



Jerry D. Young

www.jerrydyoung.com • jerrydyoung@hotmail.com



Frisco Lessons

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Frisco Lessons - Prolog

Joe was content with his life. Finding a wife would be nice, but he was still young. Romance would come to him eventually. Right now he had a great job, a great car, and a great place to live. Who wouldn't love living in an historic San Francisco town house, working in one of the finest restaurants in the city, and driving to and from work in a classic Corvette?

It was blustery, windy, damp day. The fog had been worse than usual on the bay that morning. Joe's neighbor had trouble managing her three spaniels when she took them out for their morning walk, when Joe was making his morning run.

Joe parked and stepped out of the classic Corvette in the employee lot of the restaurant. He'd been named employee of the month just the day before and had the reserved slot right by the rear entrance to the building.

He pointed the remote on his key ring at the canary yellow 'vette and pressed the button. He heard a rumbling, instead of a chirp. He pressed the button again. There was the chirp, but he could barely hear it over the rumbling sound that was getting louder.

The ground began to shake. Joe began to have trouble standing up. He heard a cracking sound, louder than the rumbling and looked at the building that contained the restaurant. It took him a fraction of a second to realize that the two story building was beginning to collapse, the brick wall he was facing coming his way.

Joe turned and began to run. It was difficult to maintain his footing, but he managed to stay on his feet long enough to be clear of the top of the wall when it hit the ground. He was pummeled by the many bricks thrown off the wall as it shattered upon hitting the pavement of the parking lot. He went down as hard as the wall had, knocking the breath

out of his lungs when he landed.

He had to struggle to get a breath. The pain in his side was vicious, and the cloud of dust coming off the still collapsing building was choking him. He laid there, the ground still shaking, for what seemed an eternity. But finally the shaking stopped and the rumbling stopped. The dust was just beginning to settle.

Gasping for breath, Joe climbed to his feet and looked around. What was that sound he was hearing? It was the subdued sound of the car alarm on the Corvette, buried under the wall of the building. Joe just stared at the spot where his car should be. There was just a high spot in the jumble of bricks.

Ears ringing, left arm pressed against his left side, Joe began to back away from the building. The restaurant kitchen used gas for cooking. But he stopped when he saw two people staggering out of the remains of the building. Both looked dirty and covered in blood and brick dust. He started toward them to help, but he was too late. Something set off the escaping gas. The fireball finished bringing the building down on the two, but not before the fireball engulfed them. They didn't even have time to scream.

Joe began backing away again, feeling the panic rising in him. He looked around again. Everywhere he looked, it was the same. Buildings were in various stages of collapse, there were fires everywhere, power lines were down. Some of the power lines were still live and were sparking and jumping around.

Suddenly the ground began to shake again. It was a stronger shake and Joe went to his knees, finally rolling onto his side as the shaking continued for another eternity. But it did finally stop, again.

Joe got to his hands and knees, but paused before he tried to get to his feet. Was it going to shake again? He waited a little longer but then did

get back to his feet. Another look around showed the even greater devastation than the first look.

He didn't see another soul. A sudden fit of coughing doubled him over. When he was able to straighten up again, Joe noticed the several other cars in the parking lot. Two had broken windows and he went over to the closest and looked in. A brick was on the seat. But so was a half-empty bottle of designer water. He grabbed it and finished it off. That was better. It helped clear his throat.

He checked the other car with broken windows. No more water. Joe decided to check the other cars, just in case. He picked up one of the thousands of bricks lying around and went to the next car. He couldn't see anything useful and couldn't bring himself to break the window to look further.

The next car was different. He raised the brick, to smash it through the side window, but hesitated. He tried the door handle. The car wasn't even locked. Feeling himself blush, he dropped the brick and opened the car door. There were two bottles of water, which he took. He left the other, personal, items alone. He closed the door and looked around again.

The disintegrated buildings surrounded the parking lot. He was going to have to cross over some of the debris to get out of the cul-de-sac. The lowest point in the debris was at the entry to the parking lot. He headed for that spot, being careful not to step wrong and twist an ankle.

He had no more than reached the top of the pile when a gas line in the nearby building exploded. The explosion threw him off his feet and he tumbled down the far side of the debris pile and was pelted with more debris from the explosion. Battered, bruised, bleeding, and covered with brick dust, Joe managed to get to his feet again and staggered away from the approaching flames.

It was only after he'd gone far enough to be safe from the new raging fire that he realized he'd dropped both bottles of water. He took a step toward where he must have dropped them but quickly stopped. The fire was too intense. He couldn't reach the water.

Shoulders slumped; Joe turned around again and began walking down the street, with the vague intention of going home. Everywhere he looked there was devastation. He began to see people, mostly looking much as he did. All seemed in a daze. Except for one. Joe's eyes were drawn to a woman going from one survivor to the next. She looked the same as everyone else, but she was doing something.

Seeing her tending to the other survivors brought Joe out of his daze. He looked around with fresh eyes. He hurried over to a woman holding her left arm in her right. She was just standing there, tears cutting tracks down the dust on her face, starting at one of the demolished buildings.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, touching her shoulder to get her attention. "Geez!" he exclaimed as the woman began to collapse. He grabbed her and eased her into a prone position on the ground.

When he looked up the woman he'd noticed before was squatting down beside him. "She just collapsed," Joe said.

"Looks like her arm is broken," said the woman. "She's probably in shock."

A little of Joe's limited first-aid training came back to him. He gently lifted her neck to keep tilt her head back to maintain an open airway. He grabbed some debris and slipped it under her legs to keep them raised.

The woman helping dug into the backpack she'd removed when she squatted down. Her hand came out with a small packet. She opened it and unfolded a triangular bandage. Directing Joe to carefully lift the woman's injured arm she eased one corner of the bandage under it and

brought the corner up and around behind the woman's neck. She pinned the ends together, and leaned back on her heels. "That's all I know to do," she said, looking over at Joe.

"Me, too. I'm Joe."

"Trisha Thomas."

The ground began to shake again, though not quite as badly as the two previous quakes. Trisha fell back onto her rear, from her squatting position. Joe was on his knees and managed to stay there. The injured woman groaned as the shaking jostled her broken arm slightly.

"I don't know what else to do for her," Trisha said.

"Not much else we can do," Joe said. He looked around. People were standing up again. Joe looked back at Trisha. "I wish I could do more, but I think I'll head for home."

"I doubt a car will make it."

A sour look crossed Joe's face. "My car is under tons of bricks."

"I use BART. I doubt if it is running now."

Half a dozen people came up to them. "I might as well go home, too. Can one of you stay with her?" Trisha asked the small crowd around them. There were several cases of two people supporting a third, injured, person.

"Aren't you going to wait for the authorities?" asked one of the group. Everyone ducked a bit when another broken gas line was ignited and exploded.

"No," replied Trisha. "It could be hours."

“I think you should stay and help,” another of the group said. “I saw you working with some of the others. Like her.” She pointed to the unconscious woman on the ground.

“I’ve already used most of my medical supplies,” Trisha said.

“At least you have some supplies.”

Trisha stood and put on the backpack, rather protectively, Joe thought. “I don’t have squat,” he said to himself.

“Yeah. well. Good knowing you, Joe. Good luck.” With that Trisha began walking away.

“I wouldn’t... you know... Your stuff is your stuff,” Joe said, taking a step after her.

Trisha hesitated, but stopped and turned around. “Which direction you headed?”

“North. I live not too far from here.”

“Oh. Me, too.” Rather reluctantly Trisha added, “I suppose it would be okay if we traveled together.”

“What do we do?” called one of the small crowd.

Over her shoulder Trisha said, “Go home on foot, or wait for help.”

It was a nightmare journey. Everywhere they looked buildings and structures were down. People were dazed, dust covered, and injured in many cases. They stopped and helped where they could, Trisha constantly amazing Joe with the items she brought out of her backpack.

He saw her give drinks of water to several people, using up three half-liter bottles of water. He licked his lips every time he saw her take a bottle out of her backpack, but he wouldn't ask for a drink, as she hadn't taken a drink herself that he'd seen.

They'd traveled for over an hour before they saw the first emergency services personnel. It was the entire complement of a fire station working the devastation on their block. Their station had survived the quakes apparently, but they couldn't go any where with the equipment. They were blocked in by debris on the road.

"Where you guys going?" asked the station captain.

They both gave him their general addresses. "Our information is sketchy. All I can advise you to do is stay put until we can get a rescue effort going."

Joe looked at Trisha. "I'm going to try to get home," she told the Captain.

"So am I," added Joe.

"I don't advise it," replied the Captain, "but I'm not going to try to stop you. God speed."

"Thank you," Trisha said.

Joe asked, "Do you have any water to spare?"

"Water? Sure." The captain called over to one of his men. "Clancy! Get these people some bottled water.

Thankfully, Joe took the water Clancy handed him. He drank almost half of one of the liter-and-a-half bottles. He would keep the second in reserve. Trisha put both of her bottles into her pack and took out a half-

liter bottle from which she took a drink.

“Thanks,” Trisha said. “I’ve given all most all of my water away.”

“You been helping people?” Clancy asked.

“Trying to,” replied Trisha. “I don’t have much first-aid gear left.”

“Clancy!” called the Captain. “Get out here. We’ve got another fire starting up.”

“Gotta go! Here. Take a couple more bottles. You may need them.” Clancy handed the pair another bottle of water each and then ran out of the station house.

Joe was trying to figure out a good way to carry the three large bottles of water.

“Here,” Trisha said. “I can carry one of those for you.”

Joe handed her one of the bottles. “Thanks.”

“Come on,” Trisha said. “Let’s go. I don’t want to have to spend a night out here.”

Trisha set a quick pace, weaving around the worst of the damage. Again they stopped and helped where they could. There was another temblor, the worst yet, as they were dragging an injured man from the edge of a debris pile. He screamed and went limp when Trisha and Joe staggered and fell.

She had to wait for the shaking to stop, but then Trisha kneeled over the man. Sightless eyes started up at her. “Must have been something internal,” she said softly.

Joe reached over and closed the man's eyes. "Yeah. Man, this is making me sick." He turned away and heaved twice, though he brought nothing up.

"Take it easy," Trisha said. "We can't save everybody." Joe looked over at Trisha. She looked a little green around the gills, herself.

They got up again and resumed their journey, leaving the dead man behind. Two more blocks and they ran across a rescue operation. There were three police cars and a couple of fire trucks. Trisha and Joe stopped for a moment to watch the pandemonium. There was a huge blaze burning amidst the collapsed building.

The firefighters were battling the fire, but they didn't seem to have much water pressure. Their gaze was drawn to the activity of one of the police officers. He suddenly quit what he was doing, calling into each opening of the building and looked over at one of the people struggling out of a partially destroyed doorway.

Suddenly the officer drew his gun and pointed it at the survivor. Before either Trisha or Joe could move, the survivor was firing the gun in his hand at the officer. Discretion being the better part of valor, Trisha and Joe both ran past the area as quickly as they could as more shots rang out.

They slowed down when there was plenty of distance between them and the short battle. They had no idea how it turned out and didn't particularly care. Trisha led the way a bit further and then said, "Let's take a break and catch our breath." She stopped and sat down on the edge of a crushed car.

Thankfully Joe stopped as well. Like Trisha, Joe took a long drink of water. Also like Trisha, he noted the people headed toward them. "Think we'd better go," Trisha said hurriedly. She stood up and headed for the next block.

Joe was right on her heels. A couple of people hurried toward them, calling out. “Hey! Wait! You have water!”

Trisha didn’t stop, and neither did Joe. They hurried a little bit faster, though they didn’t break into a run. Joe caught up with her and glanced over.

Trisha saw him and said, “I decide who gets my water. I don’t mind sharing, but no one is going to take it from me.”

“I understand,” Joe replied. He walked beside her, looking around more warily. They were beginning to clear the concentrated commercial area they’d been in, and were moving into more open ground. There was much less debris, and more people. And from the looks of it, the looting was starting.

Trisha kept them away from groups and from looters, as she led the way. “Trisha,” Joe said, moving up beside her. “I’m up this way.” He pointed to the northeast.

“Parting of the ways, then,” Trisha replied. “I stay north for just a while longer. Nice to have met you, Joe. Too bad it was under these circumstances.” She held out her hand and Joe shook it.

“Not that I’ve been that much help, but will you be all right the rest of the way? If you run into a bunch...”

Suddenly Trisha was holding an automatic pistol in her right hand. “I’m not worried.” It disappeared behind her back.

“I guess not,” Joe said, taken slightly aback. “Well, take care.”

“You, too.”

She turned away and headed resolutely away. Joe watched her until she was out of sight. It was only when he went to take a drink of water that he realized he'd not retrieved the other bottle from Trisha.

“Well! Nuts!” he muttered and then finished the bottle. He started to throw it away, but decided to hang on to it. For what, he wasn't sure, but he didn't want to litter. And he might find a use for it.

Between the shootout and the looters he'd seen, Joe was a bit jumpy as he headed for his home. It only occurred to him that his home might not be standing when he saw the devastation as he approached his street. There was only a narrow open lane between the remains of the three story town houses on the cross street.

Joe turned the corner. There wasn't that much debris in the street, but all the town houses on each side of his street had collapsed over onto the one next to it. People were milling around. He saw several people enter and then leave the precariously perched townhouses. He stood debating whether or not to try to get inside his townhouse to get a few things out when he nearly fell down as the ground began to shake once again.

It was a staggering run, but Joe spun and ran back to the center of the street. The explosion behind him blew him almost too far. The townhouses on the other side of the street disintegrated in flames as explosion after explosion went down the line. He was peppered with burning debris.

Scrambling back, he slapped at the small flames on his clothing, and then dove back down to the ground when he felt heat on his back. He rolled over and over, adding bruises to bruises. But the flames were out.

He heard screams coming from down the street and hurried in that direction. Like him, the woman's clothing had caught fire. He whipped off his jacket and tackled the running woman, wrapping her in the jacket. “Roll! Roll!” He was slapping at the flames that the jacket hadn't

put out.

The woman was unconscious when Joe put out the last of the flames, and suddenly Joe was cold. The wind was picking up, and a light rain started. Joe did all he could for the woman, but there was no protection from the weather to be found. As he'd done with the other woman, Joe lifted the burned woman's neck and put a small piece of debris under it, and then did the same with her legs to guard against shock.

Keeping an eye on the woman, Joe moved closer to the blaze coming from what remained of his townhouse to gain a little warmth. It was starting to get dark. The only illumination came from the gas fed flames.

The third time Joe checked on the burned woman she was dead. He couldn't bring himself to get his jacket from the dead woman. He moved back closer to the fire again, feeling as dejected as he ever had in his life. He sat down cross-legged as near the fire as he could get and wrapped his arms around himself.

Twice helicopters flew over, one slowly and one higher up and faster. Neither appeared to be looking for a landing site. Joe assumed they were news helicopters, covering the story. He checked his watch when the gas fed fires suddenly went out. It was a few minutes past midnight.

Without the fires it got very dark, only the glowing coals of the few combustibles left visible in the darkness. The wind died down and the rain stopped about three in the morning. Joe sat there shivering until the sun came up. He began to see others like himself, though most were in groups. They too had spent a long, miserable night.

Joe saw the National Guard convoy turn into his street, but he couldn't seem to gather enough energy to get up. He had to think hard why seeing them was important. He was still shivering. Other than that, he couldn't seem to move. It was a long time before one of the uniformed men came over to him.

“You all right, buddy?” asked the Guardsman, leaning down to look at Joe’s face. He squatted down in front of Joe then and asked the question again. “You all right?”

Joe could just shiver and stare at the Guardsman’s face. The Guardsman stood up and called over to another California National Guardsman. “Over here! We got another hypothermia!”

Later, Joe didn’t remember much of what happened after the Guard showed up. He pieced together what must have happened later, from reading up about hypothermia, but he had no actual memory of it.

The one thing he did know, when he was able to think again, was that he was never going to be caught in the position he’d been in when the earthquake hit. He was going to be like Trisha, with her knowledge of first aid and her backpack, and even her gun. He would never be unprepared again.

Frisco Lessons - Chapter 1

Joe rocked back on his heels and stood up. He looked over at the CPR test monitor. “You did fine. Passed with flying colors.”

Smiling, Joe said, “Thanks, Christie. You’re a good teacher.”

“Aw, you’re just saying that because it’s true.”

Joe laughed. Christie filled out the paperwork and gave Joe his CPR qualification card. “You’re good to go. What’s next?”

“Advanced first-aid. I wanted to get the CPR out of the way first, after my basic first aid training.”

“Ron Guiterierz teaches that. He’s good. Lot’s of hands on”

“Yeah. I know. I met him the other day. Seemed like a good guy. A bit distant, though.”

“That’s Ron. Don’t let that ‘distance’ thing bother you. Once you’re in class, he’s right in your face.”

“Oh, Gee! That’s a lot better.”

Both laughed and Joe left the training room of the church, headed for his car. He hadn’t decided yet what he wanted to get for a permanent ride after the earthquake, so he’d just bought an old beater to get around in temporarily.

Joe made sure the trunk was secure. It would pop open if it wasn’t closed properly. The starter ground a few moments before the engine caught, but it started and Joe breathed a sigh of relief. It did that every time, but it had started every time, too.

He was whistling as he drove out to the firing range. Joe was going to test fire a Glock 21 again today. He’d been trying different handguns and rifles since he’d got his initial firearms training. Like his ride, he still hadn’t decided on what pistol and rifle he wanted.

The shotgun decision had been easy. It had only really been between a Remington 11-87P police model shotgun, and a Benelli M4 tactical shotgun. After shooting each one several times, he went with the 11-87P. He seemed to be able to shoot it just a little more accurately. He had one on order at the gun shop, along with accessories, spare parts, and several cases of shells of various types.

He’d pared the handgun selection down to two, as well. The Glock 21 or the Para-Ordinance P-14. Both were high capacity .45 ACP’s, and according to his research, that caliber was one of the best for self-

defense. He also liked the fact that he could get shot shell rounds and flare rounds in .45 ACP. The shot-shells would be handy in snake country, and having the flares would mean he wouldn't need to carry a separate flare gun of some sort.

Jake Dragsman, Joe's firearms instructor, met Joe at the range and they got set up at one of the pistol lanes. With shooting glasses on, and hearing protection in place, Joe went through the drills he'd learned, using the Glock 21 that Jake was supplying.

An hour later Joe made his decision. He wanted the Glock. Or, rather, the Glock's. Jake had brought along the compact Glock 30, which was also .45 ACP and could take its own shorter magazine, or the full sized Glock 21 magazines. A pair of 21's would be his main handguns, and the 30 would be a hideout gun.

After policing up the brass (Joe planned on reloading sometime and was keeping all his expended brass) Joe thanked Jake and headed for the gun shop to put in his order for the handguns, spare parts, accessories, and ammunition.

Next session he would decide between the PTR-91, Springfield Armory M1A, and a FN/FAL, all in 7.62 x 51 NATO. One of them would be his main battle rifle. Joe was firm on the decision to get a full power rifle for his main gun, but was still waffling about whether or not to get something that would fire the 5.56 NATO cartridge. There were tons of AR-15 clones on the market, but he'd shot the Steyr AUG once and had really liked its compactness and feel. He would decide on that whole situation later.

He stopped at the gun shop and put in his order. The guns were in stock, but there was the waiting period, and the shop didn't have all the ammunition or spare parts Joe wanted. They'd be in by the time he could pick up the guns.

Joe shook his head as he left the shop. He'd never have been able to get what he wanted in San Francisco. The state laws were just too strict. Moving to Reno had been a good idea. It didn't really get him away from earthquake dangers, as Nevada was seismically active, too. Joe had searched on the internet for safe places to live and found that pretty much anywhere you went in the United States, there was some sort of major danger from nature.

Since he still had ties in California, Joe had picked Reno to live, since it gave him plenty of advantages, while still being close to California. He'd not had any trouble getting a job in a casino as a bartender, and had quickly moved up to assistant bar manager in the year he'd been in Reno.

He'd lived in a FEMA supplied trailer for three months after the earthquake. The first thing he'd bought, after getting a small backpack, a big first-aid kit, and a case of bottled water, was a new laptop computer. Every minute he wasn't eating, sleeping, or working for one of the cleanup companies FEMA had hired, Joe was on the internet. There were still places in the city that had a WiFi connection.

Those three months of internet research had brought him to Reno, and the position he was now in. It wasn't where he wanted to be, but he was on the way. His small one bedroom apartment barely had room in which to turn around, it was so full of preparations of one sort or another.

Between the grocery store, two buyers clubs, Emergency Essentials, and Walton Feed, Joe had a year's supply of bottled water, a year's supply of regular grocery store food, a year's supply of long term storage freeze dried and dehydrated food, and a year's supply of basic Mormon plan foods. That was in addition to a three year supply of non-food consumables such as cleansers, toiletries, and toilet paper.

He also had the hardware to make everything useable. Things like a Country Living Grain Mill, a Crown Berkey water filter, a Thetford

chemical toilet, a solar cooker, and so on.

His BOB, or Bug-Out-Bag, as he learned to call it, like Trisha's backpack, had evolved from his first knee jerk reaction of pack, first-aid kit, and water. He now had a Kifaru Navigator 4,000 cubic inch backpack that held field living equipment and enough emergency food for three days. There was also the 2,500 cubic inch Kifaru Marauder pack that could be piggy-backed to the Navigator. It held additional food to extend his stay in the field, if need be.

Joe felt a lot more comfortable with his situation, but certainly wasn't satisfied. He still didn't have any CBRN equipment, or means of sheltering in a CBRN environment. He was still researching those aspects of preparedness on the internet.

Upon leaving the gun shop, Joe went back to the apartment to get ready for his shift at the casino. As usual, he checked in early. He made sure all the bars under his supervision were stocked and ready for the big swing shift crowd.

It was relatively a quiet shift, for a swing shift. Joe had time to do a complete inventory. Everything up to snuff, as usual. He got home at midnight and went straight to bed. It had been a long day.

Joe slept late the next morning. After he was up and had his breakfast, he got on the computer again. He was currently researching homesteading and small scale self-sufficient farming.

It was another decision he had to make. Whether or not to go that route. It definitely had advantages for long term, really long term, survival. But he really wasn't cut out to be a farmer. He really would be better off storing for a longer period than normal, and try to develop contacts on small farms where he could work, if things went really bad. He could do the work, if instructed, but there was no way he was going to be able to both learn the ins and outs, and acquire the land and... "everything else

needed,” Joe muttered.

He made the decision then. No farm for him. He would find other ways to ensure his survival. Now a garden was a different story. More accurately, a greenhouse garden so he could grow a few things year round. Of course, that meant a piece of property. He was looking in the area around Verdi, Nevada. It was right on the border.

But land in the area was really expensive. At least what constituted a ‘regular’ lot was really expensive. That meant good access and a view. Joe was convinced there was some cheaper land to be had in the area. Something that didn’t have good access or much of a view. He was doing a systematic search with several local real estate agents. One thing he did want was a southern exposure.

Of course, looking for property with less than easy access was going to be one of the determining factors of the vehicle he would get. That meant four wheel drive, for sure. He was researching possibilities on the internet. He’d already decided he didn’t really want one of the hard core mudders or rock climbers. He wanted something he could drive every day and still take him where he wanted to go, wherever that might be, with equipment and supplies.

It would be more like one of the bug-out vehicles discussed and described on the preparedness forums and in some of the PAW (post apocalyptic world) fiction. He liked some of the ideas, but some of them were really expensive. He had plenty of money at the moment, with the insurance money from the ‘vette and the townhouse, plus the government recovery money he’d received. But he wanted to take his time. He had to control the knee-jerk reaction he’d experienced right after the earthquakes.

So he was looking for a suitable four-wheel-drive rig. But he couldn’t decide on an SUV type rig or a pickup. Each had certain advantages and disadvantages when it came to what he needed to get to and from the

type of property he was contemplating and handling the additional preparations he was also thinking about.

A large SUV would do most of it, like a Suburban or Excursion. But it couldn't carry large bulky loads. Or really large amounts of fuel. A heavy duty pickup could do both. But the pickup didn't have that much enclosed space, even a dual cab model, for those things that needed the protection of an enclosed space.

Of course, if he had a trailer for the SUV, that would solve the hauling problem, and the fuel problem, but with some awkwardness. But a topper and a trailer for the pickup would solve the limitations of just the pickup, also somewhat awkwardly.

Joe searched the internet for more ideas until it was time for him to leave for his advanced first-aid class. As well as doing some highlighting in the manual, Joe took copious notes, because Ron added more than a little information that wasn't in the manual.

The class over, Joe headed for work. For whatever reason, unlike the night before, it was three times busier than normal. It kept Joe on the run. He was ready for bed when he got home. It went about the same the next few days, with work and training taking up his time. But the following Wednesday he got a call from one of the real estate brokers he had searching for property for him.

“Joe? This is Dan Constantine. I think I may have found something you will be interested in checking out.”

A few minutes later Joe was headed for Constantine's agency. Three hours later he was back home, getting ready to go to his advanced first-aid class. He had a big smile on his face. The property acquisition problem was just about solved. The property he'd checked out had been just about perfect for his wants.

Dan and he had gone up to look at it in Dan's Jeep Wrangler. It made it fine, but nothing less capable would have done so. Joe would have to have a bit of road building done to allow construction trucks in to the site, but it wouldn't take much. And, with some additional tree cutting, Joe would have his good southern exposure on the property itself.

But to be able to supervise the activity, Joe needed to be able to get to it. That meant getting a suitable vehicle now. Time to make another decision. Joe sat down with his computer and pulled up the Excel spreadsheet where he had listed various attributes he wanted in a vehicle suitable for a prepper.

He studied the information for a short while, but came up with nothing new. He'd been over and over the information. There was no 'perfect' vehicle. Joe knew he had to give up something. He couldn't have it all. He simply had to make a decision, based on what he'd already researched.

What to give up? Joe sighed. EMP was the hardest to achieve. He might be able to incorporate EMP protective measures later. Okay. That was one decision. It turned him loose to look for new, or newer, vehicles.

What else... Bulk cargo capacity. It would be a trailer. That meant an SUV. Which one? The Ford Excursion was larger than the Suburban, but it had essentially been discontinued by Ford. That meant replacement parts might be hard to get in the future. Suburban it was. New or used? That would be dependent on what was available. So Joe went Suburban shopping.

Being much tighter fisted than he had been in the past, Joe checked the used car places first. There were plenty of Suburban's around. All the large SUV's were falling out of favor, due to fuel prices. But every used Suburban he found was lacking something that couldn't be corrected by aftermarket fixes.

Joe went to the Chevrolet and GMC dealerships. Chevy had one possibility. He went to GMC next. He began to smile. The dealership had a Yukon XL, the GMC equivalent of the Chevy Suburban. It was the previous year's model. It had a diesel engine and it was loaded. That was why it hadn't sold. The dealer was hurting for sales. They had a large SUV inventory and they just weren't selling well. The Yukon XL from the previous year was marked way down.

Joe could negotiate when he wanted to. He wanted to. He negotiated a reduction in price for not taking the factory bumpers and spare tire. He got the price down another fifteen hundred dollars on top of that, and 0.0% financing. He signed the deal.

It did call for a large down payment, but Joe decided it was worth it. It would be the next day before the dealership had the Yukon ready for him. Joe headed for advanced first-aid class, smiling.

While the paperwork for the property was going through, Joe took the Yukon XL from place to place in the city, having a few changes made, and additions done. Joe had what he wanted when he needed to go back to the property to start the process of cutting in a road.

He'd planned to do some of the tree cutting and removal on his own, but found he just didn't have the time. He hired a contractor to cut the access road into the property, and clear an area for the buildings to come. All of the timber was saved for firewood.

In between classes and work, Joe began checking out log home dealers. That's what he wanted to build. On top of a big, deep, basement shelter. In the meantime, Joe had a well drilled and the components for a septic system delivered. Wouldn't matter much what he built. He'd need both water and sewer. And electrical power. He wasn't going to get that from commercial sources either. Not where his property was located. Ditto TV. Telephone. Internet access. All that. But there were ways. He'd already done the research. He put in orders to provide himself with

modern technological wonders for his soon-to-be new house.

It took almost a year, but the installation was complete. Joe began to breathe a bit easier. Nothing major had happened in the two plus years since his experience in the Big Frisco Quake. He'd not only learned much since then, he'd incorporated what he'd learned into his life. He was a full fledged prepper now.

He had a few limitations, and he knew it. He didn't plan on taking any further advanced first-aid courses. He just wasn't cut out to be any type of medical person. He could handle things in an emergency... he'd done that when riding the ambulance as part of the advanced first-aid training. But he didn't want the responsibility of being the one responsible for treating someone badly hurt or seriously ill.

In lieu of additional training, Joe stocked up on first-aid supplies. And not just basic, or even advanced, first-aid supplies. He found a doctor into preparedness. Joe liked her and decided she would be his doctor. After enough routine visits to get a feel for her attitude, Joe approached her to get advanced medical equipment and supplies suggestions. She was fine with that and gave him the advice and several good internet sources from which he could buy them.

It was only in the last month that she had agreed to provide him with prescriptions for 'just-in-case' medications and other supplies for him to stockpile and for her or other professionals to use. In return, he'd given her the location of his house, and the assurance that he would bring in the medications for her to dispose of when they reached the end of their shelf life.

So Joe was ready when Reno was hit with a three day blizzard coming down from the arctic that following February fifteenth. He was at work when the blizzard started. A few people took off early, but Joe worked his full shift and then a double when his scheduled relief didn't show up. It was snowing heavily when he climbed into the Yukon. City, County,

and State DOT were all out in force, trying to keep the roads clear.

Traffic was light. There had been warnings out for two days that it would be a bad one.

At least most people were following the advice to stay at home and stay off the roads. The snow accumulation was almost too much for even the Yukon XL. Despite having Mud & Snow rated tires, Joe put on his chains all around. He still had to stop several times and dig through deep drifts with the snow shovel kept in a mount on the roof rack of the Yukon.

It took him the rest of the day to get to the house. He backed the Yukon into the garage, plugged in the oil pan, battery, and cooling system heaters, and then went inside the house. It was cool inside, but Joe stoked the wood furnace and soon had it comfortable again.

The hours of digging in the snow, on top of a stressful double shift, had Joe exhausted. He puttered around in the greenhouse for a few minutes, to get things for a salad, ate it, and then went to bed.

He was up a few hours later, only a little the worse for wear. Joe had already begun incorporating his LTS food stocks into his daily meal plan. After a hearty breakfast Mountain House ham and eggs, and half a pot of Bigelow Earl Grey tea, Joe bundled up and went to the garage.

The Yukon fired right up. The blizzard was still raging and again Joe had to do some digging through snow drifts to get to where he was going. Scolding himself more than a little for not having done it earlier, Joe pulled into a truck equipment place and bought a snow plow. He got the last adapter that would fit his vehicle, and that was only after some intense searching by the shop staff.

After the plow was installed, and the salesman had shown Joe how to operate it, Joe went in to work early. It was well he did. The dayshift bar

supervisor was adamant about going home early. When Joe offered to take the rest of the shift, Sergio went home, his job intact, though barely.

Though no new customers were coming in to the casino, due to the weather, quite a few were stuck there after their intended departure dates. Business was about equivalent to that on a moderately slow day. Joe talked to his supervisor about rationing the alcohol, but was told to serve it as requested until it ran out. No rationing. Joe nodded. No skin off his nose. Yet, anyway.

Again he pulled his own shift, when it started, as well as the graveyard shift. Graveyard, usually fairly busy, was very slow. Several people, besides the bar supervisor, hadn't shown up for the shift. Everyone that was there was kept busy, despite the slow business.

Sergio showed up late the next morning, but he did show up, fearful of losing his job if he didn't. Joe headed home. It took him several hours to clear his road from the county road to the property. By the time he was at the house, he was an experienced small snow plow operator.

Whistling tunelessly, Joe fixed himself a greenhouse salad and ate it in front of the TV. The satellite dish was working, and he watched the news coverage of the blizzard. It appeared that it would continue for another day. Joe fell asleep in the recliner, but he woke up in time to get to the casino for his shift.

He ran the Yukon with the blade down and turned at an angle to clear the single lane. The snow was diminishing significantly and he made good time. He arrived at the casino, ready for work at the scheduled time. He felt late, because he was usually there a half an hour or more early.

Sergio was chomping at the bit to leave, and did so as soon as Joe appeared, without bothering to brief him on the current situation. Joe made a quick round, talking to all his bartenders and checking stocks.

Unless they got a shipment in, which was doubtful, they'd be running out of a few items.

There was some grumbling, when they did run out of a couple of very popular liquors, but no real trouble. Things were quiet when Shelley showed up for her first graveyard shift in three days. She was unapologetic about her absences. Joe wondered how much longer she would last in the position. It wasn't the first time she'd been on their supervisor's list.

Joe put it out of his mind and went home. Just for the practice, Joe cleared the road again, though he could have made it home without doing so. Tomorrow was Saturday, and Joe didn't have to go in, so he slept later than he usually did.

Much to his surprise, he got a call from his supervisor at the casino. Jean wanted him to work the swing shift today and Sunday, and then take over the dayshift beginning Monday. He actually preferred the swing shift, but cooperation with their wants and needs at the casino had stood him in good stead in the past. He said he'd do it. Jean was on the way up the ladder, and Joe very well could have her current job in the not too distant future.

So, with a sigh, Joe got ready to go in to work. People were digging out from the havoc the blizzard had wrought. He wondered for a moment how he would have fared had he not changed his outlook on life and become a prepper. Probably be like Sergio or Shelley. At least in their inability to get to work. It didn't seem to bother them. Even in the old days, not showing up for work would have bothered him.

He took the time to clear a larger area around the house of snow. Then he parked the plow and disconnected from it. He was at work at his normal time. The airport was open again and there was a lot of activity in the casino. And the casino bars. The delayed deliveries were beginning to show up. Joe was kept hopping both weekend swing shifts.

Come Monday, day shift, things were just about back to normal.

When he got his paycheck for that pay period, he used all the overtime money to increase his holdings of gold and silver coins. He was on a regular buying program anyway, but decided to get a little more with the extra money.

All of his extra money went into preps, actually. Having put down large down payments for the Yukon XL, the property, and the house, his major monthly payments were fairly low. The subscriptions for satellite TV and internet, and cellular phone were nominal.

His heating and cooking fuel was free for the taking for the most part. Wood. He could harvest from his own property, but would only do that for specific building needs. He had permits to harvest deadwood in the National Forest that abutted his property and he took advantage of them.

He was able to haul the wood out with the trailer he'd had made from a wrecked GMC $\frac{3}{4}$ ton truck the same year as his Yukon XL. He'd hired a temp from an agency the previous fall, and using Joe's Husky 570 24" bar chainsaw, they had cut, split, and moved enough wood for two severe weather years. He'd do the same every year until he had ten years worth stockpiled. As a backup, Joe was having a semi-truck load of coal brought in every year. All of the stoves in the house, greenhouse, and garage/shop could burn either wood or coal.

Joe settled into his new shift. It wasn't long and he was in a new position when Jean got her promotion. He took the position and got a hefty salary increase. It all went into preps. Joe thought about some type of conventional retirement plan, but decided to follow his gut and keep prepping.

The one concession he made to conventional economics was to invest in some income producing property. Namely, he found a large corner lot in a growing neighborhood, despite the current slowdown in housing, and

bought it. He financed the construction of a rental quadruplex. As soon as it was finished, he was able to rent all four units.

The income was easily paying for the purchase and construction costs. He decided to continue a program of building quadruplexes for income production, using the previous to finance each succeeding one. He could continue to do that until he had all he wanted, or until he retired.

Assuming, of course, nothing happened to interfere with a conventional retirement. If something did interfere, he had his preps, which he was able to increase with the income stream from the rentals, after the third one was built.

Joe continued the building program in a nearby town, not wanting to put all his eggs in one basket, by having all the quadruplexes in one city. Namely Reno. With his decision to spread out the quadruplexes, he began to think about his single place to hole up if things went bad. He began looking for another piece of property for a bug-out-to retreat.

He finally found a small piece of ground outside of Winnemucca. He decided it was far enough away from Reno to be outside the range of anything that might affect Reno, with a couple of exceptions.

Joe decided to keep it simple. He'd run across an electronic copy of the old Civil Defense Publication MP-15. It had a dual wall, above-ground shelter design in it that he liked. He added a few design features, including enlarging the shelter, and found a contractor willing to build 'the storage shed'.

When the contractor had done his work, Joe bought more concrete blocks and built an interior wall concealing the supplies and equipment he purchased just for the retreat. If anyone did break in, all they would find would be an empty concrete block room. He cached a few items in buried polymer drums so he would have access to them even if someone was in the shelter when he got there.

Among many other things, they contained several smoke grenades that could be used to drive out anyone inside. One of the design features Joe had added was a small access port that could be opened from the outside, specifically to use the smoke grenades. The port could be blocked from the inside, but Joe was confident that no one would discover the port, much less how to block it.

Feeling better and better about his preps, Joe decided it was time to practice with them. He had plenty of vacation time accumulated and decided to take ten days and do a one week bug-in.

Joe found himself somewhat disappointed. He stayed in the shelter, which was off the side of the basement of the house, for seven days. He ate, he slept, he read, he listened to music, he watched DVD's. He didn't have any contact with the outside world for seven days. The photovoltaic power system worked like a charm. The temperature was cool, so he put on a sweater. He needed no extra heat. When he came out everything was the same as it had been when he went into isolation.

He turned on the news while he was making breakfast. It could have been the morning after he'd started the practice run. The same stories were on the news. Except for one. Joe stopped eating and watched the report. The news reader was reporting a story of the buildup of Chinese military forces across the strait from Taiwan, as well as along the entire border of North Korea.

"That doesn't sound good," Joe thought to himself. He watched for a while longer, but there was nothing further on the buildup. He kept an eye on the news for the next couple of days, as he relaxed around the house. On the day he had to go back to work, the Chinese story was in the background.

Now Russia had gone silent. Flights into and out of Russia were cancelled. All forms of electronic communication were down. The borders were sealed. Two days later there were Communist coups in

several of the former Soviet republics. Communication and travel to and from each of them was also cut off.

Taiwan asked for increased military help from the US, fearful of an imminent invasion. South Korea did the same. Japan, too, requested a stronger US presence in the area.

Things seemed quiet in the Middle East, with renewed peace talks on going. The US was conducting a staged withdrawal of troops from Iraq, as sectarian violence lessened dramatically. Both Iran and North Korea were hinting at renewed interest in resuming nuclear non-proliferation talks.

Joe checked and rechecked his preps. He searched the internet any time he wasn't at work, asleep, or eating; looking for anything that could increase his state of preparedness or an indication of an impending attack.

But nothing happened for two weeks and Joe decided he had been nervous about the situation for no good reason. Apparently he hadn't shown much sign of his nervousness during that time. He'd stayed out of the discussions about what was going on overseas. With things seeming to calm down, one of his bartenders, Artie, asked him, out of the blue "Hey, Boss. How come you weren't worried about all this stuff that's been going on? I don't think I've heard you say a word about it."

"Nothing much I can do about it," Joe replied carefully. He liked to keep good relationships with those working under him, but he wasn't about to let anyone know the extent of his preparations.

"I don't know," Artie said. "I went and got a couple cases of tuna. You know. Just in case."

One of the cocktail waitresses was waiting on a drink order and said, "We did that after that big blizzard. Used some of it since then. You

think I should get more?”

Joe stayed silent, but Artie said, “I would. But then again, it really looks like it’s all been a tempest in a teapot.”

“What do you think?” Bella asked Joe.

“I’d get it,” he replied. “Don’t see what it would hurt.”

“Do you keep a good pantry?” Bella asked then. “I know you live out somewhere in the boonies. Though you were here every day during that blizzard.”

“Have to, where I am. I was just lucky I was able to get back and forth during the blizzard.” Joe didn’t like where the conversation was going and was about to excuse himself and head for one of the other bars to check.

But just what he was trying to avoid happened. Artie grinned and said, “Knowing you have that pantry, if anything happens and I run out of food, I’ll head for your place.”

At the sour look on Joe’s face, Bella laughed and said, “Me, too.”

Joe shook his head and left. That’s all it had taken for them to think of his place as a refuge and supply point. One little conversation. They’d forget all about it until something happened... if something happened. Then it might come back to them. And they might act on it. Joe shook his head again.

When he came into the city for work the next day he came early and stopped at his buyer’s club store. He picked up two cases of tuna, two of Spam, four of Macaroni & Cheese, two large packages of toilet paper, and ten cases of bottled water. He’d share. But on his terms.

World tensions diminished, but Joe stayed on his guard. There was still nothing from Russia or the Republics. China was withdrawing some troops from the border areas. It was a very slow withdrawal, however.

The White House was deluged with even more reporters than normal during the period. The most common question, “Is war coming?” basically got the “No Comment” reply from everyone that was in a position to know.

Others, however, speculated wildly. The opinions ran the gamut of this just being an ordinary event to calls for a pre-emptive nuclear strike on Russia, the Republics, and China.

Joe knew exactly how lucky he was when China and Russia announced they had just signed documents creating a Russian/Chinese alliance. China immediately launched invasion forces toward Taiwan. Another wave headed for Japan. China lent immediate help to North Korea when it invaded South Korea.

Russia also announced it had been returned to Communist control and was actively rebuilding the Soviet Union.

Russia and China both announced that the battle would go nuclear if the United States or any of her allies tried to intercede in China’s or Russia’s activities.

For eighteen days Joe watched the news and waited with the rest of the world to see what would happen. The North Koreans took Seoul about the same time the Chinese gained foothold on the western coast of Japan.

Frisco Lessons – Chapter 2

Business at the casino was almost non-existent. Joe took the offered layoff, with guarantee of rehire when business picked back up. He lost no time heading home. He'd barely parked the Yukon XL in the garage when his cellular telephone rang. It only rang twice and then stopped before Joe could answer it.

After flipping one of the hidden switches under the lift up console between the front seats, Joe got out of the Yukon and locked it and set the alarm. He was confident no one, if they even found the Yukon XL and tried to steal it, would be able to get it started. The switch he'd flipped disabled the engine.

Going inside, Joe immediately went to the shelter. A control panel assembly with 19 inch rack mount subassemblies in it was sitting on the desk that also held his communication equipment. He flipped several switches on one of the panels. They tripped relays that isolated each section of the PV electrical system from each other. He wasn't sure it would prevent the system from being fried by EMP, but it was all he knew to do to protect his solar roof array. It was working when he shut it down. Hopefully it would work when he turned it back on.

The communications gear was mounted in another assembly. It was a large faraday cage with a removable front panel. Joe made sure it was secure and all the antenna leads grounded. He opened the cabinet next to the desk. It contained additional electronics, and was built as a faraday cage as well. He took out a small hand crank radio and quickly closed and latched the door of the cabinet.

He would listen to the news on the small radio, a small jumper wire connecting the built-in antenna to a short long-wire antenna that ran outside the shelter and up the side of the house. Joe listened for a while. There was wild speculation about what would happen. No information was coming in from the areas of combat anymore. Unhooking the antenna lead and grounding it, Joe went over everything in the shelter with a fine toothed comb. Nothing had changed, just as he knew. He just

needed something to keep him busy.

Every hour on the hour Joe would check the radio. He was napping when something woke him up. He glanced at his watch. It was 8:45 AM. Joe tried the radio again. All he got was static. He checked frequency after frequency. Nothing but static. Disconnecting the antenna out of habit, Joe then checked the CD V-717 remote reading fallout meter. Nothing.

Joe went outside and looked around. And there it was when he looked toward Reno. The famous mushroom cloud. He could see the lightning flashes in it. It was still growing. Joe watched it for a few moments, and then came to his senses and headed back for the shelter.

He watched the CD V-717. The needle finally moved. Joe noted the time and reading on a form attached to a clipboard lying beside the meter. The winds were strong and from the west, as they often are in Reno. Joe didn't get that much fallout. He was out of the shelter after two weeks.

Joe had been monitoring the Amateur Radio bands since the static had started to fade. He wasn't finding anything yet.

He checked the Yukon XL. It started right up, to his surprise. He'd never taken the EMP protection steps he'd half planned. Either EMP had been less of a danger than some had stated, or the thin metal sheathing he'd applied to the inside of the garage had worked as a giant faraday cage and protected the SUV. Either way, he was glad he still had a good ride.

The PV system batteries had been fully charged when he disconnected the component parts. He reconnected the inverter to the batteries while in the shelter and drawn power the entire two weeks without drawing down the batteries too much. He put the PV panels back in the circuit and the meter showed an immediate flow of power. The PV panels had survived the EMP, too.

For another week he stayed close to the place, doing the small amount of decontamination needed. Despite the low levels, Joe used one of the Tyvek hooded and booted coveralls, with heavy nitrile gloves, rubber boots, and Millennium CBRN respirator. He wasn't going to take any chances.

He'd lost a few things in the greenhouse, for lack of attention, and possibly from the radiation, though he couldn't really tell. Joe finally decided he should check around outside his own little area of operations.

Joe checked over the Yukon XL again, and went through his vehicle BOB. He really didn't know what to expect and decided not to go obviously armed. He would have long arms in the Yukon, but would only carry one of the Glock 21's in an Andrew's Leather Monarch shoulder holster rig with off-side carrier for three magazines and a Cold Steel Counter Tac II. He'd carry the Glock 30 in a Bianchi ankle holster.

He had been in the habit of keeping the Yukon as full of fuel as possible, refilling the tanks whenever he dropped to three-quarters full. He had a total capacity, in three tanks, of over a hundred gallons. He was only down by ten percent but Joe refueled from his thousand gallon underground diesel tank.

Joe drove cautiously. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary until he got to the main road. That's where he saw the first stalled out cars. And car crashes, both single car and multiple car. And bodies. It was a strain on him not to pull over and puke his guts out, but he managed to control the urge.

When he hit Interstate 80 it was much the same, except worse. There were vastly more abandoned vehicles, crashes, and bodies. There were several points where Joe had to put the Yukon in four wheel drive and go off the pavement to get around blockages.

He was keeping an eye on the CD V-715 meter in the seat beside him

and when the radiation level began to climb he stopped in a likely spot and turned the Yukon around. Time to quit looking and start doing something productive.

Joe had brought his CBRN gear with him and suited up. He began checking each of the vehicles as he came to them on his way back to the house. He found very little in the cars. Joe decided they were just ordinary people doing ordinary things when the attack came and EMP disabled their vehicles.

Most of the vehicles were abandoned and he wondered where the people were. Those vehicles that weren't abandoned held bodies in extended states of decomposition. Joe was thankful for his protective gear. He checked everything on his way back to the house and collected a few useful items.

He had a good pair of bolt cutters with him and had no trouble getting into the semi trailers he came upon. Most were carrying hardware of one type or another. He found one reefer trailer loaded with now thawed and spoiled frozen food. The trailer cooling system had run out of fuel. "What a waste," Joe muttered and closed the doors of the trailer.

Anxiously, Joe came up to the semi tanker with pup that he'd passed on the way in toward Reno. He climbed out of the Yukon and clambered up the ladder of the pup to get to the tank hatches. He opened one compartment hatch and discovered the tank was full. He couldn't tell what it was until he cracked the seal on the respirator and took a slight whiff. Gasoline. The second compartment of the pup also held gasoline. Three thousand gallons total.

When he checked the lead trailer he found diesel fuel. Seven thousand gallons of it total in the several compartments the tank trailer had. Joe assumed it was a delivery for Reno from a California refinery or bulk plant.

Joe took a few minutes to try to start the engine of the semi-tractor. No luck. Joe didn't waste time fretting about the possibility of losing the fuel. He continued his search. He tried each of the semis he found. None would start. He did note one semi with an equipment trailer that was carrying some construction equipment. He stared at it for several long moments, an idea shaping up in the back of his mind. It wouldn't jell, and he moved on.

When he got back to the house somewhat after dark, he put the Yukon and its load of scavenged goods in the garage. He'd unload in the morning. He ate a hasty supper and went to bed in the shelter. Though the radiation was low enough to be outside, Joe thought it wiser to sleep in the shelter to minimize what radiation he did receive.

He woke up a little after three in the morning. He'd been dreaming about the tanker load of fuel, and a plan on how to salvage it came to him. He fell back asleep smiling.

The next morning after his breakfast and a check of the Amateur Bands, Joe unloaded the Yukon and put the items away. When he came to one set of the guns he'd found, he wondered again about the situation that had put them into his hands.

When he found them, it appeared that there had been some type of shoot out. There were a dozen dead bodies with what looked like bullet holes in them. Half of them clutched weapons of one sort or another and there was empty brass lying all around them and the vehicles behind which they'd apparently taken cover.

He'd surmised the direction they'd been firing from the way the bodies were situated and went looking for more bodies. He found them. Four dead with bullet wounds. There was a lot of empty brass around, but no weapons. This group apparently had won the battle, and the survivors had left with the weapons of their fallen companions. Joe shook his head. He'd never know what happened for sure. But the thought didn't

keep him from taking the weapons and accoutrements.

Joe shook his head and added the weapons to his small armory in the shelter. The rest of the scavenged goods put away, Joe checked the Hatz diesel powered ROKON bike parked out of the way in one corner of the garage. He checked the fluids. Everything was up to snuff, including fuel. The ROKON started right up and Joe drove it outside and let it warm up a bit while he dressed for the occasion.

Again he suited up in CBRN gear and strapped on the Glock 21 and Glock 30. He strapped his 72-hour BOB on the back of the bike and then straddled the ROKON. He advanced the accelerator and headed out to recover the fuel tank trailers.

He went to the truck that was carrying the construction equipment. He tried the truck engine again, just in case. It still wouldn't start. No matter. Joe had a plan. He unfolded the ramps on the back of the trailer, not without some difficulty, and climbed aboard the old Caterpillar D6 crawler tractor with bulldozer blade.

It took him several minutes to figure out how to start the thing, but he finally hit the right combination and the engine turned over. A little more sure of himself, Joe tried again. The engine caught and began to run, though rather roughly. Joe hoped it would smooth out while he was un-chaining the thing.

The D6 was idling smoothly when he climbed aboard several minutes later. Again Joe took some time to familiarize himself with which control did what. Gingerly he began to back the D6 off the trailer. He didn't have the bulldozer blade high enough and came to a screeching halt when the blade caught on the ramps when he was halfway off. Lifting the blade, he finished backing the D6 until he was clear of the trailer.

A few minutes later and the ROKON was chained up on the back of the

D6 and Joe was headed toward the tanker. He stopped at another semi-truck pulling two short trailers and a dolly for a third trailer.

It was much more of a struggle than he anticipated disconnecting the dolly from the trailer and getting it turned around so he could connect it to the D6. The D6 didn't have a pintle hitch, so Joe used another tie-down chain to securely attach the dolly tongue to it. It wasn't a perfect setup, but Joe was able to again head for the tanker truck, the dolly trailing behind the D6.

When he got to the tanker truck, Joe halted the D6 and let it idle while he lowered the landing gear of the front trailer. He released the king pin in the fifth-wheel of the truck. Much to his disappointment, he had to release the dolly behind the Cat so he could maneuver well enough to pull the dead truck out from under the trailer and out of the way.

Joe knew he had to hurry. It wasn't a good idea to leave a loaded trailer on its landing gear. But it took Joe quite a bit of time to struggle the dolly under the trailer. He took a long rest and then chained the dolly back to the D6.

Smiling, he climbed back onto the Cat and put it in gear. The trailers moved, but the tires made a squealing sound. Joe had forgotten about the trailer brakes needing air to release them. He said a couple of bad words and climbed down from the Cat. Crawling under the lead trailer Joe studied the brake system.

"There," he said aloud after a while. If he could find the correct size wrench, he could back off the brakes manually. He had a Leatherman Surge with him, but it just wasn't stout enough to do the job.

Joe searched the truck again, as well as the D6. He couldn't find anything that would work. After shutting off the D6 and taking down the ROKON, Joe headed back to the house to get some tools.

It took him almost two hours and he was sweating bullets, hoping no one would come upon the rig and take it before he could get back to it. He breathed a sigh of relief when everything was just the same as he'd left it when he got back to the site.

Getting the right wrench, Joe backed off the brakes of both the lead trailer and the pup. That done, he chained the ROKON back up, this time on the pup in a handy place. The Cat running again, Joe put it in gear. The trailers rolled along behind, sedately. Leaving a somewhat weaving path behind, not completely due to maneuvering around blockages, Joe took the trailers home. It was dark when he got there and he shut down the Cat.

Joe had his untouched lunch for supper and fell into bed. Handling that dolly by hand had probably not been a good idea. How he felt the next morning confirmed the thought. He dug out a bottle of one of the pain killers for which Dr. Jacobson had given him prescriptions. He took two tablets to ease the pain and wondered idly what might have happened to her.

Far from an expert dozer man, Joe took four days to dig a trench with the Cat long enough to bury the trailers two-thirds of the way up the sides. After he pulled the trailers into the trench, he used the D6 to mound the dug out dirt up and over them, leaving uncovered the access hatches. Since he'd propped up the tongue of the dolly when he'd unhooked it from the Cat, he didn't have much trouble re-connecting to it.

Joe rested up for a couple of days, taking it easy to allow his body to recover from the effort extended getting the fuel. He monitored the radios occasionally, still not hearing much. After the two days Joe began the scavenging operation again. He finally found a working semi truck and could more easily move the trailer, when he found one that had something in it he wanted. If it was just a few items he would bring the Yukon and trailer, and just transfer items.

It took almost a month to get everything he wanted from the strip of Interstate 80 he was comfortable of scavenging. The semi truck had not run well, even though Joe had been able to start it. He went to start it for one last semi load, but it wouldn't start. He did everything he knew, but wasn't able to get it going again. He used the Yukon XL and trailer to move the contents of that last load.

He'd seen no one in that time. But there had been some signs of people doing the same thing he was, except on a much smaller scale. He noticed that some of the vehicles he'd gone over were being disturbed. When he looked closely, he discovered that jewelry, wallets, and even clothing were being taken from the dead.

He stayed at home for another month, sorting and storing the items he'd scavenged. He always went armed when outside and kept a sharp lookout, as well. He finally began to hear some Amateur Radio traffic, mostly on the HF bands. There were definitely other survivors. But he still hadn't heard anyone locally.

One of the trucks he'd scavenged had been carrying a load of Radio Shack products. He used several of the remote mount cameras to set up a video surveillance system, with sound, around the house and property using a computer with motion sensing software. He got the occasional false alarm, but they were infrequent enough that he checked each one and didn't downgrade the movement limit for sounding an alarm.

It was the alarm triggered on one of the cameras monitoring the road onto the property that gave Joe his first indication of local survivors. The small group of people he was seeing was obviously not military. The fact that there were children with them gave Joe no indication of whether or not they would be friendly. Each person was carrying a suitcase or a backpack.

When the group was close to one of the cameras, Joe pressed the

intercom button and said. "I have you under surveillance. Who are you and what do you want?"

"Joe? Is that you, Joe?"

"Who are you and what do you want?" Joe repeated.

"It's me, Joe! Artie! Bella is with me. You've got to help us, man! We're starving and one of the Reno gangs is after us."

Joe thought long and hard before he triggered the intercom again and said, "Come on up to the house. We'll talk. But I'm not making any promises." He left the shelter and went up to the front door of the log house. He had grabbed the Remington 11-87P on his way up.

He opened the door and held the shotgun casually, as the group approached. "Hold it," he said when they got to the porch steps. "Any one of you armed?"

There was some stirring within the group, and then one of the men in back said, "I have a shotgun."

One of the women said, "I have a pistol."

"You're going to have to leave them out here if you want to come in."

There was some whispered conversation among those in the group, but it didn't last long. The weapons were produced and the owners set them down on the porch by the steps. "Okay," Joe said. "Come in."

He stepped back, still holding the shotgun, and the eleven members of the group came inside. It was trying to snow and had turned cold the previous night. Seeing the heater vent, several of the group, with less clothing than some of the others, moved over to it and began to warm themselves.

Joe spotted Artie immediately, but he had a hard time recognizing Bella. She looked much the worse for wear, he thought. It was only when she spoke that he recognized her. “Joe, do you have any food? The children are hungry. We’re all starving. Please?”

As much as he wanted to tell them to just move on, Joe couldn’t do it. “In the kitchen,” he said. “You can tell me your story while we fix something to eat.”

Keeping a wary eye on them, Joe set the shotgun close to hand, and began getting things out to make macaroni and cheese with tuna and sweet peas. A couple of the women stepped forward and pretty much took over the preparations. Joe answered their quiet questions while he listened to Artie and Bella tell of their experiences since the war.

Except Artie asked a question first, that Joe ignored. “How much food do you have?”

“Tell me what happened,” Joe replied.

“Well, since I didn’t have enough money to take the lay-off, like you did, I was at the casino when the bombs came.”

Joe didn’t correct him that it had probably been missile warheads that had hit the US, not bombs.

“Some of us, when we figured it out what happened, went down to the deepest basement under the casino.” Artie looked over at Bella. “Bella was working too, and she was one of us that took over the basement for shelter. Some of the security people had guns and we were able to keep enough other people out, that we had room for those of us that got there first.”

Joe felt a tightening of his gut, but said nothing.

“When those trying to get inside finally left... to look for other shelter, I guess... some of us went up and raided the different kitchens for food and water.”

“It was terrible,” Bella said. “There wasn’t enough food for everyone, and there weren’t any toilets.”

“No blankets or cots, either,” one of the others interjected.

Joe nodded.

“The only thing we had enough of was water. One of the main pipes went through that basement and we could get water from it until the day we left. Actually, that is why we left.”

“How long after the... ‘bomb’?”

“Nine days,” Bella said. “Nine terrible days.”

“It was just as bad outside,” Artie continued. “Some of the buildings close to our casino were down, and it was hard to move through the debris. But we left the area with the worst damage and began to look for food. Some people went off on their own and never came back. I don’t know if they found stuff or not.

“From what happened to us, they probably got killed. All the security people were with us and the children. We got shot at, but security ran them off.”

Bella took up the tale. “But we weren’t finding enough good food to stay very long in one place. And we kept getting shot at. They finally killed one of the security officers, and it got worse after that. We had to move every couple of days, even if we found some good food somewhere.

“Some of us wanted to break off from the others, but it just seemed too dangerous.”

There was a lull, and Joe asked, “How’d you wind up with five children? There were hardly ever children in the casino.”

“Two couples from De Moines, Iowa were on vacation. Two of the kids are from one of the families and the other three from the other. They just happened to be there when we headed for the basement.”

Artie and Bella looked at one another, and then Artie continued. “The two husbands got killed in the fighting in the basement. Both of the mothers disappeared looking for food when we got out. We took a vote and it was decided to keep the children with us.”

The way he had worded it, Joe was immediately certain that Artie hadn’t voted to keep the children and take care of them. He looked at Bella. Joe couldn’t tell, but he had the suspicion that she might not have, either. The children were staying close to the other four adults.

“Go on,” Joe prompted.

“Well, we decided to keep moving, trying to stay away from the gang that was after us,” Bella said.

Then Artie excitedly said, “Then I thought of you! You’d said that time that Bella should get some food put by. I figured you said that because you did it. We’ve been trying to find you ever since. Finally found where you’ve been going in and out.”

Artie’s eyes narrowed. “What have you been doing, going in and out so much?”

“Looking around,” Joe said evenly. “Trying, like you, to find food.”

“You must have gas and a car that works,” Bella said, rather hopefully.

“We want to go south, before the winter gets here for real. I’ve read about nuclear winter,” Artie said then. He was still watching Joe closely. “If we can use your car, you can come with us.”

“I’m fine here. I can give you some food for your journey.”

“We need your car,” one of the others said. He looked at the children. They had gathered together watching the two women prepare the food. “For the children,” he added, looking back at Joe.

The oldest child, a girl, looked to be fourteen or fifteen. She had been watching Joe out of the corners of her eyes. “Can we stay here with you?” she suddenly asked Joe.

“Honey,” Bella said, “we want to go south. You remember.”

Joe didn’t like the tone. He was beginning to get suspicious.

“You can go,” said one of the younger children. Perhaps eight. “We want to stay. He has real food.”

“No,” Artie said firmly. “We’re all going.” He turned back to Joe. “Look, Joe... I never thought I’d have to suggest this... But we can pay you for the food and the car. We have plenty of cash. And jewelry, if you want. Lots of it.”

Joe suddenly decided he knew where the scavenged jewelry and wallets were. “I’ve got a week’s worth of food to spare. You can have that. You don’t have to pay me.”

“What about the car?” Bella asked.

“It stays here,” Joe said.

Artie studied Joe for several long moments, and then looked at the children again. “Tell you what, Joe. We’ll give the children to you. Look at Cynthia. She’s ripe for the picking. And Twilla will be before too long.”

The two girls mentioned hugged one another and looked fearfully at Artie.

“I don’t think so, Artie,” Joe said coldly. “Oh, the children are staying here. But none of the rest of you are.” He reached over to pick up the shotgun again.

At Joe’s motion, Artie said, “Bob! Take him!”

Joe’s eyes cut to the man that was suddenly reaching around behind his back. Moving quickly, Joe grabbed the shotgun, changing position as he did so. It was all over in seconds. Bob lost the quick draw contest. Joe fired the shotgun a fraction of a second before Bob cleared his coat with the pistol he was drawing.

“Out!” Joe said, including the two women just finishing up with the food.” The shotgun covered all the adults. “You guys move on back out of the way,” Joe told the children.

The other man made a move to try to grab one of the children, but Joe put the shotgun on him and the man backed off. Artie and the others began backing toward the front door of the house, watching Joe like hawks.

“What about the food?” Bella asked, her voice cracking.

“You gave up the right to any food when you used the kids for bargaining chips,” replied Joe.

“Artie did that. Not me! Please! We’re so hungry!”

The third man started to bend down and retrieve the weapons on the porch when the group moved outside.

“Oh, no,” Joe said. “They stay behind.”

“You can’t do that!” screamed one of the women.

“I can and I am. I suggest you all take off running before I change my mind and just put you down like the rabid dogs you’ve become.”

The other man growled and said, “I’ll get you!”

Joe didn’t hesitate. He pulled the trigger of the shotgun. The buckshot charge hit the man in the center of his chest, killing him instantly. The others took Joe at his word and ran away. He’d worry about them later if they came back.

He had enough to worry about now. Five children, aged nine to fifteen. Cynthia was fifteen, Twilla fourteen, Gary twelve, Tommy ten, and Sissy nine. Cynthia and Tommy were brother and sister. Twilla, Gary, and Sissy were the other family.

They were totally ignoring the dead man in the kitchen and were eating the mac, cheese, and tuna ravenously. They stopped eating when Joe entered the room, but only for a moment. “Are they gone?” asked Cynthia.

When Joe nodded all five children went back to eating. Joe could only shake his head and go get a tarp from the garage. He used it to drag both bodies out to the edge of the forest. He would bury them the next day.

Joe went back inside. Much to his surprise, all five children were helping with the cleanup. Not only of the meal, but the mess on the floor

where the dead man had lain.

When they saw Joe the five of them huddled together. “Thanks, mister,” Cynthia said. “But did you do that just to get me and Twilla? If you did, we’ll kill you in your sleep.”

Her words were soft and matter-of-fact, but Joe saw the glint in her eyes. “No. I have no intention of harming any of you.”

“What’s going to happen to us now?” asked Sissy. “I’m scared. I don’t want to go out in the cold again.” She started to cry.

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you want,” Joe said, squatting down to speak to her eye-to-eye. “I don’t know much about taking care of kids, but if you help me, I’ll do my best.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Tommy said.

“Me, too,” Twilla said.

Joe showed the children where the bathrooms were. The three girls disappeared into one, and the boys took turns in another. Joe was finishing the cleanup in the kitchen when the children returned.

“Can we go to bed now?” Cynthia asked.

Joe was surprised. It was still early afternoon. “So early?” he asked.

“We get really tired,” Twilla replied.

Joe felt a tightening in his gut. “Were you all sick, earlier? After you left the shelter?”

Cynthia nodded. “Yeah. But only for a couple of days. Everyone was.”

Trying not to be obvious about it, Joe studied each of the children in turn, looking particularly at their heads. All five had obvious loss of hair. Only time would tell, but Joe was afraid they had picked up heavy doses of radiation since they had left their shelter.

“Sure, you can go to bed now, if you want. Grab your bags and I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.” They followed Joe down into the basement and then into the shelter. It took a little while to arrange bedding for all of them.

“We aren’t staying in the bedrooms?” asked Cynthia. “The house has bedrooms, doesn’t it?”

“It does. But I think it’s still safer to be in the shelter.”

“You think they’ll come back?” Twilla asked.

“No,” replied Joe. “I was thinking of the radiation from the fallout.”

“But it stopped weeks ago,” said Cynthia. “They told us everything was okay, now.”

“I just don’t like taking chances,” Joe replied. He didn’t want to alarm them, but Joe was worried about the radiation levels to which they had been exposed. Not only had they been out of shelter much longer than had he, the levels to which they had been exposed had to have been much higher, as close to the detonation as they had been.

Yes. Only time would tell if they survived the exposure. Joe would do what he could, but it wasn’t in his hands.

Two weeks later Sissy became too weak to stand. And so it went, by body weight, each of the children succumbed to the radiation they had experienced. After Sissy and Tommy had died, and Gary had fallen ill, Cynthia and Twilla came to Joe.

“It’s the radiation sickness, isn’t it?” Cynthia said. “Gary is going to die and then Twilla and me. Aren’t we?”

Joe couldn’t keep the tears from streaking his face. He couldn’t meet their eyes. “I don’t know,” he mumbled. “It’s... possible... but... there is still hope.”

The two just turned around and went to the shelter. As hard as he tried, he couldn’t get either girl to eat anything, or even drink water. They both died shortly after Gary, just a few days later. Joe buried the children, in a pretty spot in the forest, well away from where he had buried the two men he had shot.

He didn’t eat much himself for several days and just moped around the place listlessly, wondering whether or not he should try to go on. The decision was almost made for him. Joe was just standing and staring at the Yukon XL on a clear morning a few days after he had buried Cynthia. Just staring at the Yukon and wondering about all the things he’d done to it. Maybe it had all been a waste of money and time.

Joe felt the bite of the bullet in his right leg and heard the sound of a shot. He didn’t think. He reacted, the way he’d trained. He went to the ground and rolled behind the Yukon. Scanning the road and forest in that direction. He didn’t see anything. Joe took a quick look at the little hole in his Cabela’s whipcord pants. Red was oozing from the hole and it stung. He reached behind his leg. Another hole and more warm wetness.

Checking all around again, Joe got up into a crouch drawing a Glock 21 from under his jacket. He breathed deeply a couple of times and then burst into a sprint toward the back of the house. Three shots rang out, but Joe didn’t feel any more impacts.

He slipped in the snow and fell, but was up in an instant. Joe hustled through the back door and into the house. He went down the steps into

the basement and over to one of the windows high in the basement wall. Three men were running toward the house, crouched down, staying near the forest on both sides of the road.

Joe popped the window out, one of the special features he'd built into the house, took careful aim, and fired at the men. They dove into the forest and Joe hurried into the shelter, returning a few moments later with a scoped PTR-91, musette bag of loaded magazines, and a pair of Steiner Commander V binoculars. He did a quick search with the binoculars of the forest at the point the men had disappeared.

When he had a fix on one of the men, lying down beside a tree trunk, he eased up the PTR, sighted, and pulled the trigger. The man flopped slightly and Joe was pretty sure he hit him. He scanned the area again. It was some time before he spotted more movement. He sighted the PTR again and fired. He fired rapidly again, and then a third time when the target started moving after the first shot.

Joe heard two shots and the impacts of projectiles on the exposed concrete of the basement near the window from which he was shooting. He quickly changed windows and began searching again with the binoculars.

When he saw the second man he'd shot at struggle to his feet and head away from the house, Joe drew a careful bead and put a bullet in the back of the man's head. Joe checked the first man he'd shot. The man hadn't moved.

Another shot hit the basement wall and Joe caught the muzzle flash out of the corner of his eyes. He concentrated his binocular search in that area. He saw movement twice, but couldn't get sighted in before the man disappeared again. He gave up the binoculars and began to use the riflescope to do the searching.

He saw movement again and pumped three quick rounds into the tree

behind which the man had jumped. Joe saw the body fall out away from the tree. He maintained a vigil for the rest of the day, checking both sides of the house and the rear occasionally, while keeping most of his attention on the front. He took time to wrap a pair of Best Glide trauma bandages on his wounds. One for the entry point and one on the exit wound.

When it started to get dark Joe went into the shelter and then outside through the escape tunnel that was part of the shelter installation. After doing a thorough search around the back of the property and the sides and not finding any tracks, Joe headed for the area where he'd seen the men.

He went past where he thought they were and looked for tracks, hoping he would find only three sets. Joe breathed a sigh of relief when that was exactly what he found. He followed the path they had taken while together and found the empty cartridge case of the shot that had hit him. Joe shook his head. He'd been lucky they'd attempted the kill at such a distance and the shooter hadn't been any better than he'd proven to be.

Joe found the man he'd killed first. A clean shot through the top of the left shoulder into the chest. The second man had a through and through wound in his shoulder. The shot that had killed him was a through and through as well. Through the skull.

The third man was still alive, but barely. All three of the 7.62mm rounds had penetrated the tree and then, tumbling, entered the stomach and groin of the man. He was a bloody mess. The only thing he could seem to move were his eyes. He was looking right at Joe when Joe drew the Glock and put a .45 ACP round through his forehead.

Joe was exhausted, and his leg was paining him, when he finally put the last of the items he'd recovered from the men into storage. The bodies would have to wait a few days. He put the Yukon back into the garage, locked it, and set the alarm, doing the same to the garage. And again the

same with the house. When things were locked down, Joe went into the shelter, ate a small meal, immediately threw it up, and went to bed, still dressed.

The throbbing in his leg woke him the next morning. He downed a couple of painkillers and then stripped the bandages and his clothes off. He took a shower in the shelter bathroom, and then, first-aid kit at hand, did what he knew he should have done the evening before.

After cleaning the wounds with Providone/Iodine prep pads, he bandaged them again. It wasn't an easy task doctoring the exit wound. He had included a mirror in the first-aid kit for such a situation, but it was still difficult. And it was painful, even with the painkiller taking effect. Joe took an antibiotic, and lay back down, already exhausted.

It was some time before he got up again to eat and check the surveillance cameras. It was snowing heavily. Joe kept checking, between naps, but really didn't expect anyone to show up in the middle of a snow storm. But he checked anyway.

He counted himself lucky when he'd gone through a full cycle of the antibiotic with no sign of infection in the wound. The entry and exit holes were still puckered, but the wound seemed to be healing from the inside out, which was what Joe wanted. He'd live with scars.

For a month Joe did little except tend the greenhouse garden, clear the PV panels of snow, and recuperate. He also continued to monitor commercial radio broadcast, public service, shortwave, and Amateur Radio frequencies. He wasn't getting anything on AM or FM broadcast radio or on the public service bands. Once in a while he'd run across a shortwave station, but they faded in and out and he wasn't able to glean anything useable from them. He was hearing some Amateurs talking from time to time, but nothing local.

The harsh winter lasted until mid-March. There had been no more visits

from anyone. The attack had decided Joe that giving up wasn't for him. He decided to go exploring.

Frisco Lessons – Chapter 3

Joe took a week to get ready. He moved everything of value that he could to the shelter, and the rest went in the basement. He repacked his various BOB's for the journey, as well as doing a minor rearrange in the Yukon.

Like the Yukon, the trailer had three underbody fuel tanks totaling a little over a hundred gallons. Also like the Yukon, there were four 20-liter jerry cans of diesel on a swing away rack on the rear bumper. With the transfer tank and tool box combination in the trailer, that gave Joe well over three-hundred gallons of diesel fuel. There were four twenty-liter cans of gasoline in the trailer, as well as four cans of water.

Joe had incorporated top of the line security shutters on all the doors and windows of the log house. He closed and locked them that Monday and was ready to go. He didn't go far, however. Just to the densest portion of the forest flanking his road. It was about a half way between the county road and the house.

After he had unloaded the ROKON from the trailer, Joe took his Husky 570 chainsaw with 24" bar into the forest. He cut down six trees, taking them from various points in the forest. With the ROKON, he skidded each one of them to the road and placed them in a modified form of an abatis.

It wouldn't stop any determined attempt to remove, but it might give someone pause. It might also fool those not studied in defensive measures into believing the fall was natural, since they had to take apart

the abatis before they could see the cut ends of the trees and with no signs of travel might also believe it was uninhabited past it. It was part of the reason Joe had picked a rainy day to leave. The rain would wash away the recent evidence of travel.

With the ROKON and chainsaw stowed once again, Joe climbed into the driver's seat of the Yukon XL and was off to see the wizard.

He headed west when he got to I-80, though his line of travel was to be east. He couldn't figure another way to get around Reno. He wasn't going to go through it, due to the lingering radiation. It took him three days of using back roads after he got to Truckee, to get to US 50. It was in decent shape and he made good time up to Fernley, where he picked up I-80 again.

Joe stopped whenever he saw friendly looking people. He gathered quite a bit of information when he stopped in Truckee, about the status of things west of them. It wasn't good. I-80 had been a major evacuation route from the west coast. There were millions of people trying to get away from the attack, and fears of further attacks and invasion of the west coast.

"Invasion?" Joe asked. It was the first he'd heard of it. None of the Amateur Radio Operators he'd heard had mentioned it.

The man he was talking to laughed and shook his head. "Who'd want it now? It was just wild rumors." His smile faded. "Got a lot of people killed though, believing it to be true. Some of them got as far as here. Weren't no more gas to be found. The evacuation kind of petered out here."

That would explain why he hadn't seen more people at his place, Joe decided.

"Lot of killing went on," the man continued, apparently quite pleased to

have someone to whom he could tell his tale, that hadn't already heard it several times.

“Over gas and food, mostly. But they were desperate. Some of those that could, killed at the drop of a hat. Seen it myself a couple of times.” He shook his head. “Over nothin’.”

Joe asked, “How have you guys making out?”

The friendly look faded from the man's face. “Don't talk much of that. Particularly to strangers.”

Joe quickly nodded. “I understand. Word gets to the wrong ears, and then... you never know. I guess I should be moving along.”

“Perhaps so, stranger. If word got back to us you been telling tales, it won't go good for you.”

“Don't worry. I'm in the same boat. Wouldn't want it known I'm traveling about. Might give people the wrong idea.”

The man's grin was back. “Yes, sir. It might at that. Mum's the word.”

“Thank you.” Joe slipped the Yukon back into gear and left the small town. He found a good place to stop and eat his evening meal. It didn't take long to heat up water on his single burner multi-fuel camp stove he set up on the open tailgate of the trailer and reconstitute a Mountain House camping entree.

After the quick meal, he traveled another mile or two, until he found a place he could turn off the road and park the Yukon and trailer where they couldn't be seen from it. Joe took a turn around the area, and then set up camp when nothing looked out of the ordinary.

It was still early spring and the nights were cold in the mountains. Joe

set up his Mountain Hardwear Trango 3.1 tent and laid out the Thermarest sleep pad and the Slumberjack Quallofill sleeping bag.

He had a Thetford chemical toilet and a privacy enclosure in the trailer, but just used the forest as a bathroom, burying his waste with a Cold Steel Special Forces shovel.

With the alarm set on the Yukon XL, Joe crawled into the tent and went to bed, one of the Glock 21's at hand.

Joe continued his trip on the old road between Truckee and King's Beach on Lake Tahoe. It was rough going in places. Twice he had to take the long handled, round point shovel from its bracket on the full length cargo rack atop the Yukon XL and do a little dirt work to make the road passable.

At another spot Joe used the 12' x 16" aluminum ramps, also carried on the roof rack, to bridge a two foot deep, three foot wide gap in the pavement that had been washed away. He could have gone through a lot of trouble going down off the road and around, but handling the ramps, even at 115 pounds each, was much easier and faster.

Joe drove around Fernley a bit after he got there, but didn't see anyone. He did see signs of survivors, but it seemed no one was willing to show themselves. Getting back on I-80, Joe continued the trip. He checked a few vehicles and trucks. They'd already been scavenged. He was a little leery of scavenging in someone else's territory, anyway.

Despite the risk of scavenging, when Joe began to find untouched vehicles, he couldn't resist the urge. The area apparently was too far out of range for those in Fernley, and it was still quite a distance to Lovelock. He took very little, except for arms and ammunition. He did make a note of everything that might be useable to a group of survivors.

He could use the information for trading purposes or even as good faith

offering. He ran across another fuel tanker with fuel still in it and topped off the tanks in the trailer. He was transferring fuel from the trailer to the Yukon every evening to keep its tanks near full in case he had to leave the trailer.

Joe took his time, keeping a sharp eye out for problems. Natural or man-made. Despite the capabilities of the Yukon XL the way he had it equipped, he continued to be extra cautious when he had to abandon the pavement for whatever reason. Occasionally he had to switch from the East bound lanes to the West bound, or back, to go around a major blockage.

One such blockage appeared to have at its center another tanker truck. There were at least a dozen vehicles involved. From the size of the burned area, Joe decided the fuel tanker trailer had ruptured and dumped fuel on the road. Joe turned around and went back to the closest restricted crossover. He went back to the East bound lanes and tipping his hat at the “Authorized Vehicles Only” sign at the crossover.

He wondered what had happened to the people in the abandoned vehicles. A short time later he saw three coyotes milling around an overturned vehicle. They took off when Joe came up. He stopped and checked the vehicle. The driver’s window was cracked, with a piece or two missing here and there. But there wasn’t enough opening for the coyotes to get in. A decomposing body lay inside the vehicle, on the roof that was now a floor. Joe gagged and backed away.

When Joe was well out into the area of the I-80 with the Humboldt Sink spread out on each side of the road, he stopped in the middle of a long empty stretch and set up camp. No one was going to come up on him unannounced where he was.

Joe set up his Katadyn Base Camp water filter by hanging it from the roof rack. It hung down the side of the Yukon. After placing the empty 20-liter water container under it, he filled the holding bag with water

from the Sink using a two gallon pail. It began to drip into the receiving can almost immediately.

He set up his camp stove on the tailgate of the trailer and heated a large pot of water from another of his water cans. When it was hot, he added water from the second water can to the Sunshower bag, and poured in the hot. It was warm enough to take a luxurious shower after he hung the bag up on the other side of the Yukon.

After thoroughly brushing off his clothing he dressed and began fixing his supper. He filled the Katadyn drip filter several times, filling both the empty can and the partial he'd used water from to take his shower. When the cans were full he put them back in the trailer, cleaned the filter and put it away. He slept soundly, feeling secure in the location.

He was getting close to Lovelock and had stopped checking abandoned vehicles when he reached the point where the locals had scavenged them. He slowed down and approached what looked like another large pileup of vehicles. Joe slowed more and came to a stop. Things didn't look right. There were cars all the way across both sets of lanes, the median, the shoulders, and out into the side ditches.

Joe had several pieces of communication equipment. First he tried several channels on the Motorola FRS/GMRS radio. No response. On a hunch he tried channel 19 on the Cobra 148GTL mobile CB radio. Bingo.

"That you out there in the grey looking rig?" came the reply to his hail.

"It is. What's going on? I'm headed to Winnemucca and would like to get by."

"No problem. We just need to extract a toll to let you pass."

"A toll? How much?" Joe keyed the mike and asked.

“Ten percent of your stuff. We decide which ten percent.”

Joe didn't reply. He carefully turned around and went back the way he'd come. “Hey you! Come on back! We can work this out!” Joe continued to ignore the voice on the radio. When he was well out of sight of the road block, Joe stopped. After getting out of the Yukon, he climbed up onto the roof rack with the Steiner Commander V binoculars and the PTR, and watched the road in the direction of the road block. It wasn't long before a pair of 4-wheelers showed up speeding toward him.

Joe had brought up the Cobra HH38WXST CB hand held radio. He immediately keyed it and said, “Call them off or I'll kill them.” He then went prone on the roof rack, extended the bipod legs of the rifle and sighted in on one of the 4-wheelers. It was close to a 600-meter shot. He fired three slow shots, aiming at the center of the chest of the driver each time. On the third shot both people on the 4-wheeler fell off and the machine ran off into the ditch.

Joe immediately brought the other team into view in the scope. It was slowing, and he hesitated. The 4-wheeler turned around and went back to where the other two men lay.

Joe heard one of the men on the second machine on the CB. He shot ‘em both! Both of them! Shot went right through Billy's belly and into Harry!”

“What about the machine?” came the reply. The leader seemed more concerned about the equipment than the men. Joe immediately sighted on the second machine and fired three quick rounds.

The two men jumped for the cover of the ditch along the road. Switching aim he fired at what little he could see of the machine in the ditch. Joe picked up the CB and keyed it. “You try to follow me and you'll get worse.”

Joe climbed down off the roof rack and got into the Yukon. He drove another mile away from the site and stopped again. He listened to the chatter on the radio. They'd made no effort to change channels and Joe shook his head.

From what he heard, both of the men were dead, their 4-wheeler had a hole in the fuel tank and a flat. The second machine had two flats but seemed to be in running order.

Joe continued to monitor the channel while he studied a topo map of the area. He got out of the Yukon and crossed the highway ditch. Joe studied the mountains for a few minutes through the binoculars. He occasionally scanned the road in the direction of the Lovelock. He saw no one, and from the waning conversation, those manning the roadblock were either unwilling or unable to come after him.

Joe went back to the Yukon, opened the cross-bed tool box, and extracted a fence tool. He cut the fence and folded back the wire. Joe went off-road with the rig, to get around Lovelock. He took it easy, having only tested out the off-road capability of the Yukon XL after he'd had the modifications to it done.

He made a point not to get into anyplace he couldn't turn around in. And he did have to turn around a few times. Following the topo map took some practice. Joe did quite a bit of pick and shovel work, to make passable stretches the Yukon and trailer wouldn't quite go without it.

The bridging ramps came in handy several times, as well. Joe was amazed at the number of small gullies the mountain valleys had in them. Not all were small ones where the shovel would lower the edges and fill the bottom. Some were two or three feet deep and several feet wide. The ramps were twelve feet long, giving him a safe span of ten feet, if the edges of the ground were sound.

He cut the 399 road north of Lovelock and debated for a while whether to take it and other local roads the long way around Rye Patch Lake, or cut back to Interstate 80 cross country. Joe took the road. The time was probably shorter, if he took the roads, though the distance was quite a bit more.

Much to his surprise, he ran across a group of people moving a herd of cattle the second day he was on the back roads. He was on them before he realized it and three men on horseback were suddenly right there. None had made a move to pull a gun, but all appeared armed.

“What’cha doing up here?” asked the apparent leader of the group. “How’d you get through Lovelock? They’re ambushing everybody and taking their stuff.”

“Came around cross-country from I-80 to this road. Yeah. I had a run in at the roadblock at Lovelock. That’s why I’m coming this way.”

“Must be pretty lucky. Or pretty good,” one of the other men said.

“Go on back to the herd,” the leader said, motioning to a pair of calves venturing from the protection of the rest of the herd. He turned back to Joe and added, “Really got to look out for the coyotes. They’re everywhere.” He paused a moment and then asked, “Would you mind stopping at the camp? We’ve hardly talked to any other survivors and would like to hear your tale. No way to prove it, but we’re a friendly bunch if no one tries to misuse us.”

“I’d be glad to. About the only people I’ve had contact with are like those in Lovelock. Everyone else is keeping a very low profile.”

“The camp should be up ahead a ways on the road. They travel faster than we do. Just ease on through the herd. Mind you don’t spook ‘em. We wouldn’t take kindly to that. I’ll radio ahead.”

Unable not to feel a bit tense about the situation, Joe headed for the camp. When he was out of sight of the drovers, and not yet in sight of the camp, he stopped for a moment and checked his weapons. While he favored the PTR and the 7.62mm x 51mm cartridge it fired, the rifle was awkward in the Yukon.

He took out a Steyr AUG and several magazines and put them on the passenger seat. The AUG was a bull pup configuration and fired 5.56mm x 45mm ammunition. He could handle it one handed if need be, and it packed much more punch than his Glock 21 in .45 ACP. Everything was as ready as he could make it and he started up again.

Joe felt considerably more confident when he got to the camp set up alongside the road at a good spot to overnight the cattle. There were women and children in the camp. The women and older children all had firearms in evidence, but they gathered around curiously, not threateningly.

“Hi,” Joe said, getting out of the Yukon XL slowly. “I’m Joe. I ran into the buckaroos and they asked me to stop.”

“Howdy. I’m Melissa,” said what looked to be the oldest of the women. “Steven radioed and said you’d be here. Welcome.” She held out her hand and Joe shook it.

“Joe,” Joe said. He was looking around at the camp. There was a pickup with a large horse trailer, two with a tank trailer each, two with travel trailers, and two with their beds full of equipment. There were three large tents up, and a couple of privacy enclosures.

A steel fire ring had a small fire burning within it. There was a tripod over it, with a suspended pot. A coffee pot sat near the fire.

“You guys have quite an operation here.”

“Thank you. We’ve been on the road for a while. We’re all anxious to hear what’s been going on out there,” Melissa said, making a vague gesture away from the camp. “But it should wait until the herd gets here so the others can hear, too.” She grinned. “That way you won’t have to tell the tale more than a couple of times.”

Joe smiled back. “Thanks.”

“Make yourself to home. We’ve got a chemical toilet set up over there,” Melissa said, pointing to one of the privacy shelters.

Nodding, Joe headed for it. When he came back he took the time to inspect every inch of the Yukon and trailer. Joe was glad he’d had the heavy duty skid plates installed to protect vulnerable items on the underside of the Yukon. Those and the rock sliders along the edges of the truck had kept the damage to a minimum when he’d been off road.

Several of the children and a couple of the women were curious about his rig and Joe, rather pridefully, showed them some of its aspects. He was still answering questions about it when the herd came into view.

Joe stayed out of the way while the hustle and bustle of getting the cattle settled and the final elements of the camp set up. Then, with two of the buckaroos circling the herd on horseback, the leader of the group came up to Joe and introduced himself.

“Hi, again. I’m Steven. I think you met my wife, Melissa.”

Joe shook hands with him and said. “Yes, I did. She’s been most hospitable. My name is Joe. I was telling your wife how much I liked the way you’re doing things.”

Steven smiled. “Thanks. Had a lot of practice. We’ve been gathering up stray beeves since shortly after the attack. Just so you won’t think we’re rustling them, we’re recording ear tags and where we found them. If

someone has a claim, we'll turn them over. Just didn't want to let the coyotes take more than what the radiation already has."

"I understand." Joe smiled and added, "Just so you know, I'm not a raider, either. I have a place in Winnemucca I want to check on. I'm from right on the state line west of Reno. Reno took a nuke and there's not much going on around it. Talked to a guy in Truckee. A few survivors there, doing okay.

"I've seen signs of other survivors, but everyone seems to be keeping to themselves. Haven't seen any signs of government. Haven't heard anything on the radio much either."

"Same with us. Our place is another three days north of here. We hunkered down when the attack came. We seemed to be all right. There was some fallout, but not much. Nobody got real sick. A couple of us on the ranches out here got together and decided to try to recover all the beef we could. Food is going to be a problem in the future if the winters get as bad as the news was talking about before the war."

"I had a shelter. Didn't get much radiation either, but enough to stay in the shelter for a while. Mostly just been waiting for settle down. I'm kind of on an exploration trip. I'm set up pretty good for produce. Have a big green house. But I'd sure like to make a deal on beef for the future."

"Really? How is your fuel supply?" Steven saw the cautious look on Joe's face and hurriedly added, "Not in detail. Just... You got any to trade? We'd just filled our farm tanks when the war started, so we're okay for the moment. But we're sure going through it fast, even being careful."

"I know where a tank truck full is, if you have a way to get it. The truck wouldn't start."

Steven's eyes lit up. "That'd be worth a beef a year for five years, if we can recover it."

"Done." Joe told Steven the mile marker on I-80 that the tanker was closest to.

Steven was excited. "We can take our old semi... it still runs... over and take 447 down to the interstate. That should be far enough from Reno not to be a problem, shouldn't it?"

Joe nodded. "I wouldn't waste any time. The areas on both sides of that stretch have already been scavenged. People are bound to get to it soon."

"Yeah. Hang on a minute." Steven went over to one of the trucks.

Joe saw him talking on a radio. It was a business band radio. Joe heard the Bearcat BCD396T scanner in the Yukon pick up the transmission. He couldn't hear what was said, but Joe could tell it was Steven. Joe just hoped no one close was monitoring like he was.

Steven came back. "They can be there late tomorrow. Thanks. If they recover that fuel, you'll have your beef. Have to make arrangements to pick it up, but we'll have one ready for you each season."

"Fair enough," Joe said and shook Steven's hand again.

Joe stayed the night at the camp, setting up his own tent. They fed him, but Joe contributed to their food stocks to equal what he consumed, despite Steven's insistence that he didn't need to.

The next morning Joe left when the camp group headed out after breakfast at dawn. He could travel faster than the caravan and quickly out distanced them. He cut east on another state road and cautiously approached the Humboldt River at the northern end of Rye Patch Lake. Fortunately the bridge was intact and he was able to cross the river.

As he'd seen in some of the other small towns, there were signs of survivors, but no one hailed him, or tried to stop him when he went through Imlay. He got back on I-80 and headed for Winnemucca. He was very surprised to find that every vehicle he stopped and checked on the highway had already been scavenged. There weren't many semis in evidence. Not as many as there should have been. Someone had done a very thorough job of scavenging.

Joe approached every exit cautiously, stopping well back and studying the area with binoculars before he went past. He was glad he was doing so, when he got close to Winnemucca. Like Lovelock, there was a blockade at the first southwest off ramp.

He turned the rig around and retraced his route for a ways and then headed up into a likely looking spot in the mountains where he could hide the Yukon and trailer. The ground was solid and he didn't leave much in the way of tracks. After unloading the ROKON, Joe covered the truck and trailer with ghillie suit style tarps. With the PTR slung over one shoulder, a musette bag of magazines over the other, and a Kifaru Marauder pack on his back, Joe climbed on the ROKON and headed for the roadblock.

Joe slowed when he neared the blockade. He stopped some distance from it and called out. "Hello! Anyone there?"

"This is the Nevada National Guard. Keep your hands off your weapons and come forward."

"I'm not looking for trouble," Joe said, staying where he was.

"It's routine, sir. Please come forward."

"Will I be disarmed?"

“No. But we need to know a little about you before you can enter the city.”

Joe eased the bike forward and stopped again when a Guardsman in full MOPP gear stepped between two of the cars constituting the roadblock. He was carrying a survey meter and ran the probe around Joe’s body. “Normal,” he said and went back to the other side of the blockade.

A Guardsman with a Captain’s bars on his collar stepped out next. He was wearing a facemask. “You been exposed to any unusual clouds of dust or fog within the last thirty days?”

Joe shook his head.

“Been sick at all?”

“No.”

“Been around anyone that was?”

“Not to my knowledge. I stayed in a buckaroo camp up in the hills a couple of nights ago, but everyone seemed just fine. They hadn’t had contact with anyone except their own people for some time they said. What’s going on?”

“Just routine. Had a couple of people come through here early on. Sick. Just the flu, but it took a foothold and we lost some people because of it. Can’t afford to lose many more. We’re just being cautious. “You passing through or hoping to stay?”

“Not sure. I have a place on the south side of town. Thought I would stick around for a while. See how things go.”

“Not a real good answer,” the Captain said slowly. “We’re hard up on food. How are you going to provide for yourself?”

“I have food with me for a little while.”

“Couldn’t carry much on that bike. Don’t see anything but a small pack and a big gun.”

Joe began tensing up again. “I wasn’t sure what kind of welcome I would get. Some people at Lovelock wanted ten percent of everything I had to just let me pass through. I stashed some of my stuff before I came up.”

“I see. So you gave up ten percent of your stuff?”

“No. I went around, cross-country.”

“Ah. Not one to cave in, huh?”

“Not to extortion,” Joe replied firmly.

“Well, we won’t ask for ten percent, but while you’re here, you’ll be subject to helping the community a few hours every week. What’s yours is yours to keep. You can trade for goods. Some people are even taking gold and silver. Don’t go causing any trouble and trouble will leave you alone.”

“So you’re letting me in?” Joe asked.

The Captain nodded. He made a motion to those still behind the vehicles blocking the way and one was pushed out of the way.

“Do I need some kind of pass to go back and get my stuff and come back in?” Joe asked.

“No. We’ll make a note that you’ll be in and out.”

“I take it we’re under martial law, wherever there is a post.”

“Haven’t heard anything from headquarters, from state or federal government. We’re the local detachment, doing what we can to keep things going. And peaceful. In cooperation with city government.”

Joe nodded and eased the bike forward, still a little tense, despite the Captain’s words. But no one tried to stop him. Breathing a sigh of relief, Joe headed for his place. There were signs that people had been in it, perhaps for some time, from the amount of junk, trash, and waste there was in and around it. But no one was there now.

The bolted down steel bunks and the steel picnic table with attached benches were intact. So was the stainless steel counter with built-in sink. They showed a few dents, but were still in good shape. The plastic bucket to catch the drain water was gone, and the simple brass bib faucet was broken off.

It took a couple of hours, but Joe had the place cleaned up the best he could without tools, the junk piled out of the way, and the waste and trash ready to be buried. With that done, Joe headed back to get the truck and trailer. He would finish the cleaning process when he got back with the rig.

There was no problem when he left. He told the guards at the blockade that he would be back in a while. They wouldn’t let him back in when he returned with the Yukon XL and the trailer. The Sergeant in charge sent for the Captain again.

Joe saw the man’s eyes widen slightly when he saw Joe’s rig. He motioned for one of the men, in protective gear, to run the survey meter over the truck and trailer. Again the man shook his head. There was no radiation.

“You didn’t say you had this kind of rig,” the Captain said, almost

accusingly.

“Didn’t want to risk it until I knew things were going okay here. It’s not going to be a problem, is it?”

The Captain shook his head. “Not officially, but you’d better watch your back. You’ll be a target once that becomes common knowledge. We’re keeping control, but there is a lawless element working around the area and here in the city.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Joe said. The Captain waved to open a gap in the blockade again and Joe drove through. He, or rather the Yukon XL and trailer, got approving glances from the half dozen men behind blockade.

Joe went directly to his place and finished the cleanup after taking a broom out of the Yukon. He kept one to clear snow from the rig, but it worked just fine for its original design. He went to the edge of the property and dug a hole in which to bury the junk, trash, and waste he couldn’t burn.

After digging up one of the caches, Joe removed a replacement faucet for the sink and installed it using tools from the toolbox in the trailer. There was a plugged drain pipe under the sink and he installed the P-trap he took out of the cache. That done, he took down the Little Giant multipurpose ladder from the Yukon roof rack and extended it. He leaned it against the building and went up to look at the roof.

It was in good shape, being a large slab of concrete, as was the flat mounted solar panel. It had a slight covering of dust, but the winds Winnemucca was prone to kept it fairly clear. After putting the ladder back on the Yukon, Joe took the long handled shovel again and dug down near one corner of the building. A few inches down was a rectangular concrete pit. It contained two deep cycle twelve volt batteries and a wiring panel, a pressure tank, and the top of the well,

with the necessary plumbing.

Joe flipped a couple of switches to reconnect the solar panel to the batteries and the batteries to the 12 volt submersible pump in the well. He went into the shelter and tried the faucet. Quite a bit of air blew out, and then some dirty water. But after the water ran for a minute or so it cleared up. Smiling, Joe went back outside and closed the hatch doors on the pit, but didn't fill in the shallow hole.

He carried in his chemical toilet. Using a pair of Channel Lock pliers from the toolbox, he took out the plug in the leg of the four inch wye sewer fitting set into one wall. He dumped the chemical toilet into the drain. It led to the septic tank that had been installed when the shelter was built. The connection for a toilet was just under the surface of the floor, but Joe had decided not to install anything easily breakable. From the attempts at damage to what he had installed, he was glad he hadn't.

Joe pondered for a while whether or not to open up the hidden compartment, but decided it was doubtful he would be staying, so just moved a few things in from the Yukon and trailer. He settled himself for the evening.

When he got up the next morning he went out to check on the Yukon and trailer. He'd set the alarm the night before, as always, but he was a little jumpy because of what the Captain had told him.

He'd brought out the Brunton ADC Pro portable weather instrument and checked the information it provided. He'd been tracking the weather with it and it was now showing a sharp drop in barometric pressure. It would probably rain before the day was out.

After making himself some breakfast using his camping equipment, Joe locked up the door of the shelter and climbed into the Yukon. He headed for downtown to see what was going on. There wasn't much, but he saw an old man sitting in front of a restaurant. The main streets had been

cleared of stalled cars and Joe was able to park near the man.

Joe sat down on the bench beside the man. “Hi. I’m Joe. What’s going on?”

“Jorge,” replied the man. He made no move to shake hands. “I never saw you before.”

“I have a place on the south side. Just got into town to check it out after the war. How about you? You doing okay?”

“Sure. Just had my morning cup and waiting to see what transpires today.”

“Such as...”

“Never know. Saw a coyote right here downtown a couple of days ago. Never used to see that before the war.”

“I suppose not. You say you had your morning cup? They have coffee here?”

“Sorry, son. Only for the locals. And a cup a day. Costs a silver dime. Just like the old days. ‘cepting it ain’t a bottomless cup.”

“I see,” replied Joe. “I’m not much of a coffee drinker, anyway. Tea is my drink.”

“They got that, too. And they’ll let you have a cup. For that silver dime. You got any? You got any booze? Or chocolate. My granddaughter would dearly love to have some chocolate.”

Joe didn’t need any silver dimes. He had quite a supply, but the rather forlorn appeal for chocolate for his granddaughter touched him. “Yeah. I’ve got a little chocolate left. And I could use a cup of tea.”

Joe went to the Yukon XL and fished through one of his packs. He brought out a couple of Hershey bars and took back to Jorge.

“I can only spare one dime...”

“That’s okay. They’re on special today. Two for a dime.”

“Thanks, Joe. I’d better get this up to home before I decide to eat it myself. Want to get back before they start the town meeting.”

“How far is it? I can take you if it’s more than a couple of blocks.”

“That would be nice. Can’t pay you for the gas, though. Just can’t spare it.”

“Diesel. And that’s okay. Come on.”

Jorge climbed into the passenger seat of the Yukon. “Wow! You from the government or something? Or a ham? You got lots of radios.”

“I like to stay informed,” Joe said, starting the truck. “Tell me how to get to your house.”

Joe followed Jorge’s directions and dropped him off a few minutes later at his house on one of the residential streets. When Jorge was back in the Yukon, Joe headed back downtown. He noticed some activity around the Red Lion Inn and Casino parking lot as Jorge said, “Pull in here. There having the meeting in the Red Lion.

He pulled in to the parking lot and parked near the other vehicles that appeared to be in running shape. There were also several horses tethered to a makeshift hitching rack.

Joe followed Jorge into the Casino and they found a spot in the rear of

the crowd as it gathered. He leaned over and asked Jorge, “Why aren’t they having this in City Hall?”

“This has kind of been the un-official City Hall since the Guard got involved. Guess ‘cause it’s kind of neutral territory.”

It didn’t make sense to Joe, but he let it slide as he was jostled when more people came in. The crowd was beginning to get unruly when several people began to take seats at a large table setting at the end of the room. Joe noticed that the Captain was one of them.

It seemed to be a routine meeting, considering the circumstances. People reporting on resources, availabilities, responsibilities, consumption rates. All sorts of things those responsible for a community needed to know to make decisions and plans. Joe noted that many of the reports were directed at the Captain. The Guard seemed to be a big part in the ongoing government of the city. Very little mention was made of the areas outside the city proper.

Things didn’t sound all that bad, but Joe began to feel a little uneasy with the way some of it sounded. He looked around the room. It seemed to him that everyone was quite comfortable with what was being said. And suggested. They were round about words, but the gist was that those who had, were soon to provide for those that didn’t. Or else. Joe decided it wasn’t the place to be.

He leaned over and told Jorge, “I’ll see you around.” He left as unobtrusively as he could, but he thought the Captain might have taken notice. Joe wasted no time getting back to the shelter. He loaded up the things he’d removed from the Yukon for the night before. And then it took him only a moment to decide which to recover first. The caches in the barrels or the goods behind the false wall.

He took the shovel off the Yukon and dug out the tops of the other barrels that were buried by the one he’d already dug up. After

transferring everything from the barrels to the Yukon XL and trailer, Joe took out the portable Oxy/Acetylene torch and took it inside the shelter. He went back and unfastened the bundle of thermal lances on the roof rack. He took one inside and connected the second oxygen hose from the tank set to the lance. He put on the cutting goggles and after firing up the torch, he used it to light the lance.

Joe was very careful not to cut all the way through block wall. He didn't want to burn anything behind it. But he cut an outline large enough to make it easy to get things out. He continued to cut the wall in a waffle pattern. With the burn completed, Joe loaded up the torch equipment and got the sledgehammer from the Yukon. A few strong blows and the sections of the wall began to fall free. When he had the opening made he began to empty out the space and load the items into the truck and trailer.

When the space was clear Joe hesitated, but he didn't want to lose more than he had to. He got the ladder and some tools from the Yukon and went up on the roof to pull the solar panel. When it was in the trailer, he pulled the batteries, the tank, and the water pump and added them to the trailer. After making a quick check to make sure he wasn't missing anything, he used the ghillie tarp to cover the contents of the trailer.

He was at the blockade when Joe looked in his side mirror and saw a Humvee headed toward the blockade at high speed. Two men were pushing a barrier car out of the way. Joe heard the radio one of the men crackle and the man quickly look at Joe.

Joe gunned the Yukon and slipped through the hole before the men could block it again or raise their weapons. He heard a shot or two as he drove away, in a weaving pattern to reduce the chance of one of the rounds hitting him. Checking the side mirror again, Joe saw the Humvee in chase. He floored the accelerator, to get as much distance from the blockade as he could.

He suddenly slammed on the brakes, stopping quickly, almost jackknifing the trailer. Joe rolled out of the Yukon, PTR in hand. He'd slipped a 100-round BETA-C drum in it before he left the shelter. He took a fraction of a second to deploy the legs of the bipod, and then began to pour round after round into the approaching Humvee as quickly as he could.

Someone was hanging out the passenger side of the Humvee, trying to fire back at Joe, but the Humvee was maneuvering too erratically for the man to get any kind of good shot. Prone, with the PTR on the bipod, Joe didn't have the same trouble. Long before the Humvee got close, it nosed over into the median at high speed, jumped the other lanes, and disappeared on the far side.

Joe got back into the Yukon and took off again. He slowed down only enough to not wreck, weaving in and out of the stalled vehicles on the road. Before dark, he picked a spot he'd seen on the way in to pull over and hide above and behind an outcropping of rock near the roadway. Joe ran back down to replace the wire fence he'd cut to get off the Interstate after he'd parked the Yukon XL and trailer out of sight from the Interstate.

He didn't think they would send anyone else after him, but Joe wasn't going to take any chances. He topped off the 100-round magazine and put it back in the PTR. He found a good place where he could lie down and keep an eye on the Interstate in the direction of Winnemucca.

Joe decided to forgo a hot supper and ate a little jerky and a handful of gorp as he kept watch well into the night. The wind had picked up and it began to rain lightly. Joe went to the truck and retrieved his Stashaway II rain suit. After putting it on, he went back on watch. He dozed fitfully during the rainy night, waking at every change in sound.

A little groggy the next morning, Joe took the time to heat water on his camping stove. He dropped two Bigelow Earl Grey teabags into his

Stanley 2-quart vacuum bottle and added the water. He let it steep for a couple of minutes and then poured himself a cup of the tea.

He continued to watch the Interstate as he drank his tea. After the first cup of tea, Joe fired up the Yukon XL and drove down to where he'd cut the fence. It took only a moment to pull the fence out of the way and get back on I-80. Checking his side mirrors often, Joe headed back toward Reno. Instead of back-tracking the route he'd taken around Lovelock, he decided to stay on I-80 until he got close to the first northeastern exit for Lovelock.

He ran into some undisturbed vehicles and did a little scavenging along the strip of I-80 he'd missed going the long way around Lovelock. He didn't get much until he ran up on the scene of another battle.

Joe studied the area through his binoculars for a while from a distance when he first saw what appeared to be another blockade. However, it was only on the west bound lanes. As he studied the layout, he came to realize that what he was seeing was an encampment. Vehicles had been pulled or pushed into a circle. The circle seemed to key on the one semi truck in the bunch. It was parked with the rear of the trailer in the circle.

When there were no signs of activity, Joe got back into the Yukon and drove up. He stopped before he got to the blockade when he saw the remains of someone with a gun lying beside one of the vehicles outside the circle. There was expended brass around. The coyotes had been at the body and it wasn't a pretty sight.

Joe got out and looked around on foot, the PTR in his hand. He started toward the body, but stopped and went to the rear of the Yukon XL. He set the PTR handy and then suited up in his CBRN gear. The scene looked simple enough, but the Guard Captain at Winnemucca had said a bad flu virus had been carried into the city from outside. Joe wasn't going to take a chance.

When he was suited up, Joe surveyed the scene in detail, on foot. He found three more dead people, with weapons, at vantage points around the outside of the circle of cars and truck. When he went into the circle, he found parts of fifteen more bodies, a few with weapons.

The semi trailer doors were closed and Joe was careful when he opened them, holding the PTR at the ready. But there was no danger in the trailer. Only more bodies. These had been protected from the coyotes, but not the bullets that had holed the doors. Joe discovered then why a battle had been fought. The truck was a grocery store delivery truck. It was still half full of food.

Joe decided that one group of people had found it and defended it against another group that wanted it. The remaining evidence indicated the raiders won, took what they wanted, and left. Without knowing how full the trailer had been initially, Joe couldn't tell how much had been used by the original finders and then taken by the raiders. The trailer floor space was three-quarters taken up with pallets, but most of the pallets had been broken open and items taken out. Having gone through the previous winter, some of the wet pack canned goods had swollen, and a few burst, but most of the canned items had made it through with no visible damage.

After deciding what he wanted to take, Joe hopped down out of the trailer and went to the Yukon. He dug out a large spray bottle of full strength Clorox. Spraying each weapon and accessory liberally with the Clorox in turn, he then wiped them all down and stowed them in the trailer. After that he took from the semi trailer everything he could fit into the Yukon and his trailer. He took only things he knew he would use, and items that he thought would have the highest trade value, whether he would use them or not.

He had good tie downs for the loads, so he piled things high on the trailer and on the roof rack, strapping them down securely. Joe looked at the loaded rig and shook his head. He was going to have to be extremely

careful when he went off-road to get around Lovelock.

Having decided to try to recover the rest of the goods later, Joe removed the bodies from the semi trailer and put them in one of the cars. He wasn't going to bury them, but didn't want to leave them for the coyotes and buzzards. He closed up the trailer again and then decontaminated himself before taking off the protective gear.

He made a note of the location of the trailer and then hit the road again. Joe continued to check abandoned vehicles but found very little more he wanted before he got to the place he was going to leave the interstate. He did find two more fuel tankers, but one was empty. He made a note of the full one.

After cutting the fence, Joe drove through and headed for the spot he'd picked out on the map for his evening meal. There was another place a ways past the meal stop where he could camp.

The long handled shovel and bridging ramps got even more use than they had on the outbound trip. He also used the 5-foot long pinch/pry bar to move some rocks. Once, rather than try to back track and take an alternate route when his way was blocked by a large boulder, he used another thermal lance to cut it into pieces on which he could use the pinch bar to roll out of the way. Joe finally made it back to the Interstate, southwest of Lovelock.

He went back through Truckee, but this time he stopped to see if he could do a little trading. Joe let it be known to the few people he saw that he was wanting to trade a few things and where he would be.

He set up camp on the edge of town, within view of one of the occupied dwellings of the town. He hoped he'd be safe there, being in open view of anyone passing by, and by those in the home.

It didn't take long for people to start showing up. Joe declined the most

wanted trades, those for gasoline, diesel, and medical supplies. Not only did he not have much with him, the items were too necessary for his own use. He did trade off a few things, including several of the less capable of the firearms he'd found, with only a box or less of ammunition for each one of them. He'd hang onto the rest for use or trade later.

Mostly Joe was looking for opportunities. From the first days after his conversion into a prepper, he'd known he couldn't make it on his own forever. He had several years' supply of many items, but only a couple of years of some hard to store or expensive to store items. He needed a way to obtain them. He'd already cut a deal for the beef with the ranchers north of Lovelock. He wanted some kind of similar deal in Truckee, only ongoing.

So Joe made many discrete inquiries about possible job opportunities. He didn't find many opportunities, much to his dismay, so he packed things up after two days of trading and headed for home, disappointed. He got very anxious when he approached his road. Would his place be intact?

The trees were still down, right where he'd left them. But that didn't mean no one had gone past on foot. Joe chocked the trailer out of the way and unhooked. He then used the hydraulic winch in the rear bumper to clear an opening in the abatis. When he could get through, he reconnected to the trailer and went up the road.

He stopped before he got to the house, parked the rig, set the alarm, and set off in the woods toward the house. There were no signs anyone was occupying the place, Joe decided, studying the house with binoculars from several locations around the perimeter of the woods. But someone had been there. He could see some damage to security shutters on the front door.

Joe finally went up to the house and opened the security shutters on the back door. Everything was secure inside. He hurried back to the Yukon

XL and trailer and brought them to the house. He parked the trailer, and then the Yukon, in the garage, before he began opening up the house again. Though everything looked secure from outside, Joe checked the basement and the shelter. Everything was as it should be.

After everything in the Yukon XL and the trailer were unloaded and stowed in appropriate spots, Joe lit a fire in the wood/coal furnace and sat back to relax and review in his mind what he'd accomplished during his trip.

Frisco Lessons – Epilog

Mainly he'd found that being on your own had many disadvantages. And he still didn't have really good long term options to make it. He had food for several years, and other consumables for three or four years. He did have options for some things, such as toilet paper. He had several packages of cloth shop towels that would be used, washed, sanitized, and reused.

Joe got up and poured himself a snifter of Hennessy cognac. Sipping it slowly he racked his brain for ideas. The only thing he came up with was to latch onto a group and either become part of it, or make it his own. He finished his cognac and went to bed.

Over the next month Joe made six trips to recover all the supplies from the grocery truck he'd found. He stopped in Truckee during three of the trips and did a little more trading. His greenhouse garden had suffered some during his absence, but it was producing well again and he was able to find a good market for the fruits and vegetables he was raising.

He kept noticing one man. He seemed to always have a horse drawn wagon load of wood available. Joe talked to him on his last trip back from the grocery truck. "How much firewood do you have?"

“All I need. Me and the family got a whole forest full.” The man looked a little amused. “How much you want?”

An idea suddenly came to Joe. “I might need a lot. Would have to get it over the pass before winter sets in.

“Won’t take the stuff over the pass. You’d have to do that yourself.”

Jokingly, Joe asked, “Don’t know anyone with a big truck in working condition, do you?”

The man grinned. “As a matter of fact, I do. Don’t have the fuel to run it, though.”

“I have a little fuel left,” Joe replied. “What are you asking?”

The dickered back and forth for a little while. They finally settled on a price, pending Joe’s acceptance of the condition of the truck. Joe agreed to come back the following week to check it out.

He took the fresh and canned food that was part of the deal when he returned to Truckee to meet with Hurley. He left the trailer at home. Hurley led the way to his place and Joe followed slowly along behind him. When they got to the small farm, Joe got his first look at the truck. It was a seventies model GMC long deck dump bed, tandem axle bob truck with a stock rack on it.

Joe realized he should have tried to find such a truck before he moved everything from the grocery truck with the Yukon and trailer. But that was in the past. He went over the truck in detail, looking for problems. He couldn’t find any.

He’d brought twenty gallons of diesel with him. One of Hurley’s boys put the fuel in one of the saddle tanks the truck had, and Hurley climbed

in and started it. It took several tries, as it hadn't been run in months, but it did finally start. Joe let it run while Hurley and his family unloaded the food from the Yukon.

Joe had assumed that Hurley would let one of his older boys drive the truck to Joe's place, with Joe taking him back, but Hurley was adamant that Joe take care of the transport on his own. The Yukon would fit in the bed of the bob truck, but they didn't have a way to load it. At least, not without a great deal of work.

The truck had a rear pintle hitch. Joe's front receiver mount tow bar for the Yukon had a ball hitch connector. "Too bad the electric's out," Hurley said, not at all upset with Joe's problem. For it was Joe's problem. "In the old days, we'd just weld up a tow bar. Got everything we need, 'cepting a welder. Always planned to get one of those Lincoln portable welders, but never did."

Joe grinned. "I have one," he said. "Not a Lincoln portable, but an On-Board welder by Premier Power Welding."

Hurley looked amazed. "You got a welder?"

Joe nodded. "If you can weld me up a tow bar that will work, I'll let you do some welding of your own, if you need to."

"Deal!" Hurley said immediately, holding out his hand for Joe to shake.

Joe had to admit, Hurley put together the tow bar far faster and more neatly than Joe's simple welding course would have let him do it. Hurley took the better part of the rest of the day to do some welding around the place, fashioning some protective bars and panels for their house. Hurley had used some of Joe's small selection of welding rod to do the tow bar, but used his own rods for his work.

After the work was done, Joe talked Hurley out of a supply of welding

rod, at the cost of several silver quarters. Joe was whistling when he headed out, driving the GMC, towing the Yukon XL. Hurley's boys had loaded the bob truck with cut and split wood. That had cost Joe a couple of one-ounce gold Eagles, and two silver dimes each for the three boys.

Joe knew it was like taking coal to Newcastle, for Joe had plenty of forest that he could cut for firewood. But he wanted to conserve it. And he didn't want to risk injuring himself cutting it.

The next day Joe called Steven on the twenty meter Amateur Band frequency Steven had told Joe he monitored regularly. After they had exchanged pleasantries, Joe asked, "You remember telling me you were having a hard time getting enough wood for your stoves on your place?"

"Sure do," Steven replied. "It's a constant battle. Not only do we not have much available up here, what is available isn't that great. And cutting it by hand is a chore. Can't spare the gas for chainsaws."

"How about I bring up a bob truck load and we do some trading?"

"Absolutely!"

The next day Joe loaded his camping gear in the passenger side of the truck cab, locked up the place, and headed for Steven's ranch. He was able to stay on back roads all the way. Steven talked him in to the ranch when Joe got close. In no time the wood was unloaded and two steers loaded up. The five steers he'd already made a deal for would be received in the future. The fuel tanks on the bob truck were refilled as part of the deal.

When he left, Joe didn't head directly back to his place. Again he took back roads and got back on I-80 northeast of Lovelock. He breathed a sigh of relief. The fuel tankers were still where he'd found them, untouched.

Again it was hard work to pull the dolly from under the empty pup of the first rig, and get it connected to the pintle hitch on the bob-truck. After that it was fairly easy to drag the truck from under the loaded fuel trailer and get the dolly under it.

Joe went slow after he'd picked up the trailer and pup. Partly out of caution, and partly because he didn't want to go through Truckee during the busy part of the day. He hit Truckee at midnight and got home mid morning. As always, upon returning to his place, with it undisturbed, Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

He parked the trailer and pup directly over the buried tanks and then took the time to fire up the Cat D-6 and build a ramp so he could unload the steers. Steven had given him a couple of halters that would fit the steers and Joe staked them out so they could graze, and filled the small galvanized trough with water that Steven had also thrown into the deal so they could drink.

It was late summer now and Joe didn't want to risk getting caught on the Truckee side of Donner Pass if an early snow storm blew in. He took the steers to Truckee the next day. He had no trouble trading them off. Hurley took one for two truckloads of firewood. A local farmer had a surplus of swine, and traded four pigs for the other steer. Joe turned around and traded the pigs to the local that was doing butchering for hire, in return for already processed meat. Joe got a dozen smoked chickens, six sides of cured smoked bacon, and eight cured and smoked hams for the four pigs on the hoof.

Joe headed for home, pleased with the trip. He wasn't too pleased when he got close to Donner. It was snowing heavily. But the bob-truck made it without a problem, even without chains. He hesitated, but left the load of wood on the truck. He would deliver it when spring broke. He covered it with a tarp to keep it dry. Joe was ready for winter.

And such a winter it was. No sooner did one storm taper off than another

was developing. Joe was snowbound from mid-November to the first of April. He spent the time productively. Joe kept the crops in the greenhouse rotated and growing. He'd stored hundreds of empty canning jars, with several hundred rings and thousands of lids. He also had a couple All American 30-quart pressure canners and all the accessories he needed to produce case after case of canned vegetables. He became expert at regulating the fire in the kitchen wood stove for the canning.

Most of the fruit was dehydrated in a pair of Cabela's 160 liter commercial dehydrators, or several of the Food Pantrie non-electric hanging dehydrators, depending on whether he had good sun for the solar panels or not.

He tried hunting several times, but never got a shot. He just wasn't a hunter. It was something he should have learned before the war.

Joe found himself getting on the Amateur Bands most nights, for companionship. He was also learning quite a bit. There were reports of places like Lovelock and Winnemucca that had set up their own system to obtain and control supplies. There were other places like Truckee and Steven's ranch where people were working together within the community and outside the community, to obtain the things needed for survival.

Despite having as much diesel fuel and gasoline as he did, and enough Pri-D and Pri-G to keep it good for a long time, Joe was pleased to hear that a couple of farmers in the area had the equipment to make biodiesel. That was one thing that would really ease the hardships many people were facing. Diesel fuel meant transportation, and that was important long term.

With the rest of the world little danger to what was left of the United States, military personnel were coming home by any means they could. Some individually, some as intact military units.

And government, real government, by the people for the people, was making a comeback. There was talk of state and federal elections. People were beginning to resist in those areas where warlords had taken control, or banditry was the norm. Talk of rebuilding the infrastructure was rampant, and some people were taking steps to do so.

Already three nuclear power plants were back up in different parts of the country, providing electrical power to local users. Joe was doing his own small part in the rebuilding by setting up the trading route between Truckee and Steven's ranch. Both groups began to grow as word was passed that they were safe havens with sources of supply.

At least in the west, with the long distances involved, and the many armed citizens that had survived, banditry didn't really develop, other than in places like Lovelock and Winnemucca that controlled very small territories. And even they were beginning to come under control of less radical citizenry.

Now if Joe could just catch the eye of Steven's cousin Rachael...

End *****

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