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QHR

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QHR

Jack was just about asleep on the sofa when the telephone rang. “Great! What now?” he grumbled as he fumbled for the telephone receiver behind his head.

“What?” he asked, his voice harsh with fatigue.

“Quebec, Hotel, Romeo. Stand-by One.” Jack sat up, holding the telephone receiver tightly against his ear. After perfect silence for several seconds, a voice he knew as well as his own boomed in his ear.

“Verify Quebec, Hotel, Romeo.”

“Verify Quebec, Hotel, Romeo. Tango, Tango, Foxtrot. Go.”

“Jack, it’s General Smith-Worth.”

“Yes, sir. I recognized your voice. What’s up with a QHR alert? I’m not service any more. Seriously. That other time was a mission essential ruse.”

“I know that, Boy. Just wanted to give you a few minutes warning. The President has just given the launch codes to the nuclear forces. Take care of my family. It’s been a pleasure knowing you.”

The dead silence of a secure line came back and Jack hung up the telephone slowly. But that was the last thing he did slowly for some time. In under three minutes he had his three INCH (I’m Not Coming Home) totes and four bags loaded into the back of the Suburban. He left the key to the apartment on the bed, grabbed the last two-liter bottle of almost frozen Classic Coke from the fridge and left the apartment for the last time.

They were waiting for him when he got to the house. They were

obviously worried, but Kathleen was more than just worried. She was angry. “I do not know why Father insisted you come along,” were the first words out of her mouth.

“Yeah. I missed you, too. I see you’re ready. Let’s go. You lead.” Jack took just a moment to hug his four year old son, Charles, barely awake, sitting on his personal BOB (Bug-Out-Bag). He held the leash of his recent birthday present from his Grandfather. A pure-bred German Shepherd. Male.

“I’m sleepy, Daddy! And so is Ruff.”

“I know, Son. You can get some sleep in the truck. Ruff, too.”

“Where are we going, Daddy?”

“Somewhere safe, I hope.”

“Don’t scare him, Jack,” insisted Kathleen.

“He’s not scared. He’s just curious.” Jack gathered up Charles and his BOB and headed for Kathleen’s Suburban. It was nearly identical to Jack’s own vehicle, minus a few of the modifications Jack had done on his.

Sara, Kathleen’s mother and the General’s wife, followed carrying two suitcases. Jack had Charles buckled up firmly in his child restraint seat and ran back to the house. “What else?”

“Those two are it,” Kathleen said, pointing her chin toward the two large wheeled ice chests near the door.

Jack grunted when he picked up the handles of the two chests. He decided to leave one on the porch while he loaded the other. He came back for the second ice chest as Kathleen started to lock the door of the

house.

“You sure you have everything? Insurance, license, pictures?”

Kathleen paled in the light from the porch bulb. “No. I’ll be right back!”

She ran into the house and up the stairs while Jack loaded the last cooler. He had one foot inside his Suburban when Kathleen came out of the house, turning off lights as she did so. She turned off the porch lamp and then locked the front door of the house.

Only when she was in her Suburban and the back-up lights flashed as she put the truck in gear did Jack get into the Suburban and buckle in. Kathleen pulled out of the driveway and turned right onto the street. Jack followed, keeping plenty of distance between them so each would have maneuvering room when the panic started.

“Jack?” came Sara’s voice over the MURS radio sitting on the seat beside him.

“Yes, Sara?”

“Jack, Kathleen wants to know if this is another drill?”

Jack keyed his radio and said, softly, “No. This is real. Tell her to just concentrate on driving. We’ll be all right.”

“She says okay, Jack.”

He set the radio down and said a prayer of hope for Kathleen to keep it together until they got to the retreat. St. Louis might not be a target, but the General and Jack didn’t take chances. There was a hardened shelter at the General’s future retirement home and current retreat, in the Ozarks, right on Table Rock Lake, in one of the small sections of private land surrounded by a section of the Mark Twain National Forest that

was spread out all through the Missouri Ozarks.

Kathleen picked up the speed from her usual sixty-eight miles an hour on the open Interstate to just a notch over eighty.

They were in Springfield in three hours and stopped in a truck stop to fuel up. They parked on each side of one of the islands that had small vehicle diesel. Kathleen and Jack got out of their respective vehicles. Sara, with a still sleepy Charles in her arms came around the front of Kathleen's Suburban.

"I'll fill them up," Jack said if you three want to make a pit stop."

Kathleen took Charles from her mother and gently waked him as she walked to the C-store part of the truck stop. Ruff was whining loud enough to be heard and Sara went to take him for a walk and drink of water.

It took almost fifteen minutes before everyone was settled once again in the vehicles. Jack kept looking to the northeast and then slightly west of north. They were perhaps an hour from the retreat when he saw what he'd been looking for in his rear-view mirror.

Kathleen must have seen the same thing for she swerved slightly and increased speed significantly. "Slow down, Kathleen," Jack said over the radio. "We have plenty of time. There are going to be vehicles stopped all over the road..."

He saw her swerve again and he dropped the radio to put both hands on the steering wheel. He had to swing wide, too, to avoid the car stopped in the middle of the traffic lane. Before he reached for the radio again, Kathleen had slowed down and was now maneuvering around the stopped traffic much more carefully, as people were getting out of their vehicles and looking around or talking.

When he saw her brake lights flare for a long time, Jack picked up the radio and barked into it. “Don’t stop! For anyone or anything, Kathleen! Think about Charles!”

The brake lights went out and a few moments later Jack went past the same accident with people lying on the ground, being tended by others.

Jack could only shrug it off when Kathleen’s voice came over the MURS radio. “I hate you for this, Jack! I’m a nurse! I should have stopped.”

“You’re a mother, too, and if you won’t take care of getting Charles to safety, stop and I’ll take him the rest of the way. Without stopping.”

Kathleen didn’t reply. But she didn’t stop or try to stop again, either, until they turned onto the fire road that led to the retreat on the lake. She slowed and waved Jack around her, not confident of the road ahead.

Jack flipped on the auxiliary lights mounted on the crash bars on the front of his Suburban, and those on the roof rack that extended from the rear of the Suburban to the windshield.

He stopped to open the gate that marked the edge of General Smith-Worth’s property, let Kathleen drive through and then relocked the gate. Taking the lead again, Jack took it slow enough for Kathleen to keep up without shaking them up too bad in the process.

Jack triggered the remote that opened both of the sixteen feet wide garage doors and drove into one side of the garage. Kathleen parked in the other double-wide bay. The garage lights had come on when the doors opened. Jack triggered the doors down and hurried to get Charles out of his restraint seat.

There was an entrance to the basement from the garage and Jack led the way down, then over to the large entertainment center that was the

centerpiece of the family room. He swung one side of it away from the wall, exposing a vault type door. Jack worked the combination from memory and went through the airlock to another, identical door.

With Kathleen carrying the German Shepherd pup, and Sara behind him, Jack opened the door to the doorway into hardened shelter the General had installed when it became available commercially, and his finances allowed it. Jack ushered the others in and handed Charles to Sara. He went back to unload the two vehicles. He closed the airlock doors behind him.

It took perhaps twenty minutes to get everything moved from the vehicles to the basement. Uneasy why the caretaker, Jonas Williamson, or his wife, weren't in evidence, Jack took a few minutes to check their small bungalow right next to the track that came out of the forest. The house was locked and he couldn't raise anyone.

Going back to the basement, Jack picked up Charles' BOB and the pup's bag, and went into the shelter.

Jack locked the inside airlock door and turned around to help with Charles and the pup when the shelter shook slightly. Kathleen and Sara gasped, but Charles and the pup both slept through the ground shock. There was no more sensation, and Jack wondered why there was no attendant blast wave shortly after the ground wave.

"Jack?" Kathleen asked. She was braced against the counter on one side of the fiberglass elliptical caterpillar design shelter.

"I don't know. Springfield maybe. Or an errant warhead off course. I don't think we'll ever know for sure. Might even have been the New Madrid Seismic Zone giving way. I didn't hear the blast valves click closed, so it is more like to have been that than a nearby hit like I thought at first. That's good. In a way.

“Jack, what do we do?”

“Just settle in. Try not to get on each other’s nerves for the sake of Charles, Sara, and Ruff. I will try my best.”

Kathleen nodded and said, “We have to. For how long do you think?”

“Won’t know until the radiation peaks and starts dropping off. I can calculate shelter stay time, then. For now, it’s early in the morning. I think we should all get some sleep. I’ll make sure the systems are all working the way they should and turn in myself.”

Again Kathleen nodded. She turned to Charles, where he was sitting on the floor, cuddling Ruff. But she stopped and looked at Jack again. “Jack,” she said, “I’m... I’m glad you’re here. We’ll be better off for it. Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for letting me come,” Jack replied, deciding telling his ex that Charles and the puppy would have come with Jack, by force if necessary, would be counterproductive. He kept the peace.

Sara asked about Jonas and his wife.

“No sign,” Jack said. “House is locked and their pickup is gone.”

As Kathleen and Sara got Charles and Ruff settled in and explored the shelter, Jack sat down at the communications center. He checked the remote reading radiation survey meter. Still only back ground radiation. Not wishing harm on others, Jack still hoped the shock they had felt was an earthquake rather than a nearby nuclear detonation. It would make all the difference in post event recovery. For those here, anyway. He couldn’t imagine the complications a major earthquake could cause those in the earthquake affected area.

Jack wanted information in the worst way, but connecting one of the

outside antennas to a radio was just risking serious damage to equipment from a HEMP (**H**igh altitude **E**lectro**M**agnetic **P**ulse) blast. It wasn't worth the risk. Especially considering that the atmosphere was probably highly ionized with the debris from the detonations. The General would not have warned him if he was expecting a single incident.

He waited until the others were settled in before he went into the bunkroom area of the shelter and laid down to try to get some sleep. It didn't come quickly or easily, but Jack finally slept.

When he did fall asleep, it was that of the exhausted. He'd been up for thirty-six hours prior to the General's call. The smell of coffee and a full bladder woke him up. He needed the bathroom in the worst way. Fortunately it was empty. Next Jack checked the outside and inside radiation levels. Well under one hundred R/hr outside and not even a quiver on the needle for the inside meter.

"Hi, Daddy," Charles said. He was sitting at the small table in the kitchen area, eating cereal with milk. The pup was curled up with one of his toys in an out of the way spot, still sleeping.

"Hi, Sport! Quite an adventure last night, huh?"

Between spoonfuls of cereal, Charles began asking questions, some that Jack had a hard time answering.

"Where are we, Daddy?"

"In a very safe place your Gramps had built for us.

"Is Gramps in a safe place, too?"

Though Sara took the question calmly, working by her daughter's side at the kitchen counter, Kathleen turned her face away, tears beginning to fall.

“I think so, Son. About the safest place a person can be.”

“Heaven?” Charles already knew about heaven. At least as much as a boy his age could.

“Yes, Charles. I think Gramps is in heaven.” Fortunately it was enough answer for an inquiring four-year-old.

“Can I go outside after breakfast. I should take Ruff outside like I do at home.”

“Afraid we can’t do that right now. Ruff will have to learn to use the papers for number two, like he does for number one.”

“Will you help me learn him, Daddy? He doesn’t always do what I want.”

“Teach him, not learn him. And, yes, of course I’ll help you teach him.”

That seemed to satisfy Charles and he began to concentrate on getting the last of the cereal from the bowl.

Jack thankfully accepted the cup of coffee from Sara. “I see you two have been busy. Sorry I slept so long.”

“You only do that when you’re totally exhausted,” Kathleen said, sliding a plate of pancakes onto the table in front of Jack.

“Did have some long hours before... before the General called me.”

Kathleen was getting Charles cleaned up after his breakfast while Jack ate his. “It’s probably bad, if he broke security to call us, isn’t it?” asked Sara.

Sara was sitting at the table now, pretending to eat her single pancake.

Cutting his eyes to Charles, now in the process of waking the puppy, and then back to Sara he replied. "I think so. He said the president had released the nukes. And those flashes we saw behind us were most certainly nukes at St. Louis and Kansas City plus Whiteman AFB, unless I miss my guess. Sara... I'm sorry. I don't think he had a chance."

"He knew as much and so did I," Sara said. She reached over and put her hand on Jack's. "Thank you for being here for us. For him. Harold always thought highly of you, despite your and Kathleen's problems."

"I always respected him. He was a good soldier and father," Jack replied.

"Good husband, too. I'll miss him. Excuse me..." Sara headed for the bunkroom end of the shelter, sobs shaking her shoulders.

Jack got up and put his empty plate and flatware on the counter and went over to where Kathleen and Charles were trying to extend Ruff's paper training a step further.

"I'll see what I can do," Jack said. "You might want to check on your mother."

Kathleen gave Jack a hard look, but stood and went to the bunks, closing the curtain dividing the areas.

A very happy Ruff and Charles, and a relieved Jack, saw Kathleen come back into the main section of the shelter. "She'll be all right," Kathleen said. "She's reading her bible."

Jack nodded.

"Is Gramnum sad?" Charles asked.

“Yes, very sad,” Kathleen said.

“Because Gramps is in heaven?”

“Yes, Charles. But I don’t want you worrying about it,” Jack’s voice was soft but firm. “Your mother and I have a big job to do taking care of you and Grammmum. Your job is to take good care of Ruff.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Charles said. He had to laugh suddenly as Ruff, eager to play, licked him on the face, with his tail swinging back and forth wildly.

Jack helped Kathleen with doing the few dishes used during breakfast. They worked silently, side by side for the few minutes it took to finish them. Suddenly after she put down the dishcloth, she turned to Jack and went into his arms when he opened them. “Hold me? Please?”

“Of course,” Jack said, his hands went around her and her head went down onto his shoulder.

After several minutes Kathleen stepped back and wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry. I just...”

“It’s all right, Kathleen. I won’t take it as more than it was. We both needed it.”

Kathleen nodded. “I didn’t sleep well last night. I think I’ll lie down for a while if you’ll keep Charles entertained.”

“Sure.” Both looked over at the little boy playing with his pup. “I think he’s good for a bit. But I’ll keep him occupied.”

Jack, with regular glances at Charles, opened up the laptop computer Jack had prepared with data for such an event and began going through

the thousands of pages of information it contained.

“Watcha’ doing, Daddy?” Charles came over and asked a few minutes later. It seemed that Ruff preferred to devour some puppy food at the moment, rather than play with him.

“Studying,” Jack replied. He picked up Charles and put him on his lap so he could see the computer.

“Learning some things we will need to know when we leave the shelter.”

“Like what?”

“How to garden. I’ve never done it before, but we’ll need to learn so we can grow our own food.”

“But Mommy buys food at the store!”

“There may not be very many stores left...”

“Toy stores!”

“I’ll learn how to make toys, too,” Jack assured his son. “And you can learn how to help. Even make some of your own.”

“That would be fun, I think. Can I get down now, Daddy? I need to go potty.”

“Go to the bathroom. Yes, you may. Do you need some help?”

“No, Daddy. I can go by myself now.”

“Good boy. But if you do happen to need some help, just call out for me. I’ll be right here.”

“Okay, Daddy.” He slid off Jack’s lap and headed for the little bathroom on one side of the shelter.

Jack kept an ear cocked for Charles’ call, but it never came. Charles came out a few minutes later. “There’s no sink, Daddy. I need to wash my hands.”

“Over here, Sport,” Jack said. He got up and held Charles up to the kitchen sink so he could wash his hands.

“Can I have a toy now, Daddy?” Charles asked.

“Sure you can. Where’s your BOB?”

Charles ran over to get the small teardrop pack and carried it over to where his father was sitting again at the computer.

“One for now. This is a small place and we have to keep things put away. So just one at a time. Okay?”

“Okay, Daddy. Umm... The fire truck!”

“No sirens,” Jack cautioned as Charles took out a Matchbox toy fire truck. “Mommy and Grammum are resting.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Charles went to his knees and then sat down on the floor to play. Jack went back to his studying, checking the outside radiation meter from time to time. Since he hadn’t stayed up to catch the peak reading and the reading one hour after the peak, he had to back into the seven/ten rule to find out when they could safely leave the shelter.

Charles played with his fire truck for a little while, making his siren sounds very, very softly, and then curled up on Jack’s lap for a nap. Jack

continued to read the computer screen as he held Charles.

He didn't notice when Sara and Kathleen came through the curtain from the bunkroom. They stood and watched in silence for several minutes. Jack finally looked around.

Quietly Kathleen said, "I'll take him and put him down for the rest of his nap."

Jack nodded and gently handed Charles to Kathleen. Jack searched Sara's face. "How are you doing now, Sara?"

"Better, Jack. A good cry and some time with the Good Book does wonders for the heart and soul."

Jack nodded and turned back to the computer.

Things went about the same for the following week. Jack checked outside, suited up in PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), after a week had passed and the outside radiation was down under 0.25 R/hr.

He decontaminated in the house and left the PPE in the basement. Sara and Kathleen looked at him expectantly when he came back into the shelter proper. "Nothing," he said. "No signs of anyone having been on the property at all. The radiation is almost non existent in the basement. It'll be okay to use it for a few hours a day, as long as we keep the security shutters down and don't go upstairs. Another week and we should be fine outside part of the day."

"That will make things easier," Kathleen said.

Another week and Jack checked again. "Down to under 0.10 R/hr. We'll be fine now. I just want to sleep in the shelter until I can decontaminate the entire property. And wear dust masks when you're outside until

then.” He looked down at Ruff. “Ruff will have to stay in a small area that I decontaminate first. He’s close to the ground and might breathe in the dust. That wouldn’t be good.”

“Ruff,” Charles said, speaking carefully to the puppy, “You have to stay right where I tell you or you’ll breathe stuff. Bad stuff.” He looked up at Jack. “Right, Daddy?”

“That’s right. It will be your responsibility to see that he does when he’s out with you.”

“Okay, Daddy. I will. Can we go out now?”

“Let me get an area cleared first. You can bring him out this afternoon.”

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll take a nap so I’ll be good and ready.”

“You do that, son. See if Ruff will take a nap, too.”

“I’m scared, Jack,” Kathleen said when she returned from putting the two little ones down for their naps. “What if... I don’t know! There are so many what ifs...”

“I know, Kathleen. We’ll all just have to do the best we can. Which brings me to a touchy subject. Are you still... reluctant... to have and use a sidearm?”

“Reluctant, yes,” Kathleen said. “But considering the circumstances in which we will now be living, I’m determined to take care of Charles by any means necessary. So, get me a gun you know I can use. I’m sure you have several.”

Jack ignored the last little dig, and nodded. “I’m sure I have something suitable. Sara?”

“I have Harold’s original issue Colt Officer’s Model, leather gun belt, and holster. It suits me just fine. I only have two spare magazines for it. I wouldn’t mind having a few more.”

“I can take care of that, Sara. No problem. I’m going back out for a while to do that decontamination.”

It took Jack the better part of another month before he would allow any of the others off the immediate area around the house. It had been built with both defense and decontamination in mind, so that part of the decontamination went fairly quickly. The rest, not so quickly, since Jack was extremely thorough.

But finally Jack declared the place clean. Only the wooded areas around the property did Jack consider the natural cycle of rain and drainage acceptable decontamination. During that time, Kathleen and Sara, with the help of the information in the shelter computer, began an extensive garden in the large freestanding greenhouse the General had included on the property as part of his preparations for disasters.

Jack had recovered some fruit and some nuts from the large orchard the General had planted when he bought the property, but the fruits were past prime and almost impossible to clean well enough to satisfy Jack’s requirements for decontamination.

Not long after the decontamination was done, Jack was taking a break from the outside work and listening to the Amateur Radio in the house. He sat up in attention when he heard the first voice from it since the attack. “Anyone out there? This is Nick talking. Should I say over and out?”

“You don’t have to say over and out,” Jack quickly said, after keying the mike of the Yaesu FT-2000 transceiver. “This is Jack. Can I ask where you are?”

“Sure, man. South of Chicago. Where are you?”

“Ozarks,” Jack said. There was no way he was going to give an exact location over the air. Not yet. “Chicago get it pretty bad?”

“I’ll say. We couldn’t get out of the shelter until a couple of days ago.” Jack heard the change in the sound of the man’s voice. “We didn’t all make it.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack replied. Seeing Charles looking at him, he whispered, “Go get your mother and Grammmum.”

Charles took off running and Jack turned back to the radio.

“I don’t suppose you have any spare supplies? And a way to get them up here? We’re hurting pretty bad. And it’s started snowing already.”

“Snow? Now?” Jack asked, somewhat alarmed. He looked over at Kathleen and Sara. With Charles, they had hurried to hear what was going on.

“It’s barely October!” Kathleen whispered.

“Sounds to me like you need to head for warmer pastures before winter gets there,” Jack released the mike key and waited for the other man to respond.

“That an offer, by chance?” asked Nick.

“I’m afraid not,” Jack quickly replied. “We’re making it, but with winter starting this early it’s going to be tough.”

“Just joking with you, man! No one in their right mind is going to take in any strays. At least, unless they have supplies for themselves and the

group they're joining."

Jack was beginning to get an uneasy feeling about where the conversation was going. "Nick, I can't stay on too long at a time. What say we talk again tomorrow at about this time. Same frequency?"

"I'll be here," Nick replied.

"Why did you cut him off short like that?" Kathleen asked.

"I don't know," Jack replied. "Just a hinky feeling. He seemed to be trying to get as much information about where we were and what we have, as he could."

"What's hinky, Daddy?"

"A funny feeling," Jack said. "Kind of like this..." He tickled Charles and the boy danced away. "Why don't you see if Ruff needs to go out, Sport."

"Okay, Daddy."

"I know we need to make contacts," Jack said slowly. "But I'm terrified there will be bands out there that survived, without major supplies, that are now bent on finding anyone that has supplies. If this winter gets as bad as it is early, people are going to be desperate."

"We're so far off the beaten path here, Jack," Sara said. "Won't that give us some protection?"

"The General picked a good place, for sure. But if we're found, we'll be all on our own, unless we can make contact with some locals that might be willing to help, if I offer to help them, if needed."

"Jack, don't go looking for trouble," Kathleen urged. "We need you

here.”

“Family comes first. But being part of a large group has some merits.”

They left it at that, but Jack began spending every minute he wasn’t eating, sleeping, or working outside, on the radio, hoping to find some friendly locals.

Another month passed and the snows started in the Ozarks. Much heavier snowfalls and accumulations than were normal for the area, much less the time of the year. There was six inches on the ground when Jack made his first local contact.

“This is Frank Thatcher calling General Harold Smith-Worth.” There was silence for a moment and then the same call.

Jack keyed up the radio and responded. “This is General Smith-Worth’s son-in-law. How do you know the General?”

“Served with him. You must be Jack. Did his family all make it to... well... to safety?”

“That’s affirmative. And yes, I’m Jack. I don’t remember hearing the General speak of you.”

“I do,” Sara said. She’d moved up to Jack’s side and had been listening since just after the first call.

Jack slid the microphone over to her.

“Frank, this is Sara. Have you had any word?”

“Sorry, Sara. He was at the base when it was hit. Tammy and I were on our way in to visit when things broke. Sara, is there any chance you can take us in? We’re in a desperate spot.”

“Of course, Frank. How many of you are there?”

Jack winced when Sara invited the group to the retreat, but didn't interfere.

“Tammy and I, both the boys and their families. And Arnold. He's not in good shape, Sara.”

“I see. Can you get here or do you need help?”

“We can make it, I think. Can someone be at the gate tomorrow about this time?”

Sara looked at Jack and he nodded.

“Can do, Frank. And Frank, Arnold needs to know not to bring any of the old baggage with him.”

“I'll tell him, Sara. Thanks.”

The radio went silent and Sara pushed the mike back to Jack. “I know you have questions, Jack. I'll answer them. But later. We need to prepare for our guests.”

“Okay, Sara. I'm trusting you that these people won't be a danger to Kathleen and Charles.”

“They won't be. I'll see to it, my self.”

Jack left it at that and followed Sara out of the den. “I'll get Kathleen to help me get things ready, Jack, if you'll look after Charles. She isn't going to be happy about this, either. I need to talk to her to prepare her for Arnold's arrival.”

Jack nodded and went to find his family. Charlie and Ruff were playing outside of the greenhouse in the snow. Kathleen was working in the greenhouse, keeping an eye on them. “Kathleen,” Jack said when he opened the greenhouse door. “Your mother needs some help with something. I’ll take over with Charles.”

“Okay. You know what it is?”

“She just asked me to get you.”

“Okay. You three don’t get into any trouble,” she said as Charles pushed his head under Jack’s arm, and Ruff stood between his legs to see what was going on.

“No trouble. Just a snowball fight! How’s that sound, Charles?”

Charles was all for it, and Ruff seemed to be, too, since both were covered in snow in just a few seconds, with Jack having thrown only two snowballs in that time.

Kathleen was tight lipped when she came to get Charles and Ruff for their snacks and nap time. Jack decided Kathleen would tell him what the problem was eventually, but he didn’t like the idea of her being upset at all.

Nothing else was said about the matter until Jack told Kathleen and Sara that he would go wait at the gate. “I’m taking one of the ROKON’s. Keep an ear on the radio.” Both women nodded. They both also noted that Jack, besides his normal everyday carry Glock 21, had taken a M1A from the house’s armory, along with a loaded LBV (Load Bearing Vest) with field equipment and ammunition for the rifle.

Jack found a good place to hide, in sight of the gate, where he could see it, but anyone at the gate, wouldn’t be able to see him. The wait was a

long one. Sara had called once on the radio just to check. He was about ready to call her back and tell her he was coming in. But he heard something and waited.

It was several minutes more before the convoy arrived. He'd heard them coming due to the drivers using a low gear and keeping the engine RPM's up to make it through the snow. They weren't off road rigs and were having some difficulty with the snow covered fire road.

There were four of the big diesel pusher motorhomes with three slideouts. Clones, from the look of them. All were identical, down to the long, tandem-wheeled U-Haul box trailers being pulled behind each one, with a car dolly behind it. That was where there were some differences.

Each rig had a different vehicle on their respective dolly. At that, the vehicles were similar. All were four-wheel-drive SUV's of one sort or another. Two four door Jeep Wranglers, one red and the other olive green. The lead motorhome towed vehicle was a Ford F350 four-wheel-drive pickup. The second in line was pulling a Toyota Land Cruiser.

Jack waited to see what they would do before he showed himself. The drivers of the four rigs got out of the motorhomes and met at the gate. Every one of them was armed with at least one holstered handgun and a long arm, carried in their hands or slung over one shoulder. Three men and one woman.

They simply stood around and looked up the trail past the gate. Jack showed himself and called out to them. "Hello! Frank?"

"I'm Frank," said one of the men. With the shotgun cradled in one arm, he walked over to the gate. Still cautious, Jack went to meet him. Jack shook Frank's hand and took a good look at his face.

He was early middle aged, and seemed fit. "Let me get the gate," Jack said and moved to the lock. He brushed the accumulated snow off and

then worked the combination. Swinging the gate wide he motioned the group to go through.

Each of the drivers went back to their vehicles and they moved through slowly, slipping and sliding as they went. When all four of the rigs were through the gate Jack closed and locked it.

The convoy was waiting for him, so Jack got on the ROKON two-wheel-drive motorcycle in the woods, started the engine and headed up the track, the convoy following along slowly. He called the house on the MURS radio and let Sara know they were on the way in. Jack wasn't sure they would all make it, but they did, barely. The last one in line pretty much had to stay where it was when it got stuck lining up beside the other three units on a wide open area off to one side of the house.

Sara and Kathleen were waiting on the entry porch of the house. Kathleen was holding Charles. Ruff was nowhere to be seen.

The motorhomes began to empty of people. Jack's heart fell when he saw the number of them. Sara came down off the porch to make the initial introductions. Kathleen stayed where she was.

"Jack, I take it you met Frank. This is his wife Tammy. I'll let him do the other introductions.

Jack knew he wouldn't be able to remember all the names off hand as Frank ran through them quickly. "My oldest boy, Mark and his wife, Janine, their boys Mark, Junior, and Greg. My other boy, Steven, his wife Margie, and their girls, Susan and Joan. And of course, my dad, Arnold."

The last introduction was to a man just getting to the group. He was leaning heavily on a cane and looked like death warmed over. He wasn't wearing a coat, only a long sleeved flannel shirt with his jeans. When Jack shook hands with him he got a whiff of strong booze. Arnold was

thoroughly intoxicated. And from the looks of his hair and gums, suffering from a serious dose of radiation poisoning.

“Hello, Sara,” said Arnold, pulling his hand limply from Jack’s.

“Come on up to the house,” Sara said, leading the way without acknowledging Arnold’s hello.

Arnold traipsed along slowly, at the end of the line. His eyes sought out and found Kathleen’s. She turned away and went to open the door and held it open as Sara led the others into the house.

Charles hurried to get behind his mother, unused to large groups of people. Ruff, on the other hand thought the more the merrier and ran out to greet each of the newcomers. Until Mark, Junior, Jack thought it was, gave the dog a kick and said, “Get away, mutt!”

Jack waited for the boy’s father or grandfather to say something, but neither did. Jack didn’t like the feeling that was coming over him. This group was trouble with a capital T.

Sara quickly got everyone to the dining room table. She had been holding lunch for the group to arrive. It didn’t matter much as it was a large stockpot of chili. The meal was barely started when one of the girls knocked over a glass of milk.

Kathleen hurried to clean it up. While she was in the process Greg yelled “Beans! This chili has beans! I hate beans!” He flipped the bowl upside down onto the table and looked around challengingly.

Jack couldn’t take it when the boy’s father only said, “Now, now, Greg. Not everyone can make good chili.”

“Sara,” Jack said, “May I speak to you in the kitchen, please?”

Sara rose slowly, her face pale. “Yes. Of course.”

“Hey now, Boy,” Arnold said. “Don’t go to thinking you’ll turn us out. Your family owes me and mine more than can be repaid. Junior, take the whelp and the dog down stairs.”

“Okay, Papaw.” The boy stood up and started for Charles. Charles clearly didn’t know what was happening, but he knew he didn’t like it.”

“Daddy?” Charles asked.

Jack was standing now, as were Sara and Kathleen, who was still cleaning up the spilt milk.

Before Jack could say anything in protest, Junior said, “I get to do the girl before we kill them, don’t I?”

“Now you tore it, you nitwit,” growled Frank.

The next eight seconds were interminable for Jack and his family. But that was as long as it took for the battle that erupted to end. Eight seconds.

As all the members of Frank’s family, except for the two young girls and Mark, drew handguns, Kathleen, Sara, and most especially, Jack were drawing their own weapons. When the shooting stopped those few seconds later, there was blood, milk, and chili all over everything. Five people lay dead or dying, and six more were injured.

Jack quickly reloaded his Glock 21, having emptied all fourteen rounds. Sara, sitting against the wall, blood running down her left arm, fumbled to do her second reload with the seven round magazines the Colt 1911A1 used.

Kathleen was lying on top of Charles, who was crying quietly. The

bloody pup was trying to lick Charles' face, but couldn't quite manage it. Junior was down with two rounds in his chest and one in the head. Frank had taken two hits from Jack, again a double tap to the chest. Sara had shot him on the way down.

Mark was lying across the table, the back of his head missing. His wife, Janine, dropped her pistol and raised her hands. Greg, still sitting across the table from his mother, was shaking so hard it rattled the chair on the wooden floor. Steven and Margie's two girls were holding each other, lying on the floor. Margie was also on the floor, beside them, but her dead eyes stared up at nothing. Steven, like Janine, dropped his gun and raised his hands. But he couldn't hold them up and fell over beside his wife.

Arnold still sat at the far end of the table, his chest bloody, but his eyes full of fire.

"Kathleen! Get their weapons," Jack said to his ex-wife. She didn't argue, though she wanted to. There were more important things to be doing, in her opinion. Like checking her mother's wounds.

When Kathleen had gone all around the table, snatching weapons from dead hands or where they had dropped them, Jack said, "See about your mother."

He was looking daggers at Arnold and then Janine. "I ought to shoot you were you stand," Jack barked. "But that'd leave me with your three surviving children. Not a good trade. So, if you stay very quiet, and do exactly as one of us says, you may live through this.

Kathleen had run to get her medical kit and was working on Sara. "How is she?" Jack asked.

"Wounds in her left arm and shoulder. One to her stomach, but low and wide. I don't think it broke the inner layer of skin.

“Can you take a minute and tie this bunch up? I’m starting to hurt, myself.”

Again Kathleen ran out of the room and then back. She was carrying a hank of cord and a kitchen knife. She was not at all gentle as she tied up Janine and then Arnold.

“The kids, too,” Jack said.

“Oh, Jack!” Kathleen said. But at the hard look in his eyes, and the memory of Junior’s words and then his shots at her and Charles she quickly tied the children. She was a bit more gentle, but just as thorough. The three children were crying quietly.

Jack was lowering his gun when a groan sounded from the other side of the table. It was Steven. Jack brought the gun back up to cover him as Kathleen ran around the table again and securely tied him where he was on the floor.

Jack righted his chair and sat down abruptly. “Might take a look at my right arm and right leg.”

“You’re be all right, Jack,” Kathleen said as she quickly cut open his clothing and put trauma bandages on all four of the wounds. “Just going to have to take it easy for a while.”

“Not likely. Help me get what’s his name up off the floor and into a chair.”

It was a toss up as to who groaned the most, Jack or Steven as Kathleen and Jack picked him up and sat him in a chair.

“You willing to work on him?” Jack asked Kathleen.”

She hesitated, but nodded.

“Patch him up enough to get him out to one of the motorhomes. They aren’t staying.”

“We’re just going to let them go?” Kathleen asked.

“I can’t shoot the kids, and I don’t want to take care of them until they come of age.”

“No. Of course not,” Kathleen said, checking the wound high on Steven’s chest. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” And then, to Steven, she said, “You should be all right. You’ll carry the bullet the rest of your life, unless you find a hospital still open than can do surgery. Change the dressing every twelve hours and make sure the wound drains.”

“Mommy?” came a soft call and both Kathleen and Jack spun around. Charles was walking over to them, carrying the limp Ruff. “He won’t wake up, Mommy.”

“Oh, no!” whispered Kathleen. Jack gritted his teeth.

Jack got down to one knee, despite the pain and hugged puppy and child to his chest. “I’m sorry, Charles. Ruff... Ruff. He’s dead.”

“Is he going to heaven, like Gramps?”

“He’s going to puppy heaven, Charles,” Jack explained. “Like Gramps, but a different heaven.”

“Oh. What should I do, Daddy?”

“We’ll bury him, out by the trees where he liked to play. But right now, I need you to go to your room and take a nap. Can you do that for me?”

“Okay, Daddy. Daddy. I’m sad.”

“We all are,” Jack replied.

“I’ll go get him settled,” Kathleen said as Jack took the pup from Charles. With Charles taken care of, Jack turned to Arnold. Jack pulled up a chair and sat facing him. “I want to know why? Why all this?”

“You’re stinking family owes me and mine,” Arnold said, his voice intense.

“And why is that?”

“Because I had feelings for him at one time,” Sara said. She was standing next to Jack’s chair, supporting herself by leaning on it heavily as she stared at Arnold. “But I fell in love with Harold and married him, instead.”

“You were mine,” Arnold said. “You should have married me.”

“Tell them the rest,” said Kathleen, coming into the dining room again. “Tell them how, years later, you propositioned me and I had to get physical.”

Jack stiffened as Kathleen continued. “I used one of the moves you taught me, Jack. The leg thrust to the side of the opponent’s knee. It’s why he walks with a cane.”

Sara was staring at Kathleen. “You never told me.”

“Or me,” Jack added.

“No. Mother, because you would have felt guilty and Jack... You would have up and killed him for it. I didn’t want either on my conscience.”

“You’re both just a couple of dirty...” Arnold was spitting the words out but stopped when he saw the look on Jack’s face and heard his words.

“Be very careful what you say. It wouldn’t take much for me to put a bullet in your head. Now. I want to know how you managed to wind up here. How you even knew of the place.”

“Through Frank. He served under the... General... The General invited several of the officers in his command up here for some fishing right after the place was finished.”

“Why would the General allow this man’s son to work for him in any capacity?”

It was Sara that answered. “It was my fault. Kathleen is right. I’ve felt guilty ever since I broke it off with Arnold. And then, when he married and she died giving birth to Frank, I felt guiltier still. When Frank joined the service I asked Harold to do what he could for him.”

“Okay. That’s clear,” Jack said. “The convoy? If you had the means for all that, why didn’t you pick a spot and settle in?”

“Hah!” laughed Arnold. “We had squat. When the bombs came, and we came out of the bank vault... Yeah. We took over a bank and used the vault for shelter. We went looking. People owed us for what happened to my family. So we took what we wanted. At the point of a gun, sometimes.

“Found where an RV and off-road vehicle faire was going on. Picked up the motorhomes and trucks. Frank and Mark are... were... whizzes with motors. Got the vehicles all going after the electronics were fried.

“We looted what we could find in a couple of Sam’s Clubs and Costco’s. Got the U-hauls to carry the goods, after we filled up the motorhomes. Got the car trailers at the same U-haul place to bring the

trucks along. We just needed a place to set up, away from everyone. This place is perfect.”

“It was,” Sara said. She raised the Colt in her hand and did what Jack wanted to do. Put a bullet into Arnold’s forehead.

Everyone jumped. Sara turned to look at the rest of the Thatcher family that lived. “I suggest you do everything Jack tells you to do.” With that, Sara turned and went to her bedroom. “Come get me when they’re gone,” she said as she left.

Jack stood up again and looked at Steven and Janine. “We’ll load you up in a motorhome and sent you on your way. Any attempt to come back will result in your deaths. Is that clear?”

Steve nodded and Janine murmured a soft, “Yes.”

“Kathleen,” Jack said, turning to her. “Take Janine and the kids out to the lead motorhome. Get it started with her in the driver’s seat. Leave the kids tied, but untie Janine. I’ll be out shortly with Steven.”

Kathleen hurried to comply. It was a struggle to handle the children, their hands, like Janine’s, tied behind their backs. Kathleen saw the signs of shock and almost asked Jack to let the children stay. But their actions came back to her mind and she hustled them out before she changed her mind.

Jack had to support most of Steven’s weight as the two followed Kathleen and the others. “I want to make this very clear, Steven. Not only will I kill you and Janine, those kids are bad seeds. I’ll do it mercifully, but I will kill them and bury them deep, if any of you show up here again.”

“I understand. Once we leave, we won’t be back.”

“That’s good.”

With Kathleen helping from inside and Jack pushing from outside, they got Steven up into the motorhome and seated at the dinette with the three children. “Search the motorhome for weapons,” Jack told Kathleen.

When she came back to the open center area of the motorhome she was carrying an armload of guns. She took them outside and set them down and went in for a second load, which was mostly boxes of ammunition. When she came back in she told Jack. “That’s all I could find.”

“I can’t drive this,” Janine said, starting to cry. “I only drove just the motorhome once and I’m not very good. We’ll never make it with the trailers. Not with all this snow.”

“No problem at all,” Jack said. “Keep an eye on them, Kathleen.”

Jack left the motorhome and came back a couple of minutes later. “Okay. No trailers.”

“What about our stuff?” Steven asked. “And the guns. We can’t go out there unarmed.”

“Tough. It stays. I wouldn’t even have thought about keeping it, if Janine hadn’t said she couldn’t pull the trailers. And no guns for you to turn on us. Now, remember what I said. Kathleen, out. I’ll take it from here.”

“But the gate...”

“Don’t worry,” Jack said. “I have a plan.”

Kathleen got out of the motorhome and Jack had Janine put it into gear. She spun the drive wheels slightly, but the tires caught and the motorhome began to move. Jack had to admit, Janine was a lousy driver.

But she made it to the gate without running off the track into the forest. Just.

“Okay. So nothing bad happens to good people, I’m going to tie your hands to the steering wheel while I get the gate open. I’ll be coming back in gun first, so don’t try anything. Since we’re out here alone, I’m really tempted to just kill you all and hide the rig in the nearest gully.”

He’d been tying Janine’s hands as he talked. He backed out of the motorhome and ran to the gate. He got it open in record time and ran back to the motorhome. He checked through the windows to make sure everyone was still seated where they were supposed to be.

Jack entered the motorhome, just as he said, gun first. No one tried anything. Jack went up to Janine and said, “I’m going to put it in gear for you. You drive well away from here before you even try to work yourself out of that cord. The knots are loose, so you’ll be able to get out of them and turn the others loose after a little work. But not until you are well away from here.”

Janine nodded and Jack worked the shift lever and put the transmission in drive. Then he left the motorhome. There was more slipping and sliding, but Janine got the motorhome out onto the fire road and turned in the direction from which they’d come.

Jack watched for a long time. Kathleen called him twice on the MURS radio and he reassured her both times that everything was all right. Finally, Jack locked the gate again and started the trek back up to the house.

Kathleen worked like a Trojan alongside Jack as they moved the dead bodies from the living room to a spot out near the edge of the forest. He was spent by the time they had cleaned up the dining room. They didn’t want Charles, or Sara, for that matter, to have to deal with seeing it again in the condition it was after the gun battle.

“I have to rest, Kathleen, if I’m to keep an eye out this evening for them to return.”

“That’s okay, Jack. I can handle it from here. But...” Tears started pouring from her eyes and Jack took her gently into his arms. “I’m a nurse, Jack! And I’ve just killed people. How do you do it?”

“You steel yourself and tell yourself it was something that had to be done to protect other lives more precious than the ones you had to take. And you believe it completely.” Jack held her for a long time, until she had cried herself out.

“I’m going to check on Charles,” Kathleen said as she disengaged herself from Jack’s arms.

“I’ll take a turn around the place, just to check,” Jack replied and headed for the door. He picked up the M1A from the rack at the front door of the house, and took it with him. Twenty minutes later, snow covered, Jack came back in.

He sat down in the executive chair behind the General’s desk in the den and turned on the Yaesu Amateur radio. Kathleen found him there, asleep in the chair, a few minutes later. She stood in the doorway of the den for a very long time, arms crossed, watching Jack sleep. She finally turned away and began to do a bit more cleanup and then prepare a supper for the family.

It was a somber meal. None of the family ate much, and Kathleen put most of it away in the refrigerator for use the next few days.

“Daddy?” Charles asked after he pushed his plate back, “Can we bury Ruff now? I want him to go to heaven soon.”

Jack almost said no, but if it would help Charles put the day behind him,

it would be worth the pain of digging a grave for the pup. “Yes, Charles. We’ll bury him,”

Kathleen almost put a stop to it, but she had the same thought that Jack did and kept silent.

As soon as it was obvious that no one was going to eat any more Kathleen started clearing the table and Jack got up. “Okay, Sport, I’m going to go dig the grave.”

“I’ll help, Daddy.”

Holding back the tears in his eyes, Jack nodded and took Charles hand when he held it up. Kathleen bundled Charles up, as the temperature was falling as quickly as the snow. With a shovel from the tool room that was part of the three double-bay detached garage, that was in addition to the two double-bays in the house garage, Jack led his son to a place near the forest that Charles had pointed out that Ruff like to play.

It hurt Jack to use the shovel, but he persevered, even allowing Charles to lend a hand on several shovelfuls of rapidly freezing dirt. With a hole two feet deep, large enough for Ruff, Jack signaled Kathleen, who was watching from the kitchen.

She brought Ruff out and handed the body to Jack. “Good-bye, Ruff,” she said softly.

“Good-bye, Ruff,” Jack said.

Charles followed suit, tears beginning to trickle down his face. Jack gently put the pup in the grave and sprinkled a handful of the dirt into the grave. Kathleen did the same, so Charles did as well.

“I’ll fill the grave, Charles. You go back into the house with your mother. It’s getting dark and the snow is heavier.

With his hand in his mother's, Charles asked, "Is Ruff in puppy heaven now?"

"Yes, he is," Jack said.

Looking back over his shoulder as Kathleen led him to the house, Charles said good-bye to Ruff one more time.

It was full dark when Jack finished covering the tiny grave and went inside. "Charles is asleep," Kathleen told him. "So is Mother." Kathleen helped him take his coat off and hung it up for him. "I want you to take a warm shower and I'll change your bandages."

"It's only been a few hours," Jack said.

"Just do it," Kathleen said.

"Okay," Jack said, too tired to argue.

The shower felt good, and Kathleen had a fire going in the fireplace when Jack came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. Kathleen had him sit on one of the ottomans, near the fire, and carefully checked and then dressed Jack's wounds again.

"You have so many holes in you..." She said softly. "That's why I left, Jack. Because I never knew when I'd get that visit to tell me one of them finally did you in. How did you face that, every day?"

"Let me get dressed and I'll tell you," Jack said through a huge yawn.

"Why don't you lie down on the sofa for a while, first? I'll keep an eye out."

"Yeah. Think I will. But wake me if I fall asleep."

Kathleen nodded and helped Jack over to the sofa. He sat down heavily, and then laid back. Kathleen spread one of the afghans her Mother had made over him. He was asleep before the afghan settled onto his body.

Roaming the house and checking outside every so often, Kathleen kept herself awake until Jack woke up on his own about four the next morning.

“Kath?” Jack asked, coming up behind her as she sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You needed sleep, and I needed something to do. If you’re up to it, I’ll get some sleep now.”

“I’ll get dressed.”

Kathleen was already in her bedroom, the door closed, when Jack came out of his. He checked on Charles and then put on his coat and went outside, again taking the M1A with him to look around the property.

The huge motorhomes loomed up out of the snow as he approached. The old tracks were gone and Jack left a set as he went around the units, looking for anyone that might be sneaking in to recover one of them. He didn’t really think Steven or Janine had it in them to do so, but he’d been caught off guard with the family’s viciousness. It wouldn’t happen again.

He even traipsed down to the lake through the rising snow. There was three inches more on top of the six they’d already accumulated and it was beginning to make walking in it a bit difficult for Jack, especially on the wounds in his leg. Looking out over the dark lake, Jack said a prayer of thanks that his family, Kathleen and Charles, had not suffered the fate of the Thatcher family. Death or injury.

Jack worked his way back to the house, pausing to look at the now snow covered mound of bodies. “Got to bury them quick,” he said aloud. “Don’t want the predators to get to them.” But Jack knew how the General had equipped the retreat, so he wasn’t worried about the job.

Finally Jack went inside again, set the alarm system and began listening to the Yaesu Amateur Radio again. There were more people on every day, it seemed like. Even a few in the Ozarks, but no one that had given enough information for Jack to figure out exactly where they were in relation to the retreat.

“Best option,” he said, thinking aloud, “is to run the lake. See who might have a place similar to this one.”

So far, they’d not seen or heard anything on the lake, but that didn’t mean someone wasn’t using it.

It was shortly after five when Jack heard Charles stirring. He hurried to take care of him before the noise wakened Sara or Kathleen. After a bathroom break, carrying his old teddy bear in lieu of Ruff, Charles joined Jack in the kitchen. Jack puttered around, doing the preliminaries to make breakfast while Charles used his crayons to draw on carefully rationed paper.

Jack set a cup of hot chocolate down near Charles and warned him of the temperature. Jack had cooled it down with milk, but Charles carefully tasted it before taking a larger sip.

Sara, in her robe, came into the kitchen an hour later and took the cup of coffee Jack handed her.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Jack asked softly.

“I’m up and about, but that’s about it. Kathleen needs to check the bandages. I already feel a fever coming on.”

Jack went still. A fever now, with the medical system, screwed up as it was before the war, could be more than just serious. It could be deadly.

“I’m afraid I’m not going to be much good to you and Kathleen for a while,” Sara said, taking a seat beside Charles. She picked up a crayon and began to help him color the drawing he’d made.

“We’ll manage,” Jack said. “You just don’t do anything to make your wounds worse.”

“I’d tell you the same, but I know it wouldn’t do any good.”

“What’s that?” Kathleen asked, coming into the kitchen. She took the coffee Jack handed her and took a sip.

“Jack not doing anything to make his wounds worse,” Sara said.

Kathleen looked over at Jack. Despite four fresh holes in him, he was getting along very well. She’d always known he was tough as nails, but this was proving it.

“Sara says she has a fever,” Jack said.

Kathleen put her coffee cup on the counter and used the back of her hand to feel Sara’s forehead. “Can’t tell. But both of you will start a series of antibiotics today.”

“I’ll pass,” Jack said, looking at Charles. “Keep them for a rainy day need.”

“I have some more for a rainy day need,” Kathleen said calmly. “You will take them. Just like Charles would, if he needed them. Isn’t that right, Sweetheart.”

“Yes, Mommy.”

“See,” Kathleen said, picking up her cup of coffee again and leaning against the counter to watch Jack prepare breakfast. He wasn’t a particularly good cook, but he had a few things he did well. He was fixing one of them. Omelets. Even with powdered eggs, they were good.

“Can I go play in the snow?” Charles suddenly asked. He’d just noticed it through the window. The snow was coming down more heavily than it had the day before. When Jack had checked the temperature earlier the thermometer read thirty-six. The snow was a wet one.

“Maybe, if you’re good, you can help me shovel some snow for a project I have in mind.” Jack looked at Charles for his reaction.

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll help. Are those people yesterday in heaven, like Ruff and Gramps?”

It came out of the blue and Jack and Kathleen exchanged a quick glance. With a lifted eyebrow Jack asked Kathleen if she wanted him to handle it. She nodded.

Jack wasn’t about to lie to his son, but Charles was too young to understand some nuances, so he said, “They went to a special place, too, Charles. For other people like them. It’s like heaven, but different. When you get a little older and think about this again, and ask us, your mother or I will explain a bit more. Is that okay?”

“Okay.” Charles went back to his coloring until Jack served breakfast.

An hour later, with Charles bundled up and Jack in a parka, the two went out and began to clear a path from the motorhomes to the outside basement door. After a few difficult scoops, Charles decided making

snow angels was more fun and Jack let him have some.

Feeling his wounds aching, Jack took Charles back inside and sat down himself with Charles in his lap for a short nap. He'd intended to go through the motorhomes and trailers and bring in anything he didn't want to freeze, but he was just too tired at the moment.

A couple of hours later, with Charles getting a pre-school lesson from his mother, Jack cleaned the path of the snow accumulated the past two hours and then started the project he'd started earlier.

Jack had to shake his head. The motorhome were full of looted items. He had to admit, most of it was going to prove useful, but it seemed like the Thatcher family had a thing for material things. There were more electronics and toys than ten children could use. Also, booze and quite a bit of fancy jewelry, though Jack had his doubts as to its present worth.

He set up five sets of piles as he went through the motorhomes, then the trailers, and finally, seeing that the passenger vehicles were also loaded down, them.

One pile was pure trash that would be burned or buried. There were piles of perishables that would go into the kitchen and quite a bit of canned and packaged goods that would go into the basement. That pile also contained things that Jack didn't want, but were worth keeping for trading.

The next pile was more weapons and ammunition. "Unless I miss my guess," Jack told Kathleen later, "They hit some big gun stores. One of which must have been a class three dealer."

The fifth pile was things that Jack had no immediate use for, but didn't want to throw away, just in case.

There was a sixth group of items, but they didn't qualify as a pile.

Arnold had mentioned waiting out the fallout in a bank vault. They'd brought along several bundles of cash. Along with looting gun shops and jewelry stores, the family must have hit some coin shops. There were a dozen bags of coins, rounds, and bars of precious metals.

"Maybe that does qualify as a pile," Jack said, wincing as he set down yet another of the heavy bags of the metals.

After taking the perishables into the house, Jack had to take another long rest. Then, with Sara keeping a weather eye out on Charles, Kathleen put on a coat and helped Jack move the rest of the stuff that needed to go into the basement. What the cold temperatures wouldn't hurt, they put back into one of the trailers.

"Jack?" Kathleen asked when they closed the trailer door after putting the last thing in. "Do you think they killed people over some of this?"

Jack sighed, paused, and then nodded. "Arnold said they took some things at the point of a gun. And with that oldest boy so willing to kill, I'd say they killed several. You're not thinking we shouldn't keep it, are you?"

"It just seems... ill gotten gains... blood money..." Kathleen shook her head suddenly. "No. I won't carry their guilt on my shoulders. If I thought there was a way to give it back to the original owners, I'd say do that. We can't, so we keep everything useful, just like you said."

She helped him carry the precious metals into the basement, and then into the shelter, using the hand trucks they'd used on the other heavy or large items.

"Why they had to attack us... I don't know, Kathleen," Jack said as he stacked the bags in the gun safe that was in the shelter. "I'm not condoning how they got it, by any means, but they had enough to set themselves up nicely anywhere the weather was good. If they had just

kept going south, instead of stopping here... They'd be alive and so would Ruff. That poor pup."

"I know, Jack. And don't do this to yourself. I think Frank and his father both were twisted in ways we can't understand. Mother and Father... I knew there was something between them they never spoke about, but I had no idea it was so... dangerous."

Jack took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "What's done is done. This is the spoils of war and here for the taking. It could be the difference in making it or not. But my plans for salvaging some of the things we need... I'm going to have to rethink that."

Once that task was done, and Jack had recovered for a day, he set about burying the bodies of the dead that were stacked like cordwood. The General had prepared well, and Jack had no problem running the A300 Bobcat skid steer with a backhoe attachment to dig and then fill the common grave.

Besides the A300, the equipment at the retreat included a Bobcat 5600T Toolcat utility vehicle, and two Unimog U-500 utility trucks. There were attachments galore for all four units, as well as several other pieces of equipment needed on a small estate slash truck farm. The mobile equipment and attachments accounted for almost a fourth of the one million, six-hundred thousand dollar total that the General and Sara had spent getting the place ready for use as a retirement home and retreat. Sara's inheritance from her father was a large part of the funding.

The retreat was set up for sixteen people. Fifteen was the maximum number the shelter would take comfortably for a long stay. The General always figured that one more could be squeezed in and planned for sixteen.

Using the foods and other consumables inherited from the Thatcher's,

the family made it through the winter in good shape. The LTS (Long Term Storage) foods stocked at the retreat were kept for later use. The greenhouse was heated and producing well, and Jack fished from the shore of the lake every few days when it was pretty and added some fresh fish to their diet.

He decided not to hunt, to allow animal populations build back up, from the losses the radiation had caused.

The winter passed slowly, and as they spent time together, Kathleen rethought her ideas about Jack and his past actions. She moved her things into the bedroom he was using just before Christmas. Nothing was said, but they were man and wife again.

Sara was much slower to heal than Jack, but she was again her spry self when spring finally came.

Jack spent a lot of his recovery time on the radio, feeling out the locals about having a get together in a neutral place. To get to know one another, exchange experiences, and set up a way to trade among the various groups.

A date was set in late spring, as everyone was going to be very busy getting gardens started as soon as the winter weather broke.

Jack wasn't adverse to that. He was going to be putting in a large garden in addition to the greenhouse, himself. But the first order that spring was to get the orchard into shape. The trees needed spring pruning and Jack got out the orchard's three-wheel, diesel powered, one-person cherry picker. With the hydraulic tools there were with it, the job went well and quickly, after Jack had read up on the process and the need for it.

Next, with a tiller on the front of the Toolcat, Jack, with an excited now five year old Charles belted in next to him, tilled the designated garden area to get it ready for seeding when chance for a hard freeze was over.

With Sara able to help out in the greenhouse and kitchen, by the time of the planned get together, they had quite a few boxes of fresh vegetables and several cases of home canned vegetables for trade. They were still working on the goods from the Thatcher family's stores for the most part.

Charles threw one off his very infrequent tantrums when he wasn't allowed to go with Jack and Kathleen to the meet. He would be staying behind with Sara. It was a risk, but every other combination was also a risk.

With his Suburban loaded to the gills, Jack and Kathleen headed for the meeting place on a warm, sunny day in late April. The sun was still watery, with a layer of high altitude fallout still circling the globe, but there was sun. There would be a summer.

Wanting to get there early on the day of the meet, Jack planned the trip to the North Fork campground in another of the sections of Mark Twain National Forest to take two days. That gave them some maneuvering time in case of necessary detours.

Jack looped north rather trying for a straight shot and pulled into Sycamore campground north of the North Fork campground late in the afternoon. There were two reasons. One, all ready stated, was to time the arrival for early morning at the meet, and the other was to give a false impression of the direction from which they had come.

The two set up a dry camp, with no fire, again for security. Kathleen heated water for tea over a shielded single burner hiker's stove. They had some jerky, a little gorp, and tea. Sitting side-by-side, Jack's arm around Kathleen, the two watched the sun set. When it was full dark Jack set out perimeter alarms and set the alarm on the Suburban and then joined Kathleen in the tent.

Breakfast was the same as supper the evening before, just before full daylight, and Jack had the Suburban on the road at full light. As soon as they hit Highway 76 the two began to see other people. There was all manner of transport, from foot to semi truck. The slower stayed to the right and those capable of going faster stayed to the left, using the oncoming lane since there didn't seem to be any northbound traffic.

Jack was itching to talk to some of the people, but most seemed to want to maintain their pace and leave the talking to when they arrived at North Fork campground. Jack might have stopped and picked up a family with small children but there just wasn't room in the Suburban.

As one of the primary instigators, Jack stopped the Suburban at the entrance to the park, locked it and he and Kathleen joined several men and women standing around, talking. One person seemed to be directing traffic to camp spots in the campground.

Just about everyone over the age of twelve was carrying a gun of some sort, but all were holstered, slung, or cradled in an arm, with no indications of trouble.

"Jack Black, and my wife Kathleen," Jack said and started a round of introductions and handshakes.

Besides Jack and Kathleen, the ones that had coordinated things for the get together were all there. Angus and Patsy McGregor, Slim and Jenette Sparks, and Elvis and Gina Turtle.

"We got here last night and did a quick survey, Jack," Angus said. No water at the spigots, of course, but the primitive toilets are okay. There should be plenty of camp spots for everyone that said they were coming." Angus pointed to a large open area being kept clear by several boys pointing out directions to those coming in and wanting to camp

there. “That open area I thought would be ideal for a trade faire.”

“That looks good, Angus. From what I’m seeing, the turnout is going to be really good.”

“I think more than one-hundred-percent.” It was Jenette Sparks speaking. “I think more people were listening in than were talking after we set up regular communications.”

“Rosey over there is telling everyone to meet at the open area at noon to set up for trading. I thought, since so many have brought things to trade. Mixing and meeting can happen as everyone goes around and sees what everyone else has. Is that okay?” asked Elvis Turtle.

Jack fell into the position of leader automatically. He tended to lead, and people tended to follow his lead. “That sounds good. Good work. What do we have in the way of security?”

“My boy and Slim’s there are out patrolling the perimeter of the campground. We’ll need to relieve them pretty soon.”

“I want to take a turn around the perimeter myself,” Jack said. “Get a feel for the place.” He turned to Kathleen. “You okay with setting up camp and holding the fort till I get back?”

“I’ll go with you. Talk and get acquainted while you get things set up,” Jenette Sparks said.

Kathleen nodded at Jack and went over to the Suburban with Jenette following. “Gotta watch my wife,” Slim told Kathleen. “She’ll have all your secrets out of you if you don’t watch out.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Kathleen replied.

“Let’s go find the boys and let them take a break. That way,” Angus

said, pointing to the densest part of the forest that surrounded the open area of the camp.

As they walked, looking all around and taking in the terrain, Angus would whistle like a bird from time to time. After about fifteen minutes a whistle answered him. “Come on out, Trey.”

Even bigger than his father, Trey McGregor stepped from a shady spot in the trees and let himself be seen. Another, much smaller young man stepped from behind a nearby tree. Jack was impressed with their field skills. He hadn’t seen Trey until just before he stepped forward.

“You two check in with yore mommas. We’ll handle it for a while.”

“Sure, Pop,” said, Trey. “Come on, Arvin. Ma’ll have something good to eat.”

The two men fell silent as they went into patrol mode. Talk could come after security concerns were met.

When they finished the circuit, two more men, rather, a man and a woman, took over the task. Jack went to find Kathleen and the camp.

“What do you think?” Jack asked when he came up and gave her a quick kiss.

“Slim wasn’t kidding. Jenette is like a sponge. Soaks things up before you know you’ve said anything. Having to keep your assignments to myself, I was able to slide around some of the questions. Oh, she doesn’t mean any harm, she’s just inquisitive. What is security like? We need to be on alert all the time? One of us stay with the camp?”

Jack shook his head. “No. Everyone is pitching in. There is at least one two-person patrol out all the time. There will be more at night. I think

the camp will be fine during the day. As long as we set up alarms.”

“Good,” replied Kathleen. “You want to go down and set up a trading blanket?”

“Okay. I’ll get the game cart off the roof rack and we’ll take our first load down.” Kathleen took the folded up game cart when Jack handed it down to her. The two had discussed what to bring for trading and what they wanted in return. They had the cart loaded in a few minutes and headed to the area set aside for trading. They were far from the first there.

Picking a spot somewhat away from the others, at the outer edge of the area, Jack and Kathleen set up two camp chairs and laid down a tarp and unloaded the game cart onto it, grouping like items together.

“You want to go see what the early birds have?” Jack asked. Kathleen had been known to spend a few hours going to garage and yard sales.

“Sure,” she replied and stood up. Hitching the gun belt into a more comfortable position, she set off, looking like she was on a mission. She was gone for a long time, stopping and going back when someone set up in an area she had already passed through.

Jack didn’t mind. There were plenty of people stopping at their setup, though most were wanting to introduce themselves and thank him for helping get the trade faire set up. There was little trading being done yet. Like Kathleen, most people wanted to get a good look at what was available before committing their precious resources to a trade.

Several people set up private radio call schedules with him, including many that asked for private conversations with him before the group broke up.

When Kathleen came back, the area was crowded. “There are a few

things I want to get,” she said. She reeled off a list and approximately where the holders of the goods were located. “See what you think, and I’ll go get them.”

“Okay. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Don’t rush. There are a lot of things here. People, kind of like us, haven’t set all the good stuff out yet.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Uh... considering some of the items you want... Is there something you need to tell me?”

“No, dear, I’m not pregnant. But it could happen anytime, as careful as we are. I want to be ready for the possibility.”

“Okay. Just wondering.”

Jack took his turn around the area. One of his goals for the meeting was to try to get regular trading going on between the various communities, and that needed, almost required, a common currency. Trading goods and services across the distances the people here represented would be a nightmare. So Jack was pushing gold and silver coins as an exchange medium. Anyone that would take them, he gave them, rather than other goods.

He intended to get as much of the Thatcher’s looted PM’s as possible in circulation. Holding it made him uncomfortable, and if some good could come of it, he intended to use it for the community good. Just handing it out would destroy, at least for a time, its worth, so he was careful about what he offered for any particular item so as not to undervalue the coins.

There weren’t very many people that took it. At least not initially, but as the three day event continued, more and more people were doing so, as Jack’s constant offer to take it or give it in trade became known.

By the time the group began to break up and those that had the longest distances to travel, or were on foot began to leave, pre-1965 US silver coins and the various recognizable gold coins were being used regularly, if certainly not exclusively.

Probably the biggest benefit of all that came out of the meeting was the knowledge that there were other people out there, going through the same things, and triumphing in one way or another over adversity, yet maintaining a degree of civilization. That if you didn't have it, probably someone did and you could get it. For a fair price.

That the good guys outnumbered the bad guys several times over. The bad news was that there were some bad guys out there.

Besides those facts, Kathleen and Jack also took home some tangibles. More than enough baby clothes and things to supply several families, at least in Jack's opinion. A lot of home canned meat, mostly chicken, but also beef and pork, with a little rabbit and goat thrown in for good measure. The chicken, rabbit, and goat they contributed to the community kitchen for one of the community meals that were done.

There were several chickens in well protected cages on the roof rack, along with three pairs of breeder rabbits. In the back of the Suburban were two purchases that hadn't been planned on, but when they became available neither Jack nor Kathleen could resist. Even at the cost.

One was an male Airedale pup, well off wean, and already house trained. The second was another animal. Another dog. Another Airedale. A young female from a different breeder. She was well trained and she could be bred with the male so they could have more pups.

The female had bonded with Kathleen almost upon sight and they bought her with Charles in mind. But when they found the pup, it had Charles name written all over it. So they wound up with both.

Jack had traded away much of the accumulation of non-tactical weapons that the Thatchers had taken, along with the ‘good stuff’ when they went through the gun stores willy-nilly.

Mostly odd caliber pistols, with a box or two of ammunition, some bolt action rifles in not very popular or available calibers, also with a useable amount of ammunition. Some .410 bore, 28 gauge, and 16 gauge shotguns of several varieties, and half a dozen single shot and double shotguns in all gauges. Though Jack preferred semi-auto shotguns, he held onto all the 20-gauge, 12-gauge, and 10-gauge pumps, not bringing anything that would likely be used against him effectively.

What guns and ammunition he sold included several items he obtained from other people, keeping tactical weapons and ammunition for storage and use or sale later.

The fresh and home canned vegetables Kathleen and Jack had went over well. There was quite a bit of food traded, bought, and sold, but more importantly, arrangements were made for the regular supply of many food items to those without the capability or inclination to grow their own, particularly the large stock animals, animal feed grain, hay, straw, and wheat for flour.

Kathleen almost had a monopoly on non-hybrid vegetable seeds. She’d allowed some of just about every variety of vegetable grown in the greenhouse to go to seed, which she collected and put aside for next year’s planting, and as trade goods. Only one other person had non-hybrid seed for sale, and didn’t have much of it. There was still a lot of hybrid seed around and it moved well, too. No reason not to use it until it ran out.

Another major outcome of the meetings that were held was the organization of a group of salvagers that would systematically go through the entire area collecting everything of use. It would be split up among the communities, with the salvage teams allowed to keep some

items for themselves as payment for their labor.

Jack and Kathleen decided not to participate, the Thatcher family's actions having turned them off to the idea. That wasn't to say they wouldn't acquire some of the items by purchase or barter, but they wouldn't take the things themselves. It was splitting hairs, they both knew, but it gave them at least a little piece of mind, and the ability to get things they couldn't otherwise.

Taking it slow, and stopping often because of the animals, they took two full days to get back home. Kathleen had been talking to her mother, and Charles, every evening they were gone, and she was reporting that everything was fine.

Which it was when Jack pulled the Suburban into the compound. Charles came running to the vehicle and Jack got out and gave him a big hug. When it was Kathleen's turn, Jack opened the rear of the Suburban and let Queenie, the female Airedale, and the pup out.

Kathleen gave Queenie a voice command and she took off like a shot, to investigate the area. Charles' mouth was hanging open at the sight of Queenie, but he turned and squealed in delight when he saw the pup. It was mutual love at first sight. The two were on the ground, wrestling together in an instant.

"What's his name, Daddy? What's his name?"

"We thought we'd let you pick a name. What do you think?"

Charles face had a look of intense concentration on it as he thought of a name. "Can I name him Spot? Like the dog in the book I'm reading?"

"Spot it is," Jack said. "Now, Spot is house broken like Ruff was, but he'll need to learn the other rules, the way I helped you with Ruff. Think you can start doing that with Spot?"

“Okay, Daddy, I will. Heel, Spot, Heel!” Beaming as Spot followed along enthusiastically, Charles took off to teach Spot all he needed to know about being a good dog.

Queenie, her first inspection done, came over and sat down beside Kathleen. She took the dog over to meet Sara as Jack started unloading the other animals from their roof rack location.

Sara and Kathleen began to unload the interior of the Suburban, talking quietly. Jack took the animals to the small barn next to the detached garage and workshop. The General had not intended to raise large stock, but had included the provisions for rabbits, chickens, and goats. Kathleen and Jack had decided not to do the goats, though some were available at the Meet.

They had several buckets of powdered milk and other dairy products so didn't feel the need for a milk cow or goat. When it became available again, hopefully in the near future, they'd start buying fresh from whoever set up an operation close.

While feeling better about things overall, there was still the concern about their isolation. While good, initially, through the shelter stay and just after, there was a large risk anytime any of the adults was gone from the estate. The bad guys would eventually learn where everyone was and a small family alone was at the greatest risk.

Jack had not found anyone at the meet that was very close to them, or would admit to it. He discussed the problem with Kathleen and they came up with two alternatives, either of which would work, and if both were able to be done, their fears would be greatly reduced.

So Jack got one of the General's three boats out of the detached garage. A fast twin outboard runabout, the engines mounted on an external transom rack for maximum useable internal room.

One of the other boats was fast, but not nearly as fast as the runabout. It was a thirty-two foot, three-pontoon party boat with a small cabin containing a bathroom and galley, along with the helm. The party boat had the same pair of Mercury outboard engines used on the runabout. Each also had a limp-home smaller outboard for safety and an electric trolling motor for slow speed maneuvering and trolling when fishing.

The third boat was utilitarian sixteen-foot Jon boat with a Yanmar diesel outboard, but Jack left it in the garage, too.

Jack wanted some real speed available, in case of trouble. Sara had given him a list of names and approximate locations of several people she and the General had met during vacations on the lake after the house was finished. “None seemed the type to have survived this, but you never know,” Sara told Jack as he got ready to leave the floating dock on the General’s section of lakeshore.

“Are you sure you don’t want one of us to go, to cover your back?” Kathleen asked. A teary-eyed Charles had already been told he couldn’t go, repeatedly. But with his arm around his mother’s leg, he hoped for a change of heart. There wasn’t one.

“No. This will be a quick scouting and first contact run, only. I don’t want to give away too much.” Jack was adamant. So as he idled the runabout backwards from the dock, Sara, Kathleen, Charles, and the two dogs headed back for the house.

When he was clear of the dock, he turned the boat around and headed down the same shoreline the compound was located, toward the major part of the lake. He stayed well away from the shore, not wanting to be a sitting duck target for someone hearing him coming around a bend in the lake.

The surrounding forest was part of the Mark Twain National Forest and

there were only a few private lots along the shore. Jack came up on a dock twenty minutes into the journey. There were a couple of small boats tied up to it, but they didn't look like they'd been used since the war. Certainly not since the winter. Both were nearly full of water, probably snowmelt from the winter accumulation.

Jack backed away and found a spot fairly close where he could run the boat ashore. He wanted to come up on anyone before they could see him, and that wasn't likely if he stopped at the dock.

With the runabout secured to a tree, Jack took the M1A in hand and headed for the clearing associated with the dock. Another twenty minutes and Jack was satisfied that there was no one around, and probably hadn't been since the war. The place was similar to the General's, though on a much smaller scale, and without the preps aspect. A simple summer vacation home with retirement home possibilities.

Back in the runabout, Jack kept going. His next stop was more productive. He found two kids fishing off a dock. Both took off running when they saw him, but the fact that they were kids, alone, fishing, Jack decided immediate contact was worth the risk. With the M1A down out of sight, he idled the runabout up to the dock and shut off the outboards.

"Hello!" he called. "Anyone there?"

From behind a nearby tree a voice answered him. "Sure are, and got you in my sights. Who are you and what do you want?"

"Name's Jack Black. I'm up the lake a ways. Looking for other survivors willing to do a little trading."

"You on your own, up the lake a ways?" asked the man.

Jack hesitated, but decided lying would be counter-productive. "No. My family, too. Mother-in-law, wife, son, and a couple dogs and small farm

animals.”

“What are you trading?” asked the man.

“Nothing today. Just now got the boat in the water to see who my lake side neighbors are. Have you heard of any problems around the lake? I don’t want to run into someone wanting to take the boat.”

“So far, so good,” said the man. He finally stepped out from behind the tree and approached the dock. He slung the rifle, but Jack noticed, that like most people of the day, he had a handgun on his hip. The boy and girl followed at a distance.

“I’ve seen a couple of boats, but no one has stopped before you. We’re way up on the lake here, so there aren’t many. Didn’t know anyone was further up than us. Except the Quincy place and ...” The man started to slowly take the rifle off his shoulder. “Except the General.”

“Before we have a situation here,” Jack hastily explained, “I’m his son-in-law. His wife Sara is at the place, with my wife Kathleen, the General’s daughter, and my son Charles. The General was on duty at the time of the attack.”

“He would have been. He was a good sort.”

Jack remembered Sara’s list and took it slowly out of his pocket.

“Would you, by chance, be Will Willis?”

“How’d you know?” asked Will, tensing up again.

“Sara gave me a short list of people they’d met while they were on the lake during the General’s infrequent leaves. She thought that anyone on the lake had made it through, it would be you and your family. I stopped at another place a ways back. It was deserted.

“The Quincy’s weren’t in residence. They were two-weekers, every couple of years. I kept an eye on their place for them.”

“Really? That’s good to know. The General had a caretaker... A couple, Jonas Williamson and his wife. They were nowhere to be found when we arrived.”

“Yeah. Met them a couple of times while we were in getting supplies in town. Good people, I thought.”

“They were, from what Sara has told me. How are you guys getting along? Like I said, I’m not carrying anything for trade, but if you need something, let me know and I’ll see about getting it to you.”

“Be partial to some salt, if you have any to spare,” Will said. “And I don’t suppose you’re a doctor, are you?”

“We have salt. I’ll run it by in a day or two,” Jack said. “And my wife is a nurse. Anything she could do to help?”

There was a look of extreme relief on Will’s face. “Yes. My wife is pregnant and having some problems. We’d pay just about anything we own to get some medical care.”

“We’ll be by with the salt in a day or two and Kathleen can check on your wife.”

“Thank you,” Will said. He reached over and the two men shook hands.

“Do you have an Amateur radio? There’s a group of us that are in contact here around the Ozarks.”

“No. Got a CB that still works.”

Jack set up a schedule to check in on the CB. He’d keep Will informed

of the goings on around the area. Jack started up the outboards and eased back from the dock before turning downstream again. He checked in by radio and let Sara and Kathleen know about the Willis family, and that he was continuing the trip.

It was nearing noon and Jack was ready to turn back, going up the other shoreline, when he went around a bend and almost hit a small Jon boat with two men fishing from it. Fortunately he wasn't going very fast and was able to swing wide and slow down before coming to a complete stop.

"We don't want no trouble, Mister," said one of the men. He had his hand on a single barrel shotgun.

"Not looking for any, either," Jack said. "I'm Jack Black. I'm out looking for others on the lake. Trying to set up a community to help each other out. Do some trading."

The two men conferred for a moment, speaking quietly enough that Jack couldn't hear. One of them turned to Jack and said, "I'm Calvin Montgomery, and this is Sidney Stalks. We've got a place down the lake a bit. Let us talk it over with everyone and see what they say. You got a CB?"

Jack nodded. Again, like he did with Will, he set up scheduled communications. "Anything your group particularly needs?"

"More food. Salt. Sugar. Health care. Gas. Everything," said Calvin.

"Yeah. I know what you mean. We'll be able to help with some of that. Any bad guys lurking about that you know of?"

"Yeah." It was Sidney this time. "They're a small group, but they's mean. Nobody can pin them down. We haven't been hit, but we heard about a couple places way down the lake that have. But they seem to be

land people. Nothing about any boat loads of bad guys.”

Jack nodded. “Okay. I’ll be back in a couple of days with a few things to trade. My wife is a nurse. She’ll take a look at anyone that needs her. I’ll radio the details.”

The two men waved as Jack started up the drifting boat and headed down the lake. He stayed well away from shore now, only wanting to get a sighting of the dock where the two men’s group was located. What he saw through the binoculars was a lot of activity in a large open area right on the lake with several houses and as many more RV’s of one type or another.

Crossing over the lake to the other shoreline, Jack made his way back to the retreat complex without seeing any additional people, though he did check two more abandoned places.

When he got back home, he filled in Sara and Kathleen. “It was a good first day’s attempt,” Jack said. “I didn’t want to commit you to too much, Kath, but I knew you’d want to help if you could.”

“Yes, of course. I have quite a supply of things, but we need to make it a priority on our trading.”

Jack nodded. “I’ll add that to the list of things for the salvagers to look for.”

It took a week for Jack to work the area of the lake in which he was interested. In all, there were seven other compounds, from a single person holding out alone, to the Montgomery and Stalks extended clans.

The retreat was, by far, the best set up of them all, and Jack had several long discussions with Sara and Kathleen about bringing some of those barely making it to the retreat on a permanent basis to improve security,

and share the workload.

“We have the caretaker’s house and the three motorhomes. If we add three complete solar power systems to the things the salvagers are looking for, we could get them power. We already made the deal for a steady supply of diesel. If we could add a large propane tank, they could be pretty self-sufficient. There is plenty of extra room to enlarge the garden.

“We could provide some necessities, but they would have to work for their share of them, and for anything else they want. We have the equipment to do a lot of work, but can’t put it to anywhere near full use alone. It’s really a shame that the people that the General had invited to come here in times of trouble weren’t able to make it.”

“Yes, it was,” Sara said softly. “We’ve known... Knew... some of them since the early days. We were all friends and though most were military, there was a good mix of other skills among the bunch.”

The decision was finally made to ask several of the people to come stay at the retreat compound, but not until everyone had become well acquainted and trust was built. As the summer ended, the small migration began.

The Willis family took up residence in the caretaker’s house first, and then, after reaching an amicable agreement, the three motorhomes were parked and people moved in. It was only when they were deciding where the motorhomes would go that Jack found the propane, electrical, water, and sewer hook ups right where the logical place for the motorhomes to be parked permanently. He asked Sara about it.

“I haven’t thought about that in years. Yes, Harold had them put in for some of our friends that had plans to travel after retirement. This would be their home base when they weren’t on the road. There should be hook ups for six units. The sewer system is independent of the caretaker’s

house system.

“But the caretaker’s house water and power systems were greatly oversized to supply the units. And that’s why the propane tank is so large. Harold had to fight to get that big of a tank for residential use.”

“I never thought to ask about the caretaker’s propane tank, since we don’t use any in the main house and the tank is buried. I just assumed it was a three-hundred or five-hundred gallon residential tank.”

Sara shook her head. “Three thousand gallons. And the solar system is the same size as the one for this house and shelter. Enough to provide fifty-amps of... the higher voltage. I can’t remember the details.”

“Two-hundred-forty volts?” Jack asked.

“Yes. That’s it. Each hook up has a fifty size plug for electrical.”

“Fifty amp,” Jack said. This will be a lot easier than I ever thought. You and the General sure knew what you were doing when you set about getting this place set up.”

“Mostly Harold, of course,” Sara said with a smile.

Jack thought for a moment and then said, “I want to check that electrical system. I’m not sure it will provide a full fifty amps to six units, plus the caretaker’s house. But it may work with just the three pulling on it. If we were to add three more we might need to expand the system.”

“I really don’t remember all the details,” Sara replied. “Just that significant efforts were made to have a working group on site. Not everything worked out the way Harold planned.” Sara sighed and excused herself.

With the additional possibilities that the General had made possible,

despite the amount of solar power available, Jack went ahead and added more capacity to the salvagers' hunt the way he initially planned.

With Will Willis' wife expecting any day, Kathleen opted to stay at the retreat and take care of her while Jack, Sara, and Charles went to the post harvest trade faire at the North Fork Campground. Will's oldest, Bill, was fourteen and rode with Jack and them to represent his family's interests, under the guidance of Jack.

The Suburban was pulling one of the Thatcher U-hauls, as was the Ford F-350, which was being used as the common use vehicle by all the other residents of the retreat that didn't have other working transport.

Ben Smith would be driving it. He was the loner that had relocated to the retreat compound. One person from each of the other two families rode with him, their goods in the trailer. Their camp gear was in the back of the truck with two drums of diesel for use by both vehicles on the trip, and four empty drums, with the intent to fill all of them with biodiesel that was supposed to be available at the meet.

Jack took the direct route this time, saving a day on the road. When he had the camps set up, he went to meet with Angus and the others to see how the trade faire was shaping up. Bill looked after Charles at the camp as the other three, from the Ford, went out exploring.

There were significantly more people on hand than the first meeting, with much more in the way of goods. The salvager's had done a yeoman's job and the leaders of the group were able to provide one meal every day and paid security to make things easier on everyone there for the trading. All paid for with the community share of salvaged goods.

Not everything that was for trade was at the meeting. Some large items, and items too difficult transport in other ways, were for trade, but would have to be traded on trust. Much like the silver and gold coins that more and more people were using.

Jack put quite a bit more of the precious metals into circulation. One item he paid dearly for was a full semi tank trailer of a mix of regular diesel and biodiesel. And instead carrying diesel back in the empty drums, they were filled, carefully, with gasoline by another trader. The gasoline went pretty cheap, due to its age. Jack bought another six drums and filled them too with the slightly sour gasoline.

But along with the large liquid fuel tanks the General had installed and had filled with treated fuel at the retreat, there was a large supply of Pri-G and Pri-D to treat several thousand gallons of additional fuel. Jack would not have a problem using the gas, once he treated it.

Another major purchase done on trust, like the diesel, was a fourteen wheel propane tanker, full. Both would be delivered to the retreat compound before winter. One thing that was there that Jack bought, though it, too, would have to be delivered, was an empty diesel powered reefer, with a complete extra refrigeration plant. When Jack saw it, he realized that the compound could freeze much of their produce, instead of canning it, plus keep the meat they were buying frozen until ready to be processed.

Just before the meeting was to break up, a small group of men, including Angus, came up to Jack and asked for a private audience with him. It was a delegation to ask him to act as a banker for the community. His willingness to use precious metals, labor, and goods for transactions, and the quantities of each he seemed to have, had caused several discussions among the people in the group. He had been an instigator in getting the meetings set up, and his organization of the Upper Lake people was now common knowledge. And he always treated everyone fairly.

Of course, the main need for using a banker, other than just the convenience of checks in the old days, was that they had money to loan. Several requests for loans until things were better came with the request that he be the banker.

Jack was all for it, but knew he'd best discuss it with Kathleen first. He needn't have worried. She was all for it. Jack told the others, and counted out pretty much all the gold and silver coin he had with him. He actually had a couple of depositors. People that wanted to do some business from long distance, by radio, and have a way to make the transactions.

Jack also had a few requests to join his group. Those people he arranged to come visit so Kathleen and Sara could meet them, and be in on the decision.

When the small convoy headed back to the retreat compound, there was a good feeling in the air about the way the region was coming together. That was in addition to the information coming from other parts of the country where similar groups were getting together. One of the most important was a group in the process of getting a small refinery going. Though they had biodiesel available locally, there was no good way to make a gasoline substitute, so that was a particular item much looked forward to.

The only really bad news of the event came after the fact. One family group that was supposed to have been at the trade faire that had not shown up was found by a group going home. All three people in the family had been killed and left lying where they fell, and their horses and other goods taken. It made the rounds on the radio quickly when everyone got home.

With winter just around the corner, and the need for everyone to finish getting ready for it, a group to hunt down the rogue group and deal with them was put off until the next spring. But everyone would be on alert and if the group made its presence known, help would be on the way. Weather permitting.

Once Jack and the others were home, and the propane truck and semi

trailer of diesel were delivered, the three families wanting to join the group all showed up, ready to settle in for the winter.

Kathleen was a bit upset that Jack hadn't asked her about it, but calmed down when he explained that the three small groups were only supposed to visit and a decision made over the winter. "I guess they didn't want to wait," Kathleen asked, when Jack finished explaining. "You're a bit too good of a salesperson, sometimes, Jack. Let's go talk to them."

The three groups had joined together, upon learning that each was wanting the same thing. They did some salvaging on their own and had motorhomes and travel trailers for all three families.

When Kathleen saw there was a baby or toddler in each family she couldn't turn them away into the approaching winter. Some of the rest of those now residing in the compound quickly got the newcomers' rigs set up. Another group, including Jack, was getting the newly acquired solar electric components installed and hooked up to the grid that fed the motorhome lots.

It was good they hadn't wasted time. The snow started on October fifteenth, and before the system had passed through, there was an accumulation of a foot and a half, with drifts of over five feet in areas.

It was another mean winter, but most everyone at the compound was well supplied for it. Those that weren't were able to work to get enough for them to make it through. Kathleen delivered four babies that fall and winter.

The parents of one of them showed up the day before Christmas in a rather luxurious houseboat. Larry McAfee had made contact on the CB just before he brought the houseboat up to the dock. Jack and Will were waiting and got it secured to the dock. Kathleen was waiting, too, with her birthing bag.

She delivered the breach baby successfully during the blizzard that raged from before Christmas until after New Years. Without much left in the way of supplies, the couple and newborn stayed the winter on the houseboat. Though he had to clear them almost every day, the houseboat was well equipped with solar panels, a battery bank, and inverter to handle most of the their power needs.

A trio of one-hundred-pound propane tanks provided the heat and cooking. Jack was able to fill them in rotation without trouble from the propane truck as each emptied.

During some mild spells during the winter, Jack and Will took the party boat up and down the lake with trade goods, mostly food and firewood, to help out some of the others on the lake that were struggling to make it.

By the time spring rolled around again, there were three more houseboats tied up to the compound's dock. One of the family's had been chased off their property well south of the area two weeks prior by the rogue band. They'd managed to escape, with most of their supplies, on the houseboat. Having heard about Jack and his operation, they'd journeyed up this arm of the lake until they found him.

Jack was able to get five people to go with him, to check things out. Five that he would let go, anyway. Between being pregnant, and needing her to run things while he was gone, Jack put his foot down and told Kathleen she wasn't coming. She took it better than he'd hoped.

Jack led the way in the General's runabout, with one man; and Will, Calvin, and Sydney aboard the party boat. The man with Jack was Larry McAfee, who turned out to be a former combat medic and all around go-getter. He was determined to more than repay Jack and Kathleen for the care they'd taken with his wife and newborn.

The two boats cruised at the party boat's highest speed until they got

close to the point where the family had been run off their property. Well out in the lake, Jack led them past, and then turned the two boats to shore.

“Larry and I will see what we can find out. There’s at least one boat at their dock. We’ll go around and go in the front way. You three keep the engines warm on the party boat and come in to cut off any retreat by water when we give you the word.”

All nodded their heads and Jack and Larry headed overland. It took almost two hours, but they finally found the gravel drive that led to the home on the lake. Jack got a very bad feeling when he saw the big motorhome sitting right at the end of the drive.

With nothing visible at the house, Jack checked out the motorhome. It was riddled with bullet holes. It was a pigsty, and there were no signs of any of the Thatcher’s that had survived the gun battle in the retreat house. Jack conferred with Larry and the two split up. Each would rush the house from a different angle, when Will had the party boat close enough to be heard in the house. Will was to use the party boat’s foghorn to draw attention.

Jack had Larry in sight when he heard the foghorn. Both men ran toward the house, using a zig-zag pattern to try and reduce the chance of someone inside getting a good shot at them. There were sudden shots, but they were out the back of the house, toward the party boat.

“Hold off,” Jack told will over the radio. “We’re going in.”

Jack gave Larry, who had his back pressed up against the outside wall of the small house, a signal and Larry went to the window to cover Jack as he burst through the front door. He kicked through the lock and went in low. There was no one in the living room and Jack motioned for Larry to go to the window in the next room. Jack moved toward the door to that room and nearly ate a shotgun blast.

He felt the heat from the shot and jerked to his left, the M1A coming up. He didn't have time to aim. The man was wracking the action of the shotgun. Jack put a bullet into his chest and turned, looking for anyone else.

He heard two shots from outside and headed for the back door. It was a mistake. There were three people, not two. This time the shot at Jack didn't miss. Fortunately it wasn't a very good shot. It took him in his right thigh, breaking the femur, and down he went. But he triggered off fully ten rounds through the walls on either side of the door from which the shot had come. A second later a body fell out, landing half in and half out of the kitchen.

There was another flurry of shots outside, but Jack had already passed out. When Larry came in a minute later to check on him, he quickly radioed Will to bring the party boat up to the dock so he could get his medical bag and treat Jack.

When Jack came to, he was in his own bed at home, felling like he'd been kicked by a mule. Kathleen was sitting in a chair beside the bed, reading. Jack's painful groan caused her to look over at him. "I'll get Larry," Kathleen said.

"Aren't you caring for me?" Jack asked.

"Of course I am. But Larry has had a lot more experience with gunshot wounds than I have, despite being married to you."

While Kathleen was gone, Jack looked down his body. His leg was splinted, with a traction splint. A lift had been rigged to keep the leg elevated.

Larry came in and checked Jack's vitals and poked and prodded him

mercilessly, until he was satisfied. “Take this pill...”

Kathleen helped Jack with the glass and the pill, and then stepped back as Larry kept talking. “A traction splint for a while. Then a regular cast, and then a walking cast. Don’t think about doing much of anything involving that leg for the next several weeks.”

“But I have to...”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Kathleen said. “You’ve got things set up so everyone knows their job and their place in the order of things. They can do without you, other than transferring information back and forth, through me.”

Jack knew better than to argue. He lay back against the pillow and watched Larry and Kathleen confer, quietly, so he couldn’t hear.

“Okay,” Kathleen said, turning back to fluff the pillows behind his head and back. “You get some sleep. I’ll have some good hot soup for you for dinner, so you can start getting your strength back.”

“I don’t suppose anyone can tell me what those three were all about? That was the motorhome the Thatcher’s left in at the house.”

“Larry and Will filled me in. They got the story from the one that didn’t die immediately. They came across the Thatcher’s not that long after they left us. The Thatcher’s must have found some guns somewhere, or had them hidden well enough I didn’t find them... Anyway, there was a short pitched battle. The Thatcher’s lost, though they managed to kill two other men that were with the group.” There were tears in Kathleen’s eyes. “Even the two girls died in the battle.”

“Probably better that than the alternative,” Jack said softly.

Kathleen wiped her eyes, nodded, and continued. “The three men have

been using the motorhome the last few months, getting enough diesel here and there to keep moving, robbing and looting what they could to sustain themselves. They just flat ran out of luck when they crossed your path. It's pretty clear they were the ones terrorizing the region. We may have a pretty peaceful time of it now. And before you explode, no, we haven't lessened security. Everyone will be watching just as close now as they did before. It seems not knowing there is someone out there is worse than knowing there is, and planning on doing something about it."

Jack nodded, but whatever they had given him was putting him out of it.

That seemed to be the turning point. There did turn out to be more bad guys, but they were the occasional hard case that every civilization breeds. They were handled as each had his or her fifteen minutes of fame. The court system was simplified by those that put it back together, and justice was swift for those that broke the rules of a recovering, post apocalyptic world.

The first two winters after the war turned out to be simple extremes that are part of climate. There was no extended nuclear winter.

With Jack acting as banker, financing project after project, the retreat compound became a hub in the Ozarks for commerce and communication. A simple tax system, like the simple judicial system, was implemented, with enough tax revenue to allow the roads, and especially the bridges, in the region to be maintained.

Much of the local work was done using the equipment with which the General had furnished the retreat.

The Ozarks were just one of the regions that finally reestablished themselves as heavy producers of food, with enough surplus to again permit some of the smaller cities to revitalize, too, becoming able to again supply manufactured goods critical to the continued recovery.

Jack was finally able to retire the well equipped wood and metal shops in the detached garage. With the skilled people that Jack had recruited, the two shops, especially the metal shop, had provided most of the small repair part manufacturing done in the region, up to the point the cities began their comeback.

As the justice system and tax system were reinvented, so was local and regional government. Despite his dislike of politics, Jack found himself the first mayor of the small town that grew up around the retreat, and then Governor of Ozark, one of the many newly redistricted states that developed due to similar terrain, political beliefs, and resources. At last count, sixty years after the war, there were forty-one of the new states, and half of the US was still being reorganized. There was even talk of a new National Government. But it was years away. Charles would play a large part in that, but that's another story.

End *****

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