read.

Michael tried to concentrate, but a group of guys were fooling around on skateboards, shouting, and making lots of noise. Michael knew who they were. Their main purpose in life was doing drugs, laughing obnoxiously, and trying to skateboard on the most improbable surfaces man could construct. The property damage or injury that frequently resulted was of no concern to them.

Unable to concentrate Michael moved to a new location and resumed his study. Just then Michael heard through the bushes behind him a girl talking. "Have your parents got their money out of the bank! All the banks are closing and everybody is trying to get their money out of the banks!"

"The banks are closing!?" the other girl repeated in disbelief. "Are you sure?"

"I called home at lunch and they saw it on the news. My parents took all their money out of the bank this morning. If they don't hurry it may be too late to get your parents money out!"

"All their money?!"

"Yes! Everybody is doing it."

"Carol! You mean some of their money. You don't mean ALL of their money!"

"ALL!"

"How much is that?"

"I don't know; they wouldn't say. But they told me they took it all out!"

"I better call my parents."

"There is a pay phone by the office. You can call home and... money out of..."

Michael strained to hear them speak, but they faded in the din of other voices and shuffling of feet. Michael looked at his watch. He had just enough time to make it to class.

When Michael entered the history class, a TV was playing at the front of the room. The news was on, and it happened to be the same channel that Michael's Dad had been watching the night before. The novelty of it muted the typical noise and commotion that usually accompanied teenagers. Michael worked his way back to his seat on the back row.

"...and the President should be making a statement soon. We have word that he is still in consultation with his advisers, so we aren't sure when he will speak to the Nation. When we do

we will break from our special report and bring it to you live. Let's go to Susan Cress and get the latest from Wall Street. Susan are you there?" The image on the screen switched to the face Michael had seen the night before, but as she spoke no sound accompanied the picture. "Susan can you hear me? We can't hear you, Susan." The well dressed, attractive, thirtyish woman stopped moving her lips and fumbled with the micro-mike pinned to her lapel then said something to someone off camera. More dead air passed awkwardly before the anchorwoman broke in. "We seem to be having some difficulty here. We will bring you Susan Cress and the latest from Wall Street as soon as we can."

The camera flashed back to the anchorwoman and a man with graying hair sitting behind a desk/console. "Frank while we're waiting for the connection with Susan Cress maybe we should take a moment and review what has happened today for those who may have just joined us. The nationwide panic that has, has... what's the word?"

"Crippled the nation..."

"Absolutely! It has just crippled the nation, causing havoc as word that the Federal Government would only insure Standard Bank depositors for twenty cents on the dollar, for deposits over ten thousand dollars. Apparently, and we cannot verify this, but rumors abound that several large holders in Standard Bank were warned to get their money out by sources in the administration. At the opening of business a flood of money started to hemorrhage out of not only Standard Bank, but also dozens of other banks until it was a full-scale rush.

"Of course the stock market, which was already on the slide, dropped like a rock. About one o'clock Eastern Standard time the government regulators pulled the plug on the whole thing. The stock market has closed until further notice. Every bank in the United States has closed. Every Savings and Loan, every Credit Union. Checks are not being honored; credit cards are not being accepted. As astounding as this may seem, whatever money you have in your pocket is all the money you have until, well..."

"Who knows," Frank interjected. "That's just it, no one knows. Nothing like this has ever happened before, with the possible exception of the Stock Market Crash of 1929. But I must point out that there is a significant difference that really aggravates the situation. With today's instant communications and computers, things can happen thousands, even millions of times faster than they could then. With computers, money can be withdrawn from accounts without anyone ever going to the bank."

"That's right, Frank. In seconds millions of dollars can be withdrawn without the bank really having any control over it. In any case, here we are, and no one knows what comes next. We have Susan Cress back now, so we will go to her right now. Susan can you hear me?"

"Yes I can, Jane."

"Susan, any word on when the stock market might open?"

"No, no word on that. The sense I get is that trading will be suspended until at least Monday of next week, but that seems to be mostly just a guess at this point, probably wishful

thinking. There has to be something to restore confidence, or the slide will just continue."

"What about the fact that people can sell stocks or take money out of the bank electronically in terms of making this problem a lot worse. I mean someone can do all this from a computer at home. Hasn't that made it a lot worse than it would have been otherwise?"

"Yes, that's true. Sell orders and withdrawals can be made electronically. Computers got so backed up that it just ground to a complete standstill. However, you have to remember that the real problem is when money actually leaves the system. If someone withdraws their money somehow they have to get the dollars in their hands or they don't have the money. Selling stock and investing the proceeds in a money market account causes the stock market to crash, but it doesn't provide spendable money. As long as the money just transfers around the system it's not really as bad as it sounds. And when I say money, I mean dollar bills. A check is only good if someone is willing to cash it.

"The problem really is two-fold. A lot of money did leave the system. Many branches literally ran out of every denomination of currency in the building! You must remember that only a tiny fraction of the money deposited is actually in the bank. Most of it is out somewhere in the form of loans to homeowners, car loans, business loans, and other loans. Also some very large transactions took place in which money was transferred to foreign banks over seas. Big institutions and the very wealthy typically did this, and it took a tremendous toll. The big winner today was gold. Precious metals and all commodities did well, but gold went right through the roof. It looked like it was going to reach three thousand dollars an ounce before the government stopped everything."

"Susan, what about the foreign banks?"

"Jan, that's one of the ironies here. They weren't particularly strong either, but with this huge infusion of money from America they could be doing just fine, at least in the short run. Nobody really knows how this will conclude, but for now anyway, they have a tremendous surplus of cash right now. I was talking to a representative of a large German bank earlier who stated..."

"Excuse me, Susan, we will come back to you, but right now we need to go to Bill Timble in Miami. Bill, Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can, Jane."

"Go ahead, Bill."

"As we mentioned earlier, a lot of tension seemed to be building here, as in many cities throughout the country. Many people in Miami are poor and a huge portion of that population is minority, mostly African-American or Cuban. A lot of the people we talked to felt that they were victims of a system out to get them. We have some tape we showed earlier that, if we could... Could we play that back." The reporter was talking to the technician behind his cameraman.

The scene suddenly changed. A group of rowdy black youths were pushing and jockeying for position in front of the microphone the reporter was holding.

"What do you think caused this problem with the banks?" The reporter asked.

"The white man with all his institutions to oppress the black man. I don't see no white man in line. They already got their money stashed. They do all this to make it look like they in trouble. They juss trying to oppress the black man like they been doing for four hundred years." His dreadlocks bounced with each jerk of his head to emphasize specific words.

"What do you think is going to happen?"

"I think that some white ___ is going to get kicked. We going to rise up and take what is ours!"

"Do you mean you're going to participate in illegal activities?"

"I didn't say that! Don't you be putting words in my mouth. I juss think that they is a lot of people out there that will! They a lot of mad people out there and you ain't seen nothin' yet!"

"What do you mean we haven't seen anything yet? Do you mean a riot?"

"___ no, I don't mean a riot! I mean all the poor people, ALL the poor people, they going to rise up and they going to be blood in the streets! I don't mean one riot here, or one there. This ain't going to be like last year or the year before. I mean the whole country! They ain't going to win this time, and we going to fight back this time. There going to be blood in the streets! You ain't seen nothin', yet!"

"What do you think?" the reporter moved the mike closer to a bald headed youth wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with a giant X on it.

"I think the police is juss waiting for us to do something as an excuse to shoot us! But they too many of us. We ready for the _____! Let them come! We ready for them! Let's get it on! We ready. Let's get it on!"

"Ok. Well I think we get your point. This is Bill Timbal, in Miami," the reporter spoke into the camera.

The tape ended and the reporter reappeared live. "So you can see there were some pretty hot tempers earlier today. That footage was taken about one thirty Eastern time. Since then we have brought you minute-by-minute updates showing that crowds have been forming all over the City. As soon as a crowd forms police and National Guard are dispatched to that area to try to disperse the crowd. Apparently every police officer and Guardsman in Miami and two counties is out there in the street trying to keep a lid on this situation. Earlier in the afternoon this seemed to be working, but about half an hour ago things took a turn for the worse.

"We'd like to show you what is happening live from our chopper, Sky Cam. Can we

make that change to the chopper now?

The seen suddenly changed to an aerial view of the City. "This is Hank Miller of Sky Cam looking down on the City near the intersections of LaJeune and Sweetwater." The camera panned around, and zoomed in on a swarm of people ferociously tearing up a strip mall at the intersection. "The looting you see down there started about thirty minutes ago. The bank on the corner, I think it's First State Bank of Florida, was set on fire with what looked like a fire bomb. In fact there were several firebombs thrown at the bank. The firebombs were thrown into the front of the building about fifteen minutes ago. The fire seems to be just smoldering, not really engulfing the building. Then just minutes ago they started the liquor store down the block on fire, which you can see is already entirely engulfed with flames.

"If you could swing the camera this way." The camera panned down the street. "We see about, oh three blocks away, a group of police gathering, apparently getting ready to confront the rioters. You can see several police officers forming a line and we assume they will be confronting the looters in just a few minutes. There must be, oh, I would guess at least a hundred officers getting ready in their riot gear. There appears to be another busload of police just arriving and will soon be unloading several more officers.

"Now if we can look this way," the camera panned down the cross street where about ten blocks away there was smoke rising from another main intersection, "we can see a similar scene is erupting not far away. Over the radio we have heard other reports from other areas. There seems to be a whole series of lootings and fires starting all over the City!

"Now, if we can look back at the crowd we are over," the camera panned back to the crowd in front of the smoldering bank. "I don't know if you can tell from here," the camera zoomed in on the crowd, "but those two cars in the intersection that are burning were trying to cross the intersection when we approached before we were on the air. There were several other cars but these two didn't make it through the intersection without being stopped. We saw some scuffling but it appears that the drivers got away on foot. We saw one running down the street as we approached and he disappeared into a yard. The other, we are not sure what happened to him, but we see no sign of him now. Traffic on this street is completely gone. Anybody with a car has either parked it, or gotten out of here."

"Hank, some people are saying this may turn out to be the worst riot in Miami history. How does it look to you?" Bill asked the sky reporter.

"Well, I've reported on several riots now, and this has the potential of being the worst! Back to you Bill."

"As you can see this situation is really exploding here and we will be bringing you minute by minute updates on exactly what is happening the second that it happens."

"Thanks, Bill. We go now to Russ Granger in Los Angeles. Russ are you there?"

"Yes, Jane," a view of another reporter in a helicopter over a city appeared. The reporter's voice was breaking with emotion as he spoke. "We are over Inglewood, and we just

saw an unbelievable scene. In all my years of reporting I have never personally seen anything like what we just witnessed. Below where we are now you can see a scene where a battle just took place. I have to warn you what we are about to show is very disturbing." The camera panned down to an intersection and a shopping plaza. In the parking lot there were about fifty bodies of black men and women laying on the ground. A few of them were moving, trying to get up, but most were lying lifeless on the asphalt. Several bodies were spattered with blood.

The bell rang, and most of the students were visibly startled by it. Although all the students obviously heard it, there was no indication that anyone was ready to leave. The last class of the day over, all were excused, yet not a soul left their seat. They were glued to the TV, and nothing at home could compete with the vivid scene they were watching.

"We will play for you the tape of that battle as we recorded it only minutes ago. Apparently the storeowners in this area are mostly Asian and many apparently have sustained substantial losses to their stores in previous riots. When the looters came this time they were not going to lose their life savings again." The tape started to replay as the reporter continued a voice over. "You can see that a large crowd was forming outside this shopping plaza of mostly small business owners. In the crowd you can see this man here waving a handgun of some kind over his head and yelling something. Some of the crowd seems to be carrying away merchandise from one of the stores. Then the shooting broke out."

From the view in the sky, the camera zoomed in on the crowd that was starting to turn and run as shots rang out. The gunshots could not be heard from their view in the helicopter, but silently bodies fell to the hard asphalt. Men and women in T-shirts and print dresses started to drop, red spots staining their clothes, slaughtered in a second. An Asian youth with a handgun could be seen running away with his gun in hand. Before he reached the storefront he fell to the ground apparently shot. The camera panned back to the crowd, which was being peppered with gunfire, and sometimes returning fire. "The shooting seems to have..."

Mr. Jones had turned off the TV. Valerie Swenson had left the classroom with her hand over her mouth and tears welling in her eyes. The classroom was dead silent. Mr. Jones started for the door, stopped, excused himself to the class, saying he would be right back, then left the room. Even Mr. Jones seemed unaware school was over.

Michael looked back at Leonard. Michael had stolen some looks at Leonard several times during the time the TV was on, and several others were also trying not to be caught staring. Leonard was the only person in the room that was black.

To call Leonard black was a misnomer. He was middle class and black, in that order. He wore his hair short and his clothes were always neat and clean. He was a straight A student and never mixed with the other blacks bussed to the school who flaunted their blackness. They would have called him an Uncle Tom or an Oreo, black on the outside, white on the inside. By there definition he was not black at all. Now he looked as edgy as a cat in a dog kennel. No one spoke a word but the tension in the room was electric. It was as if they expected him to suddenly grow dreadlocks and pull an Uzi out of his shirt, spraying the class with bullets. To him, the rest of the classroom seemed filled with white hooded figures and a burning cross.

Just then Ben spoke up so that the whole class could hear. "My Dad always said that there was no way that blacks and white people could get along. He said that all the blacks should go back to Africa where they belong." Michael was absolutely stunned! It was the most obscene thing Michael could imagine. Michael suddenly thought Ben was pulling a joke of absolutely the worst possible taste. But as Michael studied Ben's face, he saw no hint of humor. Ben had only a self-assured look as if he did this everyday. Michael looked at Leonard. Leonard looked as if he was about to bolt for the door. Ben continued. "I say this class is for whites only." Two or three of Ben's friends gave tentative agreement.

Michael clenched his fists wanting to attack Ben, but lacked the courage to do so. Suddenly Warren Kennett stood up. "Ben, shut up!"

"You want to make me?" Ben responded as he stood up.

"It would be a pleasure." Warren replied as he stood.

Just then Mr. Jones came through the door and stopped. He quickly surveyed the two standing and saw the tears in Leonard's face. He flashed an angry look at the students in the room. "What's going on here?!" he demanded.

Chapter 15

Mr. Jones was incapable of getting any useful information out of anyone. Warren and Ben sat down and Mr. Jones assumed that that was the end of it. He would have pursued it further, but he had bigger problems right now. There was a wana-be race riot brewing down between the gym and the cafeteria in the quad, and there was no hope of assistance from the police. His first priority was to get Leonard down to the office and then get over to the quad. With Leonard gone he assumed the problem would be solved.

"I want every one to take out their books and start reading chapter eight. I'll be back as soon as I can." Mr. Jones' voice was level, taunt and very commanding. "Listen up people. We have an emergency situation. The Moreno Valley Police Department has asked that all students remain at school until their parents come to pick them up. Think of this as if there had been an earthquake, we've drilled this before. We have our emergency barrel in the back of the classroom, and each of you brought your emergency pack to school at the beginning of the year." He did not want to mention the riot, which he hoped would turn out to be a non-starter. "So let's stay cool, real frosty, take good care of each other and we'll get through this just fine. In a little while, we'll be getting you back to your home rooms." He thought for some tactful way of covering Leonard's removal. "Kristy Zimmer, David Blondek, and Leonard Wilson, please come with me. They need help from students in the office."

As soon as Mr. Jones' footsteps faded Ben challenged Warren. "Nigger lover!"

"Ben you're so full of it." Warren responded.

"You're a dead man mister." Ben snarled.

"Let's take care of it, here and now, outside."

"You're on."

A crowd poured through the door. Warren led the way with Ben close behind. A large circle formed around the two as they squared off. Ben threw the first blow, but everything became rather confused after that. The next thing Michael saw, Ben hit the ground and two bystanders, friends of Ben, jumped Warren. Michael sprang forward, tackling one of them. It was not a graceful tackle. Michael hit a little to the right, but it worked none the less.

Now things were more confused than ever. A sharp pain hit him in the back of the head and things went fuzzy for a moment. Then he saw one of Ben's buddies' legs in his face so he bit it. He got kicked in the head again and he decided it was time to retreat.

Getting out proved harder than getting in. Blows and kicks were flying in every direction and getting to his feet was impossible. Finally, Michael scrambled out of the pile on all fours and climbed to his feet. It seemed that everyone had had enough and the fight was fast losing steam. Everyone stood up and departed in various directions each tending a bloody nose, a bruised arm, or some other wound. Just for good measure Ben let fly a few last insults, but by this time no one cared.

Warren walked up to Michael licking the bloody knuckles on his right hand. "Thanks." was all he said.

"Sure." was Michael's response.

Someone patted Warren on the back and he turned away. Just then someone else spoke to Michael. "Say, you're bleeding pretty bad. Don't you think you should go to the bathroom?" Michael touched the back of his head where his would be benefactor was looking. His scalp was very tender to the touch, and wet. When he pulled his hand back around to look at it, it was covered in blood. Michael felt a trickle of warm liquid run down the back of his neck to his collar.

"Yeah, I guess I do." Slowly the pain began to grow in the back of his head until his vision began to blur. On the way to the bathroom Michael almost lost consciousness but he remained cognizant enough to lie down on the floor. Someone lent him a jacket to lay his head on.

Five or six students hovered over him wondering what to do as Michael rested and recovered his strength. He was pressing some wet paper towels on the cut, applying pressure to stop the bleeding. The bleeding had almost stopped when someone said. "Boy, that sure wasn't worth getting your head busted over." Michael turned it over in his mind along with the pain and then softly spoke to no one in particular, "Oh, I don't know."

Chapter 16

Sarah was already exasperated with herself before she even backed the mini-van out of the driveway. How could she have possibly neglected to get so many things? She bought most of what she thought she needed the day after John and her discussed the possibility of shortages. Now that it had happened, she knew she needed more. More raisins, more vegetable oil, more cans of soup, and most especially, more peanut butter.

When the supermarket came into view, Sarah couldn't believe her eyes. There wasn't a parking space that didn't have a car in it. The curb of the main road in front of the store was filled corner to corner with vehicles parked right under the no parking signs. The right lane of traffic was abandoned to the parked vehicles. Sarah didn't even try to pull into the parking lot, but turned down the first side street she came to and took the first open space.

Shoppers attacked most of the stores, but the main assault was on the supermarket. When Sarah reached the front of the store she found herself at the back of a mob that was pushing and shoving trying to maintain their position in front of the door. Quickly she noticed that the other door on the opposite side of the storefront was not crowded so she hurried over, wondering why no one seemed to have noticed the other entrance.

When she arrived, she was met by two store employees guarding the door. "This is the exit Ma'am, you'll have to wait your turn at the other door." It was obvious that he had said the same thing over and over a thousand times already in the last hour. "This is the exit Ma'am, you'll have to wait your turn at the other door." he repeated. Sarah stood on her toes to peek in the window. She could see that they were limiting the number of people in the store to keep control. "This is the exit Ma'am, you'll have to wait your turn at the other door." Sarah had left for the entrance before he finished repeating himself the third time.

When she arrived at the back of the crowd again she could see that this was a futile effort. There wasn't going to be anything in the store if she waited until everybody in front of her had their turn. "Three days food." she said to herself. Everyone seemed to intuitively know what John had told her some time before. "There is only three days food on the shelves of the stores of any American community. What you see is it. There is no back room in the store. Unless new trucks come with food from the warehouse, there was going to be a food shortage in a matter of hours. Some will have food for two weeks. Some will have nothing."

This is precisely the reason John added the pantry to the house, and they had stocked it with food. It wasn't as big as he wished he had, but it was mountains more than their neighbors.

Because they already had a sizable stock of food at home, Sarah could afford the luxury of being a little more analytical about the situation than the other would-be-shoppers. There wasn't really a line in the classical sense of the word, but there was an order to the mob, something like the order of a pack of dogs. Everyone knew who was just ahead, and on either side, and right behind. Order was kept by each person keeping anyone from pushing past them. Each person struggled and pushed to maintain their position.

Sarah almost turned away, but the lure of getting a few more precious food items was

more than she could forgo. She realized that newcomers were already passing her up and even though the effort looked futile, she had to try.

Twenty-five minutes dragged by before she made it up to the front door of the store. "Fifty dollar limit Ma'am. Fifty dollars only." the clerk repeated over and over as each new shopper passed through into the store.

"Fifty dollars! That won't buy anything!" someone said next to Sarah.

"I don't think that's fair. They didn't have a limit for the ones that got here first I'll bet." someone else agreed.

"And you can bet there isn't a fifty dollar limit for the store employees!" another accused.

Sarah listened to the constant snips and jabs but said nothing. She just kept looking at the shirt in front of her and the two sleeves on each side.

When she finally passed through the door she raced to get a cart. The shelves were practically empty. The first thing she came to that she vaguely wanted was shampoo. As she approached the door she had changed her plan to include anything that might be useful, rather than the much more specific list she had in her hand. Better to have something rather than an empty list. Next she included several cans of crushed pineapple. Next she came to some shredded coconut; she took one bag.

Then she saw some cooking oil. Great! It wasn't the brand or even the type she liked, but at this point, it was close enough. She had already passed the peanut butter and seen that it was all gone. The only bottle left was lying on the floor smashed open. Normally a helpful clerk would have promptly cleaned it up, but that was not a priority for the store right now.

Plastic wrap, dish soap, toilet bowl cleaner, sweet pickle relish, mustard, bottled dressing; those and others were thrown in the basket as she raced down the aisles. Sarah figured it up in her head to be about fifty dollars, maybe a little over. It sure wasn't much for all the effort.

When she approached the checkout stand she saw a squall starting to blow into full force.

"Twenty dollars! They said fifty dollars!"

"Yes Ma'am, but..."

"I have babies to feed!"

"But Ma'am..."

"I can't believe you let all those people buy fifty dollars, and now we're only going to get twenty dollars!"

"Yes but..."

"You guys are a bunch of thieves. You let us stay in line all this way..."

"I don't control store policy I just..."

"Oh, shut up!"

With that, the irate customer's contempt boiled over. She steered her cart past the checker and started full steam for the exit, daring them to stop her. She stormed past the checker who stepped out of her way, and headed full speed towards the exit. The checkers were lost for an appropriate response. They had always been told that the customer was always right, but a customer had never confronted them before with a shopping cart turned into a battering ram.

The manager stepped forward and declared with an authoritative voice to the checkers. "Let her go." He looked around at the carcass of a store with virtually nothing left to take and the crowd outside more desperate than ever. Having crossed the Rubicon he decided there was no way back. With a half hearted smile he declared loud enough for all to hear. "Open the doors. Let them all in. Everything left is free, one hundred percent off."

Instantly the shoppers sprang into action. Those inside the store started grabbing everything in reach. Those outside the store poured in and joined into the frenzy. The checkers and the manager pulled into a defensive position around the cash registers.

Suddenly someone snatched a bottle of salad dressing out of Sarah's cart. The violation of protocol was so appalling to Sarah and she hardly knew what to do, she was beyond words. Finally she said to her self, "Well if she wants it that bad, she can have it."

Sarah worked her way up to the cash registers and found refuge in the area, which the other shoppers were avoiding. It appeared they skirted the cash registers for fear they might have to pay after all. Sarah pulled her wallet out of her purse and produced two twenty-dollar bills and a ten.

"A ma'am. It's free. You don't have to pay." the checker tried to inform Sarah.

"Oh yes I do." Sarah responded firmly. She pushed the money at the checker, who dutifully accepted it with bewilderment. The checker slipped back into a behavior she was more familiar with and bagged the items in plastic bags with handles.

Sarah started to work her way toward the exit. As she made it closer to the door she struggled to keep control of her items but made it clear of the door without losing any more merchandise. She left the store and made her way to the van carrying the food in four plastic sacks. Once she delivered her purchase to the van she would return the cart to the store.

Before she made it to the side street that she had parked the mini-van on, she suddenly noticed that she was being followed. She tried not to look, but over her shoulder she occasionally caught a glimpse of a tall thin man of about forty who maintained about a hundred feet distance behind her. He didn't chase after her, but Sarah knew she was being followed.

She picked up her pace as she moved closer to the van, and he also seemed to speed up a little. By the time she reached the mini-van she had her key ready and jabbed it at the lock. Fractions of a second dragged by as she fumbled with the lock. Finally she gained entry, and threw herself and the four sacks into the vehicle giving the cart a shove. She slammed the door and locked it, just as the man made it to the side door of the mini-van.

He had in his hands a fist full of twenty-dollar bills that he was trying to shove at her. "I'll give you sixty dollars for whatever you have. Cash. Eighty dollars? One hundred dollars?"

Sarah paid no attention as she jabbed her key in the ignition and started the van. The man moved around to the front of the van flashing the bills; hoping the sight of the greenbacks would change her mind. She swung the steering wheel and looked behind to see if traffic was coming. The man could see he wasn't going to prevail but he still persisted as he moved out of her way. Then she pulled out into the street. As the car picked up speed Sarah looked in her rear view mirror. The man stood in the street looking at the back of her rapidly departing mini-van, the fist of bills at his side. Finally, from a safe distance, Sarah began to feel sorry for the man.

Chapter 17

John's boss, Mr. Martin came into the conference area where most of his white-collar employees were gathered around the TV. It was typically used for video presentations, but it did have a hookup to commercial satellite. The view on the screen was a helicopter shot of an intersection. People were running and some were shooting. Burning cars and bleeding bodies were strewn in the street.

"How many of you want to take administrative leave?" Mr. Martin spoke as soon as he entered the room.

The question took them by surprise. The work had been so intense the last month and a half that being found watching TV on company time seemed like they had been caught playing hooky. Not knowing, they all looked at each other wondering what to say. Being a small company, they had never had such a thing as administrative leave before.

"Well, I'm not going to hang around here." Mr. Martin continued. "I've got too much on my mind to do anything useful anyway. Anybody that wants to go home is welcome to do so, with pay. I just told the techs I don't want to see their faces around here until it is safe to make house visits. Last one out, turn off the lights and lock the door." With that Mr. Martin turned and left.

No one needed to see it in writing. They all high tailed for their cars, post-haste. John jumped in his old Chevy, pulled it out of the fenced parking lot and headed for the freeway with apprehension. There was no way of knowing what he might find.

Traffic was chaotic but that wasn't so unusual. Suddenly the traffic stopped. The warm fall Southern California sun beat on the cars as they idled. Finally, drivers turned off their engines to keep their cars from overheating, and some got out to reconnoiter the situation. A few of the cars showed signs of overheating, and the same was true of some of the drivers. John climbed out of his car just to stretch his legs, but he was worried about his family and was impatient.

Several motorists were muttering not too quietly, or even yelling at the traffic ahead. It occurred to John that they might as well be yelling at the tide for coming in, or the rain for falling. It seemed that each felt that their problems were unique, and special treatment was expected. It did no good. When the time finally comes, the tide turns or the rain quits.

Inexplicably, the traffic started to move again. Drivers returned to their cars and the procession started to move slowly, ever so slowly. For about a mile John crept down the giant concrete freeway. His speedometer rarely registered any speed at all. When it did register, it jumped between 0 and 10 miles per hour.

As the traffic rounded a gentle curve he came to where he could see that the cars were being funneled together and guided off the freeway onto an over pass. Most of the cars crossing over the highway and re-entering heading back the way they had come. Police officers and a barricade enforced the exit from the freeway.

As John approached the blockade he recognized one of the police officers as Bill Turner. Bill's son had been in the same Scout troop as Allen. When he got close, John called out to Bill. "Hey, Bill." The officer showed no signs of having heard, though others noticed and waved John towards the exit. John persisted, pulling out of traffic past some orange cones and coming to a gentle stop. "Bill, hey Bill." The officer still seemed not to hear but stood surveying the traffic and occasionally waving to urge the drivers on. Finally John tried a different tactic. "Officer Turner." Finally Bill turned his head and looked at John.

The light of recognition didn't turn on immediately, but after a moment the grim look on his face escaped, replaced by a smile. John's car had pulled out of the far left lane, which allowed Bill to walk up to John's car.

"Hay John, how the heck are you?"

"Not going too fast right now. What happened?"

"Oh it's unbelievable. We have completely lost control of everything from here past the Harbor Freeway to the 710, and all the way north to the Santa Monica and south to the 405. John just trust me. Go back to the San Diego Freeway, go north to the 210, take it to Pomona, and out the 10 or the 60 to the 215. Listen to the radio, avoid tie ups, and good luck."

"You're kidding! The 210 must be more than 40 miles from here."

"I'm not kidding." From the look on Bill's face he could see that he wasn't.

"What do you mean, lost control?"

"Just that. We are massing officers and National Guard to try to retake the area. They call it "asserting authority." Looks more like urban warfare to me. Personally, I think it's crazy. Let them burn the town, and then go back in when they're tired of burning and looting. Right now, they're so worked up nothing is going to get them to stop. Sometimes you have to let it crash and burn before you can build it back up.

"Urban warfare?"

"I was up there earlier before we fell back to our present position and I tell you, I have never seen anything like it before in my life. There was a bunch of them up on the overpass throwing bricks and pipes and you name it on the motorists below. We were trying to evacuate whomever we could before the gunfire trapped us. Finally we had to leave and just get the officers we had out with us. I feel for the civilians we had to leave behind but there were just too many of them. I tell you it looked just like gargoyles up on that overpass throwing things down on the poor souls below. Laughing, yelling, I swear I got a good look at hell today." Bill and John looked each other in the eye for a long moment. "I guess this wasn't the future we had in mind for our kids when we worked together in the Stout Troop, was it?" Bill added finally, with out a crooked smile.

"No I guess it sure isn't," John responded, "but at least we did what we could."

"Yep." John responded with resignation in his terse reply. "I've got to get back to work and you better get going." Bill walked along side of John's car as he inched forward to the edge of the traffic.

"Good Luck." Bill added as John worked his way in between two cars. "They'll head you back down the freeway toward the 405. I'd go home the way I said if I were you. And please, when you get home, would you give my wife a call and see if she is home. If she is, tell her you saw me, and I'm OK. Tell her I'll call her when I can."

With that John pulled slowly away up the exit. With two left turns he was heading west on the Century Freeway back the way he came.

* * * * *

John was never so glad to pull into his driveway as he was tonight. It took almost four hours to make a 60-minute trip. When he came through the door -- safe in his castle, he was instantly greeted with a new set of problems.

"Michael was in a fight at school today and his head was cut open. Would you take a look at him?"

"Sure." John knew at a glance that Sarah was losing her grip. Sarah was usually so self composed and controlled that the few times that she did lose it, John knew it was time to step in and do something immediately.

"I took him to the hospital, but they wouldn't see him. They said it wasn't bad enough. All the doctors had been moved down to Los Angeles, but I told them I just wanted them to look at him, and they wouldn't. They wouldn't even look at him. The receptionist could see that it was bleeding, but she wouldn't even have someone look at it."

John reached out and pulled her to him. "It's OK. Don't worry."

Sarah pushed him away. "I will worry if I want to. He's my son and I'll worry about him if I want."

"OK, OK." John placated.

"Now will you go see Michael and see how bad it is? He is lying on his bed."

"Yes, I will." John hurried down the hall and into Michael's room. Natalie and Kevin were hovering close to Michael as he lay on the bed. The two youngsters were very interested in Michael who was holding a bag of ice wrapped in a towel to the back of his head.

"Kids, would you please go find something to do for a while. I need to talk to your brother." John spoke in a firm voice.

The two children left without a word. John was glad they didn't put up their usual protest when they were asked to do something they didn't want to. John assumed that they must have realized this wasn't life as usual from the way Sarah was acting.

Michael sat up holding his homemade ice pack to the back of his head.

"Your mother tells me that you were in a fight at school."

"Yeah." Michael admitted.

"You want to tell me about it?"

"Sure." Michael told what had happened with more accuracy and journalistic detachment than a typical teenage boy would to explain a fight he had been in. John listened intently; formulating what he would say when Michael finished.

"Michael, I'm kind of surprised that you got involved in a fight. It is not like you to be involved in fights..."

"Dad! I had no choice."

"Michael. We always have choices. Too often we limit our options before we have thought it through."

"Dad! They were beating him up. There wasn't a lot of time for thinking about it. It was three on one, and they were wrong."

"Now Michael, can't you think of some other way of handling the situation other than lowering yourself to their level."

"Yeah. I could have gone down to the office and told them that when they get through with the race riot at the cafeteria, and the City of Los Angeles finishes burning itself to the ground, would they mind calling for an undertaker, too scrap Warren up off the sidewalk!"

John turned away from Michael to conceal the smile that broke over his face. It was bad form to laugh when giving a lecture on proper behavior. But the image Michael painted did strike John as funny. When he turned back he admitted, "You may have a point there, Michael."

"Dad. Remember when we talked about the American Revolution, when I was studying it in school?"

"Sure."

"Remember what Patrick Henry said?"

"Yeah. 'Give me liberty or give me death.'"

"Dad. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time, and I'm not sorry I did it. I just wish I had been the one to stand up for Leonard first. To tell the truth, until I jumped in there with Warren, I felt like a coward. It just seems like if we don't stand up for what we say we believe in, we're just a bunch of cowards. I would like to think that if I were there with Patrick Henry, I would have said 'Me too'".

John contemplated his son's words for a while. "You did the right thing, Michael. I'm proud of you. Just don't let it happen again too soon. I doubt your mother can stand it. And if it does, be sure to duck."

"I would have, but it happened too fast."

"I understand what you're saying. Sometimes problems come at you faster than you can take care of them. C'mon, let me see that head of yours."

"It's nowhere near as bad as Mom makes it sound. This ice bag was Mom's idea, not mine. I lost some blood, and I had some mild shock, but I just did what they say in the Scout handbook and I was OK. It just looked real messy. Really I'm fine."

John examined the wound and he had to agree with Michael. It was swollen, but with the blood cleaned up it didn't look very serious. "Well just stay here on your bed until dinner, and we'll see how you do then. I'll come get you when dinner is ready."

John checked on Natalie and Kevin on the way to the kitchen. Natalie was reading a book, and Kevin was playing with his castle and knights. John found Sarah in the kitchen working on dinner.

Sarah turned as soon as John entered the kitchen "Is Michael all right?"

"Yes he's fine, darling. Please don't worry about it."

"John I'm sorry. I was at the supermarket and they wouldn't let anybody buy more than twenty dollars worth of groceries. It started at fifty dollars, but later they changed it to twenty dollars. And then finally they gave up and it just turned into a free for all. This lady took a bottle of salad dressing right out of my cart. I didn't really care about the salad dressing, but she just took it like she had a right to it. Then a man followed me to the car. I think he was just desperate to buy food, but it scared me and I drove away without listening to him."

John stepped forward and hugged his wife. It was a long tender embrace. John rubbed her back as her tears wetted his shirt over his breast pocket. As he held her she continued.

"Then when I got home I got a call from the school. They said there had been a riot at the school and Michael had received a head injury and had passed out. I raced to the school and picked him up. He seemed all right, but I know sometimes people get injured, especially head

injuries, and they go home and then they have a brain clot or something, and they just die. They wouldn't give him a CAT scan, or even look at him. Most of the doctors and nurses were taken down town to the other hospitals. There were just a few people left and they were only seeing the worst cases. And then you were so late. I was afraid you were trapped in the riot and there was no way to find you. John, I was so scared."

John just held her and rubbed her back as the tears flowed freely wetting the front of both of their shirts. Finally Sarah asked, "Is Michael going to be all right?"

"Michael is going to be fine. It looked worse the time I ran into an old broken down barbed wire fence playing capture the flag in the middle of the night at my cousins' house when I was fourteen. Tore me up something terrible. I was fine the next day."

"You never told me you ran into a barbed wire fence when you were fourteen."

"Darling, if little boys told their mothers and big boys told their wives everything they got into when they were being foolish, the hospitals would be full of women suffering from cardiac arrest."

"Is that so?"

"I'm afraid so. Just trust me, Michael is going to be fine. You'll see when he comes out to dinner."

"Don't you think he should have his dinner in bed, just for tonight?"

"Look, you start treating him like royalty, he's going to start expecting it. Not only that, the other kids will start jumping out of trees to get the same special treatment. Now you don't want that, do you?"

"No." Sarah pulled away and got the hand towel to wipe John's shirt with. "Did you and Michael have a good talk?" she asked as she worked.

"Yes we did. You know, sometimes I wonder which one of us is raising the other."

"You mean Michael?"

"Yes. You know, before Michael was diagnosed with a learning disability I couldn't figure him out. I knew he was smart, but he did lousy in school, especially reading. I wondered if he was either lazy or just belligerent. But he seemed to be working hard, at least he spent a lot of time doing homework, and he didn't act belligerent to us, he just didn't seem to get with it. I couldn't figure him out.

"Now that I realize how hard he was trying just to keep up, I have a lot more respect for him. It shows in his character. All that hard work has made him better. He sometimes acts and talks more like an adult than a seventeen year old.

"He likened this fight at the school to the American Revolution. He wasn't just trying to rationalize himself out of being disciplined. He had thought it through. I'm real impressed. He is quite a guy."

Sarah looked up in John's eyes and finally whispered. "I wonder if John Adams wife cried all over his shirt when she was scared."

John contemplated his wife who busied her self with the hand towel. "Darling, Maybe I should take you and the kids up to see Grandpa and Grandma for a while. How does Bishop, California sound to you?"

Sarah continued to stair up into his eyes. "John, I would love to spend a little time with my parents in Bishop."

Chapter 18

Randy flew up the steps of Allen's apartment and burst through the door as if he lived there. "Have you got your stuff? Let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go!"

"I can't get a hold of my parents," Allen exclaimed "Their line is busy."

"Forget it. The phones are probably down. We'll go there after we pick up Roxanne and hit the armory. But let's move it!"

Allen grabbed two suitcases and started past Randy. Randy grabbed them from Allen and headed for the truck. Allen immediately turned around and grabbed the last of his possessions worth taking, which were stuffed in a cardboard box and then followed Randy at a run. He shifted the box enough to grab the door and pull it closed then bounded for the truck. Randy had dropped the suitcases in the bed of the truck and was already climbing into the truck jabbing the keys into the ignition. Allen tossed the box in the back with little more care than Randy had used for the suitcases, then ran around to the passenger side of the truck. Before he reached the door the truck roared to life.

When Allen jumped in, he had to be careful not to step on the cash of weapons and ammunition on the floor of the truck, hidden under a blanket. On the seat was a revolver in a leather holster. He grabbed the Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum as he slid onto the seat. Allen glanced over at Randy and noticed for the first time that he had a semi-automatic pistol in a holster belted to his right hip. Allen pulled the door closed with a thud and Randy popped the clutch at the same moment. Allen buckled his seat belt as they drove.

Randy drove fast, but not recklessly. He slowed at stop signs, but no more than necessary. Allen considered the holster in his hands. It was a military issue shoulder holster and Allen wasn't familiar with it. He laid it out in his lap to examine. "Do you know how to put it on?" Randy asked as he drove.

"No, but I think I can figure it out." Allen turned it around a few times until he had it laid out properly to put on. He slipped it on his left shoulder and buckled the strap. It fit a little loose, but with a minor adjustment it came to a snug fit. With the holster on, Allen returned his attention to where they were going.

Randy was still maneuvering through the traffic intent on where he was driving. Without even a sideward glance Randy asked Allen, "Are you ready to use that thing?"

Allen knew Randy was referring to the revolver cinched close to his left side under his arm. Allen glanced over at Randy who appeared only concerned with his driving. "Do you mean, am I ready to shoot someone if I have to?"

"No, I mean are you ready to **kill** someone if you have to?"

Allen thought the distinction was not necessary but answered flatly. "Yes, I'm willing to kill someone if I have to."

Allen looked out of the truck again. From time to time they passed large concentrations of police officers and National Guard. At other times they traveled for blocks without seeing any government presence. Always he saw chaos. As they rounded a corner Allen could see dozens of people pulling loot from the stores of a small strip mall. Would he kill one of them? Allen thought not, but he would be willing to clear the store by brandishing a gun if it were his store. What if one of them pulled a gun on him, would he shoot first? Allen looked over his shoulder at the crowd that had just passed out of sight. Yes, Allen concluded, he would.

Allen tried to think about how he might be confronted and consider where the line in the sand lay, but he had run out of time. His pulse was racing and so was his mind. This was it. The time to evaluate what constituted self-defense and what did not was gone. The time to think was over; there was only time to react. Allen had to trust Randy and his instincts.

"Well I sure hope you're ready to kill somebody." Stated Randy emphatically. "If someone points a gun at you, and you hesitate for one second, not only are you a dead man, but so am I. If I say shoot, you shoot. If you see someone who is pointing a gun at any of us, you shoot first and worry whether you did the right thing later. And if you shoot, shoot to kill. Do you think you can do that?" Randy shot a glance at Allen but didn't wait for a response.

"Yes. If someone is pointing a gun at me, or you, or Roxanne, I'll shoot."

"OK." was all that Randy said, apparently satisfied.

Allen knew that they were almost to the girl's apartment when suddenly the thought of Cindy flashed in his mind. What if Cindy wanted to go too? Allen hadn't even considered Roxanne's roommate Cindy until they were almost in the apartment driveway. Cindy was an unpredictable quantity that Allen didn't want to deal with, let alone be responsible for. Cindy was not an asset, but only a liability. She was a creature of the city. What possible good could come from taking her alone? At least Roxanne could take care of herself. Roxanne would not be an obstacle to survival. Well he would have to deal with it when it happened.

Randy pulled to a stop just past the driveway of the apartment and then backed into the driveway in a single quick precise curve. The truck stopped close to the curb and they both jumped out. Randy made it to the door first with Allen right behind. This time Randy banged on the door and waited for an answer.

Roxanne answered the door, a quizzical look on her face. Randy spoke as soon as the door opened. "Allen and I are leaving for Bishop. I told you that he has relatives there. Do you want to come with us?"

Roxanne was taken back, but answered quickly. "Yes." Then she turned to Cindy who was just coming to see who was at the door. "Cindy, do you want to come with us to Bishop?"

Cindy glanced at Randy then at Allen. Her glance stopped on the shoulder holster Allen was wearing. "No, I think I would be safer here. My father will be coming for me soon and take me back to our house."

Roxanne opened the door wide to invite them in. "Come in, I'll be just a minute. I need to get some things."

Randy called to her as he disappeared toward her bedroom. "Just take what you need. We need to go fast."

Allen was relieved that Cindy didn't want to come and now he just wanted to leave as soon as possible.

Cindy hovered around examining Allen and the side arm he wore openly out of the corner of her eye. Finally she spoke to Randy who had closed the door and stood next to the window looking obliquely out of the window, keeping an eye on the truck. "Do you expect some shooting?"

"Yes." Randy answered matter of factly.

Cindy looked back at Allen who was standing in the middle of the living room uncomfortable for the silent attention Cindy was giving him.

"What happens if you run into the same kind of trouble like we had last time?"

"They're going to die." Randy spoke without emotion.

Cindy looked at Randy, her eyes narrowed. "How are they going to die?"

"I'm gong to kill them."

"With this." Cindy pointed at the U.S. Army issue 9mm pistol in Randy's hip holster.

"Possibly, but more likely I'll use the rifle in the truck." Randy then called in a loud voice. "Roxanne, are you ready?"

Allen concluded that Randy had no more use for Cindy than Allen did. Randy was fidgety and wanted to leave as soon as possible. He had little desire for chitchat with Cindy.

Cindy examined Randy for a while then looked back at Allen. Just then Roxanne came in carrying two large suitcases. Allen stepped forward and took the larger of the two. As the three prepared to leave Cindy finally spoke to Roxanne. "Are you sure you want to go with them? You could be killed."

Roxanne hesitated.

Randy spoke "It's up to you Roxanne, coming or staying, but you need to decide now; we're leaving. You can take your chances with us, or stay here and trust in being able to stay out of harms way. But if gang bangers come through here looting and raping, and the city burns down, there is no way we can come back to save you. This is your last chance. Which is it, stay

or go?"

Roxanne looked in Randy's eyes as he spoke then turned back at Cindy. "Are you sure you don't want to come with us?"

"Not a chance." was Cindy's simple response.

"OK, lets go." Randy took charge again.

Roxanne hesitated in the doorway, blocking Allen's way. Cindy and Roxanne exchanged stares for a second then Randy stated again a little more emphatically. "Let's go. Who ever is coming, come; but lets go."

Without another word Roxanne followed quickly and so did Allen. They reached the truck and jumped in after tossing the suitcases in the truck bed. Randy drove, Allen was on the passenger side, Roxanne was in the middle. The truck pulled into the street and they were gone.

At the end of the street, Randy turned right onto the main street and then abruptly pulled a U-turn. About three blocks down Randy had seen fighting, shooting and bricks flying. Going in the opposite direction, at the first turn Randy pulled another right and raced down a residential street. Before long he stopped and pulled backwards half way into a driveway. He stopped the truck with the hood of the truck even with the cars parked on the side of the street, the rear wheels on the sidewalk.

Randy reached over and uncovered his AR-15 and pulled it out. "Hand me some of those clips he demanded." Allen handed Randy two twenty round clips heavy with ammunition. Randy shoved them into his empty pockets as he stepped out of the truck.

"Roxanne, you drive. Allen, you get ready with that peashooter of yours. There is a .45 pistol in there too. You had better get ready with it too if we need it. Roxanne, There is a blockade down at the end of this street. I'm going to pick off those that I can. When I say go, you drive down there as fast as you can. Allen, you cover the right side of the truck. I'll be in the back of the truck covering the left. Everybody keep your head down and with a little luck we'll be out of here before they have time to know what hit them. But when they catch on, they are going to be madder than a hornet's nest, so we have to move fast. Everybody got it?"

"You want me to drive the truck that way?" Roxanne was pointing in the direction of the blockade.

"After I take care of them. They are probably going to be heading for cover if their are any of them left at all. I'll bang on the top of the truck and yell go. You turn right and gun it through the intersection down there. Don't stop for anything. If there are bodies in the street, drive over them. If we stop, we all die. Everybody got it?" Roxanne and Allen shook their heads in the affirmative.

Randy jumped into the bed of the truck. He quickly assumed the kneeling position and looped the strap of the gun around his left arm and sighted on the blockade. He had a clear shot,

and he wasn't worried that his body might possibly be seen through the windows of the cars parked on the street because he knew the a bullet would not travel through several slanted surfaces of tempered glass. He did worry that he couldn't see the legs of those he sighted on. If they dropped at the first sound of shots, he would be powerless to finish what he had started.

Randy turned and rolled out of the bed of the truck with a smooth motion without unstrapping the rifle from his left arm. His feet hit the pavement like cats paws and he crept around to the front of the truck to positioned himself behind the front of the truck shooting over the hood. From here there was nowhere for them to go that Randy couldn't see if he started with the one on the right. At two hundred and fifty yards this would be a turkey shoot. Randy placed his finger on the trigger. He took three short breaths, let out the last breath quickly, and then held his breath. With his sights on the torso of the figure furthest to the right he started to press off his first shot.

* * * * *

Mark danced around in the street reveling in how **bad** he was. Oh he was bad! He pulled his Tec-9 machine-pistol out of his baggy pants just to show it off again, then shoved it back to be ready to pull it out again. Oh, it was fun. Mark thought this was the most fun a fourteen year old could ever have. Together with his gang banger buddies, his "family", he was not afraid of anybody.

A few minutes before they had pulled over some guy and rolled him for fifty bucks. Ripping him off was fun, but the most fun was yelling orders at him at gunpoint. "Get out of the car! Lay down on the street, face down! Move and I'll blow your head off. Give me your wallet." He didn't do it fast enough to suit Mark so kicked him in the side. He didn't grunt loud enough so he kicked him again in the head. Oh this was great fun!

Mark pulled his Tec-9 out of his pants again. The fifty round clip stuck awkwardly out of the pistol grip. It had the look of a machine gun, which Mark loved. Yes, Mark was one bad gang banger.

To join the gang Mark had been beat mercilessly. He lost two teeth and had four broken ribs, but it proved he was a man. Now he was one of them. His gang brothers would die for him, and he would die for them. But none of them were dying. If anybody was going to do any dying, they were going to cause it. Oh, they were bad!

Mark could hear the occasional popping of gunshots, but it didn't frighten Mark at all. It was music to his ears. It added to the thrill. Danger was what made life real. "Without danger, you're not alive," he loved to say.

Mark stuffed the machine pistol back in his pants and looked at his cohorts in crime. Mark instantly frowned. Two of his brothers were laying on the street, sprawled out flat like they had been shot. Just then another one dropped, blood spraying from his chest. Mark instinctively crouched and pulled out his gun. He started to spray aimlessly, not having a clue what he was shooting at. After a long burst Mark heard a "thap" and another gang banger dropped to the ground. Mark flashed his gun around knowing if he could just see who was

shooting, he would be able to blow him away. But where were they firing from, and why couldn't he hear gunshots? Mark's attention was riveted on the intersection, searching desperately for the source of the gunshots.

Mark could hear some gunshots in the distance in various directions, but nothing close enough to register in his mind as a danger to him. Mark had never seen a shootout where the assailants shot more than thirty yards. Just then Mark heard another "thap" and the thief to his right sprawled out on the ground with a groan. Mark spun around and sprayed the street where he thought the bullet must have come from. He stopped to survey whether he had hit anything when a .223 bullet passed through his chest. Mark hit the pavement on his back. For Mark, the fun was over.

* * * * *

Randy flipped his left arm out of the sling and shifted the semi-automatic rifle into his right hand in a single smooth motion. His head passed past the truck window as he headed for the back of the truck. With the grace of a high jumper, and a motion not dissimilar, he lifted off the pavement and into the back of the truck. "Go." he shouted and pulled himself into position, his barrel over the left rear panel of the truck. He banged the top of the cab with his hand, but Roxanne had already started the truck in motion.

The truck pulled into the street and barreled down into the intersection. As Randy had predicted, there was no serious resistance when they blew through. Randy held his revolver out of the right window looking for a target, but never saw one. A couple of pistol bullets passed through the air in the general direction of the truck, but none found their mark. The truck sailed on with Randy looking barely over the tailgate to survey his handiwork. He had seen similar carnage before, some that he had created, but this was a first time on U.S. territory. He knew he had done it right, and he felt no remorse for those he had just killed. Still it gave him no satisfaction either. It was just something he had to do. Randy wondered how many more times he would have to kill before it was over.

Chapter 19

Officer Ridley was expecting something; that was for sure. But whatever he was expecting, it wasn't this. Prisons are not forts. They are designed to keep prisoners in, not resist military assaults. Occasionally there might be an attempted escape with help from the outside, but they were not equipped to handle anything like this.

Ridley was assigned to man the guard shack in front of the prison. Ridley had left his two partners in the shack to go see what the lieutenant wanted. It was the typical bureaucratic hogwash that the lieutenant seemed to endlessly fixate on. Ridley froze in his tracks as soon as he stepped out of the door on his way back to his post.

Ridley watched as two or three dozen vans, trucks, and cars pulled up facing the front entrance of the prison. The lead two vans unloaded a dozen armed gang members in front of the prison carrying fully automatic weapons. The smallest weapon that any of this makeshift army carried was a fully automatic assault rifle. Nothing they carried was legal. Most of them carried Chinese made AK-47s shipped in crates directly from the manufacturer to a middleman who delivered them to the gang. This was in exchange for a portion of the drug profits. In the world of drug smuggling and murder for turf, gun control laws were insignificant. Given enough money, any weapon devised by man could be bought. Any weapon! And the drug gangs of L.A. had all the money they needed.

Ridley was staring in disbelief as one of them fired a rocket-propelled grenade directly into the guard shack. The rocket flew through the shack without hitting anything hard enough to detonate the warhead. Instead the RPG rocket continued on until it hit the building Ridley was stepping out of.

Ridley turned and launched himself into the single story office building that housed the prison administration. He did not see, but he knew what happened next. The gang members that had dismounted from the vans cut through the guard shack like a chainsaw with automatic rifle fire and moved on to destroy the next obstacle they would encounter.

Ridley flew past the lieutenant who was screaming as if the lieutenant wasn't there. In a couple of seconds he had exited the back of the administration building and stopped once again. In disbelief Ridley watched as a pick-up truck with a .50 caliber machinegun mounted on top of the cab riddled one guard tower after another with bullets that passed through the "bullet proof" armor. Ridley had seen a lot of nasty weapons during his years in the prison. He had seen a fight in which a man was sliced open with a knife made from a razor blade and a toothbrush. Just the week before he had confiscated a hand crafted pistol, fabricated in the secure walls of the prison. One time he had even seen a sawed off shotgun, some how smuggled into the prison. How it got in Ridley had no idea. But he had never had to face a large caliber machinegun before.

Just then he saw a dump truck rounding the building and then rammed through the wire fence leading to the buildings that housed the inmates. The windshield and grill had been covered with a steel plate. A small slit had been cut in the front for the driver to see through. The truck burst through the fence with ease.

Officer Ridley grabbed his 9mm pistol from his holster, thinking he was as naked as a jaybird in the springtime. Just then he heard the concussion of an 82 mm mortar round as it hit one of the guard towers. Ridley fell back into the building stumbling backward as he did. Just then a mortar shell hit inside the administration building sending smoke and dust in every direction.

Ridley rolled over enough to dimly see figures racing by in the smoky hall. Just then a figure stopped in the doorway and glanced at him. It took just a second to pass judgment. The figure emptied half of his thirty round clip into Ridley. He surveyed his work for another second then ran on, never feeling the slightest regret.

In spite of their unconventional appearance, they moved with deliberation and forethought. They knew exactly where to go and were prepared to destroy every obstacle until they obtained control of every cell in the institution. The United States Army or Marine Corps had trained some of the attackers. Young men without police records had been recruited by the gang to volunteer for military service. They were not only professionally trained, but they managed to “lose” a considerable amount of weapons, ammunition and other essentials while in the service. A few were caught by the military and either discharged or disciplined, but most were not.

The trained and well-equipped force, combined with the intelligence gained by those who had been previously incarcerated, provided an irresistible assault. There was no surrender for the guards; they were never given the opportunity. They were simply overpowered and killed. Before the cells were opened, certain enemies of the gang were executed in their cells. Revenge was swift and sure. But revenge was very selective in who it eliminated.

In less than twenty five minutes over 2,700 killers, rapists, arsonists, muggers, child molesters, extortionists, drug pushers and the like were released and scattering like a flock of birds. Most were not associated with this particular gang; that did not matter. They would make the escape more likely to succeed due to the sheer number of escapees. It would take a whole army of police to deal with an escape like this, and right now the police already had their hands full. There is no police force big enough to control a nation gone nuts.

Chapter 20

“Sarah. We’re back. Michael and I got the gas for the van and the Chevy.” John's voice did not convey the usual satisfaction in a job successfully accomplished.

“Did you have any trouble?”

“Nope. Not at twenty dollars a gallon.” John was obviously not pleased.

“Twenty dollars a gallon! You're kidding.”

“Nope.”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“No. I paid 420 dollars for two, half tanks of gas. I don't know what the price of gas will be tomorrow, but 420 dollars bought me 21 gallons of gas tonight. I guess I should be happy.” It was obvious to Sarah that he was straining for a silver lining.

Just then Kevin ran through skipping like he was riding a horse. “We get to see Grandpa and Grandma tonight!” He exclaimed with glee.

Natalie dragged in behind him with a much more sour expression. “Mom! Kevin messed up everything I was packing. He’s been in my stuff, and everything. Mom, do we have to go? I hate going up there. It’s so boring, there is nothing to do.”

“Natalie.” John jumped in. “We’re not going there to play! We’re going because we have to.”

Natalie, pouting, turned and stomped down the hall toward her room. “No one ever thinks about me!” She slammed the door behind her.

John started after Natalie with a determination to bring her back in line.

“John, I'll handle her.” Sarah interceded.

“Sarah I can’t let her get away with...”

“John, give it a rest. You’ll just make her more upset.”

“But Sarah!”

“John, you’ll just make it worse. There is enough fighting out there. We don’t need war with our kids. Let me handle it.”

John took in a deep breath and let it out involuntarily. He could feel the anger building. With all the problems he had, the last thing he needed was a bratty preteen. But Sarah’s words

rang true.

“Sarah...”

“John, you’re upset. It’s been a hard day. I’ll handle Natalie. There are other things I need you to do more.”

John stared at Sarah. His eyes locked on hers.

“John, There are packed suitcases on our bed, and I need some garbage sacks and boxes to pack more things in. Would you please take the suitcases out to the van and get me some garbage sacks or cardboard boxes. I think there are some in the garage. And when you're done, would you please tell me.”

John just looked at Sarah. He clenched his fists and let them relax. He took one last deep breath and let it out, then finally relaxed his shoulders. “What was it you wanted me to do?”

“There are some packed suitcases on the bed. Take them to the van. After that, I need some boxes or plastic bags.”

John took another deep breath then headed for their bedroom to collect the suitcases.

Sarah turned toward Michael. “Michael, have you finished packing your stuff?”

“No, not yet.” Before she had a chance to say anymore, he headed for his bedroom. Sarah next turned toward Natalie's room and started to formulate what she would say to soothe her daughter and iron out the wrinkles. Sarah felt exhausted and worn to the bone, but there was no time to rest now.

Two and a half hours later they were ready to go, sort of. The packing had not gone smoothly, but now that they were actually about to leave John was starting to feel better about things. John came in to see what was keeping Sarah. He found her sitting on the floor carefully packing the fine china into two cardboard boxes with each plate, saucer, and cup individually wrapped in paper towels.

“Sarah, what are you doing?”

“I'm packing the China.”

“Sarah, we can’t take everything.”

“I'm not taking everything. I’m taking my china.”

“Oh, come on. Just leave it and let’s go.”

“It will only take a minute, I’m almost done.”

“We don’t have room in the cars.”

“I’ll put it under Kevin’s and Natalie’s feet. It will fit.”

“Good grief, Sarah, LA is burning down; we’re leaving like a bunch of Okies from the dust bowl; and you’re packing for a picnic!”

“I’m not packing for a picnic! These mean a lot to me, and I’m leaving a lot of other things behind. You just can’t understand because you’re not a woman.”

“You’ve got that right. I don’t understand!”

With that John finally gave up and circled through the rest of the house just to do something else. He had relented, but he didn’t like it. It was too frustrating to stand there and watch her do it, so he protested by leaving. When he came back, Sarah was putting the last few plates into the second box. She taped it closed and he begrudgingly carried one of the boxes out to the car. They did fit after a fashion, but it cost in lost legroom.

John tried one last time to call both Allen, and Sarah’s parents. But every time he started to dial, he got a busy tone, meaning that the system was hopelessly overloaded. “Don’t you think we should try somehow to find Allen?” Sarah asked John one more time.

“Sarah, I can’t. I’ve tried to call him, but here is no way to reach him. I’m sure he’s fine; especially if he’s with Randy. Randy will take care of him until I can get back from Bishop. As soon as I can, I will turn around and come back, but we could go in circles for hours, days if we try to go looking for him. We’ve left a note. He’ll know what we have done. We’ll just have to trust him to use good judgment.” John wasn’t as sure of Allen’s judgment, or Randy for that matter, but he did know that trying to contact them was useless. He really had no choice but to put the best face on things, and hope for the best.

Sarah sighed and turned around. The roller coaster of events was taking its toll on Sarah. John reached out, turned her around and embraced her. She sank into his arms. John supported her more than hugged her. Finally she pulled her self together and stood up. Sarah was too tired to wipe away the two little streams of tears. “I’m ready. Lets go.” she spoke softly.

John gently wiped the tears away with his thumbs but they quickly returned. He hugged her again then finally spoke. “I don’t know what will happen, but this much I do know, we can’t just stay here and wait. If everything gets back to normal we’ll be back in a week.”

Sarah managed a feeble smile. “I’ll be OK.” She worked at composing herself for a few more moments before adding, “We better go now.” John gave her one more hug then a kiss and led her out toward the garage.

John was driving the van with Michael next to him in the front passenger seat. The rest of the seats had been removed from the van and stored so they could pack it with as much stuff as possible.

Sarah was following in John's Chevy with the two younger kids. Natalie was in the front seat, and Kevin in the back. It wasn't hard to talk Kevin into sitting in back even though it was crowded with all the stuff piled on the seat next to him. Sarah pointed out that he could use the pile as a mountain for his army men to fight on, and he bought it.

Traffic was busy but not unreasonably so until they got on the freeway. It was maddening to John to have to crawl down the freeway, wasting gas he would need to reach Bishop with. He was fairly sure the van would have enough gas to make it without filling up, but he wasn't so sure about the little Chevy. Highway 91 is an overburdened road, especially during rush hour, but eight o'clock at night should not have been a major problem. Red tail lights as far as the eye could see stretched on ahead of them.

Being an engineer, John couldn't help but analyze the problem before him. A mile is 5,280 feet. If the average car is about eighteen feet long, and the car ahead is about thirty-five feet away when they are moving at about ten miles per hour, each car occupies about, let's make it 53 feet. That would be 100 cars per mile of road. John was liberal with the distance between cars to fudge the numbers to make the calculation easier. There are probably about twelve million people in the LA basin. They probably have about one car for every two people. Six million cars divided by 100 cars per mile would be 60 thousand miles of road filled with cars.

John couldn't believe the number, so he worked the problem again before he finally accepted the answer to be correct. Divide that by three lanes of traffic and you have 20 thousand miles of three-lane freeway filled with cars going ten miles an hour. At ten miles per hour it would take approximately forever, give or take a few years, to empty the LA basin on the six main freeways that radiate out from the city.

John gave up the analysis knowing that the premise of his analyses was bogus, and the conclusion was beyond comprehension. Only a fraction of everybody was leaving LA. Most people had nowhere to go, and of those on the road, most were not leaving the city. They were just churning around doing whatever. But John knew that a tiny fraction of six million cars were between him and where he was trying to go, and that was enough to bring the traffic to a standstill.

Feeling fidgety John turned on the radio. They were reporting that there was rioting and they were asking the man on the street how he felt about it. They also played a previously recorded message from the Governor stating that everything possible was being done to bring the situation under control. Obviously they didn't know anything worth telling, but had to fill the air anyway. If someone had just come out of a coma, it would have been useful information, but to everybody else it was just rehash.

The one thing they did say which was useful to John, was that most of the rioting in California had not spread beyond four cities, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Oakland. As long as it stayed primarily in the cities, that was good news for John and his family. They also mentioned that most freeways were open outside of the downtown sections. When they started to rehash for a third time, he turned it off.

It took about an hour to travel about eight miles. Occasionally traffic perked up, but usually it crawled forward or even stopped. Finally they reached a police checkpoint. There was an M113 fighting vehicle on each side of the freeway and several highway patrol cars parked near by. Their red and blue lights were flashing in disunion. The lights illuminated the checkpoint in a crazy kind of way. As they drew closer, the flashing grew until it enveloped them.

Long before they reached the checkpoint, John handed the 9mm pistol to Michael and told him to stuff it in the piles of things behind him. It was loaded and not locked up which made it very illegal, but he knew that they would probably not search the car. He just wanted it out of sight until they were on their way. The 30-06, the shotgun and the .22 were packed down in the piles and not accessible without unpacking the whole van.

There were dozens of police officers and National Guard mostly milling around at the checkpoint. A few officers were talking to the driver of each car, but most of the police and National Guard were just waiting for something to happen. Hurry up and wait.

Finally a police officer waved them forward until he was standing beside the driver's door of the van. He flashed a flashlight in their faces, and then turned it on the belongings in the back. "May I see your license, please?"

"Sure." John had his wallet out in anticipation of the request. "What's up?"

"Where are you planning to go Sir?" the officer ignored John's question which he had literally heard hundreds of times tonight.

"We're going to Bishop."

"Bishop, California?"

"Yes."

"Are you planning on making any stops between here and the Cajon Pass?"

"No. We plan on going straight to Bishop."

"Ok. The road is open through San Bernardino, but all the exits are closed. You will not be able to leave the freeway until you reach the intersection of 15 and 215. After that, the roads are clear up through the pass. We are trying to isolate the areas of rioting and deny rioters the use of the freeways. So you will not be allowed to leave the freeway until you reach the intersection of 15 and 215. Do you understand?"

"The exits are closed through all of San Bernardino?"

"That's correct Sir. You're clear to go." With that the officer backed away from the car, waving him to proceed.

“My wife is in the car behind us.” John spoke in a loud voice. The officer nodded, but continued to look back. John thought the officer heard him and understood, but he wasn't sure. John pulled ahead a little and watched in his rear view mirror. The officer stopped Sarah, flashed the light in the car, glanced at John, and then waved the car on.

They moved on quickly now that they were past the checkpoint. They traveled the speed limit North over highway 60 and on to the intersection of Interstate 10. From time to time they passed a parked police car or an M113. Occasionally there were several racing down the freeway to some unseen conflict. Each exit and entrance was blocked to traffic. Usually there was a squad of National Guard guarding the freeway entrance. They would be standing around with their automatic rifles on their shoulders. A vehicle, either a Humvee, or a pickup truck would be parked sideways across the single lane of the entrance or exit. After they passed the Interstate the guards seemed more intent about their task. In the distance there were several fires gutting one building after another. Occasionally they could hear the sound of gunfire in the distance.

The night took on a ghostly strangeness. John and Michael looked both ways, as each new fire came into view. The nasty smoke hung over the city like an evil spell. The sound of gunshots became louder more frequent. Several times they could see the rioters for a second as they sailed passed each street, which stretched out in either direction. Sometimes they could see police and National Guard fighting the rioters. John wondered about the wisdom of letting people like John and his family travel on the highway until the entire area was under control, and the shooting was over, but he was glad they had not closed the road.

What John didn't realize was that it was quite deliberate to keep the main arteries open, regardless of the cost. If the freeways were closed, then panic would set in and everybody would try to leave. There was no way they control that. The entire U.S. Army wouldn't deal with twelve million fleeing Angelenos. The appearance of freedom had to be preserved to maintain faith. Only a fool would close the freeways to passenger traffic. Limit it was no problem, they were used to endless traffic jams, but never shut it down completely.

Not only that, the city had to move. Closing the freeways was like keeping a gilled fish from moving through the water. Without moving through the water a fish suffocates. Los Angeles would not function if the highways were closed. Of course they also had to keep the truckers moving. Without the truckers, the city would start to starve in three days.

Michael reached back and pulled the 9mm from the sacks and boxes and held it in both hands, pointing it at the van floor. Michael brushed the safety with his thumb, but did not push it from the safe to fire position. Michael rehearsed in his mind what he would do if they were suddenly attacked. First he would snap the safety off, then with a quick motion he would action the slide which would fill the chamber with a live round. The pistol would then be ready to fire. He would swing the pistol up and snap off a couple of rounds at each attacker. When the clip was empty he would pop the magazine out, and snap in another and continue to fire. Michael had fired the pistol several times, and the feel of the gun was familiar to him, but still he rehearsed the procedure in his mind just to be sure.

John glanced over at Michael and then down at the pistol. After considering a moment

what his son was probably thinking he reached over and took the pistol from his grasp. He glanced down again at the gun to be sure the safety was still on then tucked it in his belt. As they drove on through the night not a word was spoken.

Sarah followed behind wondering what her husband was thinking in the van ahead of her. Kevin had gone to sleep, and Natalie was staring at the fires. Occasionally Natalie would ask a question, and Sarah would give a minimal answer, as she was unable to concentrate on the conversation. A million things ran through Sarah's mind, one was the stark realization that she may never see her home again. No matter how sincerely John spoke about possibly coming back, Sarah didn't believe it would happen. How could she have just gotten in the car and left? Rioting may spread and their home destroyed. So many things she had just walked away from.

She felt she had to defy logic, and stay with her home. But she had to leave too. Her babies were in danger! How can she stay if there is risk to the children? She had to do whatever was necessary to be sure her children were safe. Sarah finally accepted that her house was gone. There was too much at stake to risk the lives of her babies.

But what about Allen? What if Allen was there at the house, unable to follow, and John unable to return for him? She had to believe that Allen was all right. John had to be right about his being able to take care of himself. She forced herself to believe it.

When they finally reached the intersection of Interstate 15 and 215 they cruised on up the pass toward the high desert, leaving the smog and smoke behind. Once through the Cajon Pass, they took the exit for highway 395 and sailed on through the night. They reached Kramer Junction in forty minutes. It was crowded, but it didn't look any different than it would have on any holiday weekend. As they pulled into the gas station, John had Michael hide the 9mm again. Gas was for sale as well as all the other things you might expect. And the prices were high, but less than \$20 per gallon. John filled up both cars.

As John looked around at the tourist trap, he wondered if the whole thing had been a big mistake. Had he gone off half-cocked? John pushed the thought out of his mind. He had a plan. The plan was a failsafe plan. The worst that would happen is that he would return in a week and put everything back.

After filling both cars he walked over to the Chevy. "Sarah, what do you think? Are you doing Ok?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"OK, lets hit it."

In the night Michael watched as the sage brush and gullies passed by. In the dark he could barely make out what was there, but he had made the trip to his Grandparents house in the daytime enough to allow his memory to fill in the blanks. Johannesburg and Red Mountain always intrigued Michael. Both were ghost towns, but the few remaining residents didn't seem to get it yet. All of the buildings were in various stages of falling down, but the ones that were occupied were in a better state of disrepair. Since the gold and silver mining dwindled, so did

the town. The only real significant supply of ore left was under the town. The company would have mined it long ago if it were not for legal problems with the old timers still living in their leased property, the environmentalists, historical groups, and general bureaucratic inertia that prevented them.

A few miles up the road they passed a much newer town in the early stages of dying. At the intersection of highways 395 and 14 were the towns of Inyokern and Ridgecrest. Inyokern, named after the county it resided in, Kern, and the county it was closest to, Inyo. Not a very imaginative name, but functional. Inyokern and its small airport had been the original home of the Naval Ordnance Test Station, or NOTS, during the Second World War. The remote location was chosen to protect it against attack by the Japanese. Shortly after the war it was moved to China Lake near Crumville a dozen miles to the East of Inyokern. Crumville was latter renamed Ridgecrest to foster a better image. NOTS was renamed the Naval Weapons Center, and still later the Naval Air Warfare Center-Weapons Division. By the time of the last renaming, the base was defiantly in its decline. The work force grew, but the useful output dwindled.

During the Korean and Viet Nam Wars, over half of the Navies weapons were developed at China Lake. Not as famous as its neighbor to the South, Edwards Air Force Base, still China Lake's laboratories and ranges were among the best in the World. But with the passing of the cold war, it shrank until now it was little more than an oversized military historical landmark. The pretense of research and development still persisted, but bureaucratic meddling, political infighting, and just plain lack of direction and moral, sapped the base of any real usefulness.

From there, highway 395 snuggled up next to the East side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The Sierras are truly impressive mountains, but especially so on the Eastern side. The Sierras start in the West as gently rolling hills which slowly grow more and more with ever mile until they are towering slabs of granite, almost three miles high. Then suddenly the mountains end as if the giants who built them mysteriously disappeared. By the time the mountains reach Lone Pine the shear face of the Eastern Sierra is almost vertical.

Michael watched out the window of the van as they passed Pearsonville, Little lake, Coso Junction and Dunmavin. Now there was a name of a place for you. Donmavin. No doubt the wheel fell off some poor settlers wagon for the last time, and he declared then and there, that he was done moving. However it got its name, all that was left of Donmavin was a bend in the road heading north.

Past Donmavin lay the Owens Valley. It once was a beautiful blue lake, big enough to carry steamboats. Since Los Angeles Water and Power "purchased" the water with less than scrupulous means, the lake, the valley, and the farms dried up and blew away. Sometimes when the wind blew out of the North, dust would blow all the way to the LA basin. When they complained and suggested that something ought to be done about it, the locals agreed. "Give us our water back." But like Moses' words to Pharaoh "Let my people go." it fell on deaf ears. The valley remained a man made desert.

At the Northern end of the dried lake lay Lone Pine. Nothing more than a place to buy fishing gear, catch a meal, or spend the night in a hotel. It maintained itself on the spoils of

vacationers who always came, good times and bad.

From Lone Pine past Independence, Big Pine and finally Bishop the valley was squeezed between the Sierras on the West, and the White Mountains on the East. The valley was a wide flat-bottomed gorge between two mountain ranges arrayed like two massive armies marshaled to battle.

Bishop is a town crowded by emptiness. The Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Indian Reservation and LA Water owned almost all the land around Bishop. Very little of the total land was left for the private citizens to develop. Around Bishop there were some farms with irrigation which managed to retain water rites for cultivation, but very few.

The Scott's pulled into Grandpa and Grandma's driveway at 3:15 am. They woke up Grandma with little difficulty, and she was glad to see them. She was the kind of person that would have been happy to see them under any circumstances, but she was especially glad to see them because George was doing worse. She had tried, and had been unable to reach Sarah on the phone. John shook his head when he heard his mother-in-law speak in hushed tones. Could it be that George was actually dying?

George Marshall was a viral man when John asked him for Sarah's hand in marriage. Even though he was close to retirement he was still a powerful man used to running powerful machinery in construction. He had worked on many roads and other projects driving bulldozers; mostly D8's and D9's. He also had the light touch necessary to drive a road grader. He could lay the road gravel within half an inch of what he wanted.

George had grown up in a hard time in an unforgiving land. He had become powerful because he had to in order to survive. But he also had a gentleness about him as well. But unlike the massive mountains, George Marshal would not last forever. George was about to die, like the nation that George thought was as secure as the mountains that surrounded Bishop, California.

Chapter 21

Randy took a good hard look at Allen's uniform. It didn't fit very well, because Allen was three inches taller than Randy, but it was passable. Pressed and starched the shortness at the wrists seemed less noticeable. Randy used pin-on rank so the PFC stripe and rocker didn't seem out of place. Randy left the parachute wings on the left breast, but the combat insignia badge and his right shoulder combat service patch had to be removed, and they left a dark shadow where his cloth had not faded with numerous washings. But with spit shined boots, a new beret, and the uncomfortable look on Allen's face, Allen was clearly a "newbie." Randy hoped that as such, he would not be asked any questions.

Randy wished he had a better sidearm arrangement for Allen. The shoulder holster he wore was authentic enough, a tanker's holster which he purchased the year before from an army surplus store. However, it contained a .357 magnum revolver, a nonstandard army weapon. In the U.S. Army that Randy had joined several years before, such departure from standard equipment would never have been tolerated. But in the last few years, military budget cuts had reduced the supply system of the US military to the equivalent of a glorified swap meet. Randy knew that the chances were pretty good that no one would notice.

Randy's holster was on his pistol belt, airborne infantry style, and it contained a civilian Baretta 9mm pistol identical to the standard US army side arm. Randy had a considerable stockpile of military equipment acquired during his time on active duty. Much of it, including his two-dozen M256 chemical detection kits he now considered useless. The way things were going he expected plenty of armed confrontation, but not a chemical weapons attack. On the other hand, his pistol belt and TA50 gear that went with it was proving invaluable. He had to have enough authentic trappings to make this charade work, or Randy was in a lot of trouble. More trouble than Randy wanted to think about.

Allen might have thought that Randy was already in as much trouble as it was possible to get into. Randy had just gunned down a half dozen people in the street. Randy knew this was far more dangerous. The chances of him being identified for a random shooting in a riot were remote in the extreme. Now he was going to try to make several thousands of dollars worth of government equipment disappear in broad daylight with everybody watching. This was going to be a very neat trick if the magic worked. If it were going to work, he would need more than nerves of steel and good acting. He needed believable props.

Besides two passable uniforms Randy had three other very important items. One was his pink reserve ID card. The other two were green active duty ID cards. One had been Randy's while on active duty in Germany. The other belonged to a captain in Randy's unit. Randy had found the captain's card on the floor of a Humvee where the drunken captain had dropped it. Normally he would have returned it, but the captain had been such a jerk, Randy decided he would keep it for some as yet unspecified purpose. All three cards were stamped INDEF - indefinite, in the expiration date box.

With careful application of forging skills taught at the US Army John F. Kennedy Special Forces Warfare Center and School, Randy had carefully inscribed a new name and SSN on his old ID card. Everything was as in as good of order as it was ever going to get. There was nothing

left to do but get on with it.

Allen's eyes betrayed his inexperience. "Randy, are you sure I can pull this off?"

Randy lied, "No sweat man, don't worry. This is going to be sweeter than Momma's apple pie. I wouldn't do this unless I was certain it was going to work. There is no doubt in my mind that we are going to walk out of here with what we want if we keep our cool. You just remember the only way we will get caught is if we lose our cool." Randy turned and started toward the Armory. As he did he put his hand on his 9mm Beretta one more time. If things went badly he'd be ready to shoot his way back out. There was not much chance of that working, but he would be ready just in case.

Randy stopped and took one last look at his pick up truck with Roxanne at the wheel. Roxanne smiled and Randy smiled back. Randy walked to the side of the truck and dipped his head slightly to speak through the window over the din of the traffic. "Roxanne, if we're not out in thirty minutes, drive away slowly and don't look back. If we come out in handcuffs, drive away immediately. You never saw us before. Go to John Scott's house and tell him what happened. Do you understand?"

"Randy, that's not funny!"

Without a trace of a smile Randy answered. "I'm not being funny, Roxanne." Randy's eyes were dark and gave away nothing. Roxanne's eyes pleaded that he be careful. After a long pause Randy backed away from the truck and turned back toward Allen. Allen snapped a sharp salute as he had been drilled. Randy replied with a slightly more relaxed one. Randy then turned on a dime and briskly started for the door. Allen followed one step behind.

Randy and Allen walked into the Long Beach armory of the 1st Battalion, 214th Aviation Regiment. Following signs, they worked their way back to a large room marked "Supply" filled with wire cages. Randy marched with a crisp sure stride as though he owned the place and Allen tried to keep up. Randy directed his advance toward the front desk and stopped directly in front of it. Randy threw a DA Form 2062 requisition sheet on the desk and announced, "I need these items, ASAP."

A SFC (Sergeant First Class) stirred in a squeaky swivel chair, apparently completely unimpressed. "We're closed for inventory. Come back next week."

Randy was also a SFC. He set his jaw and shot off a blast of profanity which said in essence "Look, eight-ball, don't you know what's going on out there. We need this stuff, now?"

The other SFC was unmoved. She returned an equally eloquent burst of profanity. With out the swearing the message was clear and concise. "We're US Army Reserve, riots are a California National Guard problem. Go call them. Not our problem."

"I am a Guardsman," flared Randy. "Charlie Company, 3rd Battalion, 19th Special Forces Group, Los Alamitos. My weapons guard and I have been called up. We just got our first Individual Ready Reserve fillers and we need to arm them. You know ____ well that

Martial law's been declared, and one way or another we will take what we need. If you don't have authorization, than get your X.O., your C.O., or whoever, but get off your fat butt!"

The female sergeant shifted her weight in the squeaky swivel chair, "You can't do that! If you just waltz in here and take whatever you like, the old man would hit the ceiling. We're all set for an IG inspection on the 27th, and we're not about to fail this inspection like we failed the last one. The C.O. will die before he'll let you take anything. The riot will be over in a couple of days. Being relived of command sticks to your career forever. Now flake off!"

Randy detected a soft spot and zeroed in on it. Randy leaned forward and lowered his voice as he spoke. "You're not ready for IG inspection, are you?" There was a touch of sadistic pleasure in Randy's voice.

There was no response.

"There's something, always something missing, isn't there? You're hoping they'll overlook it, aren't you?" Randy unfolded the DA 2062 form. "There's no line of "X"s and there is plenty of room to add a few things you can't presently locate. It would be very convenient to create a paper trail for a few items you're having trouble finding right now, right? Face it, LAPD and National Guard have already taken casualties. They have already lost weapons and have had other equipment captured. Lots of things just disappear in the fog of war. If other items already missing were tacked on, it would just clean up your paper work, save a report of survey... insure all good commanders and supply sergeants make it safely to retirement." His voice drifted. The inference to bribery was tempting, but the supply sergeant wasn't sure she wanted to trust Randy.

The supply sergeant pointed at Allen. "Is he good?"

Randy turned to Allen. "Private, have you heard any of this conversation?"

Allen did as he was coached and snapped to attention. He then shouted in a loud voice, "No, drill sergeant, no!"

The supply sergeant was almost convinced. "Sergeant to sergeant?" she asked. The obvious implication implied was that sergeants don't tell on other sergeants.

"Sergeant to sergeant." Randy promised.

"O.K." She began examining the 2062s then her eyes widened and she let out a small gasp. "Wait a minute. This is worth a lot more than a lost sleeping bag and two cases of MREs."

Randy shrugged, "No problem. You name it, it'll be done."

"Sergeant to sergeant?" she asked again, hoping for an ironclad guarantee that she would not get caught.

Randy nodded.

The supply sergeant grimaced, uncertain at first, but finally deciding Randy was way too far out on a limb himself to point any fingers at her.

“The old man took a Huey up to Santa Barbara last month. Went out and got plastered. Flew back drunk and crashed the tailboom on landing. I need someone to blame.”

Randy produced the captain’s ID card. “Will this individual do?”

Eyes wide, not wishing to question whether this was too good to be true, she nodded and began typing the name, ID card number and SSN into the flight logs. Relieved she returned. “I haven’t got two Humvees. Almost everything was moved to Camp Bobby to keep gangs from stealing it. But there’s one left and an M-880. They’re up and running.”

Randy was relieved. He had talked Allen through driving a Humvee, but Allen had never done it. The M-880 was a camouflage painted Dodge RAM pickup truck. This would be much easier for Allen to drive.

“Also, no M-60 machine guns. We turned them in for M249 squad automatic weapons, but they haven’t arrived yet. Also no ammo. Can’t be stored in an armory any more.”

Randy took his lumps, but left satisfied. Three racks of M16s and M203s were under canvas in Allen’s M880. The M203 is basically an M-16 with a 40mm grenade launcher attached below its barrel. The M880 was beat up, but the Humvee, was practically brand new. It had only 500 operating hours from the factory. It had been loaded with five-gallon diesel and MOGAS cans to refuel other vehicles. The maintenance sergeant had received notice of a potentially faulty winch control and grounded the vehicle until they could receive and install the new part. Randy said if it failed he would take full responsibility. Randy was sure that a faulty winch control was the least of his worries.

After they drove out of the compound they passed Roxanne and waved her in behind them. Randy glanced at his watch. Twenty-seven minutes had elapsed since he had left Roxanne. Randy’s smile broadened for a moment then faded as his mind started thinking about his next problem.

Chapter 22

Randy pulled the Humvee into the driveway in front of John's house. Allen and Roxanne parked their trucks in the street. Allen was out in a bound and up to the front door. It was locked but he quickly recovered the hidden key and opened the front door.

"Anybody home!" Even though he didn't really expect to find anyone, he hoped he would. On the second pass through the kitchen he saw the note on the table.

"Dear Allen,

We have gone to Bishop to be with Grandpa and Grandma. Your Dad and I have taken all we can fit in the two vehicles. Dad will be back as soon as he can. If you come here and decide to come up to Bishop before he gets back, leave word. Your Father and I love you. Be careful.

Love,

Mom"

"What does it say?" Randy asked.

"They went to Bishop last night. Dad will be back soon."

"Allen, we need to get these vehicles out of sight. They don't fit the neighborhood. Is there room in the garage for both vehicles?" By now Allen was standing in front of Randy.

"Doubt it." was Allen's reply.

"We need to put this out of sight if nothing else. And we need to unload the weapons."

"Got-cha."

"Let's get on it."

Thirty minutes the Humvee was in the garage and the M-880 was unloaded into the garage as discreetly as possible. "Well that problem is solved." Randy stated. "Now what do we do? Move on to fort Irwin to get ammunition, or wait for John."

Randy walked over to the answering machine next to the phone and pressed replay. There were two calls on the machine, one from the school; the other was from a neighbor. Neither was of any interest to Randy.

Just then the phone rang. The sudden sound took all by surprise. Randy picked the phone up and handed it to Allen.

"Hello?" he inquired.

“Allen? Allen, is that you?”

“Hi Mom! How did you get through on the phone?”

“I don't know. I just kept trying and praying, praying and trying. “Sarah’s voice cracked with emotion. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, sure Mom. We’re all fine. I’m here with Randy and Roxanne. How are you?”

“Just fine dear. Are you sure you’re all right?”

Randy leaned close to Allen, “Ask her if your Father has started back yet.”

“Fine Mom, really, we’re fine. Has Dad headed back already?”

“Yes, Allen. He left early this morning. He should be there soon. He took Michael with him to help him drive if he got too tired. He took his car because the van wouldn’t start. For some reason the van got us here just fine, but as soon as he got in it to return, it just wouldn’t start. He thinks it might be the computer or something. He said he would take as many trips with his car as it took to bring the rest of the food storage back up. I wanted him to wait, but you know your dad. When he gets going, there isn’t much that will change his mind.”

“Yeah, fine Mom. So you think he should be here any time now, and he took Michael with him in the Chevy?”

“That’s right Allen. Be careful.”

“Mom, don't worry. I don’t plan on taking any unnecessary chances. Believe me, I’ve seen enough already.”

“What do you mean you’ve seen enough already? Have you been shot at?”

“Mom, everybody in LA has been shot at. We’re leaving town as soon as Dad gets here. We’ll be fine. We’ll see you later tonight, no, make that tomorrow sometime.”

“I love you Allen.”

“I love you too Mom.”

“Be careful Allen.”

“I will, Mom. I will.”

“See if you can get your Dad to get some sleep before he comes back.”

“I will. By Mom.”

“By son.”

Reluctantly Allen hung up the phone not wishing to cut off his mother’s last words.

Allen looked around at Randy and Roxanne. “My Dad and Michael should be here soon. He’s bringing the Chevy because the van wouldn’t start. What do we do now?”

“First we go over the trip to Fort Irwin, and determine what we need to take from the house in the back of my truck. Before we do that we eat. No telling when we will get another chance.”

Chapter 23

Fighting to retake San Bernardino from rioters was not exactly what Ted Murray had in mind when he joined the United States Army. It reminded Ted of countries that had to use their military to crush rebellions. Russian forces in Chechnya, Iraqi tanks fighting the Kurds, Chinese soldiers sent to Tibet. Now he was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 160th Infantry, California Army National Guard, fighting the battle of San Bernardino.

To be honest, he joined the Army for the money. At the time he signed up, he had a young pregnant wife, bills mounting faster than he could pay them, and a job as assistant manager of a Mexican fast food joint. Not only was the pay marginal, it didn't have medical to cover the birth. He realized too late that he had not taken his future seriously enough. For that matter, he simply hadn't thought about it all, until he got married. By then it was too late to start thinking about his career options. Of course, with the government two months behind on sending his checks, and his military benefits quickly dwindling, Ted was beginning to feel like he had been taken for a chump.

It's not like Ted wasn't committed to the Army, or patriotic. He just had other, more personal problems pressing on his mind right now. Ted and his wife had made the classic mistake of getting a fist full of plastic, and then buying everything they thought they needed. Things that they wouldn't have wanted if the cash had been required in advance. Now Ted was struggling to pay his debts, which were overpowering him. Ted had kept his part of the bargain to the Army and now the Guard. He had shown up at the drills, learned how to shoot his M-16 and studied the rest of his training. He had been deployed to make sweeps of the Mexican boarder to keep their civil war on their side of the border.

Although he didn't relish the thought of being shot at, he knew it was part of his job description. After all, that was what he signed up to do. He just figured he ought to be paid for it. That was there part of the deal after all. Two months was a long to wait for money you needed yesterday.

But what weighed hardest on Ted's mind was his young wife pleading for him not to leave as he headed out the door. Dressed in European camouflage, and with a rucksack slung over his shoulder, all he could say was, "I'll be back as soon as I can." It stuck in his throat to say it. He knew she was worried for him; that he could handle. What hurt was that she was more worried about herself and the baby, and for good reason. If Ted had his choice, he would have set up a roadblock at each end of the street, and organize his neighbors into a local defense force. Instead, he had to put his faith in the local police to protect his home and family. What a joke. They couldn't even do that normally, let alone in a full blown riot.

Ted worked his way down the side of the street with the rest of his squad. Usually in past riots, when the Bradleys showed up, the rioters lost interest and went home. Ted hadn't been to the St. Louis or Miami riots, but videos were part of the regular training. This didn't look like the videos Ted had seen. Snipers seemed to be hiding in every window, and in every ally. Ted had technology on his side, with night vision goggles, and helicopters, but they had the urban jungle on theirs. It was clear to Ted that the rioters were not going home to watch TV. He wondered if the Government had edited out the bad stuff, or if this was really a different kind of

riot.

Ted's flak vest and helmet were bulky to wear, but they didn't feel bulky enough right now. They were designed to stop shrapnel and most pistol rounds. But a 30-06, or .308 bullet, fired from an ordinary hunting rifle was likely to pass right through his body armor. Not only that, he had a lot of appendages like arms, legs and a face which were completely unprotected.

San Bernardino was not much different from Beaumont where he lived, except that it was more run down. Ted had never been to San Bernardino before, he knew better. Racial divisions had hardened significantly in the last ten years, and the boundaries were well marked. There were some mistakes you couldn't afford to make.

Lone Pine, where he grew up, was nothing like either. Ted was not aware of any racial problem, just fishing and camping. But then there wasn't much of anything in Lone Pine but fishing and camping. Just a small little town at the base of the Sierras, surrounded by miles and miles of nothing as far as the eye could see. Ted thought to himself, too bad he hadn't stayed in Lone Pine. But that was many decisions ago.

Gunfire kept popping in his ears, as Ted followed Jerry down the street. Jerry was the skinny silent type who spent a lot of time on the internet, and always looked out of place in uniform. Maybe it was the glasses, but Ted doubted it. Jerry had the coordination of an ostrich. Regular Army always made fun of the Army reserves, and the Reservists made fun of the Guard. Jerry was an OK guy, but he sure did nothing to break the stereotype of a Guardsman.

Ted figured that Jerry's parents must have put a computer in his crib when he was a baby. He figured that like a baby chick that whatever it sees first is its mother, Jerry must have thought that the computer in his crib was his mother. When seated at a computer, Jerry was in his element. When he carried an M-16, he conveyed nothing that would inspire confidence.

Jerry scurried over to a parked car and took up position to cover Ted's advance. The doorway Ted occupied felt like a nice safe shell, and Ted was as reluctant as a crab to leave it behind and run to the next doorway. It was a game of musical chairs which ended in death if you were slow or unlucky. Ted saw Jerry glance back over his right shoulder at him. Without a hint of hesitation he bolted out of the doorway and darted down to the next doorway. As he did, he heard a gunshot, a little louder than the rest, and felt fragments of building wall hit him in the side of the face. It stung, but he just squinted and darted into the next doorway.

Once in the security of his new hiding place, he quickly wiped his right cheek with the back of his hand, and glanced at it. In the artificial light he couldn't see the thin streak of blood so he didn't give it another thought. His right hand slipped easily back onto the pistol grip of his M-16, his finger lightly touched on the trigger. Ted glanced back over his shoulder at the two advancing Bradley Fighting Vehicles. Their more than 10 tons of armor, and powered by Cummings diesels, looked and sounded impressive. They were not only big and loud, they shook the ground. Ted liked to have them around.

Ted was under no illusion that they were invincible. If you knew where to shoot, an anti-tank guided missile could take one out. There were reports of 50's mounted on pickup trucks

roaming around town, as well as light anti-tank guided weapons. They made a deadly combination. The machine guns tied up the infantry while the ATGMs took out the armor. In close urban combat, it was impossible to keep your distance, so even the Bradleys had to tread carefully. But they had a lot more armor than Ted had.

When Ted was forming up with his unit earlier this evening, the unit had been shelled with three mortar rounds. The shells weren't well aimed, but they were scary. Men went scurrying everywhere. Ted was no exception. The first thud of a mortar round firing, and he was hiding behind the nearest car. It took Jerry a little longer, but with the sound of the first impact even the slow learners were looking for a hole to climb in.

As Ted was looking over his shoulder at the two Bradleys, a burst of automatic gunfire sprayed the doorway he was in. The bullet impacts splattered bits of wall in every direction. Ted instinctively covered his face with his left hand as he pressed himself deeper into the recesses of his hiding place. The angle of fire gave Ted just enough room to escape being torn to shreds with 7.62mm bullets fired from a Chinese made AK-47.

When Ted opened his eyes he blinked away the dust that filled his face. The first Bradley opened fire with its 25mm cannon. The explosive rounds sprayed out at 100 rounds per minute. The part of the building where the shells hit, flew apart. Ted glanced back at Jerry who was still behind the car, lying in his own blood. Ted resisted the sudden urge to run to his buddy's aid. He knew it was a guaranteed way to die. Besides, from the look of Jerry's wounds, it was doubtful he was still alive anyway.

The Bradley opened fire again with a blast of sound. The flash lit up the darkened street. By now the Bradley was almost abreast of Ted. He wondered if whoever fired at him was dead or not. He leaned a little further out of the depth of the doorway to get a better look at the other side of the street. His eyes danced from door to window to rooftop, looking for places which snipers might hide. The problem was, there were hundreds of them.

Ted glanced up and down at the building facing him, but saw nothing. Somewhere in that building there were combatants ready to kill him and the rest of his squad, if they didn't act fast. Suddenly, a second story window of the building filled with flame. It was the flash of a Russian built anti-tank weapon. The shot hit the Bradley above the reactive armor, just below the turret. The armored vehicle stopped in a flash and died instantly.

* * * * *

Emilio Rodriguez never knew his father. From looking at his mother and himself he would guess he was probably at least part Anglo. He used to be curious, but now he hated it. Emilio used to ask his mother about his father, but she wouldn't talk about him. Emilio's mother came to America two days before she gave birth to his older sister, Maria. Maria's father was not his own, he knew, Maria was darker, like her mother. What he didn't know was that her father died in a bar room fight. He was too drunk to get out of the way of a knife, and bled to death before the town doctor bothered to see him.

Emilio's conception was a one night stand with a Marine from Nebraska. The Marine had a great night, what he could remember of it. As far as he was concerned he was just out for a little fun. As he had his fun, he spread his seed, a seed that would grow up to hate everything he stood for. Of course, he wasn't there to teach his son any differently. He never gave it a first thought, let alone a second.

It used to be that anyone born in America was a U.S. citizen, regardless of the circumstances of their arrival in America. Once Maria was born a citizen, her mother had her ticket over the border. The law had been repealed since, in an attempt to stem the tide of immigrants. But with the war in Mexico growing worse, and living more unbearable, the draw of the promised land was ever more irresistible.

At a very early age, Emilio took up with his uncle, Raule. Raule was not really Emilio's uncle; he was actually his mother's off again, on again live-in. Raule taught Emilio all he had to know to be a man. He taught him how to shoplift, how to lie, how to lay around all day and do nothing, how to sponge off his old lady. To Emilio, that was how it was.

Maria didn't like Raule. What did she know? She spent all her time studying and going to church. Church was the worst. When she got Jesus, she kept trying to give some to Emilio. "Don't do that Emilio. If you hang around with Raule, you'll wind up in jail like him. He's a bad man. If he doesn't repent, he's going to go to Hell." So what if he had been to jail. That's what made him a man. All you had to do was look at Raule to see he was a real man. He had huge arms and neck from constant weight lifting. His big arms and chest were covered with tattoos. Spider webs on the elbows, barbed wire around his biceps. Across his back his name in bold capital letters. Next to his left eye was a small black teardrop. He got that the first time he killed a man in cold blood. Emilio was actually looking forward to going to jail. Every man he knew had been to jail. It was a rite of passage. Emilio hadn't been so he wasn't a man, yet.

One night Emilio was hanging around with Raule and some of his friends. They weren't just hanging around without purpose. They were hanging around like a black widow spider hangs around, waiting for unsuspecting prey. About eleven o'clock, it showed up.

He was nineteen, white, and apparently lost. He made the serious mistake of taking the wrong freeway off ramp. His motorcycle putted to a stop at a red light just long enough for the trap to close. He was suddenly surrounded by eight gang bangers, several carrying weapons.

Raule stood before the young man on the motorcycle, waving his shotgun toward his head, demanding him to get off and hand over the keys. He did. Then Raule demanded that he kneel in the street with his head bowed. Raule played with him for a while, prodding him with the barrel of his shotgun until he grew tired of the game. Then they all just went away and left him in the street to find his way home. It was more fun than killing him. They saved murder for special cases. Emilio loved it.

Emilio didn't get caught for selling the motorcycle, but he did finally get his chance at the big house later when he tried to steal a car. He got to go to prison and now he was a man, but he got something else while he was there that he hadn't expected. He got recruited.

Gangs flourish in prison, and to become a member of a gang in jail was more the rule than the exception. Of course Emilio was already a member of a gang, but he found a new leader who took the place of Raule. He found Jesse Funiestras. Jesse was not just thinking of drug money, booze, and easy woman. Caesar was politically aware. Caesar knew who owned California first, and whom it should belong to now, and it wasn't the Anglo. More than that, he had a plan to get it back.

Once Jesse was through "reeducating" Emilio, he had a new direction and a new reason to live. Emilio was going to be the next Cha Gavara.

Jesse was backed by more than just drug money and theft. Some of his sources included left leaning stars in Hollywood and other deep pockets, usually well removed from working America. Most had no idea that they were paying for weapons. The few who did were proud of it. The money was collected by others working the cause were far removed from Jesse. He was far too messy to mingle with high-class crowds. Others did that work, then passed the money through the organization until it reached the street.

Illegal weapons could certainly be had by anybody that wished, but not cheaply. A .50 caliber machine gun with 10,000 rounds of ammunition, recently missing from the Marine training center in Camp Pendleton, California, could cost 80,000 dollars if you knew whom to ask. Russian designed anti-tank weapons cost at least 40,000 dollars each. Not the kind of weapons the peasants could afford.

When Emilio was released from prison with one year served of his three-year sentence, he started working for a free California. Making money was his prime directive and his forte was dealing drugs and ripping off cars. His new handlers found him to be a profitable source of income, but even better, he was potentially a totally devoted soldier. He would die for the cause. That would be important.

His relationship with his sister reached new lows due to his new enlightenment. She was now married to a postal worker. A postal worker! Why couldn't she have married anybody but a postal worker! They seldom talked anymore because it just ended in an argument. The last time they had tried, she had invited him to dinner. It ended before dinner made it to the table. Maria's husband ended it by throwing Emilio out of the house. As soon as the revolution got going he would be sure to blow up a post office just to even the score. Hopefully it would be the office his brother-in-law worked in. Maria's husband may speak Spanish, but he was worse than an Anglo. He licked their Anglo boots by delivering their white Anglo mail. There would be no room for the likes of him, after the revolution.

Emilio was good with bombs. Pipe bombs are tricky. If you're not careful, a person could easily blow his head off just screwing the cap on. He was also good with automatic weapons, but his true love was the Javelin anti-tank missile. It gave him no end of thrill to know that the FBI was searching all over Southern California for what his suppliers had stolen, and he actually had. He couldn't wait to blast a United States Army tank with it. He fired one Tuesday in training. It demolished an abandoned car in a wash East of Barstow. He stayed up nights dreaming about it.

Now here he was, in the second story window of a brick building in San Bernardino. The revolution had started, and he was going to kill some tanks. He could see Anglo Army pigs working their way down the street, but they weren't his targets. The Bradleys were. He could hear them, he could even see them, but he didn't have a good line of fire yet. It would be easier on the roof, but he had been trained not to do that because helicopters could easily spot him. Sweat ran down his forehead as he fidgeted trying to get a better shot. For the first time in his life he was really alive. No one was going to read him his rights, this time. This time he would assert his rights -- and they would pay with their blood.

He could clearly see the soldiers leapfrogging from cover to cover down the street. Any minute they would get theirs. Three of his comrades were down stairs with automatic weapons to kill them all. Just then fire broke out from the story below. One of the soldiers slumped to the ground behind a car, but the one in the doorway seemed to have been missed. Perhaps his comrades could not see him. No time to worry about that right now, the Bradley was coming into clear view. There was no way he could miss at this range.

Emilio squeezed the trigger, then suddenly he was blinded by a flash of light. The one training shot he had fired was in the daylight, and the difference was startling. At first he thought something had gone wrong, but as soon as his night vision started to return, he could clearly see it was a direct hit. The rocket-powered weapon had hit right where he had intended; just above the reactive armor, and just below the turret. It was definitely a kill.

He quickly grabbed the second weapon to fire at the second Bradley. Before he could position himself in the window, everything around him started to blow apart. The second Bradley had been directed where to fire and had opened up on the window. None of the 25mm rounds hit him, but he threw himself on the floor to escape from the hail of shells, brick and plaster. The window grew in size with every round that blasted threw the wall. Amazingly, he was not torn apart.

Emilio grabbed his weapon and made his way to the back of the building. The further away from the window he got, the faster he moved. He nearly fell headlong down the back stairs and out the back door. Into the night he ran. He was not a glorious soldier yet, but he wasn't a dead one either, and he had killed a tank. Later tonight he would kill again, not on their terms, on his own.

* * * * *

Ted scurried as fast as he could, across to the smoldering Bradley. He unloaded his twenty round clip into the front of the store, snapped in another magazine, then covered another Guardsman as he moved toward the gaping store front. Ted watched intently as he threw in a hand grenade and then ducked for cover. The concussion made Ted wince, but he didn't loose his concentration. After the Guardsman disappeared into the building Ted focused intently, ready to cover fire for his buddy. As he waited he suddenly realized that Jerry was not covering his back. He was lying dead in the street. As much as he had trained, it surprised Ted how

stupid he was, as soon as real bullets started to fly.

He spun around to cover his own back, but saw no threat. He knew that just because he couldn't see it, didn't mean it couldn't kill him. He had to find cover fast. Turning back to the store they had assaulted, he ran into the dark that he knew one of his buddies was in. He could not stay in the street where the moon illuminated him for anyone to see, and kill.

When he stumbled into the dark, he stepped on something that wasn't brick or mortar. He looked down to see what it was. As he suspected, he had tread on a dead man. He was hard to see in the dark, but Ted could see what looked like someone laying face down with a gun still clasped in his right hand. Ted stared down at the corpse for a second, then out into the street where he could barely see Jerry lying behind the car. Ted looked back at the dead man at his feet, then he turned to find the rest of his squad. He had no time to think now; he could only fight. Maybe tomorrow he could think. Maybe tomorrow.

Ted didn't have time to think about it the next day either, but he did think about it later, much later. Over and over again. Ted didn't know the corps he stepped on, but he did know the one lying in the street in the same uniform as his. He knew he was a good chess player. He knew he liked ham sandwiches, and bananas. He knew he had a funny laugh. He knew he had a father and a mother and two sisters. He knew Jerry didn't what to die.

Chapter 24

Richard Wagner was born Samuel Earl Wooley. The name his parents gave him was quite sufficient until he was seventeen, five years before. At age seventeen he finally recognized the cause of his constant anger. His new name was one of the ways he dealt with his anger. The new name was carefully chosen; it was a code. Secrecy was imperative. Richard loved codes and secrecy.

Most people pronounced his last name Wagner, just the way it looked. Every time they did, Richard smirked a little condescending snicker to himself. "That is why they are destined to be destroyed. They are incurably ignorant. They deserve to die. They're to ignorant even to think." His close friends knew what it meant, and they knew how to pronounce it. His name was pronounced Rick-hard Vahgner, like the famous German composer. Richard Wagner would not be the last name he would choose either. After the war he would choose another. Richard was acting, but the act would end, as surly as corrupt America would end. The tool by which America had been corrupted, would end. The tool would be used against itself. The tool was a wicked tool. It would be a nasty, bloody end.

Richard stood before the three by five foot Nazi German flag, hanging on his wall. He was naked to the waist. He wore U.S. Army issue fatigue pants and black, spit polished, dress Army boots. His exposed torso was that of an athlete. His face was handsome, in spite of its cruel expression. He wore a conservative short haircut. Richard thought skinheads were nothing but a joke-- children playing in a man's game. They had the right objectives, but they were totally out of control, not to be trusted. Richard wore two tattoos, both were only visible if he took off his shirt, which he never did in public. One was of an Iron Cross on his left shoulder, and the other was of a German Eagle with a swastika in its talons on his right shoulder.

With solemn ceremony Richard reached down and picked up the carefully pressed shirt that matched his pants, and slowly unfolded it. The shirt was standard issue, but Richard had made one alteration. Over his left pocket he had sown a W.W. II German insignia like the eagle tattooed on his right shoulder. He finished putting on the shirt then picked up his American made replica 9mm Luger pistol in it's black leather holster, examined it, than strapped it around his waist. Finally he picked up his fully automatic M16 assault rifle.

This was his pride and joy. As he pulled the action back and let it snap forward. Richard smiled to himself when he considered what his boss would think of him, if he only knew. His boss was so stupid. The Aryan race had been so corrupted by the Jews and their liberal faggot friends. America could only be saved from utter destruction by an unyielding devotion to total control, utter discipline, and an iron fist. Social Darwinism. The strong must prevail; the weak will be crushed. Nature decreed it. It is inevitable!

Richard looked at his watch. The watch read 22:17. Time to be leaving soon. He picked up his bag full of ammo clips each filled with twenty rounds of military issue, full metal-jacked 5.56 mm ammunition.

Richard met his five friends, including the owner of the property, at precisely 22:55. Richard was the fourth to appear. They each had a precise time to arrive, five minutes apart.

Carl was the last to arrive at precisely 23:00. Carl glanced around at his squad, each wearing essentially identical uniforms. He asked a few brief questions to be sure everything was ready to go. As expected, it was.

Carl had formed the militia squad, and trained them with absolute precision and demanded dedication. Each was hand picked, rigorously trained, and utterly competent to carry out their mission. This was no wana-be warriors who spent their week ends swapping stories about black helicopters and plans to resist the United Nations take over of America, while they blast off hundreds of rounds of ammo at black silhouettes and drink beer.

The garden variety, so called militia member would shrink in horror from what Carl had in mind for his small squad of men. Most Militia had no effective strategy. They simply expected to have some heroic recreation of the Alamo. Then they expected America to suddenly come to its senses and right itself. Most militia had no concept of a strategy. But these six soldiers knew precisely their plan, and they were ready, willing and eager to carry it out.

Carl had concluded that the Jewish Bankers and other One World Government conspirators were about to make their final push to shove America into a Socialist Dictatorship. That much was clear. Every position of power had been subverted. Democracy had become a joke. Since all political candidates are hand picked by the council, there was no real difference between the candidates. Whichever way the populace voted, they lost. America had been led to a helpless position by the staggering debt they had heaped up while inducing more and more Americans to be weak and corrupt. The Welfare and Social Security System was specifically designed to make every American dependent on the Government's good grace, and incapable of self-reliance. Computerized money made every American constantly vulnerable to government control. It was no coincidence that cash was being replaced with other financial tools such as debit and credit cards. Cash was a commodity the council could not control. They had all but eliminated cash from circulation, and soon they would make private ownership of cash illegal. Computerized money was the ring in the pig's nose that the Trilateral Commission needed to subjugate America.

All that the One World Council needed to close the trap was an excuse to move the troops in. The excuse would be massive civil unrest. Nation wide riots were the inevitable result of the course that they had plotted. Although they hadn't started the civil unrest with any overt act, by eliminating every other possibility, it was inevitable. Three days of nation wide rioting, and the people would be demanding a strong dictator to restore order. They wouldn't call him a dictator, he would still be a president in name. But Congress would just give him more sweeping powers to crush the rebellion. In other words, throw out what was left of the Bill of Rights, and constitutional government. We the American people would beg for a nice safe cage to be locked in. Thus would begin Gulag America.

But Carl had a plan to throw their conspiracy off track. He would use their lie against them. He would use a lie to kill a lie.

After receiving reports that all was ready Carl pulled himself a little taller and straighter. "Gentleman, tonight it begins. Tonight we begin to destroy the Jewish conspiracy. Victory or Death!"

“Victory or death!” the other four shouted. Each was stern faced and resolute. This was not acting; this was real. This was the cause.

They loaded into the stolen Humvee painted to match U.S. Army camouflage and headed out into the cooling Lancaster evening. As they drove the vehicle’s headlights shown out into the evil night. Flames like those of funeral piers spotted the valley. The five would build some fires of their own, fires of hate.

* * * * *

Doctor Malcolm Reynolds was not at home. Dr. Reynolds was down at Lancaster Regional Hospital working the emergencies as they poured in. However, Doctor Reynolds’s wife and three children were home. Tonight was not a good night for a black family to be rooming about. Even in an upper middle class neighborhood it was not a good night to be black, and wandering about. Instinctively they knew that the respectability they had achieved through their father’s hard work and education did not protect them from distrust whenever racial tensions flared. The best thing to do was to stay out of sight.

Mrs. Reynolds was puzzled when she saw the military vehicle pull up to the front of her house. Had the government decided that all black families required military protection? Surely they had not. Perhaps they decided to provide protection because her husband was a doctor? Why had Malcolm not notified her if that were so? Whatever was happening she would know quickly enough. Two of the five soldiers were standing next to the military vehicle they had come in with their automatic weapons at the ready. The other three were coming to the door.

Richard held his position behind the Humvee scanning the street. Carl led the way to the door with the other two at his side. It was important that they be seen as U.S. soldiers, so they were circumspect to create that image, and they were not quiet. Richard could see out of the corner of his eye Carl reach the door. Richard scanned the street, but no one was in sight yet. A sport utility vehicle passed by and pulled into a driveway three houses down the street. The driver stepped out of the almost new vehicle. He stopped and starred at the Humvee. “Good,” Richard thought, “witnesses.”

Richard saw with his peripheral vision a figure open the front door of the house. Undoubtedly it would be Mrs. Reynolds. Of course, as long as she was black and living in an upper scale community it didn’t matter who she was, it just happened to be Mrs. Reynolds. Richard starred at the man down the street gazing back at them. A shot rang out. Richard glanced over his shoulder at Carl stepping over the legs of the dead body in the doorway and entering the house.

Richard snapped his eyes back on the man by the vehicle. The man was a statue, not moving. Two more shots rang out in the house and then three more. Finally the man started to run toward Richard. Richard lifted his automatic rifle and leveled it. “Halt or I’ll shoot!” Richard shouted. The man stopped. Richard kept his iron sights centered on the man’s torso. Two more shots rang out in the house. The man took one more tentative step forward. “Halt.” Richard repeated as he kept his rifle on the man.

“Hurry up.” Richard called without moving. Carl and the other two came out of the front door, on the double. By this time other people started to come out of their houses. Richard pulled back to the Humvee pointing his gun at one person, then toward another. Just then he saw a man come out with a rifle in his hands. Richard swung around and popped off a single round. The man dropped. Then Richard jumped in the door as the vehicle as it lurched forward. Into the night they sped leaving behind three dead, two wounded and half a dozen witnesses absolutely convinced that the United States Army is systematically executing the families of black professionals.

* * * * *

By the time they had reached their fourth target Richard was really getting the hang of it. The flutters were replaced with exhilaration. It also helped that after the first two targets they didn't enter the homes they hit. The first two targets had been highly placed black families. The third was a left wing local politician. Of course all politicians were left wing, but this politician was particularly left wing. The fourth house was the home of a police officer. He would of course not be there. There would, however, likely be a spouse who was proficient with a weapon. That was not a problem. Killing people was not the objective. Sowing terror, confusion, and most importantly mistrust of the government was the intended objective. Killing people was only incidental to that end. Shooting the house up would be sufficient in order to be successful in their mission. They all jumped out and opened fire immediately. Richard unloaded two twenty round clips into the house before he jumped back into the Humvee and sped off.

Richard could not tell if they had hit any targets, but that did not matter. No police officer would trust another soldier and visa versa. The next target would be their last. It was another police officer's house. It was an officer with a big family whose wife stayed home to take care of the kids. It made a good target. It made an easy target.

The next day dozens of witnesses would testify that they had seen well-trained military death squads carrying out executions. Of course the government would vehemently deny it. Likely they would try to smear the witnesses, but that would backfire. There would be too many witnesses, and their testimonies would be unshakable. No matter how they would try to explain it away it will smell of a cover up. Lying would be their first resort, and the truth would be their last. That's the trouble with lost credibility, nobody believes you when you finally tell the truth.

Chapter 25

John drove into the driveway wondering where all the extra trucks came from. Michael had driven part of the way from Bishop to give John a rest, but John was unable to sleep in the car. He could tell he was suffering from exhaustion and it dulled his ability to think. Why would there be a military truck parked in front of his house? He blinked a few times, but it wasn't until Allen and Randy came out of the front door that he recognized one of the trucks as being Randy's. The other truck was Army camouflage and he figured it had to have something to do with Randy. Suddenly he realized not only Randy, but also Allen were wearing a military uniform. There was more information necessary for John to figure this out, tired or not.

"Hi Dad." Allen greeted him. "Gee, you look tired."

"Never mind that. What's with the uniforms, and where did the Army truck come from?"

"The uniforms are Randy's, and the truck... well, you could say it used to belong to the Army." Allen tried lamely to put the best face on things, but apparently his father wasn't buying.

John was scowling. He shot a glance at Randy who was standing a few paces away like a guard at ease. At first John was concerned that Randy had talked Allen into joining the National Guard. Suddenly he was more concerned that Allen had committed grand larceny of government equipment. "I don't suppose you got these at an Army surplus store, did you?"

Allen knew he would be in trouble with his dad, but only now did he start to care. "Dad, we..."

"Mister Scott. If I may explain." Randy stepped forward as he entered the conversation.

"Yes, maybe you had better." John's voice betrayed his impatience.

"This morning I entered the U. S. Army National Guard armory in Long Beach and provided them with paperwork which I signed and provided identification and sufficient persuasion to obtain certain equipment which will be necessary to establish a defense force for Bishop, as we discussed before. Allen only accompanied me. This was entirely my doing."

"Obtained certain equipment?" John asked with exasperation.

"That's correct." Randy answered directly.

"Persuasion sufficient to obtain certain equipment?"

"Yes sir." Randy never blinked.

"You stole it! That's what you did. You falsified government documents and you flat out stole government equipment."

"Mister Scott, could we carry on this conversation inside?" Randy spoke calmly as if his

next question would be “Would you like your coffee black or with cream.”

John realized he was talking loud enough to be heard by neighbors, and he also realized he should be more discrete. He further realized that he was tired, and he was not at his best when he was tired. But it infuriated him to see Randy standing there calmly, right after involving his son in a federal crime. He was tempted to refuse to go in, just because Randy had suggested it, but the logic of Randy’s suggestion prevailed.

John took a deep breath and let it out. The anger he felt subsided just enough to be controllable. “All right. Lets go in.”

They all filed into the house, Michael entering last. John noticed Roxanne for the first time as he headed up the walk toward the front door.

As soon as they came through the door John walked to a position in front of the fireplace as if it were a podium and fired off his opening question. “I don't suppose there is something in the back of that truck under that tarp is there?”

“We have three racks of M203's and...” Randy started.

“Wait a minute. What’s an M203?” John interrupted.

“An M203 is a fully automatic assault rifle, with a grenade launcher attached.” Randy responded unruffled.

“Good grief! You took my son on an expedition to steal three racks of assault rifles with grenade launchers from the United States Army? What were you thinking? You don’t suppose they’ll miss them, do you? We’re going to have the BATF down on us like nobody’s business before the day is out!”

“No, Mister Scott. With all due respect, I doubt that the BATF or anybody else is going to come looking for us any time soon.” Randy spoke with perfect assurance as if he had a signed deed to the equipment in his shirt pocket.

“Is that right? What makes you so sure?”

“First, in spite of, or perhaps because of the massive book keeping system the military has, they misplace millions of dollars worth of equipment every day, literally. Units occasionally come back from field exercises missing equipment the size of a refrigerator. Stuff just disappears. When we’re talking about hundreds of billions of dollars worth of equipment, it is impossible to track every single rifle and shovel.

“Second, I made sure that the few who could possibly identify me as being involved have dirty hands. Those who gave me this equipment profited from bending the rules, and they knew I was not totally legitimate in my intentions. No one in that Armory is going to tell anybody anything if they don’t have to.

“Third, there’s a war gong on. Points one and two are true in peacetime. Chaos increases material losses a hundred fold. If I knew the right people, I could almost walk off with a tank column. They might miss that, but they wouldn’t know were to look for it, and they are far too busy to care right now.”

Randy walked to the television and turned it on.

“...and how long before they are able to capture the prisoners which escaped?” the anchor woman asked of a twentyish man holding a microphone in front of a large concrete building surrounded by tall fences topped with razor wire.

"Susan, with half of the Southland in chaos, nothing even approximating police work is even being attempted. 911 has been virtually discontinued, because there simply aren’t any police officers to send out. What they are doing is simply taping the calls to listen to later, when things calm down again, and that is about it. Their hope is that they stumble on some of the escaped prisoners at checkpoints, but that is probably more wishful thinking than anything else. In the meantime there are about two thousand escaped prisoners out there somewhere.”

“Wow! Thanks for that report Bill.” Susan concluded.

The scene changed to the anchorwoman in the studio. “Gene, let’s sum things up as we know them so far.”

“Sure, Susan. First whole sections of the Los Angeles area are completely out of control. Nothing even close to order has been restored. Second, an infantry division is being flown in from...”

“I believe that is a brigade that is being flown in.” Susan interrupted.

Gene consulted the paper in front of him. “Yes, that’s right. A brigade is being flown in from Japan to reinforce the police and troops already here.” Gene looked around the studio for assistance. “Is a brigade bigger than a division?”

Susan didn’t know, and neither did anyone else in the studio from the expression on Susan’s and Gene’s faces.

Randy shook his head. “There are three brigades in a division.” he interrupted.

Gene ventured a guess first. “I think a brigade is bigger isn’t it? It’s about twice as big, right? Well we’ll let you know as soon as we can find out the answer to that question. Anyway we are getting a brigade from Japan.

“There has been a major breakout from Wasco prison. Almost the entire prison population has escaped. Also, there has been a major disruption of food traveling into Los Angeles. Some places have ample supplies, but many do not. As soon as we can get an up to date list of those places that have food we will get that for you.”

John realized without being told that wherever the news reported food could be obtained, a mob would form. Not only that, the streets would be jammed in the area near it. The answer was not to bring the people to the food, but bring the food to the people.

“Next,” Gene continued “Telephone service, particularly long distance service, is almost non-existent. There are some calls getting through, but mostly there is only local service if that. Also, more than half of the trains are not moving. Many of the engineers and other employees have simply left their trains at the first road they came to and walked off the job. They claim they have been repeatedly shot at, and they won’t go back to work until they are sure it is safe to run the engines. In the meantime, hundreds of the trains are not moving. What else is there?”

“Isn’t that enough?” Susan asked.

“Well we haven’t had an earthquake yet.” Gene responded with half a smile.

Susan looked at Gene with a disbelieving look. “An earthquake?”

“Well, with all that’s gone wrong, at least we haven’t had an earthquake.”

“Well, we’re not through yet. Maybe that will be next.” Susan apparently didn’t know quit what to say after Gene’s spontaneous supposition. They had been working almost nonstop reporting the local news and they were losing their professional edge. Susan finally recovered. “All of that was just the local scene. Nationally it is more of the same from coast to coast. Miami, Washington, Atlanta, St. Lewis, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, San Francisco, city after city, civil unrest like this country has never seen before.”

“Yes.” Gene picked up the line. “And until Washington finds a way to restore order, there doesn’t seem to be any end in sight.”

“Well, what can we add to that?” Susan repeated. “All eyes seem to be focused on Washington to see what they will do, but so far, there doesn’t seem to be a solution coming forward...”

Randy shut off the television. “I think that’s enough to make my point. They aren’t going to be knocking on your door looking for a few missing rifles. They have bigger problems on their hands right now.” Randy paused to allow his arguments to sink in. He spoke as if he were an attorney for the defense making his closing arguments, certain that the jury would acquit.

John stood motionless, staring at the blank television. Finally he shifted his eyes to meet those of Randy. “Your probably right. I guess they’re not coming after the weapons. But it still doesn't make it right to steal.”

“When the revolutionaries threw the tea in Boston Bay, it was an illegal act. The battle of Concord was fought to keep the British from seizing the arms stored at the armory, which had been paid for with British pounds. They were British muskets that the revolutionaries had seized.” Randy stood his ground.

“Be careful of your situational morality, Randy. You may be right, but you may just as well wonder down the path to anarchy.”

“Mister Scott. I have sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. I have fought with distinction where my elected leaders have sent me. I was willing to die for the United States of America. I still am. America didn't get in this mess by accident. Elected officials of this country made decisions that were politically safe, and personally enriching. They have betrayed the United States for personal gain, thinking they would never have to answer for their actions. But the clock has run out. The day of judgment is here.

“I didn't take those weapons to line my pockets. I took them to defend citizens of the United States against all enemies, both foreign and domestic. I have been on missions before where my chances of returning alive were less than fifty-fifty. I expect this mission to be the most risky I have embarked on so far. There comes a time when people have to do what is right, regardless of the risk, even if it gets them killed. If you want out, you have every right. If you don't want Allen involved in this, that's between you and him.

"So far today I have killed half a dozen people just to get Roxanne out of her apartment. But they were people who were in the process of destroying our constitutional way of life. They were pirates. They were robbing innocent people at gunpoint. This is going to get a lot worse before we ever see the light at the end of the tunnel. If you don't have a stomach for war, I don't blame you, but you need to decide if you're in or out. This is the time to decide one way or the other. Which is it?"

John stared at Randy for what seemed like minutes, not speaking a word. John could see that Randy was not just blowing smoke, he meant every word, and if that meant dying for the mission, he was prepared to die. The United States Army had trained him to do a job, and he was going to do it, to the best of his ability. He could easily imagine Randy storming the beaches of Normandy, fully aware of the prediction of 85 percent casualties in the first twenty-four hours of fighting.

John slowly pulled his eyes away from Randy and looked at Allen. He spoke not a word, but his body language broadcast his support of Randy. Next he looked at Roxanne. She stood close behind Randy, her hand slid through his arm as she drew nearer still.

Finally John turned his gaze on Michael, almost forgotten standing by himself. John smiled and asked, “Well Michael, what do you think? Should we sign up, or let the revolution pass us by?” The tone of the question betrayed John's leaning toward Randy's impassioned speech.

“Dad, you know my answer.” Michael spoke.

“What's that?”

“Give me liberty, or give me death.” Michael spoke the words with resigned resolution in

a quiet deliberate tone.

John's faint smile faded away. After a long pause John spoke to no one in particular. "I am too old for war. And my sons are too young to die." He paused for a long time before he continued. "War is a nasty business, but to give in to cowardice is the worst fate of all. If die we must, then let us die doing the best we can. Randy what do we do now?"

Chapter 26

“Mr. Scott,” Randy answered John’s question “we need to maximize our effectiveness. To do that we need to rotate who is awake and who is asleep. This is your turn to be asleep.” From the look of John’s eyes Randy could clearly see that he badly needed some rest, and probably something to eat too. But he also looked edgy and fidgety. “I suggest we load up as soon as possible and get out of here. But while we load up, you need to get some rest.”

“Oh I’ll be all right.” John brushed off Randy’s suggestion.

“John, you’re going to need all the rest you can get. There is no need for you to use up precious time you could be resting. We can easily take care of loading the stuff while you rest. Once you have rested we will have to go. Even a little sleep will be invaluable.” Randy’s voice was polite, but authoritarian.

John decided Randy was right, but wanted to assert himself a little as well. John felt he had given enough ground already. “Well, I’ll lay down if the first thing you do is get that army truck out of my front yard. Hurry up and pull it into the garage before the whole neighborhood sees it parked in front of my house.”

“Dad,” Allen spoke, “the truck won’t fit in the garage.”

“What do you mean it won’t fit in the garage? The van is in Bishop. That truck isn’t much bigger than the van. It’ll fit.”

“Dad, we put the other vehicle in the garage, and I think you would rather we leave it where it is.” Allen was beginning to almost wince as he spoke.

“Other vehicle? Don’t tell me you have a tank in the garage!”

“No, not a tank.” Randy interceded. “It’s a Humvee, but it does have a very distinctive look to it. Of course we didn’t want to bring more attention to ourselves than necessary, so we parked it in the garage as soon as possible.”

“Of course.” John answered with just a touch of sarcasm as he made his way to the garage door, wanting to see this for himself. When he opened the door he was surprised at how big the Humvee looked in his garage. It’s distinctive lean-to canvas back, and massive knobby tires looked so out of place compared to the smooth, civilized lines of the mini-van that normally would have been here. John just stared, taking it in with out a word, before he finally let out a little laugh. “Well this may be a two car garage, but it’s a sure thing you can’t fit a truck and this beast in here.”

Just then the doorbell rang. John looked around as if to ask, “What’s next?”

Michael jumped to life. “I’ll get it.”

John went back to surveying the Humvee and became curious to know what the inside of

the Humvee looked like. Before he got very far Michael returned, followed by Frank from across the street.

“Hello John.” Frank spoke as soon as he worked through the crowd enough to talk to John. “Holy Toledo! That’s quite a vehicle you have there.” Frank seemed genuinely impressed with the new addition to John’s garage.

“Yea. You could say I got it real cheap.” As he spoke with a touch of sarcasim he smiled over at Randy and Allen. Allen’s eyes dropped, but Randy was visibly agitated.

“Excuse me. I’m Frank, the neighbor directly across the street. I recognize Allen in that uniform, but I don’t believe we have met.” Frank stuck out his hand to Randy as he spoke.

Randy took his hand heartily trying to put a good face on a situation he clearly didn’t like. “I’m Sergeant Martin, Special Forces, United States Army Reserves.”

“Pleased to meet you Sergeant. Sorry you only made it into the Army, though. I did three years in the Marines, where the real men serve.” Frank’s insult was accompanied with a good-natured smile.

Randy began to smile as well. “Well in the Special Forces we don’t serve tables, we fight.”

“Fight! The only fighting I saw the Army do was with the geisha girls in Tokyo when I was on leave from Vietnam.” Frank grinned as he verbally counter punched.

Randy’s smile widened even more reveling his brilliant white teeth. “Sorry that wasn’t Army. Nope. I’m afraid you’re mistaken.”

“Oh really.” Frank responded anticipating Randy’s next move. “Who was it then?”

“Air Force. Has to be Air Force. There is only one branch of the military that has a section of their training manual devoted to fighting geisha girls. That is definitely the Air Force. No question about it. You must have seen Air Force and mistook the uniforms for Army in the dark.”

Frank laughed loudly. “You could be right. In fact, in the dark a blue uniform could easily be taken for green now that I think about it. You know, when it gets dark, color distinction is the first to go. Yea, It must have been a couple of fly boys.”

Randy’s smile faded just a touch as he started to ponder Frank’s words. Randy wasn’t sure if Frank was just a good talker, or if Randy was trying to read between lines where nothing was written. Either way, Randy took an immediate liking to Frank, which was a fortunate thing, because he had already guessed why Frank was there.

“And what might your name be?” Frank asked with more than a little charm toward Roxanne.

“My name is Roxanne Wilson. I’m **Sergeant** Martin’s fiancée.” Roxanne’s over emphasis of the word sergeant teased Randy and Randy smiled broadly.

“Well, Sergeant Martin, your a very lucky man.” Frank observed.

“Yes, I guess I am. By they way, most people call me Randy. Why don’t you do the same.”

“Fine by me.” Frank turned back to address John. “Well, John. Some time ago we talked about covering each other’s back in the event that shooting breaks out. Kind of looks like maybe you found a better offer. Could it be you’ve decided to pull up stakes and move on out?” Frank left the question hanging in the air as John and Randy exchanged glances. “Hey don’t get me wrong. You’re not turning your back on me. We didn’t sign anything in blood that I remember, I just wondered if an old jarhead might fit into your plans. If so, I’m just across the street. If things aren’t too crowded, I think I might be interested. If not, that’s fine too.”

Frank was too sharp to miss the obvious fact that John had managed to come into some serious military equipment. He also knew that they had gotten it through “creative means.” To Frank, John had an edge that could make the difference between surviving and dying, but he knew enough about poker to play his hand well.

Frank glanced back and forth between John and Randy, but he looked more at Randy than John. “Well you talk it over. I’ll be right across the street. Like I said, if you could use another ground ponder, I could be interested. If there isn’t room, I understand. You talk it over.” With that Frank took one last probing look at Randy who licking his lips as he usually did when was thinking fast and hard, then Frank worked his way out of the crowd and toward the front of the house.

As soon as Randy heard the front door close he started to question John. “Can Frank be trusted?”

It wasn’t the question John expected. He expected to be questioned about Frank’s fighting abilities. “Trusted?”

“Yea. Would you trust Frank with your life? More importantly, would you trust your family to be in his hands?” Randy shot the questions rapid fire.

John furrowed his brow. “I don’t know.”

Randy let out an exasperated breath of air. “I hate unknowns.”

“Welcome to the club. I’m not sure I can trust you any more than I trust Frank. I guess we’ll all just have to wing it won’t we?” John savored seeing Randy squirm for a change.

Randy glanced back at John. He wasn’t as amused at the latest turn of events as John was. “Well what do you know about him?”

“I know he lives across the street from me. I know he is divorced. I know he is a gun nut. I know he has built his house into a fortress in anticipation of wide spread social breakdown. I didn’t know he was a Marine until just now.”

“Fortress?”

“Yes. He added the slab stone front to the house to make it bullet proof. He has a platform behind his chimney, which he added six inches to. The platform is to stand on as he shoots the looters.”

“He added a stone front to his house to stop bullets?”

“Sure, let me show you.” John led the way back through the house to the front room where they could see across the street. Frank was standing in front of his house, obviously waiting for an answer.

“He had all that stone work added to his house specifically to give bullet protection?”

“Yep, and the front door is steel with wood veneer.”

“Really?”

“Yep, he’s a real nut. He should fit right fine with the rest of us, come to think of it.” John added.

“You may be right. Anybody crazy enough to add stone to the front of his house, and six inches to his chimney can’t be all bad? So why is he leaving all that preparation to come with us?”

“I don’t know, why don’t we ask him?” John turned to Michael and directed him to ask Frank to come over. Michael hurried across the street and met Frank half way up the driveway. Randy and John watched as they approached. Frank entered with a smile on his face. Apparently he anticipated being accepted.

“Frank,” Randy asked, “John tells me you built a lot of defenses into your house. Why do you want to leave it and come with us?”

“I didn’t say I would. Heck, I don’t know what you’re planning. Before I agree to anything, I’d like to know what you’re planning. But if you have a plan, and it’s a good one, and you could use another hand, I’d like to be considered.”

“We’re going to Bishop.” Randy started to explain. “Mr. Scott’s in-laws live there. Mrs. Scott and the children are already there. As soon as we get through loading up here, Allen and I are going to Fort Irwin to get ammunition for the weapons we were provided at Long Beach Armory. Mr. Scott, Michael, and Roxanne are driving directly to Kramer Junction, which is half way to Bishop. We will meet them in Kramer Junction and drive the rest of the way to

Bishop together. Once we get there, our plan is to help establish a civil defense unit for the protection of Bishop. That is as far as the plan goes. As for needing a Marine, if you're interested, we could certainly use a good shot. I understand you still have a few weapons. How good are you at 300 meters?"

"Plenty good enough." Frank responded without hesitation.

"Are you interested in driving a truck full of food and supplies to Bishop along with Mr. Scott and the others?" Randy asked.

"Sure. Can someone drive my car?"

Randy turned to Roxanne, "Would you mind darling?"

"Not at all," she replied.

"It would sure make me feel better if there was one more gun traveling up with them. My presumption is that it is probably getting very dangerous out on the highways." Randy concluded.

"Then I guess we have a deal." Frank declared.

"I guess so." agreed Randy. "Ok folks, lets get going, were burning daylight."

Chapter 27

Kramer Junction consists of three Gas stations, a couple of convenience stores which specialize in junk food, a liquor store, a power grid junction, a rail crossing, a 1940's motel and not much else. The sole reason for Kramer Junction, also known as Four Corners, is the simple fact that U.S. Highway 395 going North and South happened to cross California State Rout 58 going East and West at this particular spot. The train tracks connecting Barstow to Bakersfield ran parallel to 58, and the power lines spread out in every direction. It was a place to buy gas, and food. That's all.

Frank pulled the truck into the Chevron station on the North East corner of the intersection and John parked on the right side of the station. Roxanne pulled in next to John. John and Michael climbed out of the Chevy, Roxanne climbed out of Frank's car. They were met with Frank with his arms out, hands facing up in the 'Oh, well' gesture.

Frank explained "They're out of gas. The pumps say no gas. It looks like the station across the intersection still has some. I'll give them a try."

John responded, "They had gas just a couple of days ago."

"Well they don't have any now. I guess that's why they don't have a line." Frank stated.

"May I use the bathroom?" asked Roxanne.

"You go ahead. Roxanne and I need to use the bathrooms, we'll get some food and then we'll be ready to go."

"Ok." Frank acknowledged as he stepped back up into the cab of the truck. The truck swayed back into the street and across to the Texaco station, kitty corner across the intersection.

John turned toward Michael and addressed him without looking him in the eye. He was sizing up the situation, observing various motorists buying something quick, and hitting the road again. Most of them looked just like anybody on they're way to anywhere, but a few looked like they could be trouble. John didn't care whether he was prejudiced or not at this point. All he cared about was getting back on the road and out of here. "Michael, I'll walk Roxanne over to the bathrooms, they're on the other side of the building. You stay her with the cars. Is there anything you want? I'll get you something inside."

"Could I have a fruit pie?"

"Sure." John's voice dropped a little and he moved a half step closer. "You know were the gun is. If anything happens, yell then lock yourself in the car. Roxanne and I will come running."

Michael blinked and then swallowed. "Ah, sure. Ok."

"Keep your eyes open." With that John turned and escorted Roxanne around the front of

the building and into the store. The station had been full service when it was new, but now it carried soft drinks and cream filled cupcakes where it used to have fan belts and tires. The station had lots of glass in front and on the East side, so Michael could easily watch his father as he asked for the key to the bathrooms and bought a few munches. As soon as the money and key to the bathroom were exchanged, the two exited the glassed area and continued around to the front until they disappeared behind the West side of the building.

Michael then glanced around the intersection observing what his father had seen before him. Business was brisk as motorist tried to fill their needs and wants. The shelves were getting thin, but they were still open for business. Michael then noticed the group of bikers kitty corner across the intersection at the Texaco station where Frank was waiting to fill up with gas. There were three cars in front of Frank so there was plenty of time to observe.

The bikers were not weekday lawyers and doctors. One wore his greasy hair in a braid; another had a shaved head. All had tattoos all over their arms, backs, and hands. A third wore a World War II German helmet. Michael was taking all this in, when his attention was captured by two pickups and a van which came roaring up 395 from the South.

The three vehicles swerved into the Unical station across the street and opened fire on the bikers before Michael, or anyone else, knew what was happening. In a second the bikers were all dead, lying on the ground. Michael was stunned, his mouth wide open. As fast as it burst upon them, it was over.

A crowd of about ten men spilled out of the three vehicles carrying guns of various types. They had recently escaped from prison, had no idea how long they would be out, were sure it wouldn't last long, and were determined to raise as much hell as possible before it was over. One with a particularly gaunt, scarecrow-like appearance ran over to a parked Oldsmobile and pulled a young woman from the passenger seat. He held her arm behind her back and awkwardly forced her toward the van. The male driver was yelling something, and so was the woman, but he stayed in the car as one of the other gang members kept a rifle pointed at him.

Michael finally sprang into action as he dove into the car, frantically searching for the 9mm pistol. His hands were butter as he fumbled about as fast as he could, but finally he grabbed it out of the backpack, which it had been stashed in. He emerged from the car stuffing the second ten round magazine in his back pocket where he could reach it. It seemed like minutes, but it had only been seconds. With the flick of his thumb the safety was off. A slap of his left hand and the slide actioned, snapping a round into the chamber. He pressed his body against the side of the car as he dropped on his right knee. The semi-automatic pistol was clasped in his right hand, which rested in his cupped left hand, arms out stretched to full length.

The pistol waved in front of him as he searched for a target. Just then he heard a voice above all the screaming. He heard his name "Michael" called by his father. The voice came from his right. He broke his concentration and glanced to his right. John had emerged from the side of the station with Roxanne and was about to dart across the front of the building toward the car. John was trying to get Michael not to shoot and bring attention to them. Just then one of the convicts shouted, "There's one!" Michael glanced back and saw a man made of muscles running for John and Roxanne. John saw him coming at the same time as Michael did. In an

instant John swung and retreated dragging Roxanne as fast as they both could go.

Michael shot and missed. He fired again and again and missed both times. He hit him with his fourth shot. It didn't knock him down but it stopped his advance toward John and Roxanne. As he turned to level his revolver at Michael, Michael pounded three more shots into him. He fell backwards and slumped to the ground. Suddenly bullets started flying all around Michael. He swung his aim back toward the trucks and let go with his last three shots. One round found its target; the other two shots went wild. Michael, scurried to his feet and started to retreat when hot pain flared in his left leg. A bullet had torn through the side of his leg. It didn't knock him down immediately, but he did lose his balance. He tumbled to the ground and rolled around in front of the car.

Blood spilled from his thigh and the pain was agonizing, but it didn't stop him from reloading and swinging his gun back around the side of the car. His left shoulder was up against the car's left front wheel. Michael couldn't see anyone and the popping of gunshots had stopped. Just then he saw under the car shoes came running toward the front of the car, and he knew he would be dead in a matter of seconds. He knew he was a dead man living. There was no way to move fast enough to even see his assailant before he his whole body from the ribs down would be exposed. Michael knew he was dead.

* * * * *

As soon as John saw the massive convict heading for him, he bolted in the opposite direction. He had a hold of Roxanne's wrist to be sure they were both going in the same direction as fast as possible, but she was rushing as fast, if not faster than he was. Gun shots rang out, but neither turned back to see who was shooting or who they were shooting at. In a few strides he let go of her wrist as they passed the back of the building and headed for the engine of a parked train. A freight train was parked at the intersection, pointing west. The long train ran along the back of the Chevron station and trailed off into the night on their right. The distance between the back of the station and the train was not more than seventy-five feet, and they covered it in four seconds.

Roxanne tripped on the rails as they rounded the front of the massive engine, but she rolled and came up running. They ran along the backside of the engine then peeled off toward the left once they passed the engine to lose themselves in the desert. To their left was the back of an old single story motel and animal pens. In the dark they could only see shadows and shapes in shades of gray. They hoped that they would soon be too far lost to be found. They passed the end of the motel and off into the desert they fled.

John dropped to the ground and scurried around the back of a tumbleweed. He was gasping for air. He tried to control his breathing enough to hear, but he couldn't. His breaths came hard and fast, his heart pounded. Roxanne was crawling back to where John was on hands and knees. John was impatient to hear, but he couldn't quiet his breathing. Slowly his body obeyed but he still couldn't hear what he was listening for. "Where is Michael?" John demanded of the night, but he dare not get up to see.

* * * * *

“Throw the gun out, kid, or I’ll blow you full of holes!”

Michael flung the pistol to his right, about eight feet away and continued to lie on his stomach, waiting to die.

“You got any surprises kid? You do, I’ll blow you so full of holes, there won’t be enough of you to bury. Catch my drift, kid?” Two others seeing that Michael was not moving scurried across the road, and then came up behind the car.

“I don’t have anything else.”

“Why don’t you just shoot him now, Snake. He killed Iron Man and I think he hit Speed. Just waste him go.” Michael heard the voices, detached from their bodies as if they were on the radio.

“He has something I want. Don’ cha, kid?” hissed Snake.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“She’s a real looker, kid. What’s her name? What’s the name of the girl?”

Michael lie there and bit his lip. The pain in his leg was beginning to throb unbearably.

“Listen kid, I don’t have all day. She’s just my kind of woman, and I’m not leaving without her. What’s her name? And who was that guy with her?”

By now they had worked their way around Michael’s legs until they surrounded Michael on the ground. Michael had rolled on his side, looking up at his captors. “Listen Kid, you better start talking. I can really get in your face if you don’t. You hear me?” To punctuate his command he placed his foot on Michael’s bleeding leg and pressed on the wound. The pain was pounding in his leg, but surprisingly, the pressure on it made it only hurt a little more, but not excruciatingly. He felt like throwing up and his head was beginning to swim, but Michael said nothing.

“Give him an other slug.” one of them suggested.

“Now that’s a good idea. Right in the knee of his good leg. He’ll be a cripple for life.”

Michael looked up at the three tormentors. Snake pointed a machine pistol at his good knee. “Her name is Roxanne.” answered Michael reluctantly. “The man with her is my father. His name is John.”

“Now that is much better. Who is Roxanne? Is she a friend of your dad’s?”

“No. She is just a friend of my brother’s friend.” Michael’s throat was dry.

“And where is your brother and his friend?”

“They’re not here.”

“Look man, lets get out of here. This is taking too long.” one of Snake’s fellow escapees insisted.

“Are you a man, or are you an old woman!” Snake snarled at the escaped con. Then he reached down and grabbed Michael by the arm and dragged him to his feet. Snake pulled Michael up until their noses were inches apart. Michael could feel his warm, foul smelling breath on his face. “Call out to your Father and Roxanne. Tell them to come in, real loud. If you don’t, I’m going to kill you, real slow. You hear me, kid?”

Michael stared him in the face. It was the ugliest face he had ever seen. Ugly with pure hate and evil. Michael knew what Snake had on his mind, and Michael wasn’t going to let him have it. Michael made up his mind right then that he was going to die. From here on in, the sooner the better.

* * * * *

“I’ve got to go back. I’ve got to get Michael. If he was going to get out, he would be out by now.” John spoke as he started to rise up from the desert sand.

“That’s crazy! It’s me they want.” Spoke Roxanne. “I’ll go back. If there is any chance of saving Michael it has to be me that goes back.”

“No! That’s out of the question. Absolutely not! If you give yourself up, they’ll take you and kill Michael. If I give my self up, I’ll make a deal with them to let Michael go or I won’t help them. Once Michael is free, I’ll lead them the wrong direction. By the time they figure out what I’ve done, it will be too late. Your way we lose twice. My way we may lose once, but at least I get a chance to save my son’s life. I have that right.”

John stood up and started to move toward the train.

“They’ll just kill you too.”

John stopped and turned. “That may be true, but if you give yourself up it will all be in vain. Don’t let that happen.” John anxiously sought for the words. “Roxanne, some things are more precious than life itself. Please, no matter what happens, don’t give yourself up. Please.” With that John turned and ran toward the train crouching as he went.

John scurried across the desert shadows half bent as he went until he came close to the train. As he got close, he got down on all fours and crawled quickly up to the trucks of a boxcar. When he reached the huge steel wheel he brought his legs up under himself until he crouched on his feet. Then he peered around the edge of the wheel, under the boxcar.

* * * * *

Michael went sprawling, his head ringing. The blow to his face felt like it was meant to knock down a bull. Before Michael could pull his wits about himself, he was dragged to his feet again and slammed against the car. “You don’t seem to be catching on, Kid. What’s wrong with you? Tell Roxanne to come back. If you do, I’ll let you go. If you don’t, I’m going to kill you. It is as simple as that. You understand?”

Michael understood. He understood all too well. He just wished Snake would get it over with.

“Scar, Dogface. Take that garbage can and fill it with water. Use that hose over there. Michael is going to have his face washed.

Michael watched, half conscious of what they were doing, barely comprehending, as they filled the gray, dirty garbage can with water. When the can was three quarters full, Snake yanked Michael over to the side of the garbage can and shoved his face within inches to the greasy water. “Do you know how much it hurts to drown, kid? You’re about to find out if you don’t yell out. If you don’t want to know how bad it hurts, just yell Roxanne at the top of your lungs. Do it Kid! Do it!”

Michael stared at the ripples in the water and wondered how much pain he could endure. Just then his face was shoved under the water. It was cool and it startled him. The coolness sharpened his senses and heightened his awareness. He struggled against the hand that held him under, and the more he struggled the tighter he was held. “I’ve got to get out. I’ve got to have air” he thought. The words bounced around the cage of his mind with no way to escape. “Air! I’m drowning! I need Air! Air! Air! Oh please let me out! Please! Please!”

Suddenly his head was pulled from the water and he gasped for breath. Snake’s face drew near. “Now wasn’t that fun? I wonder how many times I can do that before you die? You think about that. You think about that real hard. And while you think about it, you breathe real deep so you can yell Roxanne real loud.”

Michael panted, sitting on the ground next to the garbage can of water. After a moment Snake kicked him in his wounded leg and demanded. “Well, you going to yell or not?” Michael coughing and gasped but didn’t look up. After a minute more, Snake yanked him up again and shoved his face into the water.

“Oh, please no.” He thought. Michael started to pray that it would end. He repeated the prayer in his mind to be delivered over, and over again. The panic for air grew like a forest fire

with nothing to stop it. His whole body shook with pain. His fate had become a watery, burning hell. Just when it started to dull and his consciousness began to fade from him. He was suddenly pulled from the water and dropped to the ground. In the back of his mind he heard Snake say, “Well, who do we have here?”

* * * * *

When John glimpsed around the edge of the railcar wheel, his worst fears proved to be fact. Michael was bleeding from his left thigh and he was being shoved face first into a barrel of water. In a second John knew he had no choice, no matter what the personal cost. John scurried under the boxcar and out the other side heading towards the three who were torturing Michael. “I’ll give you what you want, just let him go.”

As John approached the three convicts, they turned toward him and Michael slumped to the ground.

“Well, who do we have here?” mocked Snake.

“John” he answered, then went on to declare, “That’s my son. Let him go and I’ll give you what you want.”

“What I want is Roxanne.”

“Let the boy go or I’ll give you nothing.”

“If I let him go, I have only one hostage. If I keep him, I have two. Why should I let him go?”

“Because I know where she is, and he doesn’t. Let him go or I won’t help you.”

“Oh, I bet you will. In fact, I bet I have here just what will make you help me, don’t I?”

John was walking toward them as he spoke until he stopped about ten feet away. John was about to say something but Michael interrupted.

“Dad.” Michael gasped for air. “Dad.”

Snake feined concern for the boy as he bent over him helping him to stand up. “You have something you want to say to your father? You have a request?” Snake’s twisted smile was as cold as that of his namesake.

“Dad.” Michael breathed heavily then saved up breath to speak. He wanted to be sure he got it all out in one breath. “Dad. Give me liberty, or give me...”

Michael blurted it out as fast as he could, but Snake was too fast to let him finish. He hit him in the nose, then let him fall to the pavement, blood pouring from both nostrils.

“You taught him that? You taught him to think like that! He’s going to die because of you. You’re going to watch him die right before your eyes!” With that he grabbed the machine pistol out of his belt and pointed it right at Michael.”

“No wait! Don’t!” John demanded.

“Don’t what? Are you going to lead us to Roxanne or not?”

“Not if you don’t Michael go.”

Snake paused then slowly pulled the trigger. The gun belched bullets and then it was over.

* * * * *

Michael watched as Snake pointed the gun at his head. Michael continued watching as his sarcastic smile turned to one of sheer pleasure. Then flames burst out of the barrel and he was enveloped in dark. The darkness only lasted a moment. He looked down and saw five people directly below him. He recognized four. His father was kneeling on the pavement, apparently crying, the three others gathering around his father, but the fifth lying on the ground he didn't recognize. Suddenly he realized he must be dead, and that must be him on the pavement. His face was nothing but blood, but he was sure that must be him on the ground, and he must be dead. He felt no pain, just a pull that drew him upward. He looked up and ascended into the illumination.

* * * * *

John fell to the pavement. He had gambled, and he had lost. He had lost everything. His son was dead. His son was dead! Rage filled his soul. He wanted to tear his son’s killers apart, but he was powerless. There was nothing on earth he could do. He would soon be dead as well.

Suddenly he heard the roar of gunfire. Five or six shots rang out, and he expected to be dead too, but instead he just kept on crying. He lifted his head and looked around. Snake, Scar, and Dogface were lying on the ground. Snake and Dogface had been torn apart by shotgun blasts. Scar had been killed as well. He was surrounded by death when he expected himself to be dead. Frank rushed forward and so did someone else. “Are you all right?” Frank asked. He wasn’t all right. His son was dead. His son was dead.

Tires screeched and gunshots rang out. John just stayed there kneeling on the hard

asphalt. People started to come around. “Who was he?” He heard someone say sympathetically. John stood up and walked over to his son’s lifeless body. He knelt down and picked up his son’s bloody head and cradled it in his arms. “My son, my son. My son.”

Chapter 28

Allen was amazed at how easy it was to drive into Fort Irwin, load several hundred pounds of pistol and rifle ammunition, hand grenades, and plastic explosives into stolen trucks, and then drive out again like it was no big deal. Randy assured him as they were about to climb in their vehicles that it would have been possible, but far more difficult and risky in the Army Randy had served in only a few years previously. Now here he was, traveling west on highway 58 just east of Kramer Junction with enough weapons and ammunition in two vehicles to supply a platoon of men. It was all so weird.

Less than fifty hours ago he was a collage student. Now he was part of... a private army. An army that had yet to be born. How did things change so fast? A few weeks ago if Allen wanted excitement he went to a movie. Now it seemed as though he was living the movie. This was all too crazy. It was a rush to be walking in and out of armories collecting piles of weapons and munitions using little more than a uniform and bluff. Allen was beginning to get the hang of grand larceny. It was so easy. The staff was so distracted with all the commotion going on in their little bureaucratic world that it was a piece of cake. It was really kind of fun.

Allen narrowed his eyes. Up ahead he could see a van and a pick-up truck roaring at him as if they were in a race. Allen followed Randy's lead and pulled his truck over to the right as far as he could without driving off the shoulder. Randy and Allen had just passed the transition from four lanes to two. The road was narrow and gently curving to the left, too narrow for reckless driving. A double blast buffed the truck as the van followed by the truck passed him going the opposite direction at about 120 miles per hour.

"Those guys are nuts!" Allen exclaimed to no one as he struggled to keep the truck from going off into the dirt.

Allen pulled back into the center of his lane. Finally he could see Kramer Junction in the distance. Now they would be able to connect with Michael, Dad and the rest, and head north toward Bishop.

As Allen pulled into the junction he couldn't see what was happening, but he could see there was some kind of a commotion. He parked the truck behind the Humvee and climbed out. Suddenly Frank appeared out of nowhere and said something to Randy. Before Randy had a chance to answer, Frank walked briskly toward Allen. He carried a shotgun loosely in his left hand with the barrel pointed toward the ground. He had a very grave look on his face as he approached Allen. Randy fell in right behind him, also grave faced.

"Allen," Frank spoke, "I think you better come over here." Frank put out his arm to guide him away from the gas station.

"What's the matter?" Allen asked suddenly knowing something was terribly wrong. Allen backed up not letting Frank put his arm around him.

Randy was maneuvering around like a line backer anticipating which way Allen might run if he made a brake for it. Their advance made Allen sure something terrible had happened,

and they did not want Allen to see whatever it was.

Allen had been backing up then suddenly he stopped. “Someone has been shot, haven’t they?” Allen asked in a forceful voice.

Frank looked him straight in the eyes, but he didn’t answer at first. Frank started to open his mouth to speak, but Randy spoke first. “Yes, Allen. Someone has been shot.” Randy stared Allen right in the eye. There was directness in Randy’s eyes, and voice that was as hard as steel, but somehow compassionate at the same time. Allen knew Randy would tell him the cold truth, no sugar coating. Allen could also sense Randy knew how much this was going to hurt, and his only concern was for Allen.

“My dad is dead.” Allen spoke the words in almost a whisper as the blood drained out of his soul.

“No Allen, your dad is fine.” Randy swallowed hard. “It’s Michael.”

Allen staggered back as if hit by some unseen blow. Frank and Randy stepped forward, Randy catching his left arm to steady him. Tears sprang to his eyes as he shut them to close out the pain. “NO! It can’t be. Not Michael! No!” Allen recovered enough to pull himself free of Randy’s grasp. Randy and Frank followed Allen as he pulled away and staggered back.

“Leave me alone!” Allen demanded with tears in his eyes. Allen turned and walked five or six paces then stopped. Randy and Frank stood looking on, ready to jump forward in an instant if needed. Allen sobbed openly, his back heaved as the tears streamed down his cheeks onto the hard asphalt street. “Why Michael? He was only sixteen. Why did it have to be Michael?” Allen turned slowly until he faced Randy and Frank. “Why?” he spoke, barely a whisper. “Why?” he mouthed the word without the ability to utter a sound. Tears continued to run down his cheeks, splashing on his army shirt, leaving dark wet streaks.

Finally, pulling himself together Allen slowly stood up straight and started walking toward the gas station skirting past Frank. Randy and Frank pulled back and moved to block his advance. Allen demanded with eyes aflame. “I want to see my brother!”

“Allen,” Randy spook in a soft voice, “There is a lot of blood.”

“I don’t care! I want to see my brother!”

“Allen, you can see your brother,” Randy spook, “but I think you need a little time to get a hold of..”

Allen pulled his revolver from his shoulder holster and pointed it toward the sky. “I want to see my brother NOW!” The gun was not pointed at either of them, but it spoke clearly how determined Allen was to see Michael.

Randy could have disarmed Allen in a single move, but he would rather do anything than use force on Allen in any way. The three stood eye to eye for a couple of seconds. Randy and

Frank exchanged glances. Without speaking a word they agreed that there was no longer any point in trying to protect Allen from what he might see. Before they had a chance to step aside a feeble voice called out from behind them.

“It’s Ok.” John spoke fighting for enough control of his voice to speak. “I’ll take him to see Michael.”

No one was aware of John’s approach and they all turned in the same motion as soon as he spoke. The harsh lights of the station behind him blanked all his features, but it was unmistakably John from the sound of his voice. The dark silhouette reached forward with his right hand to beckon to Allen. “I’ll take you to Michael, Allen.”

Allen slipped his pistol back in his shoulder holster and stepped around Frank as Frank stepped out of the way. Allen slowly closed the distance between himself and his father, apparently no longer sure he wanted to see his brother now that it was freely offered. When Allen reached John, John put his arm around him and walked him around the corner of the car.

There on the pavement lay the shattered body of the little brother that Allen never knew he loved so much, until now. People who were looking on with pity, moved away sensing the great pain of both Allen and John. They aimlessly moved away, not knowing what they should do or say. Allen stood, unable to move closer, staring at the blood spreading out on the pavement. He hardly noticed the other three bodies, only the one he grew up with. Finally, unable to bear more pain, he turned and staggered away, John just behind him. After a few steps he veered over to the back of the parked car and half sat on the back of it.

John stood a few feet away as Allen sobbed. Finally John spoke in barely a whisper, the most he could muster. “He wouldn’t tell.”

Allen looked up, his chest convulsing as he stammered the words. “He wouldn’t tell them what?”

John tried to answer, but was unable. After a moment to collect himself and he tried again. “They wanted to rape Roxanne, and Michael wouldn’t tell where she was. They shot him, they beat him, they tried to drown him, but he wouldn’t tell. I don’t think I could have taken the beating he took without breaking. If there was any way I could have taken his place, I would have, but they wouldn’t let me. Then all of a sudden, he was dead. In a sudden burst of gunfire they snuffed out his life.

“You know, he did it deliberately. If Michael hadn’t covered our retreat we never would have made it. He willfully gave his life to save us. If only I had come back sooner. Maybe I could have talked them into killing me instead of Michael. No, I should have kept the gun. If I had taken the gun with me instead of leaving it in the car, I would have been the target instead of Michael. I could have covered their escape. I should have taken the gun and sent Michael with Roxanne. I should have known. It’s my fault Michael is dead. It’s my fault.”

Allen stood as if he had suddenly come to life. “Dad, did they get away driving in a van and a pickup truck?”

“Yes. I think so.”

“Did they go that way?” Allen pointed east down highway 58.

“Yes, but...”

Allen swung around not waiting for John to finish his sentence. Immediately he started trotting for the truck. “Allen, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to do what Michael would do if I were laying in the street with blood poring out of my head. I’m going to find the guys that did it and kill ‘em.”

John hurried to catch up as Allen headed directly toward the truck. “Allen. Allen!”

Randy and Frank stepped in front of Allen this time with more resoluteness in their stance.

“Out of my way. I have business to attend to.” Allen demanded.

“No, you’re on your way to get yourself killed.” Randy replied.

“That’s none of your business.” Allen sneered.

“Maybe not, that’s debatable, but that truck and everything in it is my business.” Randy spoke with a steady, controlled but emphatic voice. “You’re not taking one gun out of that vehicle that doesn’t belong to you without my permission.”

Allen shot back with a vengeance. “You mean you wouldn’t go after the killers of your brother if it happened to you?” Allen demanded.

Frank cut in. “If it’s revenge you’re after, we took care of that already. Those three bodies lying on the ground next to your brother were the three that killed him. I shot the one who killed your brother with this.” Frank lifted his shotgun. “I hit him with three blasts. Some other guy shot the other two with his pistol. Trust me, in this case, vengeance was swift and sure.”

Allen persisted not willing to be dissuaded. “If those were the killers, then who was in the van and the truck.”

“They were with them,” Frank answered, “but they weren’t the ones who killed your brother. They were robbing other people at the time.”

“If they were part of the gang,” Allen continued, “they are just as guilty as the other three. They’re just as guilty of my brother’s murder.”

Randy stepped in again. “Look Allen, chasing after ten murderers isn't going to prove

anything. First, you probably won't be able find them. They were long gone before we got out of the trucks. Second, Southern California is crawling with scum like that. Killing them won't make a bit of difference. Third, we don't need to kill them, their gone. Trust me it doesn't feel all that good to kill people."

"Yeah, you're one to talk." Allen accused. "Wasn't it you that killed half a dozen boys like so many pigs in a pen. The sanctity of life speech sounds a little hollow coming from you."

"They were a clear and present danger to us." Randy defended his record. "These other guys are not. If I had been here I would have dropped them in a heartbeat. You can bet on that. But to chase after them now is pointless. It's a waste of time, and it diverts us from our mission. Our mission is to get all of us to Bishop, not to settle personal vendettas."

Allen, Randy, and Frank stood face-to-face breathing hard, none speaking a word. Finally John's voice came in quiet, still tones. "Allen. I'm going to have to bury one son and explain why he died to your mother. Please don't make it two." Allen turned to see his father's drawn face. "Let's go to Bishop were we can protect the living, not avenge the dead."

Allen's demeanor softened only a shade. He took a deep breath and let it out. After a moment he turned to look east, then turned back. "Ok dad." Allen relented in deference to his father's wishes and respect for his mothers love. He would let it go for now, but the hatred he would treasure for another day. Revenge, Allen was sure, would be sweet, even if he had to find a surrogate guilty party. The way things were getting ugly, that shouldn't be hard. Allen would have to wait, but he would get his revenge.

Chapter 29

Ted Murray walked directly up to his Lieutenant. Second Lieutenant Chuck McCollum could tell right off by the way that he walked that Ted had bad news. There was something about the directness of his stride that portended bad news. That was the last thing that Lieutenant McCollum needed now, more bad news. Three days of fighting a guerrilla war in San Bernardino with no more than a two-hour break left both McCollum and his men exhausted. McCollum had thought that he could finally relax now that they had been replaced and pulled back into a school auditorium, but it was evident from the look of Ted, that he wasn't going to get the rest that he was counting on.

“What is it Murray?”

“Lieutenant, I think we have a situation here that you should be aware of.” Ted looked his commanding officer straight in the eyes. “Blackwell just called home and...”

Lieutenant McCollum interrupted Privet Murray with a string of profanity. “... I gave a direct order that no one was to make, or receive personal calls. That was a direct order! What does he think this is, a girls camp?”

“Lieutenant...”

“I'll have him court martialled. I'll have any man court martialled that doesn't obey orders in combat.”

“Lieutenant. You have a bigger problem here than you seem to realize.”

“My men won't follow orders and you say I have a bigger problem?” The lieutenant's voice was filled with impatient sarcasm.

“Blackwell's wife is about to leave their house. Three houses on their block have been burned to the ground. One of the houses is two lots down from theirs. Blackwell's wife is terrified. The men are extremely concerned about their families.”

“Where's Blackwell. I swear I'll have him court martialled.” The Lieutenant started to stand up, but Murray stepped in front of him so that he had to sit down again.

“I wouldn't do that if I were you.” Murray stated flatly.

“Are you threatening me, soldier?” McCollum demanded.

“No Sir. Just giving you sound advice so that we can all live to fight another day.” Murray let the Lieutenant chew on his words for a moment before he continued. “There is a solution that I think will work if you are willing to just bend the rules a little.” The lieutenant looked up at Murray, his eyes demanded that he continue.

“If we get our families out of harms way, than the men can concentrate on what they're

sent here to do. I have relatives in Lone Pine. That's about two hundred miles north of here. Let four men gather up the families and make sure..."

"Not a chance! If Major Hinkle heard about this..."

"Major Hinkle hasn't got a clue which way is up. The only way he would know anything is if you tell him."

"Murray, are you suggesting I send a portion of this platoon on an unauthorized, self serving field trip? An army that can leave whenever it feels like it is an army that will disappear in a puff of smoke."

"Lieutenant, I just think it would be a very prudent choice on your part to protect the fighting capability of your men by insuring the safety of the men's families. I would think it would take an exceptional leader to show the initiative by protecting moral under difficult and unforeseeable circumstances. I would say that that would look very good in you background folder come time for advancement, should the subject ever come up."

"You're a bunch of cowards." McCollum sneered.

"No sir. We are not. But may I point out that trust goes two ways. I haven't been paid in two months. I haven't received the medical and other benefits promised to me by the Army when I enlisted. When we signed up we expected to defend our country. We also expected our country to protect our families while we did it."

"Well, it didn't work out that way, did it?"

"No sir, it didn't."

After a few seconds Ted continued. "We were hoping you would see it our way."

"Well, I don't."

"Lieutenant, there isn't a man here that isn't ready to do his duty, but you can't ask them to fight for a country that isn't willing to protect their families."

"Let me make myself perfectly clear, Murray. If any soldier in this platoon deserts his post for any reason, I will personally see to it that he is hunted down, court martialled, found guilty, and shot! And not necessarily in that order. Do I make myself clear, Murray?"

"Perfectly."

Chapter 30

When the President walked into the conference room, the members of his cabinet stood, as was the custom. As soon as he reached his chair he motioned all present to be seated. It was not a full cabinet present, only a select few. Donald Riplinger as head of the State Department was there. So was T. L. Rockwell, head of the U. S. Treasury. Laurence Piece, head of the Department of Defense and General Masters, head of the Joint Chief of Staff were also there. Doug RanDel of the FBI, Gerald Stillwell of the CIA and Ms. Crandall of the DEA were also present. Robby McCormick, personal secretary and close confidant was the only other person in the room besides the President.

The conference room was the same one in which John F. Kennedy had conferred with his cabinet about the various options in response to the Cuban missile crises. In this very room John Kennedy had pondered the possibilities as the world teetered toward Armageddon. President Clayborn was absolutely as sure the decisions before him were equally as grave.

As he glanced around the conference room it occurred to him how oversized the room seemed. He wished there was someone else there he could have called upon with sufficient cunning to help him wiggle out of this one, but there was no one else. On the other hand it might be useful to have the fewest possible witnesses, especially if it became necessary to deny the very existence of the meeting.

The president opened the folder he had before him and studied its contents without uttering a word. The cabinet members present sat waiting, a few beginning to glance around at the rest of the cabinet members as the pause became uncomfortably long. Finally, without lifting his eyes, the president began to speak. "In the past the United States has always had a workable strategy it could draw upon whenever it was threatened. This time it escapes me how we can avoid dire consequences.

"The Dar-Bash drug cartel, which has recently emerged out of a conglomerate of criminal organizations, reaching virtually around the glob..." President Clayborn raised his eyes long enough for Ms. Crandall to confirm what he was saying with the hint of a nod, "...has given us an ultimatum." Only Ms. Crandall and Robby McCormick did not seem surprised by the announcement. The rest glanced at each other wondering what kind of ultimatum the president might be referring to.

"If we agree to comply with their demands they will begin to pay for all police and military operations in the state of California. They will also subsidize several other mandatory governmental services necessary to run the State of California. They will make payments in a ratio of ninety percent stable currencies, primarily the Euro-dollar and ten percent gold. They will also guarantee the depositors of three regional banks, which are primarily located in California. By so doing they will allow those banks to reopen immediately. They claim they have sufficient monetary resources to back these promises." President Clayborn raised his eyes again and shifted them around without moving his head, observing their reaction. Satisfied he lowered his eyes again and continued to speak.

"In return they demand control of the police and the military."

With that General Masters interrupted in a burst. “Never! What they ask is absurd! There is no way I will ever stand by and watch any portion of the United States Military be turned over to a bunch of drug lords, foreign thugs and common criminals!”

“There is a complication attached that we haven’t yet mentioned.” Robby interjected in a soft, even voice.

The five star general glared at the president’s pet poodle with contempt, but waited to see what came next. Robby McCormick was incredibly political, even by D. C. standards. Although the general arrived at his lofty position due to a little politicking of his own, he detested the silky smoothness combined with an amoral agenda, which Robby had so completely mastered.

After a moment of cold silence the president continued. “It seems that this little bunch of drug lords, foreign thugs and common criminals has stockpiled more than just tens of billions of dollars in cash and gold. They claim to have at their disposal at least five nuclear weapons and an unspecified number of biological weapons. They claim that two atomic bombs are in position in large metropolitan areas somewhere in America even as we speak. They are ready to be detonated on their command. They claim that if we do not comply with their demands they will poison an untold number of civilian targets, and if we retaliate, they will incinerate two cities immediately, others to follow.

Speaking directly to General Masters without lifting his eyes, “Can you promise me, based on your military background and experience, without reservation, that this is a bluff? Or that we can move swiftly and with enough certainty to capture every single weapon of mass destruction they have, or might have, and be sure they can’t retaliate?” The President finally lifted his eyes and riveted his gaze on General Masters.

The general sat eyes equally as unyielding staring back at the President. The mussels in his jaw rippled. Finally he dropped his eyes to his folded hands. “We have ways of detecting the presence of nuclear devices...”

“Yes,” Robby interrupted, “If you know where to look and have enough time to do the looking. And as soon as they see we are looking for a bomb, they detonate both devices. They have hired renegade intelligence personal from Great Briton, Russia, even the United States, and those are the ones we know of. It would be impossible to move against them without them knowing it. And bacterial weapons are impossible to detect.”

The general spoke without lifting his eyes from his hands. “It is impossible for me to conceive that we are sitting here talking about surrendering the sovereignty of United States territory.”

“General Masters,” the president responded, “we are talking about nuclear blackmail. They have the ability to incinerate five U. S. Cities!”

The general slammed his fist on the table and swore. “When Kennedy was president he stared down the Soviets when they had over a hundred warheads! Ronald Reagan wouldn’t let

them have a crummy island in the Caribbean when they had 35,000 warheads! Do you mean to tell me that your going to knuckle under to five lousy bombs and give them the entire state of California? This is madness!”

“Oh General, get a grip.” Robby condescended. “Are you still living the Cold War? Get out of the past. In those days the U.S. had specific targets in specific enemy countries. We have no idea where they are most of the time, or even who they are. Are you suggesting we launch a nuclear strike against Mexico City because we think they might be channeling weapons through Mexico? Or should we launch on southern France because they might be vacationing on the Riviera?”

General Masters fired back. “First, I suggest we use the appropriate military response to match the target, not a simple response in kind. Unconventional Combat Units and surgical strikes could destroy targets in countries unable or unwilling to expel cartel activity. Second, it was not the nuclear weapons, but the threat of nuclear destruction that kept the Soviets at bay for almost fifty years. If we make it clear that they will be hunted down and destroyed if they attack U.S. soil, the concept of assured destruction is maintained.”

Robby smiled a mocking smile. “Are we to assume that your Unconventional Combat Units are now more effective than they were three years ago in Bosnia?”

“That was not our fault!” The general shot back. “If we had not been given faulty intelligence...”

Gerald Stillwell director of the CIA interrupted. “It is impossible to guarantee perfect intelligence. We did our job. There will always be a certain level of uncertainty about any clandestine operation, and it is impossible to have total knowledge about a target area. It is the responsibility of the planers of any military operation to anticipate the unexpected. To have the proper contingencies...”

“Anticipate the unexpected? We walked into an ambush. They knew we were coming. What kind of a contingency plan...”

“Gentleman, gentleman.” The president interrupted. “It doesn’t matter whose fault it is. What matters is that we can’t launch a preemptive strike that will, with total certainty, eliminate the threat. They have the upper hand.”

“But Mr. President,” General Masters continued, “we don’t have to launch a preemptive strike. All we have to do is stand firm in our resolve to retaliate. If they know, with certainty, that we will never give them what they want, and that the eventual result of their attack will be their own utter destruction, they have no motive to carry through with their attack. Even if we aren’t able to eliminate them with the first strike, then the second or the third or however many it takes until we kill them. The point is, regardless of the threat, deterrence requires resolve. Resolve to never capitulate. Once you capitulate you are domed as a nation! There will be one threat after another until there is no country left. Once you start paying blackmail, there is no end except your own.”

“Mr. Masters.” Ms. Crandall of DEA responded without using his proper title. “We have been hunting drug lords for decades without being able to apprehend them and bring them to justice. There are thousands of criminals in the U.S. we haven’t been able to affect an arrest against. There is no credible threat of utter destruction against these criminals, only against us.”

“Ms. Crandall.” General Masters shifted in his seat to address her. “You have been trying to effect an arrest. I’m not talking about an arrest. I’m talking about retaliation. We won’t be going to a judge to obtain a search warrant, and we won’t be reading them their rights. It will be a simple, lethal strike. They will never see it coming. And we will have the entire resources of the United States military to draw upon.”

Robby gave a condescending half smile. “Are you going to hunt them down and destroy them like you hunted down and destroyed Al Qaeda?”

“The ongoing war with Al Qaeda is different. Religious fanatics don’t care about consequences. The only way to deal with them is to simply fight them until you destroy them. Their demands are intolerable. They want us to cease to exist and convert. You simply have to continue to fight them indefinitely.”

“Fight them indefinitely?”

“Yes, fight them indefinitely!”

“And how long is indefinitely?”

“You fight until they give up or are dead.”

“What if they don’t give up, and what if they don’t die?”

“Then you keep on fighting.”

“Indefinitely?”

“Yes, indefinitely.”

“You expect America to fight and fight and fight indefinitely! We don’t want to fight indefinitely. We want to live in peace. You make your living fighting, we make our living by making peace. We choose peace.” Robby McCormick simply stated.

General Master’s eyes glared at the presidents’ advisor, but he said nothing.

The silence in the room dragged on as president Clayborn sat, hands folded before him with his eyes shifting from Robby’s face to the General’s. Finally he shifted in his chair and prepared to speak. “Gentleman and Ms. Crandall, I will consider my options but I have not decided on a course of action. I appreciate your council and I will consider all your points of view. I thank you all for your advice. Everything discussed here is strictly secret. I need not emphasize how imperative it is that everything discussed here remain in this room.”

With that they all stood as the president rose and retreated with his personal advisor close behind. The door closed and the meeting was over.

* * * * *

Robby sat down lightly on the couch so that he was facing the president. President Clayborn flopped into the leather chair behind his desk. The oval office's stately decor starkly contrasted their casualness. "I told you the general was going to be a problem, Doug."

President Clayborn absentmindedly picked up his pen and lightly tapped the end of it on the desktop as he struggled for an acceptable option. "What am I going to do, Robby? What am I going to do?"

"What you're not going to do is make mistakes." Robby counseled. "The general is a Neanderthal. He's so wrapped up in his antiquated military thinking that he has no clue as to what is really going on."

"What if he leaks something to the press? You were right; I should never have talked to General Masters. Now I can't possibly deal with the Dar-Bash. If I do, it will come back to haunt me for sure."

"It won't haunt you if you are careful not to leave any finger prints. First, I wouldn't worry about leaks to the press. There are so many wild rumors flying around that one more won't matter as long as we don't dignify it with any attention. Deny everything and move on. Second, turn the control of all military affairs over to the National Guard in each state. Say it is so you can deal more effectively with other matters that can't be delegated to the states. As you know, Governor Cruzan of California is defiantly in their camp. This way, you can easily deny culpability no matter what happens. By simply not resisting, it becomes a fate-accomplee."

"Turn the regular army over to the National Guard? Don't you think that sounds a bit peculiar? How do you get that to fly?"

"Easy. You're doing it to more strictly comply with the law. Posse Comatatus."

"If it was the law all along, how did we get away with ignoring it all these years?"

"Situations change. Quit fighting it. We can make it fly. Just let it work. I'll take care of everything."

"Including General Masters?"

"Especially General Masters. I'll have to deal with him first. I'm going to have to do some digging into his past until I find some dirt. Nothing like a little dirt in the closet to keep people quit. You leave everything up to me, Doug. I'll handle everything."

* * * * *

General Masters stormed into his office in the Pentagon like a tank battalion. He slammed the door behind him and marched to the window behind his desk. Fall was creeping in, and the sky was overcast. The general stood motionless staring out at the gloom as the battle in his mind raged on. Finally he turned, swearing as he did. He leaned across his desk and pressed the button on his speakerphone. "Get Skip in here."

Terry "Skip" Warkentin rose through the ranks with General Masters, and he had always been there for Masters whenever he had a tough mission. They had first met at Fort Benning when General Masters was Captain Larry Masters and they hit it right off. During Desert Storm they served together and Masters decided that if he had any choice, Skip would be in any unit he ever commanded. Masters' rise to the top was methodical but sure, and Skip followed him in most of his commands.

Skip entered the room with his perpetual smile, but it quickly disappeared as soon as he saw the general. "What's wrong?"

"Let's go for a drive."

Five minutes later General Masters was pulling his personal car out of the parking lot of the Pentagon and into the traffic, Skip seated beside him. General Masters didn't say a word as they traveled west on the Henry G. Shirley Memorial Highway. Before they had traveled far, he took an off ramp and wound through traffic until they were parked in front of a car rental. A few minutes later they were heading west again on the same highway in a rented car.

"Skip, the president is going to give away the State of California."

Skips' eyes narrowed as he sat staring at Masters, not believing his own ears. Skip had forced the best face on a lot of political bungling over the years in order to earn his four stars, but giving away the wealthiest state in the Union was not something he was prepared to even consider. "What!"

"The Dar-Bash cartel has offered to subsidize the running of the State of California in exchange for covert control, without federal interference."

"And the President is considering it?"

"I'm afraid so. They claim they have five nuclear devices and an uncertain number of biological weapons." Masters spoke with resignation. Then he swore clenching the wheel in his hands as if he was going to tear it from the steering column. "I am not going to let this happen! Skip, we will not allow any illegal orders. There will be no orders that do not come through the regular chain of command. I will not let any portion of the United States Armed forces be used to carve up the Union! It just will not happen as long as I'm alive."

“Somehow we need to get those boys paid. I can just see it now. If they get paid from the drug cartel, wrapped up in officialdom, do you think they are going to question where the money comes from? Do you blame them? Most of them haven’t received a regular check in three months. I don’t care if we have to sell an aircraft carrier to the Chinese to raise the money, I want those boys paid!”

General Masters paused for a moment hardly paying attention to the freeway he was sailing down. Finally he broke his meditation by swearing; then swearing again and again.

Skip sat silently next to his friend Larry Masters wondering if he had lost his mind, or if the president had lost his.

“Skip. If I suddenly commit suicide, rest assured, it’s a case of mistaken identity.” General Masters shifted his eyes from the road to his friend Skip and back to the road again with a faint smile on his face.

Skip half smiled himself, seeing again the sharp wit that made him follow Larry Masters, the soldier. “Sure. I understand.”

“Don’t worry about getting even. The mission is saving the Union. Whatever it takes, if you have to arrest the President of the United States, don’t you let any coward in those hollowed halls sell off a portion of the United States like a piece of devalued real estate to save his pitiful political career. I don’t care what it takes, the United States has to survive in one piece.”

“Arrest the President? A newly elected president?” Skip asked with incredulity.

General Masters let out a long sigh “Oh Dear Lord, save us from ourselves.”

Chapter 31

John stood as straight and tall as the Sierra Mountains behind him. The cold fall wind ruffled his hair and chilled his wet tear streaked cheeks. Before him lay two caskets, one for his father-in-law, the other for his son.

John knew that many fathers had buried a son. But he wondered how many had inadvertently contributed to their death. How many fathers had seen the torn body that had been their son. How many fathers were tortured, having smelled the blood of their son after it had spilled out on the cold, black asphalt of a dusty desert gas station. How many more times would he see the gun go up, pointed at Michael's face, and then a deafening explosion. Before John could move, Michael fell backwards, his face gone. John closed his eyes, but the vision in his mind only intensified, the smell of blood still in his nostrils.

His own pain and sense of loss was only eclipsed by the coldness he felt from Sarah. She never said, "You killed my son!" She didn't have to. Her stony silence said more than enough. In all their years together, through all their ups and downs John and Sarah had always been able to work things out in the morning. Two mornings had come and gone; all John could see was the empty shell of the woman he had married more than two decades before.

Then there was Allen. Last month Allen was a carefree collage student. Last week he was becoming a trained soldier. Two days ago he participated in the theft of tens of thousands of dollars in government military equipment. Today he had become hardening like steel, into a cold hardened killer. John gazed at Allen with love for his son, but he could see nothing but hate. Pure, all consuming hate. Allen will never be the same again, John concluded. Chances are he won't live through the end of the year. He'll find someone to vent his revenge on, and he'll die trying to exact vengeance.

I've lost two of my sons already, John lamented. One was murdered and the other destroyed. I wish they were both murdered. John looked back at the two caskets before him. He longed to trade places with the one his son was in. Forces beyond his control were taking his entire family from him.

His eyes filled again and everything blurred away in a flood of tears. His mind writhed in a seizure of pain. He felt the bitter torment of a tortured soul. He squeezed his eyes tight, but the pain burned hotter. He opened his eyes and looked again at Allen. There stood a young man he hardly recognized. As he stared, a resolve burned in his soul. Michael is dead and he died unbending in his desire to save another. He died for a reason. -- God has left me alive, and I still have a job to do. I must save my son from the gall of bitterness, and a living hell.

* * * * *

"I'm sure sorry about your son, Mr. Scott." Officer Clay Wilson spoke in his most consoling manor. "As I said before, I knew your in-laws; finer people I never met. I just want you to know... well, I'm just real sorry."

“Thank you Clay.”

John and the rest of Randy’s small army had met Clay as they approached Bishop. At the south end of town, just beyond the golf course, the Bishop Police Department had set up a checkpoint for refugees coming north on highway 395. Those with a local drivers license or a recognized reason for being in Bishop were allowed through the checkpoint on their own recognizance. Those who were looking for a place of refuge were escorted by armed men down Main Street and out the other side of town. The police force had deputized about a hundred locals to help provide security for the town. Clay was in charge of the south entrance into town on 395 and happened to be there when John Scott and the rest arrived.

Randy, Frank, John and Allen had all volunteered on the spot. That was part of their justification for being allowed to stay in Bishop, along with Sarah’s connection through her family. Clay was cautious at first. The huge cash of military weapons along with Randy, Allen and Frank’s willingness to join seemed to be unreasonably good fortune. Clay was old enough not to accept offers that appear to be too good to be true. But Clay knew Sarah’s parents well, and judged John to be an honest man.

Randy and Frank had pulled duty already, and were excused to come to the funeral. John and Allen had not had to report yet in deference to the deaths.

“John,” Clay continued, “I know this probably seems like terribly bad timing, but I need as many bodies on the check stations as I can get, and I need them around the clock. Could you come down tonight with Randy and have Allen come down with Frank tomorrow morning?”

John struggled to speak, but his emotions overpowered him. Tears pored out of his eyes.

Clay shifted his weight uncomfortably and brushed his hand against his mustache searching for something for his hands to do. “Never mind, John. I’m sorry I even asked. Just send Allen down in the morning. You come when you’re ready.”

John struggled to compose himself and put his hand on Clay’s shoulder to prevent him from backing away, embarrassed. “Clay.” John choked through his tears. “Clay...” he spoke again in barley a whisper. “Clay, I want to do guard duty with Allen. I want to keep an eye on my boy.” John barely managed to speak.

Clay glanced over at Allen then back at John. “Sure John, you and Allen come down in the morning. Get a good nights sleep, you’ll need all the rest you can get.”

“Thanks, Clay. Thanks”

* * * * *

As soon as John stopped the van in front of the house Allen shoved the back door of the Mini-van open and slammed it shut. He walked to the house like he intended to tear the front door off their hinges, and nearly did. He slammed that door too as hard as he could.

John slumped forward, exhausted, resting his forehead on the top of the steering wheel. Allen was furious he had to wait until tomorrow to stand guard and he was even more furious his father had to baby-sit him. Most of all he was just furious.

“John,” Sarah pleaded, “Couldn’t he just stay home just a few days?”

“Sarah, they need men now.”

“But Clay said to you, you don’t have to go down yet. I heard it myself. Why not just wait a few days?”

“Look, the reason you don’t want Allen to stand guard duty is because your worried he might be killed, right?”

“Yes I...”

“That’s precisely the reason Allen and I have to go. There is a huge stream of people heading up the highway, and if things get out of hand they will need all the people they can get out there. That includes us. I can’t ask somebody else to die protecting my family if I’m not willing to fight. They have mothers too, and I can’t ask them to die without our help. I just can’t. Besides, the more people on the checkpoints the less likely it is of having a fight at all-- perceptible strength prevents conflict.”

“John, I just buried my son! I’m not going to bury another.”

“Sarah, we have to do our part to defend Bishop. The main reason they let us through the check point was so we could help defend this town.”

“I didn’t see anybody else’s mother out there burying their son.”

“Don’t worry Sarah, there will be plenty more funerals soon enough. With any luck one will be mine.”

Instantly John knew his last quip was a mistake. Sarah swung around and grabbed at the door handle but was too flustered to open it.

“Sarah, I didn’t mean it that way.” John reached out to pull her closer.

“Don’t touch me!” Sarah batted away his hand.

“Sarah!”

“I don’t want to talk. Leave me alone.” Sarah finally managed to find the door latch and burst from the car. She made for the house and quickly disappeared inside.

John desperately watched from the driver’s seat as Sarah escaped. He almost went after

her, but barely managed to resist the desire knowing it would only make things worse. Sarah needed to be alone, and besides John wasn't sure he was capable of saying anything to smooth it over. Why hadn't he just kept his last thought to himself? John clenched his fists and buried his head in his arms. Tears came and flowed freely and over flowed. In rage John pounded the dash of the van with his right hand, swearing as he did. Finally he relaxed after his burst of carnal anger. "Why am I so stupid?" John asked of himself. "Why am I so stupid?" he asked one more time hoping for an answer.

Chapter 32

Cindy was lucky, although it might not seem like it at first brush. Her father never came for her as she had declared he would to her roommate Roxanne. Her father and mother ran into some bad luck, and weren't able to help her as she had expected. Someone rammed her mother's Chrysler minivan accidentally. It smashed the front grill and jammed the radiator and fan against the side of the motor. She tried to continue to drive it anyway, trailing a stream of cooling fluid and other mechanical fluids, but it shortly refused to go further with billows of white smoke. Her father's Lexus was carjacked at almost the same time several miles away. He was left in the street as three armed men drove off in his car. He tried to call Cindy several times, but he couldn't get through. She couldn't get to him either because her car had been stolen out of the apartment complex parking lot. But Cindy had connections. She was lucky.

Cindy was lucky because she knew Jack, and knew how to handle him. Jack had the keys to a cabin at Bear Lake and there was a sizable stash of food there. Jack's parents were in Florida and they had no need of the cabin at the moment, but it was of infinite value to Jack and Cindy. Cindy was lucky that she knew Jack and how to influence him. In the new world order, like the old world order, who you know and whether you have pull made all the difference in the world. Cindy didn't know how to deal with societal disaster, but she knew someone who did; at least for a while anyway. Cindy knew Jack and she was cute. For now, that was all she needed. For now she was lucky.

Mr. Laurence was not so lucky. The lawyer had never found himself in a situation where lots of talk and bluff, or stacks of money didn't get him anything he wanted. He had tried to make a stand in his house, but eventually he found that even a small private army of mercenaries has its limits. When men are asked to die they have to have a cause that they can believe in. Mr. Laurence could not give them that reason. The lawyer's money wasn't any good, his threats were hollow, and they weren't men of honor. Last of all, he wasn't cute.

How do you bribe someone who has no ethics with something they can simply take? What did Mr. Laurence really have? In the end all he had were empty threats and an empty house. The looters came and took what they wanted, and no one stopped them. At first the security fought back but eventually they joined the looters and carried off the most expensive valuables that could be looted. He tried to stop the mob himself, but somebody stabbed him in the stomach and left him dazed on the floor of the entryway. He crawled out of the way and watched as they carried off everything not broken or nailed down.

He could have been in the Caribbean watching the destruction of major U.S. cities as he smoked a cigar and sipped brandy, but he had not cultivated friendships with those that might have warned him to get out. In fact, he hadn't cultivated any friendships; he had won cases. Wining cases, big cases, was what he did. But in the end it was all for not. Most people hated Mr. Laurence so no one bothered to give him the hint to get out of town. There were those who could have, but why? What was he to them?

King Izzy wasn't very lucky either. In fact, his luck was down right bad. It boiled down to an old score. King Izzy had harassed his second in command unmercifully every chance he got. His first lieutenant thought Ishmael had it coming sooner or latter, and this was as

good a time as any. Izzy figured he was a lot better than the rest of his small army, so he always cut himself a very large share of whatever booty they came in possession of. Izzy thought things were going his way. Business was booming in the New World Order, and he was becoming one of the new rich. Izzy never saw it coming. He just turned to walk away and a bullet went through the back of his head. The lights went out before he hit the hard asphalt.

Luck is a funny thing. Usually there is a lot more to luck than luck.

Chapter 33

Privet Ted Murray was getting ready to go on patrol again and he hated it. His platoon had been working near Highland and Vernon in San Bernardino and he was becoming all too familiar with the area. Familiar with every window which concealed a sniper. Familiar with every corner that concealed a band of armed youths who fire then disappear. Familiar with the smell of burning buildings, smokeless gunpowder and death. Ted detested the smell of decomposing corpses. Each time he smelled a dead body, rather than getting used to it, the smell sickened him even more.

“Murray, Murray.” Corporal Jeremy Bradford came running up crouched over as he scurried for Ted’s cover. “Murray,” the corporal panted, “the lieutenant is dead. Sergeant Smith says for me to take you, Gunner, and Hernandez and evacuate all our families to Lone Pine before anybody figures out what’s going on.”

“The lieutenant is dead?” Ted questioned.

“Yea, come on.” the corporal commanded than turned and scurried off. Murray followed when the corporal had reached about fifty feet ahead of him. Three minutes later Ted was standing over the lieutenant’s dead body along with the sergeant and corporal. He had died of a single bullet wound in the back, straight through the heart. He was lying on his back exposing an exit wound in the center of his chest from a high velocity rifle bullet.

Ted looked up at the sergeant, “Was he friendly?” The term meant did he die from friendly fire with the unspoken understanding that it was not accidental.

“Hard to tell.” the sergeant replied in a voice that conveyed less doubt about the cause of death than the words alone were willing to admit. “No time to worry about that right now, sort that out later. I want you four to get moving and get wives and children out of the valley and up to Lone Pine. The corporal is making the list of dependents and where to meet them. Get a move on.”

Murray glanced down one more time at the dead man at his feet and then back at the sergeant. He had no love, not even respect for the officer, but he didn’t care to see him dead either. But the sergeant was right about one thing, no time to worry about it now.

The list was shorter than Murray thought it would be. Most men in the platoon were either single, or their family lived far from the L.A. basin. Few had much in common. One women serving in the platoon had her kids with their daddy, her ex-husband. Several didn’t want their families to leave. The list rounded out at nine service men or women wanting family to go. Phoning the dependents was less successful than would have been hoped for. The phone only worked occasionally, and when it did often no one answered. The list dwindled down to seven families. Finally they commenced the tiny evacuation.

Traveling the highways was a nightmare. Three hours into the exercise they gave up on the highways and stayed on the surface streets. The two humvees gave them the ability to drive around traffic unchallenged even when they were escorting several cars, but still the progress

was painfully slow.

Twelve hours after they started, somehow they managed to collect seven cars full of kids, housewives and one grandma. Ted feared somewhere they would be challenged at a checkpoint, but no one seemed to care enough to stop them.

Ted knew there was trouble the moment they crested the hill allowing him his first view of Kramer Junction. It was an hour after sunset and the intersection was clearly marked by billowing flames leaping into the air. They were more than five miles away, yet the spectacle of the burning buildings stood out against the night, like a lighthouse on a stormy coast. But this was no friendly beacon of warning. It was the ravages of willful, senseless destruction.

The cause of the destruction was still visible, but only barely. Like a trail of fire ants, the red taillights of dozens of vehicles were making their way north up highway 395 headed for Lone Pine and presumably destinations beyond.

Tim swore as he approached the intersection. The whole point of evacuation was to get their families out of harms way, but now he found himself following a wake of destruction. What should he do now?

Tim pulled the humvee to a stop about eight hundred meters short of the intersection. Two men were approaching carrying guns, but their body language was that of farmers, just saved from the Indians by the seventh cavalry.

“Man, if your fixing to tangle with that group, you better get a lot more fire power than what you’ve got.”

Corporal Bradford stepped out of the right door of the humvee and slung his rifle over his shoulder. “What happened?”

“What happened?” the first man echoed incredulously, “They shot the ____ out of us, that’s what happened!”

“Who were they?” Ted crossed in front of the vehicle and stood beside the corporal.

“I don’t know. Bunch a hooligans is what they were.” The man had a bit of a southern accent. Twenty-five years of living in California had softened it considerably. “What you got, seven cars of volunteers and two humvees with a couple of automatic rifles? You’re no match for two or three hundred heavily armed hoodlums!”

The corporal glanced over his shoulder at Ted with a sarcastic half smile then looked back at the man. “Actually there are only four of us. The seven cars are filled with women and children.”

The man took a fresh look at the cars and realized that even his modest estimate of fighting capability was grossly unjustified. Some of the woman and children were stepping out of the cars to see what was going on. The two soldiers from the tail humvee were telling them to

get back in the cars. “Gee.” was all he could manage as he shook his head.

“You said two or three hundred?” the corporal asked hoping it was an exaggeration.

“At least that many. Trucks, cars, vans, they even had a couple of 18 wheelers to carry off the loot in, not that they got much here.”

“You’re kidding!” Ted interjection not really believing he was.

“Two big rigs. One had Wall-Mart written on the side, can’t remember what the other one had. They weren’t here very long. It didn’t take them long to pick this place clean of what they wanted. Mostly they just wanted gas. Soon as they were done they torched the place as you can see.”

The man was right about their handiwork being evident. All three gas stations were ablaze. The gasoline was storied underground where it was safe from ignition. The fuel/air mixture in the buried tanks was too rich to allow detonation, but the looters had spilled gas around generously hoping to destroy everything. They were successful at that, but the underground gasoline remained unignited. It was the only thing not destroyed. Waist high flames leaked from the destroyed pumps, the blackened and crumpled buildings were still burning. Cars sat on their bellies, the melted tires and interiors belching flames and smoke. Even the restaurants and hamburger stands were ablaze.

After briefly surveying the damage corporal Bradford turned back to the man with the gun. “Well I guess we will have to abandon our first plan and head in another direction. You must have heard word from travelers. What’s it like in either Barstow or Bakersfield?”

“Neither direction someplace I’d like to go. Reports I’ve had are that both are filled with looting, shooting and constant fires. No, personally I was planning on heading to Bishop if anywhere at all. The police have set up some kind of a militia there and they seem to have things pretty much under control, so far.”

“Ah ha.” the second man agreed with a nod, the first sign of any opinion he had made. Three others carrying guns approached, obviously other victims of the assault.

“I was planning on sticking it out here, but I didn’t figure on defending against the Mongol hordes.” the first man continued. “I guess now I’m kind of stuck. They burned everything I own, including my truck.” He indicated toward a burned hulk, no longer recognizable as a Ford.

Ted suddenly interrupted sending thoughts rapid fire. “They just left here heading north, it couldn’t be more than fifteen minutes ago, right?”

“Yea.” the first man agreed.

Ted continued, “If their prime objective is to loot, their next target will be Ridgecrest. That’s about fifteen miles off the highway and it’s going to take them some time to do it, right?”

“Yea.” the man agreed again.

“If we move fast we may be able to slip past them and beat feet up the highway. Lone Pine and Independence are probably indefensible, but if Bishop has a defense force already organized we may be able to help them beat these guys if we can warn them in time.”

Corporal Bradford was facing Murray now, taking everything he said in and evaluating it. The rest made a larger audience listening intently. “You think we can get around them?” Bradford asked.

“Probably. It sure beats sitting here waiting for the grass to grow. If we can’t make it past them, we pull back and we are no worse off than we would have been otherwise.”

“Well lets do it!” the man with the gun seconded the motion.

“All right.” Agreed Bradford. After a quick discussion two decided to come, three decided to stay. Then those that were going the convoy jumped in the vehicles and the caravan was moving forward up the highway again, this time following three hundred killers.

Chapter 34

Randy scanned the two-lane road with his AN/PVS9 night vision goggles. Every now and then he spotted one or two cars, by now most traffic kept to the daylight hours. Right now he saw nothing.

Sean crawled up the craggy slope to where Randy was perched. "See anything?" Sean asked.

"Not a thing." Randy answered still scanning the road. Finally Randy flicked off the goggles and slowly let them down to his chest.

Randy knew where all his men were. With his infrared goggles he could see all of them from his perch at the crest of the rise. They stood out as fuzzy pale green ghosts against a darker green background. Hot car hoods, tail pipes, and tires shown a lighter shade of green as well. Trees down by the riverbank were dark, as was the water.

Mother earth and the United States Government had provided the location for the ambush, a few miles south of Big Pine. Randy had positioned his men to make the best use of it. Against a well-trained helicopter attack, Randy's little impromptu squad would be nothing at all, but if the likes of king Izzy came rolling up the road, Randy would be calling the shots this time.

The eastern side of the Sierra Mountains is sporadically dotted with volcanic debris. At this particular location recent eruptions, not more than a few thousand years old, had caused lava to flow down the mountainside extending an arm of the mountain well out into the valley floor. The magma oozed down the slope in thick plastic rolls until they exhausted themselves leaving rock embankments which eventually became sparsely covered with brush. The top of the embankment was not visible from the valley below.

In its meanderings the Owens River had snuggled up close to the western side of the valley leaving less than a hundred yards between the river and the lava flow at its closest approach. Just at this point a small dam had been constructed across the river during the early part of the twentieth century. Behind it was Tinemaha Reservoir.

Squeezed between the reservoir and the hillside, the two lane 395 highway had been built. As the highway approached from the south, the extent of the lava flow appeared as a black craggy line several hundred yards to the left. As the road traveled north, the road came closer until finally it cut through the embankment which the lava flowed against. The road then banked gently to the left. Beyond this point the hillside was tall and swept away from the road quickly. A farm nestled in the triangle created between the road and the hillside.

Randy had most of his twelve-man squad spread along the embankment in a line. Each man had built a small wall of rocks to crouch behind for protection. They could fire on the road with little fear of fire from below. Four vehicles had been placed sideways in the road as two half barricades separated by ten meters, causing traffic to either slow and weave through the barricades, or drive off the road into the desert and sage brush. Randy had placed two of his squad behind the barricade. The two were to challenge each car as it approached. If they acted

normal they were allowed to pass. If they acted aggressively, every position was to open fire.

Randy looked at his watch, 21:53. Seven minutes until it was time to switch positions. Every hour Randy had each man except Randy and his radioman Sean move through a rotation. He rotated them to keep them awake and to train each man at every position, thus making them all versatile and expendable. This was the third night of watch and most of Randy's men were already beginning to wonder how long they were going to have to do this.

It had only been just under two hours since the B squad had come on duty at 20:00. The A squad, led by Frank, had taken the day watch, and were now sound asleep. Randy would rather have had three squads, but he was lucky to manage twenty-four men from the chief of police.

“Is it really only ten o'clock?” Sean asked.

Randy glanced down at his watch to confirm what he already knew. “Six minutes to.” he spoke in mild correction, then lifted his goggles to his eyes flicking them on without thinking about it. In the distance he studied an approaching car that Sean watched, seeing only the bright white headlights. The car obediently slowed and then stopped at the barricade. The driver was briefly questioned then waved through. The car weaved around the two sets of cars and in a few seconds its taillights were disappearing behind Randy and Sean who didn't bother to watch.

“This is going to be a long night.” Sean complained as he shook his head looking at his feet.

“I never said it was going to fun, just necessary.” Randy stated without looking at Sean. “Better keep sharp or you may cause the death of one of my squad.” Randy lifted the goggles to his eyes again and examined the road looking for something that Sean could not see. “I'd hate to have that happen for two reasons. First, I can't afford to lose two men.”

Sean furrowed his brow as he wondered if Randy had lost count between one and two.

“Second,” Randy continued, “killing you for dereliction of duty would be a significant loss of an asset to the squad.”

Sean jerked his head over to look at Randy, who gave no indication he was joking. Sean stared at Randy wondering if he meant it or not. Randy lowered his goggles and looked at his watch.

Finally Randy turned toward Sean and announced, “Time to shift. Go down and verify everybody has moved to their new position.” Randy paused for a moment. “While you're out there, you might mention to them that I sometimes sneak up on sentries who fall asleep.” Randy pulled a knife out of his belt and examined it in the moonlight. “You might tell them I take a very dim view of gross dereliction of duty. You think you can do that?” Randy spoke with a hint of a smile.

Sean swallowed, “Sure, I can do that.” Sean started to pull away wondering if he was

working for a crazy man.

“Sean.” Randy spoke stopping him before he could crawl away to carry out the inspection. “Would you ever worry that someone would crawl up behind you, and knife you in the back because I fell asleep on guard duty?”

Sean reflected for a second. “No.”

“Do you believe the same of everybody else in the squad?”

Sean reflected longer. “Most of them, I think.”

“I won’t be the one that kills you, Sean.” Randy spoke matter of fact slipping his knife back in his sheath. “The one who gets you killed will be the one who fell asleep. Remember that. The life you save will be your own.”

Sean thought a moment longer then nodded his head. Without a further word Sean crawled away to check on the positions.

Randy already knew they were in their new positions, he had watched them through his goggles, but he could tell some were getting lax. Randy hoped his little talk with Sean would at least get them to stay alert. Randy shook his head as he examined his squad through his goggles. “I sure hope nothing happens tonight.” Randy spoke to himself. I need to figure some way to get these guys to stay awake all night.

* * * * *

Ted stopped the hummer at the beginning of the gentle left turn, which then banked into a right. They had just passed the Garlock fault ten miles back that gouged a valley in the surrounding foothills. If Ted’s memory served him well, after the gentle right turn ahead of them, the road split three ways. U.S. highway 395 went straight, China Lake Boulevard angled off to the right, and the old 395 went sharp to the left, then angled to the right and eventually entered Inyokern. Inyokern was almost visible ahead of them and Ridgecrest would be to their right behind the hill.

Ted stepped out of the drivers seat and corporal Bradford walked around to take his place driving the humvee. The man with the southern drawl from Kramer Junction stepped out as well. During the one hour drive from what was left of Kramer Junction, Ted and the corporal had learned his name was Leon. Ted walked back to the vanguard hummer and returned in a few minutes with Gunner. He slipped two flashlights out of the lead hummer and handed one to Leon. The plan was for Ted Murray and Gunner to neutralize any force that they may find at the intersection. Leon’s job was to relay the signal that it is clear back to the convoy using his flashlight. At that point the convoy was to dash ahead, collect all three of them and race up the road as fast as possible.

Ted crunched instinctively as soon as he turned to approach the target. Gunner followed likewise. They headed for the left side of the road so they could hide behind the road berm when they reached the right turn in the road. Leon followed but kept well behind. He followed them knowing sooner or later he may have to lose sight of the convoy to keep in contact with Ted and Gunner.

Ted realized after three hundred meters that it was going to be further to the intersection than he had thought. Better too far than too close he thought. Ted had driven the road several times, but at sixty miles per hour it took seconds what was turning out to be close to one and a half kilometers. Ted crouched now that he could see the intersection in the distance and those guarding it.

Ted could see they didn't need an extreme level of stealth. Their adversaries were spending considerably more effort downing their third 6-pack of beer than they were guarding the intersection. The three trucks had their lights on and their motors running. They could neither see more hear.

Ted wondered whether he should cut across the road and across the wash to the small hill to the east of the intersection. The high ground would be preferred, but getting there could be more dangerous than was justifiable. It could take half an hour to carefully work his way through the dark to a proper position without tripping in a hole or stepping on a rattlesnake. On the other hand if he continued along the left side of the road he could sneak up until he was less than thirty meters away from them, and still have good cover.

They continued around the bend crouching behind every bush or rock along the way until they reached the guardrail. It provided better protection and they scurried a little faster.

Suddenly Ted froze. As soon as he did Gunner stopped too. Off to his left, not more than ten meters away, someone was watching him. He was crouched in the bushes, moving slowly back and forth. Ted carefully flicked on his night vision scope. If he pointed his gun at whoever it was to look through the night scope, if they were armed, he would be dead before he could look through the eyepiece. If he shot without looking he could be shooting an unarmed person and blowing his cover before he had a chance to get into position. Dead either way.

Ted started lifting his rifle with a motion slower and smoother than a three-toed sloth waking on a cold morning. Finally his sight reached his eye and he scanned his target. He was so close everything was blurry and he couldn't find him. Back and forth he scanned, but he couldn't manage to find a warm body. At this distance Ted couldn't figure how he could miss. His left eye could still see the dark silhouette, but his right eye searched in vane for a light green blob.

Finally Ted realized he was aiming at a large piece of something caught in a tumbleweed. Suddenly the thing he was looking at transformed before his eyes from a person into a sack. Ted approached until he touched the empty bag of ready mix concrete with the barrel of his rifle, just to be sure.

Ted made his way back to the road and continued on. They stalked as quit as cats

through the knee high brush for about three hundred meters hiding behind the guardrail. They continued until they were less than one hundred meters away from the three trucks. Ted signaled Gunner to stay where he was about ten meters behind him. Ted looked through his night sight on his gun and surveyed the intersection. It looked more like a beach party than an outpost.

Ted then turned his rifle back toward Leon. Leon had lost sight of them and the convoy as well. Finally he lost his nerve and crouched by the side of the road hoping he was doing the right thing. Leon was straining to see them without being seen but without success. He was obviously nervous.

Ted turned his rifle back toward the three trucks and pulled his rifle butt up tight to his cheek. He shifted his gaze from the night vision sight of his M-16 to glance at Gunner. Gunner was settling into his firing position and getting ready for Ted to fire his first shot as a signal for him to do the same. Ted shifted his line of sight back to his pray.

Ted had chosen the asphalt gutter below the guardrail to rest his gun on. He snuggled up behind it and wiggled into the sand to make the most stable position he could manage. Ted watched for a moment then finally chose one of the men who happened to be the furthest away, leaning against a truck. Ted was targeting the ones on the left while Gunner was targeting the ones on the right.

Ted took aim on the center of his head. He took three breaths and let out his third and held it. The strap around his left arm, and the position of his body held the gun so that virtually no effort was necessary to point the gun at the beer drinker. He was waving his arms in grand motions and it looked like he was talking, probably bragging. Ted could hear laughter and talking, but couldn't discern the meaning. He lightly rested his right index finger on the trigger and began to press. The trigger moved smoothly. A shot rang out and the rifle balked.

As soon as Ted recovered from the recoil he quickly started to search for a second target. Before he could, a second round fired from Gunner's rifle made Ted flinch. He quickly found a second target. Two men were climbing into one of the trucks. He fired for the windshield one round after another. The glass crazed after the first round, but he could still see motion in the cab until he had fired more than half a dozen rounds. The truck remained motionless. Ted quickly searched for a third target. A truck was leaving which Gunner was firing at repeatedly, apparently without effect. Ted took aim and squeezed off several rounds, but the motion of the truck made it difficult to hit. The truck lost two tires but it wobbled away down China Lake Boulevard towards Ridgecrest anyway.

Ted climbed to his feet, pulled the flashlight from his pocket and flashed, dash dash dot, dash dash dash, Morse code for "GO" back towards Leon, making sure the light was shielded. Leon had been coached that this would be the signal, but he was basically only looking for a red flashlight in the dark. As soon as he received the signal he jumped to his feet and ran for the convoy. As soon as he saw them he flashed his light frantically at the convoy.

Ted returned his light to his pocket and started toward the two remaining trucks. He worked to the left while Gunner worked his way around to the right. They walked slowly and deliberately watching for any movement, pointing their guns at the two trucks. The trucks

looked eerie, both running, both with their lights on, neither going anywhere. Nothing moved.

Ted and Gunner made it to the two trucks when the lead hummer in the convoy caught up to them. Five bodies were found. Each was dead.

Gunner slipped into the back seat on the right side of the hummer while Ted chose the front. Both had their gun pointed out of the window. Before the door was closed, the hummer raced forward. The rest of the convoy followed suit.

Six miles up the road they came to another intersection. This was the overpass of Inyokern Boulevard with Inyokern just off to the left. No one guarded the intersection and they sailed under the concrete bridge and off into the night. A wave of sickness broke over Ted. Not because of the men he had killed in combat, but because he was the mouse that had just bit the lion's tail. The next attack would be by the lion and Ted was not sure the mouse could find a place to hide in time.

Things were not going for Dunagon the way he figured it. The looting of Kramer Junction was no problem, but with better than twenty to one odds as well as surprise on his side, it was a sure thing to not be a fair fight, but the pickens were slim. Dunagon was counting on much bigger game to feed his horde of ex-cons and would be road warriors. Ridgecrest was supposed to be the first, and main course in that meal.

First stop in Ridgecrest was Walmart, Staples and Albertson's, but they didn't have much left after several days of all demand and no supply. Once that shopping center's looting was well under way, Dunagon led the bulk of his band down China Lake Boulevard looking for something else to steal. He found two more major shopping centers, the second one an off pink, referred to by the locals as "The Pepto-bis Mall." Nowhere did he find the big haul he was hoping for. Even though the stores had not been looted, there just wasn't much left worth stealing.

Then Dunagon got word that his six-man guard left at the intersection of China Lake Boulevard and Highway 395 had been ambushed. They were all killed except one who barely got away, but bled to death before Dunagon got the chance to question him. Now he found himself the target of persistent sniper fire trapped inside Mervyn's.

Roy Dunagon was a mountain of a man. Blue-collar parents of European extraction gave him a shot at middle class America, but he turned it down. Dunagon made a life of crime his career path at an early age, and never deviated from that choice. He was forty now, and old man compared to most in his gang, but his age and size along with his natural qualities as a leader made him the undisputed leader. Demographics handicapped Dunagon since the Southern California prison population had become predominantly Asian, Black and of course Hispanic. Still there were plenty of pure white criminals to recruit and he had an advantage over all of these other gangs, black, brown or white. Dunagon was smarter than all of them put together. He was sure of it.

So why were things getting all mucked up? Dunagon wasn't sure, so he got mad.

"What are you guys looking at? Do I have to do everything around here? Break open those cash registers and leave the rest. Stuff what we have in the trucks and vans and let's clear out!"

"Bill you run down the rest of the mall and get everybody out of here. We're leaving now! Move it!"

Bill turned and ran out of the store.

Dunagon made his way to the north entrance of the store. A small Rider moving truck was outside only slightly full of merchandise. He knew enough to leave the cheap stuff. He was concentrating mostly on jewelry and the like. Anything that was small, light, and expensive. The problem was there wasn't much here to steal. He had sent scores of vehicles in every direction looking to steal anything from anybody, then burn indiscriminately. So far it had yielded less than he expected. A couple of small jewelry stores were sweet pickens, but not

much else was as juicy. Not only that, there was more fighting going on than he expected. Why wasn't it easier than this?

He dashed out of the door and headed for the Big 5 store across a small access ally. Just as he ran through the front door a bullet shattered through the window just to the right of his head. Someone was shooting at him from across the parking lot, probably across the street as well. Dunagon swore as he ducked in the building.

“See that Dodge dealership over there.” he yelled as he pointed across the street. “Level it!”

* * * * *

Jamie crouched on the top of the Dodge/Chrysler dealership across the street from the Pepto-bis Mall. He could clearly see the army of looters trying to take what they could from Mervyn's and the rest of the mall. He lined his sight on the doorway of Big 5 because he saw someone run in there a moment before. Another guy had run down the front of the mall, but he had disappeared behind some other buildings in front of it and he was concentrating on the Big 5 instead.

The dear rifle was familiar in his hands and he had no trouble lining his eye behind the high power scope. He concentrated on the door of the Big 5 but he couldn't see anybody inside. He was at least 200 yards from the store, too far for a good shot, but there was always luck. Not only that, enough bee stings and these destroyers of Ridgecrest just might leave.

Just then a man ran into his field of view from the direction of Mervyn's. Jamie squeezed off a round but the bullet hit to the left of his intended target. Jamie had judged the distance correctly, but it was just too hard to hit a moving target at this distance. The fact is he was lucky to have come as close as he did. He had never shot at a dear from more than 50 yards, in order to get a good clean kill. He never wanted to wound a dear and then have to chase it over three counties. Besides, people were shooting at him. When Jamie went dear hunting, the dears never shoot back.

Jamie was not a trained killer. He was much more familiar with balancing the books and keeping the cash flow up month after month. Jamie was good with people; he knew how to close a deal with a fat profit. He had to be, he was part owner of a car dealership.

Sam was the other owner, he was down at the other end of the building with his semi-automatic – not quite legal, but that was half the fun. He was much more the gun nut than Jamie. Sam was also pretty deadly in a game of poker. He always laughed, drank lots of beer, and he usually walked away with more money than he brought. That was just the kind of guy he was.

Of course he was not laughing or drinking now. He wasn't bluffing either. For both Sam and Jamie this was a very deadly game and they planed on winning. If they lost, they lost everything. The dealership was worth killing for. They never thought of it that way before, but

it was clear to them now. In a civil disturbance, and this was clearly one of those, insurance covered nothing. Three other employees were scattered around the properties with guns, but for them is loyalty, not the loss of a life's work.

Just then Jamie heard a thump in the distance. A few seconds later an explosion erupted in the cars in front of him. The blast sprayed rocks and debris in every direction. The sound was defining. Then there was another thud. This time Jamie tried to duck for cover, but there isn't much cover on a flat roof building. This time the explosion tore a gaping hole in the middle of the building. The 82 mm mortar thumped again. Jamie started to crawl for the back of the building. The blast blew him over again. The ringing in his ears made it impossible to hear anything. With the next blast he passed out.

* * * * *

Jamie blinked his eyes and wondered where he was. He hurt all over. There was blood on his face and his shirt. Dust was everywhere. He couldn't hear anything except a persistent ringing. Jamie pulled himself up and rolled back until he was resting against the edge of an air duct. The end of the dealership where he was sitting was still standing, but the majority of the building was destroyed. The dealership was gone. Everything he was hoping to protect was destroyed.

Jamie wondered how long he had been lying there. He figured it must have been at least a couple of hours. The sun was setting now. Everything was still. Jamie crawled to the edge of the building and he could see that the looters were gone. A couple of people were wandering about looking at the damage, or helping injured people. Jamie slumped down turning around as he did. He looked at the sun that was setting over the mountains in the distance. The sunset was beautiful. The clouds were pink and orange in every direction and they illuminated the earth with their radiance. "I guess its over." he said to himself. "I guess there is nothing left." Jamie watched the sunset for a long time as the colors turned to red then purple, and finally gray. He closed his eyes and slid to off to sleep.

Chapter 36

Clive Nelson was woken from a light sleep by the sound of honking car horns. It wasn't one horn but a whole herd of them. He jumped from the cot and grabbed for his shotgun in the half-light of the Lone Pine general store. A kerosene lamp burned dimly in the corner. Clive took to sleeping in the store ever since the disaster started several days before. He hadn't been robbed yet, but that wasn't for lack of trying.

Twice the first night and once the next he had heard someone breaking in the back door. Each time he had made sure he made enough noise coming through the store that they were gone by the time he opened the door. He would shoot if he had to, but hopped he wouldn't.

Now he was scrambling to figure out what was happening in the street in front of the store. He fumbled with the lock, holding the shotgun in his left hand as he worked the keys with his right. Finally he managed to get the door open. He had already seen through the glass storefront a convoy of cars in the middle of highway 395. When he got outside he could clearly see several cars led by a humvee in the front and another one following in the rear. The convoy stopped just as he came out.

The street was beginning to fill with both the occupants of the cars and the residents of Lone Pine. Clive looked north up the street at a soldier who was walking back towards him. The soldier was waving for people to back up like he was collecting baby ducks. Another soldier was doing the same on the opposite side of the line of cars. When Clive looked to his left he saw two other soldiers doing the same working forwards towards the middle. In a minute there was a collection of a hundred people or more in the middle of the street with more people coming to see what was happening.

"I'd like to have your attention please." The soldier's voice was a command with an air of urgency in it. "I need your attention."

Clive noticed something familiar about the soldier speaking. Clive's eyes narrowed until it dawned on him he was looking at the Murray boy. He was older now, but there was no doubt about it being the Murray kid. Couldn't remember his first name, but he was sure he was looking at Bob Murray's boy. It was quieting now and Private Murray was about to speak again.

"There is a large mob of looters coming this way and we need to evacuate everybody and build a defensive position here to slow down their advance. There is a mob of at least three hundred, possibly four or five hundred heavily armed men coming this way and we need to evacuate immediately."

"Who says we have to evacuate?" someone said from the back of the crowd. "Let's fight them here."

"We are going to fight them, but we need to evacuate everybody other than those actually fighting. We can't hold this position..."

"Who says we can't. We can't hold this position, my eye! This is my store and I'm not

leaving.”

“Yea!” Someone else yelled.

“You don’t understand. There at least three hundred...” Murray started to explain.

“No Ted, you don’t understand.” someone else chimed in. “This is our town and we’re not leaving.” obviously Ted had been recognized by more than Clive.

“Mr. Withers, they are heavily armed. Stopping them is going to require... is going to require...” Ted’s voice was getting lost in the din.

“Hold it! Hold it.” Corporal Bradford held up his hands and shouted his words to quiet the crowd. The small mob settled down.

As it quieted someone yelled “I’m standing and fighting. You can’t make me leave.”

“Yeah!”

“Count me in.”

“Fine, Fine.” The corporal agreed. “Fine. We need you to fight.”

“So what’s all this about evacuation?” Someone asked.

“Well, we need you to fight, but the battle is not going to end here, and it’s not going to be won here. Kramer Junction has been obliterated. There is nothing left of it but burned out buildings and ashes. Ridgecrest is under attack as we speak. Several hundred hardened criminals escaped from prison are overwhelming Ridgecrest as we speak. All they know how to do is rape, and murder, and steal, and they are good at it. There are scores of trucks of them armed with fully automatic weapons. Before we’re through, most of this town is going to be burned to the ground. Now I’d like a show of hands. How many of you want to have your children shot down in the street, and their wives and daughters raped? Anybody here want to watch their children slaughtered?”

The crowd grew deathly silent. Corporal Bradford surveyed the crowd letting silence tell it all. Once he was sure he had made his point he continued. “I think you see the point. What we need is to get all the older people, children, and women not capable of fighting out of here. We need about a dozen volunteers to help them. Those who want to stay and fight are welcome to stay, but we need to position our selves effectively and have a way to pull back after the first attack. It’s going to be a long battle before we’re through. Anybody that just wants out is invited to escort the evacuation.

“Before we do anything we need to wake up everybody in town and get everybody going. Lone Pine isn’t that big of a place. Spread out so that every street is covered. Wake up everybody and tell them a convoy is leaving in forty minutes.”

Clive looked at his watch. It was fifteen minutes past three. He had been asleep just under five hours.

“What about the houses that are way out of town. It will take more than thirty minutes to contact them, get ready, and get back here.”

Bradford glanced at privet Murray. Before he could say anything the corporal continued. “If it takes more than ten minutes to get to them, they’re probably far enough out of the way that they are somewhat safe, and even if not, there is nothing we can do about it anyway.” Bradford thought for a minute. “Lets make that in thirty minutes were leaving.”

Forty five minutes later private Ted Murray glanced over his shoulder as the long caravan of red taillights was filing out of Lone Pine. Dawn was just breaking and the light was still very dim. He turned to Clive who just ran up to him, “How is the barricade coming?” You better come at get a look at it yourself.

On the south end of town Tim surveyed the construction with a bit of chagrin. It was built of old cars and other vehicles, stretching the width of the street from a fence up against a miniature airport hanger on the left side of the street to a gas station on the right. So far it was two cars deep with each car parked perpendicular to the direction of traffic. The problem was it looked like a paper wall to private Murray. A tracked vehicle could roll over it like a bunch of empty beer cans. Ted would have much preferred concrete filled with rebar. Not only that, it wouldn’t take them long to realize they could simply go around it. To the left was the airport and the right was open fields. But first they had to figure that out in the dark while they were being shot at. The only thing privet Murray had going for him was confusion. The fog of war would have to be his ally. But he was loosing dark and he was not yet ready.

* * * * *

As it turned out Ted didn’t have to worry about an attack with the coming of dawn. Looting is not an exact science, and a rabble of criminals does not move with military precision. As it turned out he had the whole day to get ready, but past noon he was basically polishing the cannon ball. He had checked and double-checked, but no matter how he arranged it, he was greatly out gunned and he knew it.

The barricade was still basically a collection of tightly packed vehicles and wood boards to hide behind. Men were stationed to the barricade and two sniper positions were mounted on either side of the barricade on buildings. The rest of the men were stationed on top of buildings through out the town. That was it. Ted and his men were basically a speed bump and not much more. Last count had a sum total of 175 men, give or take a few. He was the only one with a weapon capable of fully automatic fire, and even he didn’t plan to use it that way. He never planed to get that close. Many had only shotguns or pistols, useless in the event of the firefight he was expecting. They would never get close enough to be effective with such weapons with the massive firepower they would be up against.

The sun set and he was still trying to go over the plan in his mind. But he was so tired he could hardly think straight. He had caught a fitful cat nap in mid afternoon, and had the first good meal in so long he wasn't sure when the last one was.

Ted went over to a truck on the side of the road and lay down in the bed. His body was so tired and sore he was beginning to stumble. He told Clive to wake him if anything happened. In a couple of minutes he was asleep, but he didn't dream. Forty minutes later Clive was shaking him awake.

"Ted wake up. I think they're here."

Ted sprang out of the bed of the truck like he was fully rested. Instantly he was trying to get his bearings and figure out where he was. It all came back in a couple of seconds. The rest had done wonders for him, and where sleep left off adrenaline filled in. Ted saw a line of vehicle headlights in the distance as they crested the rise. They were about a mile south from where Ted stood. "Clive, get into your position." Much louder he shouted, "Everybody, grab your guns. Kill the lights. Here they come!" Several men ran to the barricade and knelt behind the hoods and trunks of the cars. Several had built walls of improvised sandbags to stop incoming rounds for them to kneel behind. A few others ran back toward town to take up position in buildings facing the highway and spread the word.

Ted glanced at the men stationed on top of the hanger and the gas station. He pulled his radio from his belt and pressed the switch. "Station one, are you ready?" He waited for maybe two seconds listening for a response. "Station one, are you ready?"

"Ready LP Leader. We see them coming."

"Station two, are you ready?"

"Roger that LP Leader. We are ready for a turkey shoot"

Ted wished it would be that easy.

"Don't anybody shoot until I give the order. Is that understood?"

"Roger that LP Leader."

"OK LP leader."

Just then someone turned out a lantern in the gas station. A couple of flashlights flicked off as well.

"10-4 over." Ted acknowledged.

Ted looked at his watch. At the speed they were coming in a couple of minutes the convoy would be here, and then the firefight would begin. Ted could hear the men getting into their positions behind the barricade. He flipped his night vision eyepiece, which was mounted to

his helmet in front of his eye and surveyed the meager defense. He wondered how long it would be before they were all dead. No time to think about that right now.

Ted started to trot back toward the center of town, which was completely dark. Ted was not used to giving orders. Privets don't give orders. Privets followed orders. Ted would have to get used to it, and in a hurry. Everything now depended on him thinking clearly and leading. Everything.

Ted continued up the road back fifty yards until he came to a motel on the East side of the road. He ran around in back of the office and scrambled up a ladder placed against the roof, then climbed up to the ridge. Clive was waiting for him with his 30-06 resting on the ridge of the roof pointing south, right in line with the center of the highway. The lead vehicle of the convoy had come to a stop about a quarter of a mile from the barricade and the rest of the vehicles were coming to a stop as well.

Ted flipped his helmet mounted night vision eyepiece up out of the way, then he took out his M-16 with a night vision scope mounted on top. The magnification of the scope was much greater than the eyepiece on his helmet. He could see the vehicles lights in the distance and there were some figures moving around, but he couldn't see what they were doing. Then he knew. It was really a guess, and yet he knew. They were setting up a motor.

Immediately he pulled out his radio and spoke clearly into it. "Station One, Station two, Barricade, kill their lights. Repeat; shoot at the lights of their vehicles and anything near them that moves. Start shooting now. Stations One, Two and Barricade, shoot at their lights starting now."

Just then, guns starting popping, and then there was a loud ban from Clive's deer rifle less than five feet to his right. Ted stuffed his radio back into his pocket and grabbed his own rifle. He got his eye up to the eyepiece just as Clive's rifle fired again and made him flinch. By the time he was focused on the scene through his rifle's scope, he could see men were running and jumping back into the vehicles. The lights were disappearing on the vehicles, but Ted could not tell if they were being hit or if they were being turned off. Ted took careful aim on the lead vehicle and fired three rounds at ghostly green figures running from the fire. At this distance it was more fire for effect than marksmanship. But he could see them dropping none the less. He couldn't tell if it was his shots or someone else's. To him it was all the same.

Ted stopped to ascertain the damage. He could see they were doing something, but he couldn't tell what. They had a vehicle off to the side of the road, but just then the image in his night vision scope light up with bright light green. The sound came less than a second later. They had a 50-caliber machinegun and it was spraying their defenses. Bullets ripped through the cars like so much cardboard. Ted could hear the thumping of the bullets as they tore through whatever it hit.

"Clive, shoot for that flash."

Ted took careful aim then started firing one round after another. After a moment the 50 fell silent. A moment later it began firing again Ted continued firing round after round taking

careful aim each time. A moment later, it fell silent again. Then there was a big flash next to the 50 as a Rocket Propelled Grenade was fired in their direction. It landed short in a flash. And then there was dark again. The small arms continued but it became unclear what he was shooting at except the vehicles and the flashes of small arms.

“Clive stop shooting.” Ted ordered. Ted was looking for a flanking maneuver, but there was too much in the way to see what they might be doing.

Ted pulled out his radio. “Station One. This is LP Leader. Do you read me? Over.” Ted waited a couple of seconds impatiently. “Station One. This is LP Leader. Do you read me? Over.”

“LP Leader, this is Station One. Over.”

“Station One. Expect an assault on your left. Over.”

There was a silence from the radio for a few seconds. “Repeat LP Leader.”

“Station One. You need to expect an assault on your left. Over.”

Again there was a silence. “I do not understand LP leader. Do you want us to attack?”

“No! Stay put. But... expect... to be... attacked. That goes for you too Station Two. Expect an attack from your side. Do... you... copy?”

“Roger that LP leader.” Answered Station Two.

“We copy LP leader.” Finally answered Station One.

Ted went back to surveying the scene, but a line of trees on both sides of the road blocked his vision. The trees kept the enemy convoy contained on the road, but it also made it impossible for Ted to see what they might be doing on foot.

Ted thought about his situation and decided that staying still was WWI thinking, and he better maneuver or lose his men.

“Barricade, this is LP leader. Over.”

“Barricade, this is LP leader. Over.”

“LP Leader, this is Barricade. Over.”

“Barricade, send a runner to my position immediately. Over.”

“You got it. Over.”

Ted waited an eternity that was no more than 70 seconds. As expected the sound of

rustling came from below and behind in the bushes near the ladder.

“Ted. It’s Bill. Dan sent me over.”

“Come on up.” Ted commanded. In a few seconds Bill scrambled to the roof and sat down next to Ted breathing hard. “Bill, they’re not rushing the barricade which means they’re either trying to figuring out what to do next or they have already figured it out and their about to do it. Either way I want to move before they hit us first. Have Dan move all the men behind the barricade to the right side of the road and work your way down behind the trees until you make contact with the convoy and hit them, then fall back. Keep them off balance. Sneak up, shoot, than fall back. You got it.”

“Sure. Head up behind the trees on the right side of the road, then shoot and scoot.”

“You got it Bill. Now move it.”

Bill ran back to the barricade and told Dan what Ted had instructed him to do. Dan was glad to get out from behind the barricade. It was a death trap. He only had nine men left of the thirty or so that he started out with. Dan knew that they would all be dead if they stayed behind the barricade for five more minutes.

“OK everybody that can walk, follow me.” Dan ordered. In less than a minute Dan had explained what to do and they were on their way down the west side of the road behind the cover of the trees and brush. Bill was next to Dan in the lead. Everybody was breathing hard and crouched over as they carried their rifles in both hands, ready to stop and shoot at any second.

Bill struggled over the uneven ground and strained to hear. After a couple of hundred yards they could hear the sound of men yelling over the other commotion. The pace slowed as they neared the convoy. Bill’s heart raced and his breath was fast. In the dark he could hardly see at all. Mostly he heard. Bill walked into Dan’s outstretched arm and someone stumbled into his back. The muzzle of a dear rifle whacked the back of his head. Someone muttered behind him “Sorry.” As they worked their way closer, quieter now, they could see through he trees men arguing and yelling. Suddenly the shooting became fierce as far more guns opened up on the now deserted barricade. Much of the fire was automatic and came in bursts.

Dan whispered, “Everybody spread out. When I count to three, we all fire three rounds and then fall back. Every hundred feet or so, we drop, reload, fire three rounds, and fall back again. Make sure you don’t shoot one of us. OK, spread out.”

Bill moved to the right away from the road about two hundred feet and took his position. From where he knelt he could easily see the men moving around on the far side of the trees. He couldn’t hear Dan count to three, but Bill’s first shot followed right after someone else’s first shot fired. Bill fired again, and again, and again, and again. Each time he fired he grabbed the bolt, threw it back and slammed it shut again.

Before he knew it he had fired all five rounds that his .308 held in its magazine. He had forgot all about the three rounds command. Bill grabbed for his pocket and pulled out a hand

full of rounds. A few fell to the dirt as he tried to jam them into his gun. He struggled to find them in the dark, but only found one. He pulled out one more from his pocket and stuffed it in to make five rounds.

Bill could hear yelling and shooting. He looked up to see confusion with men appearing to run in every direction. Bill took aim on one that he assumed was a bad guy. He fired and missed the running figure. He actioned his bolt and fired again, and missed again. Just then three bullets hit near him.

Bill spun and ran west away from the road. Bullets sailed past him on both sides as he ran as fast as he could. A moment later he tripped on a ditch and fell head long on his face. The pain was muted by the panic of the moment, but he hurt none the less. Bill scrambled for his gun and brought himself back around facing the gunshots. He tried to check his muzzle to be sure he hadn't filled it with dirt, but there was no way to tell. It was far to dark, and he couldn't tell one way or the other with his dirty hand. He would just have to be lucky.

Bill snuggled into the ditch and carefully picked a target. He pulled the trigger and the bullet went wild. He grabbed the bolt, slammed it back, and forward again. This time he would take more care. His breathing was fast and it was impossible to control it. He had to if he was going to hit anything. Bill grabbed a breath and held it, but before he squeezed off a shot he started gasping again. He held his breath again and this time he squeezed off a nice one. The bolt went back and forth again and he selected another target. He held his breath, squeezed the trigger and the rifle recoiled again.

They didn't seem to know he was there because he was too far away, but he could easily pick out targets. That was easy, there were men running around everywhere. He held his breath, squeezed the trigger and it went click. "Shoot, I forgot to reload." he muttered.

Bill pulled out four rounds and reloaded. It was his last four cartridges. Where had they all gone? Bill had forty rounds of ammunition when the shooting began, all his pockets would hold. Had he lost that many? No, he had shot that many, or close to it. No matter now, he had to move back north toward town and link up with the rest of his friends.

Bill picked his way along slowly in the dark. He kept his distance from the road, but he could still see that a lot of action was going on over there. Finally Bill sat down and carefully picked three targets. Each time he squeezed off the round. Each time he took down a man. With one round in the chamber and none in the magazine he sat back and wondered, what do I do now? What do I do now?

* * * * *

Roy Dunagan was furious. He figured that after Ridgecrest turned out to be such a bust, that at least he could take his men to Lone Pine for a little rest and relaxation. Lone Pine was so small it had to be easy.

Ridgecrest was a whole lot more trouble than it was worth, and now he couldn't even get his men into Lone Pine due to an armed barricade. There was no other direction to go. Left and right there were impassible mountains and behind him he had already looted with the exception of Death Valley. But a national treasure of beauty was not the kind of treasure he was looking for.

The problem with Dunagan was that he never realized that he was a parasite. He never thought past what he could take. It never occurred to him that he depended on the host being healthy. Without a healthy host to live off of, he was doomed. The truth is, as much as he hated law and order, he depended on it as more than most. The government was failing and with it went all the protections he had come to depend on.

Dunagan had the right to remain silent, but he no longer had the right to an attorney. He no longer had the right to a trial of his peers, and he no longer had the right to be assumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. The police, the government neither of them were there to protect him. He didn't even have the right to a prison cell and three squares a day. The truth is Roy Dunagan wasn't near as smart as he thought he was. If he were smart he would have figured a way to adapt to the new order. Or to be more correct the new disorder. But instead of smart he was mad, but anger is a poor counselor.

* * * * *

Tim could see that they were coming through, and there was nothing he could do about it. A huge truck had passed the parked convoy and was barreling toward the barricade picking up speed as he went. The rest of the convoy was beginning to follow too.

The truck hit the barricade at about fifty miles an hour and sent the parked cars flying out of the way. The impact was amazing to see. Suddenly here was a hole right through the barricade like it was made by little children to stop a charging bull. The truck was slowed, but kept right on moving in fact it had to slow a bit to make the turn into town right next to the Hotel that Tim was on top of. Tim had only about a dozen men in the south end of town with rifles to stop a gather wave of vehicles. Tim fired, as did Clive until they were both out of ammunition. At last all they could do was watch as the vehicles flew past them heading north, toward Independence and Bishop.

Chapter 37

Tim surveyed the situation as the last vehicle pulled out of sight on the north end of town. He had made his way down off the roof, Clive right behind him. As he made his way up the street, Dan came up beside him.

“What do we do now?” Dan asked.

Tim stopped and gave Dan a sideward glance. “Well, first we gather the men and assess what resources we have. Then we follow them and carry on a harassing maneuver.” Tim gestured north toward Bishop with his rifle. Tim turned his head looking at Dan who didn’t say a word. “We chase them up the road and kill everybody we can, without getting killed ourselves.”

“Yea I got you the first time. I was just wondering if there were any more details than that.”

“No, not yet anyway. Get everybody together in front of the PJ’s.” Tim turned and stared walking briskly toward the center of town, Clive just off his right shoulder. As he did, he pulled his radio from his pocket and changed the channel to match that of Corporal Bradford. Dan headed back to pick up as many stragglers from the Barricade that he could.

Two minutes later most everybody was gathered in the street in front of PJ’s restaurant. There were less than a hundred men, about half of what Ted started with. Some were dead or wounded, some were tending the wounded, some were lost, and some getting lost as fast as they could. Those who were there standing in front of Tim were in no mood to stop fighting now. Tim had given up trying to contact Corporal Bradford. He wasn’t able to get him, but he did get Hernandez, one of Tim’s fellow privates, which Bradford had left behind in Independence. Hernandez said he would relay the message to Corporal Bradford.

“Well I guess we showed them a thing or two.”

“Yeah we sure gave them a licking.”

“Say Tim, we’re not going to let them just get away, are we?”

“OK listen up. No we are not going to let them ‘get away’. We are going to chase them, and we’re going fight them. But don’t get it in your head that we are tougher than they are. They just choose not to fight us. They have other plans. So we are going to take the fight to them. But be very clear about this. They have a lot more firepower than we do, they have more men than we do, and they have little fear of dying. This is not going to be easy.” Ted glanced back and forth from one face to another as he spoke. He could tell he had a bunch of men in front of him who were ready to fight.

“On the other hand we have no choice but to chase after them. Our families are right in the way of where they are going. They are a killing machine, so we have to be smart about this if we are going to win. Is everybody with me?”

“Yea, we’re with you!”

“Sure, let’s kill them!”

“Come on Ted, let’s get moving. Time is wasting.”

“Ok everybody, but lets get organized first. Who is out of ammunition?” A dozen hands went up. “Oh crap, we don’t have interchangeable ammunition!” Ted thought for a moment.

“OK, tell you what. Who has 20 rounds of ammunition or more?” More than half of the men raised their hands. “OK all of you who just raised your hands divide yourselves into two groups. Yea, half over here, and half over there. Hurry up. OK all you in that group; I’m your leader. Somebody get me 100 rounds of .223 ammunition. Hurry. Clive you’re in command of the second group. Get yourselves ready and follow as soon as we are gone. Get yourself at least 20 rounds of ammo. Dan, you are in charge of everybody else. Share what ammo you have and come as soon as Clive’s group is gone.

“Who has a radio? You, move into that group. And you, you go with that group. Each group leader, have a radioman in your car with you. Use the others as you wish.

“This is what we are going to do. We are going to drive like crazy, catch up to them, start shooting at them as best we can on the fly from the lead vehicle. As soon as the first car is out of ammo, it pulls over and the next car takes its place. We just keep the pressure up. If they stop, we improvise and pull back if possible. Keep them off balance. We never fight them full force against full force. We don’t stand and fight. Got it?”

“Yea we got it.”

“So what are we standing around for?”

Somebody ran up to Ted and shoved four blue boxes into his hands. “Here’s 200 rounds of ammo Ted.” Ted shoved the boxes into his backpack without looking at them.

“Ok, now this is how it works. I’m going to be in the second car of the convoy so I can see what is happening. I’ll keep in contact with the other two group leaders. When the car in front of me pulls off the road, I will give the signal by flashing my lights twice and the car behind me passes me and engages. We repeat every time a car pulls over and I flash my lights twice. Everybody go it?”

“Yea, yea. Lets get moving.”

“OK, lets move out.” Ted concluded.

Ted made his way toward the north end of town at a trot as the cars began to form a convoy. Once the cars were in a line he jumped into the second car and gave the signal to go. Like a bunch of high school kids on a Saturday night they hit the gas and in no time they were

traveling at speeds of over a hundred miles per hour. The lead car was a late model Toyota and a couple of times Ted was afraid it was going to leave the road. But he kept it under control and powered forward on the straight sections hitting speeds of 135 miles per hour. Ted's driver could not make his car keep up, and it didn't corner any better even though he has taking the corners slower. The suspension just wasn't there for racing, and Ted knew the driver was trying his best to make time.

After a few minutes he lost contact with the lead care and he had to hope they knew what they were doing.

* * * * *

The Toyota Avalon powered through the turns designed for 55 mph at almost twice that speed. In the long straight stretches the roar of the V-6 engine was muted but the ride was exhilarating. When they lost the headlights of Ted's car behind them they talked about slowing down, but decided not to, and raced on into the night.

Just past Manzanar National Historic Site, where they kept Japanese-Americans during World War II, they caught sight of the convoy ahead of them traveling about 60 mph. They closed the distance rapidly and pulled in behind the last vehicle that happened to be a van. The passenger opened his window, chambered a round in his rifle then awkwardly worked the barrel out of the open window. The right side mirror made a passable gun rest. The driver kept the care as stable as the road would permit while the passenger squeezed off a single round.

The right tire of the van blew and the van started to pull to the right. The driver overcorrected to the left and again to the right. On the second maneuver the van rolled over and started to flip end over end. The driver of the Toyota braked slightly then the wheels of the car hit the dirt as it passed the cart wheeling van on the left. The van skidded to a stop on its side. Nothing but a spinning wheel moved on the vehicle. The Toyota closed on the next vehicle that happened to be a small sedan. Before he managed to repeat the same maneuver the passenger in the back seat of sedan pulled out a fully automatic weapon and opened fire.

Bullets shattered the glass windshield and perforated the radiator of the Toyota. The driver was not hit, but startled and started swerving back and forth. Someone in the back seat pulled his pistol and started unloading it through his open side window. His shots went wild, apparently to no effect. The Toyota slowed and come to a stop.

The driver looked at the passenger next to him who was slumped forward against the shattered windshield, obviously dead from two, probably more bullet wounds. "Oh Mark!" The driver reached over and pressed the dead body of his friend back against the seat. Mark's head flopped back against the headrest and then rolled to the side. The driver threw up and them climbed out of the car. He looked back into the night as headlights approached.

* * * * *

Ted's car pulled up behind the Toyota that was stopped in the middle of the road, steam rising from the hood, the engine idling roughly. The driver was standing next to his car visibly shaken. The whole caravan stopped behind him waiting for the OK to proceed.

Ted got the picture in a short broken verbal description, and the evidence before him. He jogged back to the next car and told them to keep their distance. "You can shoot much more accurately from a distance than they can, so that is what I want you to do. Stay at least a quarter of a mile behind them. And this time don't leave me behind. I want to be able to see what is happening, and give you cover if need be. Got it?"

"Got it."

The next car, which happened to be a Buick, pulled past him and accelerated into the night. Tim ran forward and jumped into the car, which they quickly followed. In a few seconds they were up to 100 mph again. This time Ted's car kept in sight of the car in front.

The Buick sped up until they could see the string of lights ahead of them. They closed until they were within a third of a mile or less of the last car. The passenger reached out of the window with his rifle resting on the side mirror, just as Mark had done. He adjusted his head and body until his eye was comfortably positioned behind the 9-power scope mounted to his rifle. This time, instead of shooting at any particular part of the car, he was just shooting at the car. Or to be precise he was shooting a little over the top of the car, taking into account the drop in the bullet over that distance. Each round was carefully executed like at a target range. Three breathes, let the last one out, hold your breath, squeeeeeeeeze carefully, Baam! Action the bolt and do it again.

After his fourth round the back window of the car being chased lit up with gun flashes as he unloaded a thirty round magazine from his fully automatic AK-47. His position in the back seat was awkward, his aim bad, and his swearing didn't help one bit. None of his shots came close to the Buick. The passenger of the Buick squeezed off another round, without apparent effect except that the car lit up again as they unloaded another 30 round magazine. At this rate they would run out of ammunition in no time. "We must be hitting the car or they wouldn't be so agitated." The driver stated with a bit of triumph in his voice.

The shooter in the Buick reloaded his rifle and started again, and again the car ahead unloaded another 30 rounds. This time a bullet happened to hit the hood of the Buick, creased up it, then hit the windshield at a glancing angle, cracked it and, then ricocheted off into the air without penetrating the passenger compartment. But the sudden noise and splintered windshield startled and rattled the occupants of the Buick. The driver backed off a little, then took a deep breath and closed again.

With the eighth round the car ahead suddenly swerved off the road to the left and disappeared in a cloud of dust, that was in turn swallowed in the dark of the night. They all cheered as they turned their attention on the next car. But just then the three last cars in the lead caravan screeched to a stop as the rest proceeded off into the night. The three cars blocked the

road, and seven men with automatic weapons and pistols positioned themselves behind the three cars, protected behind the hoods and trunks of the parked cars.

The Buick screeched to a stop, as did the rest of the caravan. Ted jumped out of his car as soon as it had come to a stop. He assessed the situation and quickly formulated a plan. He went back to the next few cars and told the first four men to make a flanking maneuver out in the desert to the right, and the next four to do the same out to the left. As he spoke bullets sung through the air, singing their song of death. In the distance he could hear the rattle of a Soviet designed weapon. It sounded like a tinny jackhammer. Several men were gathering around hiding behind the cars returning shots at the flashes in the night.

A couple of minutes later flashes appeared off to the right and left of the cars. More flashes appeared in the middle where the three cars were in the middle of the road. More shots rang out near Tim. Finally the automatic fire from the three cars stopped and the two groups of men from the left and right made their way toward their pray.

The shots ceased firing. The smell of burned tires and gunpowder wafted through the air. Ted relaxed and slid back onto the asphalt road. "How long?" Ted asked himself. How long had it been since it started. Was it a couple of days, of weeks, of months? Ted couldn't tell anymore. How long would it last? Weeks, months, years? It was impossible for Ted to know. "This must be what hell is like." Ted thought. "No this IS hell. I've died, and I don't know it." Ted shook his head. "If this is hell, then lets get on with it." He thought.

Ted stood up and looked at the men gathering around him waiting for his next command. He knew that the stress, fatigue, and lack of sleep were pushing him to the edge. He also knew that he had better not wig out now or all was lost.

"OK guys, let's do it again!" Ted said out loud. With that he jumped into his car and the caravan started moving forward toward the three dead cars in the middle of the road.

Chapter 38

Private Hernandez already knew that manning the barricade wasn't a good tactic, so he didn't even bother to place men behind it for fear of them being slaughtered. It was already built of cars, just like the one in Lone Pine, but no need in loosing men needlessly Hernandez reasoned. So he placed all his meager force in buildings along Main Street, which is of course highway 395.

Hernandez placed himself, like Private Tim Murray, in a position where he could see both the barricade and the approach of the dreaded convoy. Sure enough here they came, headlights blazing in the night. Unlike Lone Pine, they didn't even slow down. The big truck in the lead just bashed through the cars like so much nothing. The entire convoy never slowed down slower than 50 miles and hour as it barreled through Independence. His men shot at the cars and trucks as they raced through town, and they shot back spraying the buildings with automatic fire. The whole battle of Independence lasted less than five minutes beginning to end.

Just then Hernandez's radio squawked in his jacket pocket. He answered it and it was Ted.

"Hernandez, are you engaged with the convoy? Over."

"No LP Leader, they barreled through here without even slowing down. Over."

"What? Say again?"

"Ted, they blasted through here less than a minute ago. I doubt either of us lost a single man. Over."

"OK. We'll be there in just a couple minutes. Get your men ready to ride and follow me when we're past. Have your men stay out of the middle of the road until we are past. My driver is hitting just over 100 right now, and we're not planning on slowing down. Over"

"Roger that. Over."

Hernandez started collecting his men and telling them to get their cars. In less than two minutes, true to his word a string of cars came racing down the highway. The Buick led the way at just over 80 mph. Hernandez was amazed at the speed with witch the cars flew through town. Not only that, there were dozens of them. After the last vehicle left town heading north, Hernandez moved into rapid motion as he assembled all his men he and started after him. Three minutes later fifteen cares raced north as fast as they could go.

* * * * *

Dunagan had decided that speed was now his best weapon. He was going to get to Bishop and hit it with all he had. He wasn't going to blow through this town. But to do so he had to get there before things got tougher. At least that was his plan.

Tim was not gaining on Dunagan like he had before because Dunagan was moving all out. The hills slowed the big trucks, but there were virtually no grades to speak of on this stretch of the road. So Dunagan's convoy was moving at more than 90 mph, sometimes over 100 mph.

Tim's radio scratched and he pulled it from his pocket. "This is LP Leader. Over"

"What's your location? Over." Tim recognized the voice as being that of Corporal Bradford.

"We are about eight to ten clicks north of Independence. Over"

"Do you have a visual on the bad guys? Over."

"Negative. But we are in hot pursuit. I expect to get a visual at any moment."

"Keep the pressure up, but do not engage. Do you copy?"

"Did you say do not engage?"

"Roger that. Keep the speed up, but do not engage. Be prepared to follow orders on my command. Do you copy? Over."

"Roger that. Over."

"Be prepared to receive verbal command on a moment's notice. Over."

"Copy. Over."

Ted looked at his driver who glanced at Ted. The Buick that was leading did not have a radio and there was no way to warn them. There was nothing they could do about it now. "Why don't they just tell us what it is?" The driver asked.

"In case they are listening in on our frequency. My guess is that there is a surprise up ahead and we will have to slow down fast." Ted looked at the steering wheel. "On my command hit the horn and make all the noise you can."

The driver looked down at the horn in the middle of the steering wheel. "Alright." He answered.

Just then the Buick crested a little rise and Ted could now see Dunagan's convoy up ahead. They were about three miles ahead at this point.

"Bradford, I have a visual. Over."

“Roger that. What is your distance? Over.”

“About five clicks. Over.”

“Roger that. Over.”

Tim griped his hands on his M-16 cradled in his lap. They were closing the gap with Dunagan’s convoy, but not very fast. If they didn’t make more progress they would not catch up to him before they reached Bishop. But on the other hand, maybe that didn’t matter. Tim sure wished he knew what Bradford had up his sleeve.

“LP Leader, what is your distance from the bad guys? Over.”

“About four, maybe five clicks. Over.”

“Be prepared to follow my command. Over.”

“Roger that. Over.”

Tim held the radio in his hand. He strained into the night to see the invisible. On into the night the two convoys hurdled at near 100 miles per hour less than three miles separation between them. The destroying angle chasing the devil. Into the darkness they each flew. Each having faith in their powers. Each flying headlong down the two lane highway into the black.

* * * * *

Randy sat next to Corporal Bradford with his standard binoculars held to his eyes. John Scott sat next to Randy. “Here they come.” said Randy.

“Can you make out the type of vehicles yet? Bradford asked?”

“Nope, just pairs of headlights so far.”

John could see lights in the distance, but he could not see the individual cars that Randy could. The three of them were kneeling on a small hill next to the highway. The road actually cut through the hill. The two-lane highway broadened to four lanes just before it rose and fell on the far side of the road cut, making a turn to the left as it did. The cut of the road left elevated dirt on both sides of the highway. The heights of the embankments on both sides were each about 40 feet. On the crest of each embankment were men with rifles hidden in the dark. There were about 100 men on either embankment spread out about twenty feet apart.

Randy kept a running commentary on the approaching caravan. “There must be as many as forty vehicles in the convoy. In the lead they have a huge truck. I would say it’s a dump truck or something. It could be a tow truck, I don’t know. Wow they must be doing close to 100 miles

per hour! I can now see the other convoy in pursuit. They are coming at least as fast. The lead truck in the first convoy is defiantly a tow truck. They're sure not going to like the surprise we have for them."

"No, I don't think they will." Replied Corporal Bradford in an even voice.

By now the three crouching men could hear the roar of the engines of the approaching vehicles. The trucks throaty growl started to fill the valley. From their perspective the vehicles were coming almost straight toward them at full speed, but none of the three seemed concerned in the least. The lead truck was less than half a mile away. In less than 20 seconds the truck would reach their position. The three watched intently but with sureness of the outcome. The truck slowed to about 80 as it approached the cut, sailed up and as it crested it slammed on its breaks and started to drift sideways heading for the dirt embankment.

Less than 50 yards ahead of it were four Cal-Trans dump trucks parked sideways spanning the road, each filled with twelve tons of dirt. The Trucks filled the highway from embankment to embankment. The tow truck started to ride up the embankment on its right wheels then turned on its side just before it slammed into the truck on the far right. Suddenly the sound of roaring engines was joined with the sound of crushing metal and breaking glass. The parked dump truck swayed under the impact and dirt went flying, but it did not yield. Before the first collision was over a second vehicle, this one a van, slammed into a second dump truck more to the center but with less effect on the parked truck. Then more vehicles hit. There were a pickup truck, then a car, and then another car. Then a Wal-Mart semi tractor-trailer smashed into the wreckage crushing everything before it into the parked Cal-Trans trucks. At the height of the impact a fuel tank exploded into a ball of flame. Vehicle after vehicle slammed into conflagration until the gorge was full from embankment to embankment with burning wreckage. Oncoming vehicles could now see the carnage and fire, and started breaking and swerving to miss each other. Many stopped in time to not hit each other as they screeched to a stop.

Corporal Bradford lifted the radio to his mouth and pressed the switch on the side. "LP Leader. This is Corporal Bradford. We are near Tinemaha Reservoir. Much of the convoy is destroyed. Approach with caution. Engage vehicles approaching in your direction. Spread your men out on either side of the road to interdict men on foot. Left and right flank advance. Over."

By the time Tim received the message he could already see what was happening a mile and a half ahead of him. His driver was already slowing down. He didn't have to worry about the Buick slowing down either, for he could see what Tim saw. A few of the vehicles in Dunagan's convoy swerved off the road and scattered in both directions. Those who went left headed straight into the Sierra Mountains and didn't make it more than half a mile before they found themselves unable to drive further. Those who went right made it a couple miles when they ran into the tree lined banks of the Owens River and were corralled by trucks in hot pursuit.

Bradford's men worked their way south as Murray's men worked north. They worked their way off the highway and moved methodically. Dunagan's men fought without plan or coordination. They basically sprayed bullets in every direction, and cursed. Among Dunagan's men no one tried to surrender, and on the other side, no one tried to take prisoners. After twenty

minutes Dunagan's men who stayed and fought were all dead or wounded. After forty minutes there were only dead.

Almost a dozen of Dunagan's men got away on foot. Eight made it to the river and decided to hide rather than fight. Three headed into the mountains and hid in the rocks. They all managed to slip into the night for a time. In less than a week all but four had managed to get them selves killed. Two worked their way into the mountains and starved that winter in a shelter they made of wood. One made his way north into Nevada and gave up his life of crime, but was killed by a jealous husband. One worked his way back to Ridgecrest where he more or less blended in and went straight. From there he made his way to Arizona where he eventually married, and had three children. Many years latter he wondered why he ever wasted so much of his early life fighting, and stealing, and killing, and being angry all the time. He died a content old man knowing he was a very, very lucky man.

* * * * *

Allan had not had enough killing. He had no idea how many he had killed, but however many it had been, it had not been near enough. They may not have been the ones that killed his brother, but they would do. They would do if he could find more of them to kill. Allen was full of hate like a glass spilling over on the table on onto the floor. It burned in him like the flames of the burning vehicles behind him. The more it burned within him the more it increased the heat. He was like a wildfire out of control.

Allen found body after body and made sure every one was dead. When he ran out of ammunition he used the barrel of his gun like a club. He was worse than an animal. Animals kill to live. Allan cared not one bit about living, only killing. When he found nothing but corpses he stood in the sagebrush and screamed at the night. "I'll find you! I'll hunt you down and kill you! If it takes the rest of my life, I'll hunt you down and kill every last one of you! Die you bastards! Die!"

* * * * *

John surveyed the carnage with no sense of victory. He had killed a few men with his rifle, but only a few. Others rushed in but John held back, picking his targets carefully. Now that the battle was over all he saw was senseless destruction. "Why do people have to be so stupid? Why do you make us kill you?"

John's eyes wondered about the wreckage until they fell upon a particular van engulfed in fire. Through the flames he saw the charred remains of two men still seated in the fronts seats. They were burned until they were barely recognizable as human forms. The red and orange flames roared from the opening where the windshield used to be then curled up into smoke and disappeared into the evil dark. The forms were mostly black against the brilliant flames. One of the forms slumped sideways until the head hit the side window that was still in tact. The head

cocked against the window in a very unnatural angle. John stared for a long time, transfixed, unmoving. Finally he spoke slowly and with determination in his voice. “May you burn forever in hell for this! Burn you beasts, burn!”

Chapter 39

John didn't see Allan walking up the street with his rifle slung over his shoulder. John was dead tired at the end of the day, sitting on the step in the sidewalk leading up to the house. It had been another long, hard, day, and he was tired to the bone.

Winter in Bishop had not been particularly cold, but without adequate heating for the house, it had been a lot more difficult than any of the Scott family had ever experienced before. John had found work cutting and transporting lumber. Winter was a good time for logging if gasoline is scarce. The logs slide better on the ice packed roads, pulled on horse drawn sleds. John was not used to the hard physical work of being a logger, but now it was the only way he could feed his family.

Kevin and Natalie had changed dramatically during the winter. Kevin's favorite game now was killing gophers and other rodents with a slingshot made from a bicycle tube. Some of his chores included collecting edible plants and bugs. Natalie also learned the finer points of scrounging for food. Both worked harder than they ever imagined possible. A lot of the time they worked in the garden now that it was spring. Food gathering and production was constantly on almost everybody's mind and a constant topic of conversation. Clothes were getting scarce, so making crude articles of clothing was a growing cottage industry. Electronic entertainment was non-existent.

Sarah had gotten over the loss of her two older boys, more or less. Michael's murder was harder than frozen nails to accept. But the disappearance of Allen soon after the battle of highway 395 was even harder for Sarah. Before he left Allen talked incessantly about hunting down those "dirty killers" until one day he just left in the middle of the night. He left a note that said he had to avenge his brother's death, and that was the last they heard of him.

John sat on the step in the sidewalk, which led to the house. The step was placed where the path crossed the fence at the end of the front yard. The street lay beyond the white picket fence. The street was paved and still in good condition. The sun had set behind the mighty Sierras, but the White Mountains were bathed in its yellowing light, tinting toward orange. John was staring at nothing in particular, thinking of nothing in particular when he heard the words, "Hi Dad."

The sound caught him by surprise. He had not heard Allen's approach, and he was amazed that he would appear out of nowhere. John had looked for Allen for three weeks, always one day behind him. He followed tails of a young man much appreciated by those who were protected by his straight shot. Those who made their living by stealing and killing didn't say much about him because they were dead. John gave up because he had to go home to take care of Sarah, and the rest of the family. He tried again a couple of times in the cold of winter, but without success. Allen had been missing for six months when we walked back into Bishop.

John jumped up. "Allen! How are you? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine Dad. I'm fine." Allen's voice had hardly any expression.

Allen had aged at least ten years since last summer, John thought. He was dirty, and it looked like he had lost twenty pounds, but that was not it. It was his eyes. His eyes were much older than they had been when his son had left for collage, so long ago.

The two men looked each other over for a few seconds then John embraced his son mightily. Allen allowed himself to be hugged by his father as John began to cry. John stepped back to look at his regained son. The tears ran down John's checks leaving streaks where the tears washed the dust away. Allen wore a sad smile.

Just then Sarah burst out of the front door followed by his little brother and sister. Allen was assaulted with affection as if he had returned from the dead. For Sarah nothing could be closer to the truth. Even Kevin and Natalie were overjoyed to see their big brother.

The Scott family killed the fatted cow that night. The fatted cow consisted of home made beef jerky reconstituted in water with potatoes, rice, beans and an assortment of edible weeds made into thin soup, and served with unleavened wheat cakes, which tasted more like crackers. It was the best anybody had eaten in so long nobody could remember.

During dinner Allen gave an abbreviated version of his whereabouts for the last half-year since he left. He had been as far a Lancaster in the south before doubling back through Bakersfield, Porterville, Visalia, Fresno, then skirting along the western Sierras through little towns like Mariposa, Angels Camp, and Pine Grove. When he reached Pine Grove he headed east through the Sierras until he reached highway 395 and headed south again. Yes he had killed a lot of men, but he had very little to say about that over dinner.

Allen was very interested in hearing about Randy. Randy, Tim and Clay had become leaders in the Bishop Militia. The Bishop Militia was much more like the militias of the 18th century, rather than the 20th century. It was established by the government of Bishop out of necessity, rather than as an excuse to shoot guns, drink bear, and brag about how they were going to show those UN armies of the New World Order a thing or two. Clay had been killed in a shoot out but Randy and Tim were still fine.

Long after dinner, and a whole lot of talking, the kids finally went to bed and John took Allen for a walk in the night air. They walked for a couple blocks before either said a word. Finally Allen began to speak.

"Dad, I've finally come to terms with Michael's Death. I was just so filled with hate after they killed Michael. He was my little... brother." Allen began to choke up, and his voice grew faint. "I just figured they had no right... to kill him like that. He never hurt anybody." John stopped walking and turned to look Allen in the face. The moon was at John's back and he could see glistening streaks running down Allen's cheeks. "It just wasn't fair, Dad. It just wasn't fair."

"Well Allen..." John started to speak, but Allen cut him off.

“Yeah, I know. Life isn’t fair. But there is unfair and there is horribly unfair. Michael’s death was horribly unfair. It was a crime of the first order. It was an abomination!” Allen’s voice was gaining strength.

“Dad, one night somewhere east of Angels Camp it came to me.” John studied Allen’s face wondering what he was about to get to. Allen was almost shaking as he struggled to get the words out. His breathing was labored and uneven. Allen bit his lower lip as he struggled for the words to say. “Dad, I’ve killed a lot of men since Michael, and as far as I know all of them were guilty. Most I caught them in the very act. Every one of them needed killing. You know what I mean.”

“Ok?”

“And there are a lot of people out there that think I’m a real nice guy. You know what I mean?”

“Well, yes, I guess so.”

“I was hunting down this one guy, and he had just killed everybody in this one family, and left them all dead on the floor. They were all just dead... all of them. So I sneak up on him... and he had just entered this one house. He had this girl with her arm twisted behind her back, and... she was terrified. I could hear her sobs as he was forcing her into the next room. I was outside the house, and I could see them through the window. Just like that I aimed my gun and shot him right in the head. I had one second before I lost my shot, and I dropped him right in his tracks. One second he was about to rape this girl and the next he was dead.

“I ran in the house making sure I wasn’t stepping into a trap and I found the girl crying on the floor. Her mom and Dad were both dead, and she was just crying there at my feet. I pulled her up and she pulled away, she thought I was another one of them. I told her I wasn’t going to hurt her, and that I had just killed the guy on the floor. In that instant she dropped at my feet and started kissing my legs. I pulled her up and she just kept kissing me, and hugging me, and everything.

“Its not like she was all that good looking or anything. She was just some girl. But suddenly I realized that I had it all backwards. I had made hate and revenge my reason for living. Hate consumed me. I hated the creeps that killed my brother, and I hated them for killing and destroying everything.

“Then I got it. It’s not about hate and revenge. Its about life, and love and living. She loved me for saving her, and love is what it is all about. I want to love and be loved.

I wasn’t protecting anybody. I was just looking for someone to vent my hate on. I was looking for someone to kill, because I was angry. Dad, I need to start living. I need peace!”

John stared at his son contemplating what his son had just said.

“Dad I came back because this is my family. Family is what matters to me. Not revenge. I had to let you and Mom know I was OK. I know how much it must have hurt Mom, and I want to make it up to her.”

“Well Allen, it’s good to have you back.”

“Dad, I want to live in peace. I’ll kill if I have to, but I want to live in peace. I want to have a family and kids and just live in peace. I want to build a new world where people respect each other and are kind. Is that possible after all that has happened?”

John looked into his son’s eyes for a long time and finally answered. “It all depends on you Allen. It all depends on you.”

“But Dad, how do I do it. Everywhere you look there is killing and hunger and greed. How do I build a new world? How do I get rid of the hate?”

“You can’t change the whole world. All you can do is change yourself. You do it one day at a time, Allen. First you start with you, and then those around you.

“Anger has been my companion many times, but it has never been my friend. It robs me of my reason, and my ability to love. Those are two of my most precious possessions. To get angry is human. To stay angry, or to act in anger is foolishness.”

Allen just looked at John with disbelief, and at the same time, a desire to believe. Finally he spoke. “Dad, what about all the killing and fighting? You never know when some guy is going to sneak up and kill you. I have cheated death dozens of times. How many times can a guy be lucky? How about Michael? He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The way things are now, every place is the wrong place, and every day is the wrong day.”

“Allen, sooner or later everybody dies. Michael died way too young, but he died with a clean conscience. You can’t ask for more than that. There is peace in knowing that you are on the side of right. No one can make you be evil.”

“Dad, how do I find peace?”

“Allen, how long has it been since you worked in a garden?”

Allen looked at his dad as if he suddenly lost it. “I have no idea.”

“Tomorrow I am going to introduce you to peace. Tomorrow you will help me producing more than we consume. That is the answer Allen. It’s not about revenge, or fairness, or personal wealth, or making somebody else share their wealth, it’s about doing your part. You may not be able to change the world all by yourself, but you will know that you did something worthwhile at the end of each day. Then you will have peace.

“But first you need to get some sleep, Allen.”

Allen looked at his father and his face seemed to relax. “It’s really that simple?”

“Allen, there is a lot in this world we can’t control. But we can control who we are. I have read of prisoners of war that have been freer than their guards. They were freer because they controlled their emotions and their thoughts. We are only prisoners if we choose to be. Just be an Eagle Scout, do your best. Do a good turn daily. This is what makes a better world. Both for others, and especially for you.”

Allen cracked a half smile as he thought back a lifetime ago. “OK Dad. Sounds good to me.”

Allen slept that night on an old mattress borrowed from the neighbor. It smelled a little dusty, and it was lying on the floor in the living room. The sheet had some small holes and a few stains. Allen slept better than he had for months. It was the bed of an angel.

The End