

Cowboy - Chapter 1

Jenny groggily reached for the telephone, trying to read the digital clock on the bedside table. It took a moment for her to focus, but finally she had it. 5:37 am. She picked up the telephone receiver, ready to rip into whoever was calling at this hour.

But when she heard the only words spoken she was suddenly wide awake. "Six lanterns," and the phone clicked. It was enough message for Jenny to activate her emergency evacuation plan.

"Must be bad," she thought as she climbed out of bed and went to her bedroom closet. "Six Lanterns!" It was the MAG's threat assessment team's take on Paul Revere's Midnight Ride. One if by land, two if by sea...

A one lantern warning was simply to be extra aware of what was going on. Six Lanterns was impending doom of one sort or another, with heading for the MAG's retreat property advised.

Jenny hesitated for a moment. The weather had been marginal at best when she went to bed. Best be prepared for the worst. She put on silk long john over her underwear, added silk liner socks and then heavy wool socks. She added sturdy cotton blend khaki pants and shirt. A million things running through her head, Jenny sat down on the bench at the foot of her bed and put on her hiking boots.

Hesitating only a moment, Jenny went to the walk in closet again and opened the small free standing fire-resistant safe and took out everything it contained. Her grandfather's pair of old Walther PPK .380 ACP pistols. One was in a small-of-the-back paddle holster. The other was in an ankle holster. She set them on the bed for a moment. There were twelve loaded spare magazines for the PPK's, four of them in two paddle style two magazine pouches, two in an ankle double magazine pouch, plus six without pouches. They also went onto the bed.

One tube of gold American Eagle one-tenth ounce gold coins she opened, and after taking off her Orvis leather pants belt with the hidden zipper, thumbed the gold coins into the hidden compartment, zipped it up and put the belt back through the belt loops of her pants. Another tube of one-tenth ounce gold Eagles, two tubes of pre-1965 silver dimes, two tubes of pre-1965 silver quarters, and one tube of Silver Eagle one-ounce rounds went on the bed. So did a Spyderco Harpy pocket clip knife.

A cloth money belt with important papers and a disappointingly small amount of US currency she put on under her khaki shirt. The debit card she kept for emergencies she put in a shirt pocket. Jenny had a feeling it was going to see quite a bit of use.

She put the one PPK holster in the small of her back, with the two double magazine pouches to the left of the holster. The second PPK went on her ankle with the other two magazines on her opposite ankle. The Harpy was clipped inside her right hand pants pocket.

Taking her leather shoulder bag and her safari style jacket from the closet she put the items on the bed into the bag and put on the jacket, looping the bag strap over one shoulder.

Jenny closed and locked the safe. She checked on Craig and Julie. Both were still sleeping soundly. Working quickly Jenny loaded up the Subaru Outback with the plastic totes containing the family's emergency supplies.

She took a pair of empty totes and emptied the refrigerator into them and added both to the others in the Subaru. From the small utility shed in the back yard, Jenny carried four five-gallon jerry cans of gasoline and a receiver hitch mount carrier to the SUV. After mounting the carrier she loaded up all four cans of gasoline.

Jenny started the SUV to let the interior warm up. Then she went to wake the children, eight year old Craig first. "We're going camping, Sweetie," she said as he came awake. His eyes brightened. He liked camping. "It's cold, so wear your long johns."

"Yes, Mother," Craig said, already sensing the urgency in his mother's voice before she spoke again.

"Please hurry," she said, getting up off the bed where she'd been sitting. Jenny hurried to Julie's room and began the difficult task of getting her five-year old up and moving at the early hour.

Jenny glanced at her watch a couple of times during the process. Even with the still half asleep Julie's slow reactions, Jenny felt they were still doing okay on time. She helped Julie get dressed in her warm 'camping clothes' as her outdoor adventure clothes were called.

When the two entered the living room hand-in-hand, Craig was watching the television. It was an early morning children's program. Everything seemed so normal, Jenny thought. Yet she'd received the call from the threat assessment team.

"Are we having breakfast, Mother?" Craig asked.

"On the road, Craig. Better turn that off so we can leave."

"McDonalds!" Julie said, loudly.

"We'll see," Jenny said softly, tugging Julie's hand gently to get her started toward the front door of the duplex she leased.

Craig followed along without a word, after using the remote to turn the television off.

Jenny got both children buckled in, and then grabbed the emergency shut off tool she'd put on the front seat of the Outback while loading the SUV.

"I'll be back in a minute," Jenny told her children.

It was a bit more than a minute, but Jenny had all the utilities turned off in the house. Just in case.

Julie was getting a bit pouty when Jenny got back in the SUV. Craig asked, "Mother, is everything all right?"

"I don't know, Craig. You know my friends... The ones we camped with that time? They think there is and I trust them to know."

"We're going to that special place we aren't supposed to talk about?"

Jenny glanced at her very perceptive son in the rear view mirror. "Yes. We are. Just in case."

Craig had been leaning to his left and forward so he could see his mother's face in the rearview mirror. He sat back and tried to remember some of the things he'd heard when they'd been with the MAG, as his mother sometimes called the group of friends that went camping together sometimes.

Julie was getting fidgety when Jenny saw the McDonalds. It was open. She pulled into the drive through and quickly ordered breakfasts for all three of them. "Help your sister please," Jenny told Craig as she pulled back onto the street, her own breakfast already forgotten.

They were seldom allowed to eat in the Outback, so Julie was considering it quite a treat. Craig helped her get her breakfast sandwich unwrapped and ready to eat. He put the straws in her juice and her milk cartons for her and then turned to his own breakfast, noting that his mother wasn't eating.

Jenny was watching for a service station. The one she usually used wasn't open yet, but down the street was an open-all-night station. She pulled in and used the debit card in the reader to fill the tank of the Outback. It didn't take much, but she wanted a full load of fuel before she got out of town.

Next, Jenny stopped at a grocery store open all night. She took both children in with her and put Julie in the cart seat. "Craig," Jenny asked, "Can you push a second cart for me?"

Eagerly Craig agreed. He was very careful to keep the cart out of the way of the few other shoppers in the store, and not run up on his mother's heels.

Jenny walked the aisles quickly. She was very selective in what she put in the cart, but when she did pick an item she put several in the cart. It was mostly canned entrees, canned fruit, and snack foods that Julie, and to a lesser extent, Craig liked. Craig's cart was loaded lightly but full of paper products, particularly toilet paper, and feminine hygiene items.

When she saw the total bill Jenny flinched slightly, but knew there was enough in the debit card account to pay for everything. But it sure didn't leave much in the account.

The sky was beginning to lighten in the east when Jenny turned the heavily laden Outback toward the MAG's retreat. It was a good two hour drive. Jenny said a silent pray, "Please, God, let me get my children to a safe place before anything happens."

Jenny waved at the truck that pulled up and stopped behind her at the gate at the end of the driveway to the retreat. "Do you know what it is?" she called back to Jim, the driver of the truck.

"No. Just got the emergency alert call and bugged-out," Jim replied. "Go on through. I'll lock the gate behind us," he added.

Jenny opened the high security combination lock and rolled the gate sideways. She got back in the Outback and pulled through. She left enough clearance for Jim's truck and waited until he was in and the gate locked again before she headed up the driveway that wound its way through the trees. Jenny was sure there was at least one, probably two, guards somewhere close, out of sight, watching the gate, but she didn't see anyone. Which was good.

The guards at the entrance to the walled compound were evident. One stayed in the armored kiosk, shotgun at the ready, while the other, armed with a holstered pistol, checked Jenny's ID against a list of MAG members. She motioned for her partner to open the gate and waved Jenny through. Jim pulled to a stop and began going through the same process.

There were already an even dozen vehicles in the large gravel surfaced parking lot when Jenny parked. "Angela!" Jenny said as the tall, statuesque woman approached. "Can you tell me what's happening?"

"The assessment team believes there is a high chance of a terrorist nuclear attack sometime in the next three days. In the city."

"The city! Why there? We're nobody!"

"I don't know," Angela replied. "But Harvey is convinced."

Jenny glanced at her watch. "I'd better call in and let them know at work I won't be in for a few days."

"Will that be a problem?" Angela asked.

"No. I work my own schedule. I just like to keep them informed when I'm not available for a specific time." Jenny was a contract editor for an internet POD publisher.

Craig had unbuckled himself and exited the car when his mother had. He went around the Outback and began the process to get Julie out of her car seat while Jenny was talking to Angela. When Craig set her down on the parking lot Julie ran around and grabbed Jenny around one leg.

"Mommy!" she said adamantly, "I have to go potty!"

“Craig, would you mind taking her?”

“No, Mommy! You! Craig’s a boy!”

“Okay, Sweetheart,” Jenny said, holding back the sigh. She knew this day would come. Craig had always been good with Julie, but apparently some aspects of that were over. Taking Julie by the hand, Jenny led her toward the retreat’s community building and the restrooms inside, Angela walking along side.

Craig needed to go, too, but he decided to wait until his mother came back. In the meantime, he began to take off the elastic cargo net holding down the items his mother had put in the roof rack of the Outback. He had to get a step stool from inside the SUV, but he was able to start unloading.

By the time Jenny brought Julie back to the Outback a small group had gathered, ready to help. “Sweetie,” Jenny said to Julie, squatting down to talk to her face-to-face, “You remember Callie? She helped take care of you when we camped like this the last time.”

Shyly, Julie nodded, and then took Callie’s hand. “I’ll take her over with the rest of the little ones,” she told Jenny. “You coming, too?” Callie asked Craig.

“I’m helping unload,” Craig said, standing tall.

“That’s all right,” Jenny said. “He’ll be fine.” It was all she could do not to send Craig with Callie and Julie, but the boy seemed to need to be doing something constructive. Jenny knew the feeling.

With Angela leading the way, everyone picked up a tote or other item in the Outback and headed for the community building. Jenny had a storage room assigned to her and everything from the Outback went into it, except for the fresh food. That went to the community kitchen. The fuel cans were labeled and added to the rest of the stored fuel kept inside a tall, earthbermed enclosure.

“I think that’s enough,” Jenny told Craig after he’d wrestled one of the medium sized totes all the way to the storage room. “I want you to get some of the smaller items.”

“Yes, Mother,” Craig replied, trying to catch his breath. Perhaps it was best if he did. The last thing he wanted to do was drop something. The next trip was one of the duffle bags of clothing. It was much easier to handle.

When everything was moved Jenny urged Craig to go play with the other youngsters. “Not the babies. Callie is the baby sitter. You can play with the older children.”

“I’ll go find them,” Craig said, relieved he didn’t have to help Callie. He hurried off to let the adults do what adults do. He saw a boy about his age and hurried over to join him.

“What do we need to do with the shelter?” Jenny asked Angela as the group that had helped her move began to break up.

“The shelter is ready,” Angela informed her. “Let’s go get you logged in. Rebecca is getting frantic. People aren’t showing up as quickly as she would like.” Angel laughed. “But Rebecca is always frantic about something.”

Jenny grinned. Angela had a point. It had been Rebecca that had gotten Jenny involved in the MAG. They’d met at a gun show when Jenny was looking for a knife with which to protect herself and they got to talking. It was some time before either admitted to being of a prepper’s mindset. Jenny bought the Harpy from Rebecca and they stayed in touch for a while. Once Rebecca thought Jenny was ready, she sponsored her for the MAG.

It had taken a couple of months to meet the key people that would have the say whether or not Jenny would become a member, and at what level she would be if she did become a member.

Everyone paid small monthly dues that paid for maintenance and upkeep at the retreat. There were several levels of buy in to the MAG, including the very basic. You brought camping gear and your own supplies and stayed in the campground area with access to a storage room, the community building, and the shelter in case of a CBRN event.

There were additional steps, up to and including a full member with your own small earth sheltered dome home, and full access to all the facilities. Some had brought in small manufactured homes. Others travel trailers or motor homes they left year round. Still others brought RV’s with them when they came. And some, like Jenny, only had money to pay the basic fees for access to the retreat and camped out at the retreat during the crises.

After Jenny logged in with Rebecca and they exchanged a few pleasantries, if their conversation could be called such, she went back to the Subaru and started it and drove to the tent camping area. When Craig saw he came running over. “I’ll help, Mother. You should have called me over.”

“Well, you’re here now. Let’s get the tent up and the rest of the camp arranged.”

“Do we set up the camp kitchen and chemical toilet?” Craig asked his mother a few minutes later.

Jenny hesitated. They could use the community facilities or set up their own. Or use both as circumstances dictated, Jenny thought. “We’ll set up our own and use them when it’s convenient. Use the community building for showers and regular meals. Speaking of which, I need to transfer enough food for a couple of days from our storage room to the community kitchen.”

“What about the fresh food, Mother?” Craig quickly asked.

“I don’t really count that,” Jenny replied. “It would be lost anyway.”

“I see. I’ll help you with the food,” Craig said.

Jenny started to say no, but having Craig close was a comfort. He was wise beyond his years, smart, and seemed to love to be doing something. “Okay, Sport. Zip up the tent and lets go.”

Knowing everything was safe where they were, Jenny and Craig didn’t bother putting any of the ancillary gear in the tent before leaving. It took Jenny a few minutes to transfer items from several of the plastic totes to a single one that she put on a set of hand trucks. Craig helped her get the trucks leaned backward and held the doors for her as she headed for the kitchen.

Maggie was on kitchen duty and signed in the food. “Going to really let us fancy up the red beans and rice and lentils most everyone else contributed.”

Jenny saw Craig turn up his nose. Lentils he loved. Red beans and rice were another story. Jenny kept foods they liked on hand. Particularly for Julie. She was a picky eater. Craig took the empty tote back to the storage room and Jenny went looking for Julie. She could be a handful and Jenny wanted to make sure Callie was doing okay.

When Jenny found the small group, playing in the playground near the community building she stopped before Julie could see her and watched. Callie was a real pro. The MAG was lucky to have her as a member. She was great with small children. It allowed parents to do what needed to be done without worrying about their children.

The older children, six to nine years old, also had an activities director to watch over them and keep them busy when they weren’t with their parents. Ten, eleven, and twelve year olds, too, had someone to keep an eye on them, and direct their activities. Teens were basically on their own, but expected to lend a hand with whatever needed to be done. They were given plenty of time for themselves.

Jenny eased away, going back to the family’s camp. She ran into Craig on the way. “Mother, Miss Marigold asked me to go to the community building library with some other kids. Is that okay?”

“Take your FRS radio,” Jenny said. “And get mine out, too. Should have already done that.”

“Yes, Mother,” Craig said, opening one of the camping equipment totes. He handed a radio to Jenny and fastened the other one to the belt of his pants.

“If you go off on your own, for any reason, I want to hear about it,” Jenny said. “You know the rules if something happens.”

“Yes, Mother.” Craig started to turn around and head for the community building, but stopped and turned back to his mother. “This is something bad, isn’t it, Mother? Not just a practice, like before.”

“I hope it turns out to be just practice,” Jenny replied. “But yes, this could be bad. If I’m not handy, do as Miss Marigold says. Okay?”

“Okay, Mother. But if you need me, just call me.”

Jenny managed to hold back her tears until Craig was on his way toward the community building again. But then two tears rolled down her cheeks. Since Craig’s father had died nearly sixteen months before, Craig had done everything he could to be the man of the house.

Even only eight, he seemed to understand, to a large degree, what the MAG was and why Jenny thought it necessary to be a part of it. It was a big help not needing to worry about Craig much. That allowed her the time she needed with Julie. And private time for herself.

She walked slowly after Craig, headed for the community building herself, to draw a work assignment. She needed something to keep her busy and thoughts off the potential problems ahead.

Thankfully, help was needed in the greenhouses. It was work that Jenny not only didn’t mind, but preferred. It made her feel like she was really contributing. In a long term scenario, God forbid, she would be a teacher, among other duties. Right now, for the short times she’d been at the retreat for practice drills, she hadn’t been able to use her professional skills.

When it was time for the noon meal, she went back to the community building and found first Julie, and then Craig, as the two groups came to the building for their lunches. Julie immediately began telling Jenny all about her morning activities. Craig sat quietly beside them, waiting for the call to form the serving line.

Jenny had to hand it to the people in charge of the community kitchen. They could work wonders with storage foods. There were the constant, normal sounds of a cafeteria in full swing for some time, and then Harvey Chambers, the man responsible for getting the MAG started called for attention.

Jenny gently shushed Julie, and turned to listen to Harvey. He looked grim. “Ladies and Gentlemen. The assessment team’s decision to call this alert is becoming more and more validated as we continue to get further information.”

“What information?” called out one of the diners. “There is nothing on the news.”

Harvey frowned. “There will be a time for questions at the end of the announcement. To continue, it is the team’s unanimous opinion that a nuclear strike is imminent. It was believed at first to be a terror strike. But further information indicates a strong possibility of a widespread attack on the United States by one or more hostile nations.”

There were gasps and sudden muted conversations as Harvey continued. “With the possibility of nuclear war we are implementing the nuclear attack plan. We still have quite a few

people left to come in, so I'm asking everyone to double up on the duties. Everyone weapons qualified should report to James as soon as possible to get put in the rotation for security watch."

Craig knew what that meant and looked over at his mother. She seemed to be taking it in stride. But it worried Craig. He knew she could shoot. She'd brought him with her once when she practiced here at the retreat. He accepted the fact that he was too young to be armed, just as his mother had told him, but she'd shown him how to be safe around her PPK pistols, and the guns here at the retreat.

Craig turned his attention back to Harvey. "Now, we all hope that this is a false alarm. We've had a couple of minor ones in the past, as most of you know. But please don't treat this as such. The assessment team has many sources it accesses to come up with these warnings. They are hearing the same thing from many of them. If the team does get information that the danger is non-existent, or over, then the all clear will be announced and everyone can go home and forget about this event.

"As to the question about the sources of information, and the fact that the news doesn't have them... We have people on the team very adept at reading between the lines of news stories. There are a few with contacts with unimpeachable in-the-know sources. And don't ask who they are. I don't know, and I wouldn't tell you if I did know. But trust them. I do. Now please carry on."

Jenny thought there were a couple more people that would have asked questions if Harvey hadn't hurried off. She put it out of her mind and helped Julie finish up her lunch.

"I'll take the stuff up to the trash, Mother. I know you have to go sign up for watch duties."

"You caught that, did you?" Looking at Craig's earnest face.

Craig nodded and began to gather their lunch things in preparation to taking them to the big waste cans and the cleanup station at the end of the cafeteria style serving counter.

"Okay, Craig. Thank you. I got you up very early this morning. After you are finished, I want you to go to the camp and lie down for a little while. I'll be around with Julie to do the same thing in a little while."

"Yes, Mother," Craig replied, his hands full. He walked calmly toward the serving counter and Jenny sighed. With Julie propped on her hip, Jenny headed for the security station to get her assignment. She'd pick up her issue SKS and accoutrements when she went on duty.

But that wasn't going to be until the next morning, fortunately. When she went back to the camp and unzipped the tent door as quietly as she could, Jenny found Craig lying on top of his sleeping bag, fast asleep.

Julie was nodding off herself, in Jenny's arms. Jenny put her down on her little sleeping bag. Julie was instantly asleep, her arm going around her Teddy Bear that Craig had apparently set by the bag for her.

Jenny gave Julie a kiss on the forehead, and then did the same with Craig, before lying down herself for a much needed nap. She stirred once, when another MAG member stopped at the camping area and set up camp beside them.

When Jenny woke and glanced at her watch it was a little after four in the afternoon. She looked over at Julie's sleeping bag, but Julie wasn't there. Craig wasn't on his bag, either. Jenny scrambled outside and then suddenly stopped. Craig was playing quietly with Julie.

Julie ran over to her mother when she saw her and said, "Craig said we needed to be real hush, so you could sleep. Did I hush enough for you, Mommy?"

"Yes, you did," Jenny said, giving her daughter a big hug and kiss on the cheek. Jenny looked over at Craig and mouthed the words, "Thank you."

Craig just smiled in return.

"Mommy, can I have a cookie?" Julie asked, looking intently at her mother's face.

"Let's see what they have for us at the community building," Jenny said.

Julie let out a disappointed sigh, but took Jenny's hand when Jenny stood up and held it out.

"Mother, is it all right if I go see what Donny and the other guys are doing?" Craig asked.

Jenny hesitated. But the camp was secure. Far more secure than her neighborhood in town. "You don't want to come get a snack?"

"No, Mother. You said we would have to make things last, once before. I can skip this one."

"Oh, dear!" whispered Jenny. "Such and observant little boy I have." Again she hesitated but then said, "Go ahead. Keep your radio with you." She looked up at the sky. "If any adults come by and tell you to get to the shelter, do you know what to do?"

Craig nodded eagerly. He pointed to the community building. "There, in the community building. There will be someone to show me where to go."

"Very good, Craig. Go run and play now."

Jenny and Julie made their way to the community building dining area again. "Just one, Sweetheart," Jenny told Julie, before Julie could grab several of the cookies on a small platter. "And how about juice. There is apple, orange, and grapefruit."

“Ew! Grapefruit! No, Mommy! I don’t like grapefruit.”

“How about the apple? You like apple.”

“Okay, Mommy. Apple is okay. It’s not yucky.”

The server on duty smiled at the two as Jenny took a box of apple juice from the bowl of ice containing beverages and Julie took one of the cookies. “You want some coffee?” She asked Jenny?”

“Thank you, no. Just a bottle of water.” Jenny picked up one of the bottles on the table after she’d given Julie her juice. “Let’s go sit down and enjoy these, shall we, Julie?”

Julie nodded, her mouth full of cookie and followed her mother to one of the tables. Angela saw them when she came into the building and went over to join mother and daughter. Jenny smiled, but it was a brief one. “Any more word on what is going on?”

Angela shook her head. “No. Harvey is really sweating it. This isn’t the same as the training. It’s much more tense. I keep going over and over what I have here, plus what I brought, and keep thinking of more things we might need, if this doesn’t turn out to be a false alarm.”

“We can only hope it is,” Jenny said, helping Julie get the straw in the juice box. “But I know what you mean. I keep thinking there is so much more that I could have done to get ready for this. So many of the people here are so much better prepared than I am.”

“But it is a MAG, don’t forget. You have everything we require for membership. You’re part of the group and can draw on the resources of the MAG as needed. I have no doubt you’ll earn your keep.”

Jenny nodded, keeping an eye on Julie. She was nibbling on her cookie, walking around and around the table next to theirs. “I just wish I could have contributed more to the common stocks.”

“Like I said,” Angela reiterated, “You’ve done everything and more to qualify for a spot here for you and your children.”

“Thank you. I just hope we can fulfill the obligations. I want my children to have a chance at a real life, no matter what happens.”

Before either could say anything else, they both saw Harvey come running into the building. He headed straight for the entrance of the shelter. Just then Angela’s beeper went off. “I’ve got to go. Something is happening,” she said and headed for the shelter entrance.

Several more people came running in, also headed for the shelter. Julie had stopped her trips around the table and stood watching. “Mommy?” she asked, turning to look at Jenny.

“It’s all right, Sweetie,” Jenny comforted her daughter. “Why don’t we go find Craig? Okay?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

Before they reached the outer door of the community building the alarms started sounding. Jenny hesitated, thinking about Craig. But there were others outside, keeping an eye on the children. And he did know what to do. And there was Julie to think about.

Jenny turned around and headed for the shelter entrance, after picking up Julie in her arms. Already the shelter entry team was at the doors, ushering people down the stairs, stopping each person to get their name and to allow the previous person to get down several steps before the next person followed.

Jennifer gave the woman her name, and Julie’s and told her that her son would be coming shortly.

Fully understanding the fear she saw in Jenny’s eyes about Craig, the woman said, “I’ll mark it. If he’s not here by the time we start slowing down I’ll get a search started. Please go on down. We don’t want to have to look for you and your daughter, too.”

Jenny went down to the air lock entry and was ushered through. Julie was starting to huff just a little, in preparation to starting to cry. Jenny quickly reassured her and took her over to the children’s area of the huge underground shelter. They found Julie’s labeled box and took out a couple of her favorite toys so she could play with something familiar. It had been part of the preparation process for the children.

Almost immediately she and a couple of others about her age began to play together and Jenny went over to be close to the entrance of the shelter to watch for Craig. She didn’t have to wait long. He came out of the air lock carrying Julie’s Teddy Bear.

“Oh, Craig! You shouldn’t have delayed getting her to bring back Teddy.”

“She sleeps better with it,” Craig replied. “I had plenty of time. You know I can run really fast.”

Jenny hugged Craig. “I know. I know. Thank you. Will you take it to our bunk area?”

“Sure, Mother.” Craig started to hurry away, but turned and asked, “Is this it, Mother?”

“I don’t know for sure,” Jenny said carefully. “Harvey and the others wouldn’t have brought us down here into the shelter, without telling us it was a drill, if there wasn’t something serious happening. When I find out, I’ll tell you. Okay?”

“Okay, Mother,” Craig said and headed for the sleeping areas of the shelter, carefully dodging around people as more and more came into the shelter.

Callie showed up a few minutes later, half out of breath, and took charge of the smaller children. Jenny hurried over to the Shelter Captain's station, but suddenly slowed down. There were a dozen people milling around, obviously wanting the same thing. To find out what was going on.

Jenny decided to wait for the announcements that were sure to come. It is how things worked during the drills. There was no reason to believe that it would be any different now. The first announcement came just as Jenny decided to sit down where she could watch Julie. The announcement wasn't about what was going on. It was a call for some helpers to move food from the community room kitchen to the shelter.

It was something to do and Jenny jumped at the chance. People were still straggling in from outside, but there was plenty of room to go up the stairs as the others came down. There wasn't that much to move. Those in charge of the provisions never took out much more than would be consumed the next community meal. It was mostly some of the fresh foods that others had brought when they came to the MAG compound, just as Jenny had done herself.

The task done, Jenny went over and waited out of the way for the announcement of what was happening. It was bound to come soon, even if it was instructions to leave the shelter, the crisis being over.

But it wasn't that, when the announcement came. "Listen up people," came Harvey's voice over the intercom system. He was in the EOC of the shelter. "We have some information for you. I'm afraid it isn't good. There have been two confirmed nuclear strikes on the United States. One on Washington, D. C., using multiple warheads. The other is New York City, also with multiple hits.

"The information that we are getting indicates that there are many more targets being hit. New York and D.C. are the only two confirmed. And..." Harvey's voice faded away and some mumbling was heard in the background.

Harvey's voice was shaking when he continued. "There has just been an announcement on the NOAA Weather Radio that the United States is undergoing a massive nuclear strike. People are being told to enter the nearest, best shelter they can find. We are officially at war with China and Russia.

"I'll give you additional reports as we get them. We've just lost outside communication. I suggest you get ready for shockwaves, in case there is an off target strike near us."

The entire shelter had been deathly quiet, except for Harvey's voice. But that ended when Harvey's voice did. It was sheer pandemonium. People shouted and screamed. Some moaned and groaned. A majority cried silently.

Jenny went to Julie and picked her up to hug tightly. She saw Craig coming and opened her other arm to take him into a hug, too. "Come now, quickly," Jenny said. "We need to find a place to sit down on the floor, away from the walls."

Most of the rest of the people were doing the same thing. A few looked befuddled, but the shelter Captain's assistants went around and got everyone down on the floor. There was quiet conversation for the most part as people waited for something to happen.

It was some time before anything did. Several people had taken trips to the bathroom facilities and returned. But then everyone felt the minor tremor through the linoleum covered concrete floor.

The designated maintenance people were the only ones close enough to the air vents to hear the blast valves on them click closed just afterwards. They reported it to the EOC.

"We've just experienced a blast wave," Harvey was saying. "That indicates a device has gone off relatively close by." Again he was interrupted by some one, but he was back on the intercom almost immediately, his voice subtly different when he announced, "We lost some of our outside cameras to EMP, but one of the ones working is showing a mushroom cloud to our northeast."

There were immediate cries and more tears. Most of those in the shelter were from St. Louis. Jenny hugged her children to her and said a silent good-bye to her old life.

Cowboy - Chapter 2

Jenny was glad that the founders of the MAG knew as much as they did. She wasn't sure how she would have handled the problems that came up during the shelter stay. There were myriads of situations, including three people that wanted to leave the shelter immediately. They were allowed to go, with what they'd brought with them, and instructions not to come back.

Others had a hard time mentally dealing with the fact that the world was now a different place. Fortunately there were several health care workers in residence that were able to isolate them and treat them, without the unreasonable fears from affecting anyone else.

Five people died during the shelter stay. Two from heart attacks and three from illnesses that could no longer be treated when their rare medications ran out. One person was in custody in the shelter's small brig. She was the girlfriend of one of the members, and a drug addict. She'd tried to get into the medical section and steal narcotics.

Two babies were born, with no problems.

Eleven MAG members showed up the day after the shelter was locked down. All were allowed in after decontamination. All had severe radiation poisoning. Only one of them survived, and it took months before she could do anything but go to and from the bathroom.

Either through chance, or by having followed the MAG members that came too late, several armed people tried to get into the shelter, but armed teams drove them off, going out one of the escape tunnels to go around and attack them from the rear.

Some damage was done to the community building, but the people had been more intent in getting into the shelter than doing damage. Either that, or the security teams worked fast enough to prevent them from having time to do anything.

The group spent Thanksgiving buttoned up in the shelter. The oldest, physically fit people took turns suiting up and checking out things outside the shelter when the radiation level dropped below 0.5 r/h. The oldest had the least chance to live to an age where the higher doses of radiation they received would be a factor in getting cancer.

The MAG celebrated Christmas outside the shelter, mostly in the community building, but everyone was continuing to sleep in the shelter. People took the opportunity to check on their personal belongings. Some of the few tents were showing some damage from the weather. Two motor homes had been vandalized, apparently by people trying to steal them, doing the damage when they wouldn't start.

Several of the homes on site had similar vandalism, but only one had actually been broken into and anything taken. Unlike those that had tried to enter the shelter, the others had been more careful not to announce their presence. Several paid the ultimate price for their actions, as the initial inspection teams found several dead bodies in the main compound. Some had been shot by others on the lookout for loot, and some had died from radiation poisoning.

Everything was cleaned up and decontaminated before the children were let outside, much to their disgust. And even then, they were required to stay in the area right around the community building, unless they lived in one of the dome homes.

Jenny got permission to check her Subaru and camp not long after people were able to spend a couple of hours outside. The tent was a bit the worse for wear, from the weather, and the wind had knocked over the privacy shelter for the chemical toilet, but everything was still there. Angela helped her decontaminate everything in the camp, and then dismantle it and put the things in the Subaru for future use. They were going to need to use the community facilities for some time to come.

The Subaru wasn't going anywhere. The electronics had been fried by EMP and Jenny had never been able to afford a second set to keep in a faraday cage. Jenny decided better to use it as temporary storage than take up any more room in the community storage area. It was towed to the parking lot that had been set aside for vehicles that wouldn't run after a disaster. There were far more vehicles in it than in the lot for those still running.

Jenny had started school classes while everyone was still in the shelter fulltime. The MAG had purchased a comprehensive set of home-schooling materials and Jenny was one of half a dozen men and women with the skills to use them to their utmost effectiveness.

But she also took her rotations of security duty, and volunteered for kitchen duty and for greenhouse duty. She had the kitchen duties down pat, but she was more in training than anything else in the greenhouse. Jenny wanted to learn how to garden.

Though there would be a huge community garden, MAG members were expected to contribute as much fresh food as they could for themselves, with a portion going to the MAG. Hopefully she would have learned enough to plant a garden for her family and herself by the time spring came around. She had plenty of open-pollinated seeds in storage.

Her children seemed to have adjusted to the situation with few, if any, problems. Julie was a bit more clingy than usual, but that soon faded. Jenny constantly sent silent thanks to whoever had decided to have specific personnel to help with the children, and provide for the means to keep the children not only safe, but happy, and out of the way of the daily duties every adult and older teens had nearly every day after they were able to stay out of the shelter for eight hours or more.

Harvey kept everyone informed of what was happening, out in the rest of the world. It was mostly bad news, and much of it came from a network of amateur radio operators with a similar mind set as those in the MAG. Many of them were in MAG's of their own.

Apparently no area on earth had escaped what turned into a full blown, world-wide, nuclear holocaust. No one seemed to have the complete answer of who fired at whom, but it was obvious that everyone with a nuke fired it at somebody.

Someone on Harvey's EOC team was keeping a tally of sorts, based on confirmed targets. The loss of life was staggering and going up quickly as the winter wore on. More of the weapons

had worked than some experts thought would prior to the war. And they were more accurate. Precise targets were hit, but that included population centers. Something else the experts had been wrong about. Many had said that neither the Russian's nor the Chinese would hit population centers. They both did. And all their targets hadn't been in the US, it seemed.

But enough were used to reduce the population by an estimated eighty percent, including those that died of radiation poisoning after the attack, and including those that died of dehydration or starvation in the months following the attack. No small number of deaths were from armed conflicts between survivors competing for the resources left by the dead.

The death rate would be much higher than the birthrate for years. The population was likely to continue to decline for a long time.

“Jenny,” Harvey said, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Jenny nodded. “I think I should participate just like the others that need additional equipment and supplies. I've got a limited amount of trade goods and I want to get as much salvage as I can. Plus if there is a problem with it in the future, we'll all be in it together, not just a few that did it for everyone else.”

“Okay,” Harvey said, finally relenting and giving Jenny permission to join one of the salvage teams just about to head out.

Team members got a small equivalent share of what they found, while looking for things for the MAG, since there was much work, and no little danger in doing so. They were also allowed a certain amount of time to salvage things directly for themselves.

Jenny carried one of the PPK .380's in her ankle holster, but drew an SKS, a Glock 21SF, ammunition for both, and an ALICE style LBE harness to carry the ammunition, pistol, and accoutrements.

The MAG preferred that everyone have their own weapons, but did have loaners for those that didn't and needed to use one from time to time. The group had decided on Ruger 10/22's for those that needed something but couldn't handle stronger recoil.

SKS carbines for the short range role.

One small lot of M1 Garands one of the members of the MAG had stumbled onto at an estate auction for the long range needs.

A large lot of used Remington 870 pump guns set up as riot guns obtained from a dealer that had taken them in on trade from a police department.

The handgun choices were a small selection of Glock 21SF's in .45ACP one of the members that was a gun dealer had contributed as part of his buy-in, Glock 17's in 9mm, again a group of police turn in's, and Ruger SP101 5-shot .357 magnum revolvers.

There weren't many of the loaners, except for the SKS carbines and 870 pumps.

The ALICE harnesses, pouches, and handgun holsters were mostly FMCO brand equipment that the MAG had made a group purchase from, for individuals and for group use needs. It was the only place they'd found pouches specifically made to carry 7.62mm x 39mm 10-round stripper clips (12 clips) and Garand .30-'06 8-round en-bloc clips (6 clips). The pistol belt part of the harnesses came from Brigade Quartermasters. The other web gear came from a variety of sources.

Jenny was equipped with one of the SKS stripper clip pouches, carrying 120-rounds of spare ammunition plus the ten in the weapon. There were four single pouches for the 13-round magazines for the Glock 21SF. Jenny had two canteen pouches with canteens and a cup; and two utility pouches, one for a personal first-aid kit, and the second for miscellaneous items.

Very glad she had taken all the totes from the house when she came, instead of just a token amount as if it was a drill, since one of them contained winter clothing for her and the children, Jenny was comfortable in the cold weather that still persisted well into spring. Perhaps there was such a thing as Nuclear Winter, after all. For whatever the cause, natural or human-made, it was snowing that April when the salvage team left, adding to the three inches of snow still on the ground.

Jenny shifted the canteen a bit, so she could sit more comfortably in the rear seat of one of the MAG's diesel powered Suburbans. The compound had four of them and four similar crew cab pickup trucks. All were old models that the mechanics in the MAG had restored and modified for use after a nuclear attack. Each was well equipped.

One of the pickups was in the lead, one at the tail of the convoy, with two Suburbans behind the lead pickup, carrying the bulk of the salvage team. Between the Suburbans and the trailing pickup were four semi tractor-trailer rigs. Two pulled two box trailers each, the third a pair of gooseneck open trailers, and the fourth had two full size fuel tank trailers. There was a tow behind diesel forklift being towed by the gooseneck rig.

After they left the compound, with Julie and Craig looking on and waving good-bye, under the watchful eyes of Angela, the lead pickup headed for the entrance to I-44. It had been decided to not salvage too close to the retreat. The decision was partly because there were other survivors in the area unable to range very far afield that would need the materials close at hand.

The MAG wanted good relations with the other locals, for obvious reasons. Another reason to range further afield was to limit the chances of someone following them back to the retreat. The two motorcyclists, both ex-military, that had left the day before to scout the route going, would follow them back, keeping an eye out for anyone following.

Like the pickups and Suburbans the MAG had acquired, the two motorcycles, again, of four near identical ones, were modified for use in the post nuclear world. The mechanics had taken four used Kawasaki KLR 650 dual purpose bikes and pulled the engines. They put in Hatz diesels so the bikes could use the same fuel as the other vehicles at the retreat. One of the

modifications was extra quiet mufflers, to reduce the sound signature when they were in a position where strict sound discipline was in order.

Though the route had been checked by the bikers, everyone in the convoy kept a lookout for trouble. That evening, after the convoy had made camp, Jenny sharing a tent with the other female on the trip, they all waited for the radio report from the scouts. It was encoded, so as to not give away positions, but to also give a false impression of what was going on.

Everything was all right for the convoy to continue the next morning, with the only warning being that those in the convoy were going to have to do some maneuvering to get around blockages on the interstate.

“You heard him,” Glen Radcliffe, the leader of the mission, said. “Hit the hay. Going to be a tiresome day tomorrow.”

Jenny had been assigned as member of the first watch so she met up with the other person on watch and laid out their plans for their two hours. Nothing untoward happened on her watch and she eased into the tent as quietly as she could to avoid waking Cassie.

They were all up before daylight the next day, shaking the light dusting of snow off the tents before they were rolled up and stowed. After a hot breakfast, they set off again, after the scouts gave a coded signal that nothing had changed.

It took three days to reach the outer area of St. Louis they planned to work over. Despite St. Louis getting hit, most of the fallout that the area had received had come from Whiteman Air Force Base, Kansas City, and Jefferson City, Missouri. Glen kept a regular check on radiation levels, and each team member was wearing a dosimeter to keep track of long term exposure to radiation.

The team would not go into a ‘hot’ area, considering the risks far too high for the rewards. They met up with the scouts at the appointed place and time. The scouts had already picked up a couple of telephone yellow page books and marked a few places that should have things the group wanted. After a few minutes discussion, the scouts left, to take up positions of high cover, so the group could get started going through the Wal-Mart and Sam’s Club they were going to enter first.

“Cassie, Jenny,” Glen said, “Start patrolling. Anything at all, and I mean anything, sing out on the radio, take cover, and wait for back up before you try to deal with it. Do a routine check in every ten minutes.” Lowering his voice he was almost whispering when he added, “Code word is ‘Applejacks.’”

Both women nodded, checked their weapons, consulted for a moment, and then went off in opposite directions.

Neither of the two stores had been looted. The attack had come too quick. It took most of the day to take what they wanted and load it into the trucks. Jenny and Cassie got their turns handling the goods as they rotated the work and security.

Each of the members took some of their personal time to pick up the items they wanted to keep for themselves. Jenny was careful with her time. She had several things in mind and didn't want to waste the time for 'nice-to-have' things. She was looking for items to help her in the long run. Almost anyone could use the home-school materials to teach the children. Being a school teacher at the retreat wasn't necessarily a highly secure job.

What she wanted were the things to allow her to do something all year round, not necessarily the same thing. She had a list of items she wanted to find. She wanted the tools, equipment, and at least an initial amount of supplies to get started in a variety of trades.

The trades she was interested in doing included barbering, making charcoal, making soap, making paper, making candles, and sharpening knives and other edged tools. And lastly, after thinking about it for a long time and reading up on it in the MAG library, Jenny wanted to find the items required to produce black powder safely. Since she needed lead balls for the ball mill, she accumulated lead casting equipment to make the balls for the ball mill, plus a wide variety of other lead objects, primarily bullets and sinkers.

Of course she needed additional clothes for the children, since they were growing, and more work clothes for herself, as she would be doing physical work for the rest of her life. She was on the list of people that were going to stay on at the retreat, but didn't have housing. A program of locating and placing suitable housing was one of the first salvage operations started. Since she had children, Jenny was one of the first to get one of the fifth-wheel travel trailers brought to the retreat and set up.

Jenny didn't get everything she wanted on that first trip, but as things accumulated after more trips and trading others for them to look for specific things for her, she was finally able to equip herself with everything needed to do work of the tradesmen of old.

For safety reasons, Jenny did all the black powder production well outside the retreat inner compound. When she'd found the small ball mills at a scientific laboratory supply business she took all of them, knowing there was a high likelihood of losing one or more in accidents.

She traded out the work she couldn't do to convert the ball mills to twelve volt, with a deep cycle battery and solar panel on a tall pole to drive it. The work also included a remote on off switch so she never had to be close to the mill when it was operating. But that was a couple of years in the process to get it ready and test it out.

Though she found plenty of the chemicals she needed to get started, as trade was set up in the area, she began trading for the potassium nitrate and sulfur. The charcoal she made herself. She made willow charcoal for the black powder, and used other woods for charcoal meant for open fire use.

One of the first things she started doing was cutting hair. Primarily men's hair. There were a couple of experienced hairdressers in residence but Jenny was the one with the specialized barbering equipment. She charged a small fee for the others to use the equipment to work on the women's hair.

Making soap and candles were the next two trades she was able to master, again with knowledge she gained from the retreat library. Like the black powder, the initial batches of ingredients she obtained on the salvaging runs. Later on she traded finished goods for raw materials. Going so far as to get several dozen wax myrtle saplings and transplanting them on the property.

Learning to make basic paper took almost as long as making the black powder safely, but she managed to make a useable form of paper. It wasn't too popular until a few years after the attack, when it became about the only game in town.

When she learned to make a paper thin enough, and still absorbent enough, to use for toilet paper, her fortune was made. Despite being in individual sheets, it went like hotcakes.

In the interim Jenny traded sharpening of knives and other edged tools for small needs. Quite a few of the men had some sharpening tools and skills, but they were often busy doing the myriad of jobs required in the post apocalyptic world, so Jenny had plenty of sharpening to do starting about a year after the attack, as knives began to dull to a dangerous point. The axes and saws so needed for firewood cutting needed constant attention.

But Jenny didn't rest on her laurels. She continued to go on the occasional salvage expedition, preferring to find things on her own than trade for them whenever she could. On the last trip she made, she made a tactical mistake and it nearly cost her her life. It convinced her to leave the adventures to the younger set.

She was after material so she could have some new clothes made for her and the children and she went into a fabric shop in a strip mall that the team had been to several times already. Jenny wasn't expecting anything. The attack came without warning. The estimates varied between twelve and twenty attackers. There were only six in the salvage team, with Jenny the only woman.

She heard the firing start outside and went to the door to add her SKS to the return fire. Jenny found a target, and fired twice, but she was tackled from behind and dragged back into the shop, the SKS falling from her hands.

The man had his left arm around Jenny's neck and she was trying to get free with her left hand, pulling on the arm nearly strangling her. When she tried to draw the Glock with her free hand the man was able to knock it free.

Jenny stumbled and went down hard on her back. Close to passing out from the choke hold she'd been in, Jenny tried to scream, but the man had his left hand on her mouth. He was sitting astride her waist, and as he kept her from screaming, the other hand went to the buttons of her shirt.

Barely able to think, she almost didn't remember the PPK in its ankle holster. With the last of her strength, Jenny brought her knees up to man's back as hard as she could, hoping to

knock him over her head, but she just wasn't strong enough. The man just pressed on her mouth and nose, completely cutting off her supply.

But the movement had brought her right ankle up within reach of her right hand. She fumbled the PPK out. The man was too intent on his actions to realize what Jenny had done. He only found out when Jenny pressed the barrel of the PPK against his side and emptied the magazine into him as quickly as she could pull the trigger.

He fell off her and Jenny scrambled away, grabbing the Glock where it lay on the floor of the shop and turned the gun on him. The man was as good as dead, with seven .380 ACP slugs having ripped his insides to a bloody mass, but Jenny, without a second thought put a .45 slug into his forehead just to make sure.

Taking only a moment to refasten her shirt, she hurried back to the door of the shop and picked up the SKS. She helped turn the tide of the battle with her furious attack, and the team managed to kill eight of the attackers, including the man in the fabric shop. The rest finally broke off and disappeared, several of them injured, from the blood trail they left.

The team didn't follow them. With four standing alert guard, two gathered up their needs and they headed back to the Retreat. Jenny had her fabric, and she left it at that. She would trade with others for what she needed, just as others had traded with her.

And so the years passed. Jenny aged slowly, and contemplated marriage several times. She was considered quite a catch with her many successful businesses. But she declined them all, determined to leave to her children everything she had to help make their life easier.

Julie grew up, too, finally, but was killed during one of the raider attacks that became commonplace some fifteen years into the recovery that was very slowly taking place, not long after Jenny passed away from a new strain of flu that was too virulent for the level of medical technology that remained. There were many herbalists practicing, and they prevented much suffering, but in the case of the new flu, only a natural resistance seemed to be the way to avoid dying.

Craig had started helping his mother as soon as he was old enough. She even, reluctantly, let him begin helping with the black powder production when he was fifteen. He was a studious and cautious young man, well liked at the retreat. He did more than his fair share from the very beginning. That did stop when he reached manhood.

He'd been wounded three times driving off attacks on the retreat over the years, including the wound he'd received in the attack in which Julie had died. Craig became even more of a reclusive loner than he'd been before his mother's and sister's deaths.

Other than the barbering and tool sharpening his mother had done, Craig kept up all the other production businesses going, doing most of the black powder production himself. He did hire a man he thought had the patience and was reliable enough to make the black powder. Craig hired him and started his training. He was able to hire employees for the other work.

Due to his relative wealth and capability in handling PAW situations, he was considered the most eligible bachelor in the area and had young women, and some not so young, interested in him as a husband. He let their approaches slide off him like water off a duck's back, except for one. And that was primarily because she wasn't chasing after him.

Sally Chambers, Harvey's daughter, was a couple of years younger than Craig, but had yet to declare any romantic intentions that anyone knew about. She and Craig had become good friends over the years that Sally had been Julie's best friend. She worked for him but showed no more interest in him than in any of the men that actively courted her.

Harvey's oldest son had inherited the responsibility of the retreat when his father retired from the active, day-to-day running of the place. Quentin was much like his father. Thoughtful, slow to anger, fair, and understanding.

When Craig went to him to explain his plan, Quentin listened quietly and then tried to dissuade Craig.

"Craig, you are a major asset to the retreat. You've done well for yourself, since your mother passed on. You've continued her dreams and are making them come to fruition. So much so that, now, you don't have to keep working physically. Your businesses are supplying your needs and then some. I know that the loss of Julie has hit you hard, but leaving the retreat, to just go adventuring? That I don't understand."

Craig wasn't there to argue. Just to inform. "They were my Mother's businesses. Meant for Julie and me. I'm not going to give them up, but I intend to make my own way in the world, not live off my Mother's foresight."

"Mathew and Mitch Armstrong are good young men," he said. "They are more than capable of picking up the slack in the defenses when I leave. And I don't plan to be gone forever. Just a year or two, to see how things are done in other parts of the country. Maybe set up some trade deals for some of the people here in the retreat and around it."

Quentin sighed and nodded. "I agree with you about Mathew and Mitch. I had hoped that they would give us that edge, with you still here, to go out and maybe prevent some of the attacks before they happen."

Craig stayed silent. After several moments Quentin continued. "No one thinks any less of you for continuing your Mother's businesses as your own. And the opening of more distant trade routes is something the group has been discussing, as you well know. You've sponsored the idea a couple of times. But it doesn't have to be now. It's too dangerous for the traveling parties."

"I might be able to do something about that, and the local attacks," Craig said softly.

Quentin's eyes widened. "You're on a vendetta! Because of your sister! Man! You can't go after those gangs single handedly. You don't have any idea which person in which gang killed your sister!"

“Not a vendetta,” Craig said slowly. “And I’m not out hunting anyone in particular. But if I happen to run into someone I know is a raider... Well, I’ll take appropriate action.”

“I’m not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?” Quentin asked.

Craig shook his head and stood. “I just thought it proper to tell you, in person, ahead of time, what my plans are, since I do know they might affect the retreat.”

“In that case, good luck, Craig.” Quentin held out his hand and Craig shook it.

A day later Craig had a long talk with Sally. About business. “Sally, I need a business manager and I’d like you to take on the responsibility. I’ll be leaving in a few days. For a good while.”

Sally looked at him calmly for a few moments and then nodded.

“I’d like you to keep your regular job with me and take on this new one in addition. I’ll double your salary and give you a percentage of everything.”

Again Sally nodded and Craig began to feel a bit uneasy. “And... well... you know how it is outside the retreat. If I don’t come back, or you don’t hear from me, in... five years, everything is yours.”

“Sounds like too good of a deal to pass up,” Sally said quietly. “Considering the dangers there area in the world outside. What’s in it for you?”

Sally was very perceptive, Craig realized. More so than he had given her credit for. “I just want my mother’s foresight to continue to help people, the way she wanted. And I get to get away from my responsibilities here. I’m not a businessman. I like to do things.”

“That’s all?” Sally said. Craig barely heard her.

He had to clear his throat before he could respond. “And I’d like to have something to come back to, if I make it.”

“Something... and someone?”

“Yes.” Craig’s voice was as soft as hers.

Someone knocked on the door of Craig’s trailer and the mood was broken. It was someone wanting to buy candles and there’d been no one at the little shop that housed most of Craig’s businesses.

Neither said a word about the conversation in the trailer during the next few days as Craig got ready. With the limited amounts of fuel available, except right around someone producing biodiesel, transportation had reverted primarily to horses for trips of any distance. There was just

no way of being sure you could get fuel away from your home base. It was the same at the retreat. They made plenty of biodiesel for internal use, with a bit set aside for trades important to the MAG.

Three of the MAG member families had horses at the retreat when the war started, and two more brought theirs with them when the alert was sounded. With those, plus all that could be rounded up from dead owner's places, horses became available for sale or trade. As more and more people bred them, the price came down.

Julie had loved horses and got one of the early ones available. Jenny had paid dearly for it, but at thirteen, it was the whole world to Julie. Julie had bred the mare when she could and had been able to develop a small herd of her own. Craig had farmed out the care, feeding, and breeding the horses after Julie's death to one of the other horse owners for one of colts. The horses were available to Craig whenever he needed them, but didn't have the responsibility of caring for them on a daily basis.

Since they were such a valuable commodity, Craig kept them close to home, primarily as a breeding herd, trading off the occasional stallion to someone wanting fresh breeding blood. The rest of the males were gelded and traded. Part of the deal with Elmer, the one taking care of the horses for Craig, was to provide stud service to Craig's mares to keep the herds genetically diverse.

Other than the original horse owners, Craig had the largest herd of horses, and had the most productive breeding program of anyone in the area. So when he was ready to leave on his trip he had two saddle horses that would take packs, and four pack animals, two of which were also broken to ride. All were geldings. Craig wouldn't take any of the brood mares from the breeding program.

He loaded the pack horses lightly, so he could travel at a fast pace, without wearing them out. And being the big, tall, strapping man he was, he had the second riding horse with its own set of tack, to switch off to so he didn't wear one down riding it constantly

Elmer was an excellent horseman and trainer, so the horses were some of the best trained one could ask for. Astride his favorite saddle horse, Clyde, a beautiful Barb gelding, the other horses strung out behind him, Craig left at dawn on a cool May day, with a nod to the guards at the gate to the compound.

If he had looked back he would have seen Sally watching from the porch of her father's home. But he didn't. His eye was on the immediate future. He had traveled the area on salvage jaunts after he became old enough, and had learned part of it the hard way, chasing down retreating gangs that had attacked the retreat. So he knew the best paths to get out of the immediate area without getting spotted.

The first few days he circled around quite a bit, to check his back trail for followers. Not too many people knew of his journey, but it would only take one to slip and let it be known that he was going, with a fortune in horseflesh, not to mention personal goods.

He kept his weapons handy at all times, with at least a pistol on him, no matter what. Since they could be reloaded easily with black powder, since that was the initial loading for both the .45-70 and .45 Colt, he had one each of them, and a pocket reloader for each, and plenty of primers. They were a Marlin 1895 Cowboy .45-70, and a Ruger New Model Blackhawk in .45 Colt. They and their accoutrements were carried on the pack horses.

For immediate reaction he carried a Glock 21 .45 ACP, on his belt, with one of his Mother's PPK .380's in the same ankle holster she had worn. There was also a cut down Stoeger 12 gauge coach gun, referred to as a Whippet, in a hand made holster on the opposite side from the Glock.

His main fire power was a scruffy M1A taken as the spoils of war from a dead raider that had been too slow to fire on Craig. He only had eleven magazines for it, but had plenty of extra ammunition in stripper clips and a handful stripper clip guides so he could load the rifle while in use, or load magazines at his leisure. The M1A was carried in a saddle scabbard on whichever riding horse he was on.

Much as Jenny had gone more than out of her way to get Julie her first horse, she had made a significant trade to get Craig something warm to wear when he was on night guard duty. He preferred the night duty, and stood it often. Jenny had found someone with an oilskin Drover's coat with lamb's wool lining and a hood. It was much too big for Craig when she got it, but he soon grew into it. Just as he did the Orvis Rogue River wide brimmed hat the man threw in with the coat. He'd been a Cowboy Action Shooter and needed things for his family more than he needed the western style accoutrements.

For hunting small game he had traded for a Savage 24 over and under combo gun in 20 gauge and .22 Hornet. It rode in the second scabbard each horse carried. It would take rabbits and squirrels and sitting birds, as well as birds on the wing.

Finally sure no one from the local area was following him, Craig set out on course that would take him across Missouri to Oklahoma. He traveled parallel to I-44, setting up camp well away from it each night. When he passed the point where the retreat had done some salvage work, Craig began hobbling all the horses but the one he was riding and checking the vehicles left on the road.

He was cautious, but wasn't bothered as he checked out each of the vehicles. He had a notebook with him and noted everything that the Retreat might be interested in. There were some signs of salvage work, but it looked more like raiders' work than careful salvage work. He occasionally found an item worth taking for trade purposes and Craig didn't hesitate to do so.

He approached the small towns along the route the same way, caching the more important items the horses carried, and leaving the rest of the packing tack hidden nearby, he'd hobble the horses and go in with just a saddle bag's worth of trade goods.

The activity had two results. One was that it allowed the horses to get plenty of graze, since he wasn't able to carry grain with him. The other was that he didn't look like the target that he would be if it became known he was traveling with a pack train.

Craig mostly got information from the stops. The occasional trade, to show good faith, and keep up the illusion of traveling light, kept him a much lower profile than he might have been. Though seeing a traveler for any distance than locally was more than a high enough profile for Craig.

There were the occasional armed roadblocks to some of the towns. Almost all required the relinquishing of firearms while in the town. It was too much risk for too little possible gain, Craig decided, and turned around and left the area each time. Sometimes he didn't even go up to the roadblocks, but made the decision while glassing it with binoculars, which he always did before approaching one.

He was on the outskirts of Springfield, Missouri when he ran across what turned out to be a treasure trove for him. The surrounding area had been well worked over for salvageable materials, but Craig found himself studying one of the remote homes back up in a section of the many forested areas in the region.

Craig had stopped there for the night, able to stable the horses in a stripped, but still useable barn. There was even a bait of grain for each of the horses in the feed bins, though it was obvious that the majority had been salvaged.

After checking the entire place over carefully, Craig did what he seldom did on the trip. He took up residence for a few days in an abandoned home. There was significant damage to the house and outbuildings, but the decorative hand pump in the front yard wasn't just decorative. It pumped up some sweet tasting water. Craig filtered it anyway, but it was very good tasting even after the filtering.

Craig noted the tall flagpole standing in the front yard with a ragged US flag hanging limp in the still air. It didn't set well with him, so he pulled down the flag, and destroyed it by fire reverently.

Little elements of the things he saw nagging at him, Craig continued to look over the house. It had a big pantry, which was bare to the wood. A gun safe stood open in what had been a very nice study. There was blood on the overturned office desk chair and Craig openly sighed. It was shaping up to the fact that someone had survived here and been attacked. What the attackers could take, they did. Only later did organized salvagers find the place and finish the job.

Moving cautiously, as always, Craig went downstairs to the basement. It too had been ransacked, both the finished portion that seemed to have been a family room, and the unfinished area that was mostly storeroom. There were a few broken jars of home canned food, but no intact ones. Again Craig felt the nagging feeling.

There didn't seem to be anything left of value, so Craig cleaned up the master bedroom and made up the bed with sheets still in an overturned drawer from the wrecked dresser. After caring for the horses, Craig turned in, weapons ready. He spent a couple of days at the place, just studying it for the same nagging reasons that there was something he wasn't seeing.

There was a pickup truck and a Cadillac car in the garage. Neither ran. Craig looked over the garage again, planning to leave the next day. That was when he noticed the pipe running up the inside wall of the garage, into the garage roof.

Craig looked around a bit closer and found three more of the pipes. There was no logical reason for them to be there. He pulled down the attic access stairs that were in the ceiling of the garage and went up, a windup flashlight in hand. All four pipes were capped with screened hoods, obviously to keep out pests. The pipes were part of a ventilation system.

Going back downstairs, Craig opened the garage door manually, and, with much effort, rolled both the truck and the car out onto the driveway. He looked down at the large concrete surfaced parking area and driveway. Craig went around to the back of the house. Sure enough, the back door patio was in line with the garage and the driveway.

Craig moved everything out of the garage that wasn't bolted down. He couldn't find any access point of any kind to what he was sure was a shelter of some kind under the garage floor, driveway and parking area, or patio.

He found a thin steel rod in the miscellanea in the barn and returned to the house with it. He probed thoroughly around the exposed areas edging the concrete patio and driveway. Nothing. Finally Craig decided he must have missed something in the basement, despite the thorough inspection he'd done the first day.

It took him all of that day and most of the next before he found the secret door hidden in the unfinished part of the basement. One of the heavy cabinets that looked so solid would roll to the left, exposing a vault door. The empty space to the left of the shelving unit, Craig had finally noticed was out of place, considering the shelving that covered the rest of the walls of the little alcove.

Craig played with the dial of the vault door, not wanting to do what he was pretty sure he would have to do to get into the hidden room. Finally he went out to the barn and opened one of the panniers the pack horses carried. He took out one of the small bags of black powder the pannier contained.

He went back inside, fashioned a holder for the bag and used a piece of plywood and a two by four to hold it against the door. He laid down a fuse, and then lit it. Craig moved quickly away from the direct line to the vault door and covered his ears. A few seconds later there was a very loud explosion, with a resulting cloud of white smoke billowing out from the area.

Craig waited a safe amount of time and then checked the damage to the door. The black powder had enough force to punch the lock. After waiting for it to cool, Craig pulled the remains of the locking mechanism out of the way. It took quite a bit of manipulation to get the locking bolts retracted, but Craig finally managed it and opened the door.

What he saw was worth the effort expended. The man had been a collector. A gun collector. This was his storage vault, for the good stuff, apparently. "He must have just kept a couple of token items upstairs," Craig thought to himself.

Craig drew up short when he took another step into the room and saw the head resting against the back of a chair. "Hey! Anyone here?" he asked softly, knowing better. The person would not still be sitting in that chair after the blast. Moving around, Craig finally saw a dead woman sitting in the chair.

What was left was all dried up. Apparently the vault hadn't been totally rodent proof. There were signs of rats and bugs everywhere. Craig swung the flashlight and looked around the area he could see. Nothing seemed to have been touched.

Craig thought about it for a little while and concluded, rightly or wrongly, that the husband had sent the wife down into the vault when trouble appeared. He'd stayed upstairs and become a victim of the violence of the early hordes. Craig checked the door to the left. It was a bathroom. The door on the right was as much storeroom as kitchen. It still held plenty of food and water for two people for at least a month. A third door opened onto a tiny bedroom.

"She must have checked her husband when he didn't return and came down here to just die." It was the only thing Craig could think of that fit the facts. He took the time to wrap the body and take it outside. He'd found what had to be the grave of the husband near the fence behind the barn.

Craig was sure it was the salvage team that came later that had buried the man, and not the original looters. It took most of the rest of the afternoon to dig a grave and bury the woman. Craig said a few words of prayer over both graves and then tended the horses.

Breathing a bit easier, Craig went back down into the vault. He cleaned up the mess from the rodents and bugs, not wanting to spend any time in the filth, thinking all the while. He'd come up with a plan by the time he finished the clean up.

Having only glanced at the collection of firearms in cabinets and on wall racks, Craig left them for a while longer and began sorting the food stored in the other room. It was mostly high quality freeze-dried and dehydrated foods in #10 cans. With what he was planning, Craig decided it was best to leave it where it was.

Finally he began inspecting the guns. There were literally dozens of them. His eye was drawn to one display case and he suddenly wished his Mother was still around. He would love to give her the Luger carbine with attached wooden butt stock that had a leather holster attached. There were five Luger snail drum magazines laid out in front of the carbine.

The case also contained six other Lugers. Each one was a different configuration, which was listed on a display card. He read the labels. All the pistols were originals. The carbine was a reproduction.

Craig continued to look around, noting the various military bolt action rifles. Then something in one of the glass front cabinets caught his eye. He took the rifle out of the case, holding it reverently. It was a pristine M14E2, the select fire version with pistol grip stock, with original sling and bipod. He checked the serial number. It was apparently early production. The

selector switch was there and when Craig tried it, the switch moved from safe to semi-auto to full-auto.

Setting it down, Craig took out the carbine that was hanging below where the M14E2 had been. He'd never seen anything like it. It was futuristic looking, with a large hump extending back over the extendable stock. He looked in the cabinet again and saw the label for the display.

He was holding a very rare, possibly the only one in existence, proto-type Calico submachine gun similar to the Calico M960. But instead of 100-rounds of 9mm in the helical magazine, the gun carried 85-rounds of .45 ACP. And barrel was made with an integral suppressor.

Checking quickly in the closed cabinet under the glass display case, Craig found a dozen of the 85-round magazines. There were some M14 magazines, too, but only six. At least they were 30-rounders. There were several cloth bandoleers, that when Craig checked them, proved to be 60-round bandoleers of 7.62mm x 51mm NATO in stripper clips, with a stripper clip guide in each bandoleer.

Digging deeper in the cabinet, Craig found the GI manual for the M14E2, and a handwritten booklet about the Calico prototype and its low maintenance suppressor. Craig started to stand up, but there was something in the back of the cabinet. He pulled the boxes forward and looked at them in amazement. This man was some collector.

There were five 100-round Beta C-Mag dual drum magazines for the M14. Craig had no way of knowing that the C-Mags for 7.62mm x 51mm had become available just before the war. If Stephan Hicks hadn't preordered he never would have received them from his dealer.

There were a couple of sealed cans of military surplus 7.62mm x 51mm NATO and .45 ACP ammunition each. Opening the other side of the cabinet Craig found several unmarked cardboard boxes. He opened one up and found a packing slip. His eyes widened. This guy had some real connections, back in the day.

Craig stood up and looked at the other two guns the display cabinet held. The top one had to be the weapon the ammunition in the unmarked boxes was for. He took it down. Like the Calico, it was something he'd never seen before. He looked at the display card for it.

The weapon was a Hawk MM-1 close support weapon firing 25mm grenades of various types. That was what was in the boxes. 25mm grenades for the MM-1. It was basically a gigantic revolver with a butt stock and vertical fore grip. The revolving drum held eighteen of the 25mm grenades. This was definitely going in the cache to take back to the Retreat.

He suddenly noticed that two of the boxes were different from the others. He opened both of them. The contents were identical. While there were six boxes of the loaded grenades, ready to go, the other two boxes contained extra projectiles, boxes of primers, and canisters of powder. Apparently the cases could be reloaded after firing. There were enough components to reload all the rounds in the six boxes three times. The tools to do the reloading were in one of the boxes.

Checking the last box in the cabinet, Craig found it filled with large drum magazines, loaded with 20-rounds each of 12-gauge shotgun shells. He finally looked at the other weapon in the display. The information card said it was an AA-12 full auto shotgun. It was fitted with another of the 20-round drums. Another cache item.

Craig kept looking, the light from his windup flashlight glaring eerily on more of the glass fronted cases. One glass case contained nineteen versions of the Colt 1911 pattern semi-auto pistol. Another, very large wall display covered by curtains, not glass, contained the primary individual infantry arms for the US Army during WW II. They included a Colt 1911A1 pistol, Garand M1 standard rifle, Garand M1 sniper rifle, M1 Carbine, M3A1 "Greasegun" submachine gun, Thompson M1A1 submachine gun, a Springfield 1903A4 sniper rifle, M2A1-7 backpack flamethrower, M-1897 pump shotgun with heat shield and bayonet lug, a BAR, and a pair of M2A1 "Pineapple" hand grenades.

Looking the hand grenades over carefully, Craig was able to determine that they were inert. So was the flamethrower. Checking the submachine guns and BAR, he found that they, like the M14E2 and the Calico, were operating full-auto capable weapons.

Cabinets flanking and below the display held bayonets, clips and magazines, ammunition, and accoutrements for all the working weapons.

Craig whistled. This man had money before the war and liked to spend it. "And had good tastes," he whispered to himself as he continued his perusal of the contents of the vault. There was a display case of Winchester Lever action rifles and carbines, another case holding various Colt Single Action Army revolvers.

One relatively small glass front case held four additional Thompson's, in addition to the one in the WW II display, each a slightly different version. Two had 100-round drums in them, the other two 30-round stick magazines. The base cabinet contained two more 100-round drums, ten 50-round drums, and whole boxfuls of 20-round and 30-round stick magazines. There were four of the large sealed tins of .45 ACP ammunition, and a variety of magazine pouches.

He didn't know if the man actually competed in Cowboy Action Shooting, but he had a case full of the proper guns and accoutrements. The fancy hat he didn't care for. Craig liked the Rouge River hat his Mother gave him. The cuff guards also held no interest for Craig. Neither did the fancy spur straps. However the cavalry gauntlets would come in handy. He took them out of the case and set them aside. Also added to the pile was a well worn railroad chronometer pocket watch on a gold chain with a pen knife fob. He didn't have a good watch. All the cheap battery operated ones had long gone dead.

The suspenders he would take, too, he decided, since they had a derringer holster on each side, and were all leather. He wouldn't have considered them, except for the collection of derringers that was on display. The old ones, percussion and rim fire, he passed on. The modern ones were a different story. Between the American Derringer Corporation models and the Bond Arms derringers, Craig found several that he would take with him, in various calibers.

Craig wasn't much of a pump shotgun user, but he saw, and had only passing interest in, the civilian version of the Winchester 1897 pump shotgun similar to the military one in the WW II display. But he saw the IAC replica of a Winchester 1887 lever action 12 gauge shotgun and decided it would be going with him, too.

The Marlin 1894 lever action in .45 Colt was tempting, but he decided it would go in the cache he was going to make. So would the beautifully set up Remington Rolling Block .50-140 Sharps target rifle. It had a period looking scope with modern glass.

The Ruger New Model Blackhawk .45 Colt revolver was identical to the one he already had, except it was a 7 ½ inch model. It he would also take. There was a pair of other Ruger single action revolvers. New Model Blackhawks, in .45 Colt, with 5 ½" barrels, nearly identical to his.

There were three coach guns in the display, one a custom modern Greener 10-gauge hammer style. The other two were modern Stoger side-by-sides, both 12-gauge. They would go in the cache.

He took out the Buscadero style wide leather gun belt with the drop holster on the right side. It was plain, unadorned leather, with oil finish. And unlike most of the belts in that style that had twenty to thirty cartridge loops in a single row, this one had two rows, one above the other, for a total of forty-eight loops for .45 Colt cartridges, shifted slightly to the right side.

That left enough room for six loops for 12 gauge shot shells and six for .45-70 cartridges on the left. It went into the to-take pile that was growing, as much for the Cold Steel Laredo bowie knife in a scabbard on the left side of the belt and the derringer buckle. It held an American Derringer Corporation .45 Colt two-barrel derringer.

It took Craig a moment to figure out what one leather assembly was. Finally he realized it was a pair of pommel bags, with a revolver holster on each one, obviously for the pair of 5 ½" Ruger. It and the two Ruger pistols for it went on the keeper pile.

And the western boot knife would go nicely on his left leg, under the two-magazine carrier for the PPK. Another gun he found was identical to one he already had. A Marlin 1895 Cowboy .45-70 lever action. In the cache it would go.

In the display was a loaded bandoleer for the .45-70 cartridges. He added the bandoleer to the take stack since he could use it with his current Marlin. Craig also added the 12 gauge shotgun bandoleer to the stack. The shotgun bandoleer was loaded with gleaming all brass 12 gauge shells. There was a second shotgun shell bandoleer, obviously for the Greener 10-gauge. It too was filled with all brass shot shells. A fourth bandoleer was set up for a combination of 12 gauge, .45-70, and .45 Colt , having loops for several of each caliber and gauge.

Next Craig took out a nice looking tomahawk and wondered idly if the man had used it in throwing competitions he'd heard about from some of those in the MAG that had been into Cowboy Action Shooting before the war.

He didn't have one, so he added it to the keeper pile. On the pile too went a tan colored duster of light cotton. Craig tried it on. It was a bit big on him, the guy must have been huge, but it would do for weather too mild for the Drover's coat, and act to keep his weapons concealed, the way the Drover's coat did.

All the various knives went onto the pile, except for one. The yellow handled Barlow he slipped in his pants pocket.

Craig checked the cabinet beneath the display. Case after case of ammunition, and more accoutrements for Cowboy Action shooting. It would all go in one of the several caches he was planning to make, now that he was finding more things that he wanted to take back to the Retreat. At some point in time.

Craig kept looking and almost fell over when he found the working .22 long rifle scale Gatling gun in a wooden case. It held the gun on a carriage, a limber with ammunition drums, and several cases of .22 Long Rifle ammunition. It would be fun to play with, except ammunition was much too precious to waste on such a toy.

The next display case was filled with muzzle loading weapons, mostly modern replicas, much to Craig's joy. Flintlocks, percussion, and even one wheel lock long arm. Flintlock and percussion handguns. Craig took particular note of a reproduction double barrel 10-gauge flintlock fowling piece. Again, there were all the accessories and accoutrements for the weapons. There were flints aplenty, also several thousand caps for the percussion arms, with patch material and patch punches, as well as pouch lube.

Craig had to smile when he saw the cans of black powder substitute. The man had far more than had been legal before the war. The same with the cartridge reloading components in another cabinet. The small reloading bench beside the cabinet was well laid out, but the Retreat had quite a bit of reloading equipment. They were just running low on supplies. The equipment would stay.

The only reloading equipment Craig pulled to take with him were some primers of various sizes for trading purposes. But he did carefully box up and cache the smokeless powder canisters and thousands of assorted primers. The man could have opened a retail reloading shop and kept it going for months with what he had in stock.

There was one more large, tall, glass front cabinet. When he saw what it contained he wondered if the cabinets contents might be worth, before the war, collectively, what the entire rest of the vault held. Each gun in the cabinet was a one of a kind, like the Calico. There were no less than four richly engraved four barrel vierlings, several engraved double barrel shotguns and double rifles, and half a dozen combo guns and drillings, one of which was identical to Craig's own Savage 24 20 gauge/.22 Hornet combo, except for the fine bluing and custom stock it had, designed to carry spare ammunition.

The Savage 24 would go in a cache, the other nice guns would stay in the vault, except for the one vierling that Craig realized the utility of. It was a Heym vierling with side-by-side 3"

magnum 12 gauge chambers, with a .22 Hornet rifle barrel below them, and a .30-'06 below that. With the one gun he could hunt any game animal in America.

The double barrel .460 Weatherby over 10 gauge 3 ½ inch magnum shotgun barrel Craig decided to take, too, just on a whim. "What if I run into an elephant or something," he said, chuckling. If he'd only known how prophetic that statement was, he would have turned brick red from embarrassment.

In a glass top base cabinet under the long gun case were several equally finely engraved and plated handguns, including factory engraved and inlaid Walther, Browning, and Berreta pistols. The only one he took from the collection was a gun he was very familiar with. A Walther PPK in .380 ACP, like his Mother's guns, only deeply blued with etching inlaid with gold.

In the cabinets below, just as he expected, were fancy wooden boxes of ammunition for both the rare cartridges that some of the fancy guns were chambered for, plus the more modern ones. He took out what he wanted and left the rest.

There was a crate, or that's what Craig had assumed while he was looking over the vault, that he finally decided to check. It wasn't a crate. It was a wooden carry case. Holding a rifle like one of the men at the Retreat had. One that had helped them drive off marauders before. It was a Barrett M82A1 .50 BMG anti-material rifle with all the accessories.

The .50 caliber cartridge cans stacked near it Craig had assumed held other ammunition or miscellaneous items. It hadn't occurred to him at all that they might actually contain .50 BMG ammunition. They did. All twelve of them. There were handwritten markings on each of the ammo cans. Raufoss. Craig wasn't sure what it meant. The guy with the Barrett at the Retreat would know. The gun and ammunition for it would definitely go into the cache for recovery.

Not knowing what to expect, Craig opened one of three identical wooden cases stacked with the ammunition cans. Like the reloading components in the extra boxes for the Hawk MM-1, there were reloading components for the .50 BMG. Raufoss projectiles, primers, and canisters of powder. Again, three reloads for the factory loaded ammunition. Craig thought he should have guessed, having seen the .50 BMG reloading tools. But the man at the Retreat with an M82A1 already had loading tools. He'd leave the ones in the vault in the vault.

Craig had kept an eye out for a key to the small safe off in one corner of the vault. Considering what else was in the vault, whatever was in the safe could be anything. Going through the heavy desk in the center of the vault room again, Craig finally found the key. He was surprised he'd missed the hidden compartment in the right hand middle drawer of the desk. It wasn't that well done. The difference in thickness of the overall drawer and the inside of it was obvious if one just looked.

Nervous for no good reason that he could think of, Craig went over to the small safe, squatted down and opened it. "I knew it," he muttered. The man did nothing in a small way. There was a plain Jane Colt 1911A1 inside, beside many large stacks of gold and silver coins. These weren't the new Gold Eagles and though the silver coins were pre-1965, they weren't the common bullion coins that his mother had collected before the war.

These were old US Gold Eagles, Double Eagles, Half Eagles, Quarter Eagles and pristine Morgan silver dollars. Craig was sorry he'd never have the chance to see the man who had once owned all this in all his glory at a Cowboy Action Shooting competition.

It took Craig another week of twelve hour days to dig caches and bury the many items he would take back to the Retreat. He went through the vault rooms carefully again, after he had everything he thought he wanted. He took a couple more items and set them aside, and then set the black powder charges that would bring the already heavily damaged house down on the basement, sealing it, hopefully, for long enough for him to put together a recovery team to get the rest of the weapons and supplies and take them to the Retreat.

As much to honor Stephan Hicks, as to take on some role camouflage, Craig moved the Glock 21 to the small of his back and wore the Buscadero belt with the Ruger 7 ½ inch barreled New Model Blackhawk in it, and the suspenders with twin Bond Derringer .45 Colt derringers in the holsters. The Laredo and the Whippet shotgun hung down on the off side of the gun belt. All the shell loops were filled.

What no one could see was the Calico submachine gun hanging on a sling down his back, under the Drover's coat. He'd intended to carry the M14E2 in the scabbard on the right side of the saddle, but it just wouldn't fit. He didn't think he could make good use of it mounted, anyway. The Marlin .45-70 took its place.

The M14E2 was packed on the very top of one of the pack horses, where it and the ammunition would be easy to get to, if needed.

He'd switched the Savage 24 to one of the pack animals and carried the 1887 lever action twelve gauge in the left hand scabbard of the horse he was riding. Craig felt a bit embarrassed at looking like a character out of a 1950's western, but so be it. Looking the way he did and openly carrying the weapons he was, should give him an edge if he got into trouble.

Having thought about it much over the days he was at the Hicks' house, Craig changed his plans. He still intended to do some traveling, but he felt an obligation to the Retreat. He was beyond wealthy now, thanks to Stephan Hicks, but he wanted to do something to feel like he'd earned it, rather than just lucked onto it. He turned Clyde toward the northeast, this time traveling on the north side of I-44.

Cowboy - Chapter 3

The inevitable had to happen. Craig was seen from afar with the pack string. It was too tempting a target. The man looked like a wannabe cowboy. Dave Holstein decided he and his small gang could easily take the man. Let some of the guys laugh at the cowboy, instead of laughing behind Dave's back about his last name.

Dave and his small band were scraping together a perilous living trying to keep a hill farm going and doing some raiding on the side, to keep some meat in their bellies. It didn't matter much what the guy had on the pack horses. The horses alone would give Dave the ability to roam much further afield on his raids. Everything else would just be gravy. Maybe he could even capture a few women to bring back to the farm to do the work and provide some badly needed entertainment for the few men still left in his gang.

If Dave had known what was in the packs, he would have drooled. If he knew how well Craig was armed, he would have drooled some more. If he knew Craig at all, with or without his new armament, Dave would have run off to hide.

Hide he did, but in ambush with all of his men. There was no way Dave was going to let the horses get away. He wanted everyone there to grab the lead ropes when he shot the man out of the saddle from behind a tree.

Only it didn't work that way. When Craig got close to the ambush site, there was only one horse. The one Craig was riding. The rest were nowhere in sight. Drawing Clyde up suddenly, when he hesitated, Craig sat there a minute, searching the tree line near the road.

He'd settled the horses for the night and was coming down to a road to see if it showed any signs of traffic. But when Clyde alerted, he knew someone or some thing was ahead of them. Not inclined to take a chance, Craig whirled Clyde around and headed into the forest near him.

Enraged, Dave started firing, using up precious ammunition in his attempt to stop Craig. Every one of his men did the same thing until Dave realized the folly of it and called on them to stop shooting. "Come on, let's go," he screamed, running toward the spot where Craig had disappeared. "He can't go fast in those woods on horseback!"

Greed and murder in his heart, Dave led the charge. It was the last thing he did. Dave had been right about Craig not being able to go very quickly in the heavy forest. Craig knew the same thing and pulled up Clyde as soon as he was out of the men's sight. He'd turned Clyde as soon as they entered the forest, so was nowhere near the spot that Dave and his men were approaching at a hard run.

Craig shifted his right arm slightly, to lift the Drover's coat enough for the Calico to swing around where he could get a grip on it. He was moving quickly but quietly back to the point where he'd left the clearing. He could hear the men approaching huffing and puffing, already running out of steam from their run.

Knowing it was showboating, pure and simple, Craig stepped out of the forest a few yards to the right of the group, the stock of the Calico extended and at his shoulder. He didn't hesitate. These men had tried to ambush him. More than likely they'd been raiding, stealing and killing and who knew what else.

Having tried the Calico shortly after leaving the Hicks place, he knew exactly what to expect when he pulled the trigger of the submachine gun. Men went down like they were poleaxed. The heavy .45 ACP slugs did their grisly work, each man taking three or more rounds in the mere seconds that Craig fired initially. It was a little eerie for Craig, for though the Calico wasn't totally quiet with the suppressor, it was far less than there should be for as much damage as it was doing.

Most of the men died on the spot, including Dave. A couple lived to tell the tale, as Craig refused to shoot men no longer able to defend themselves.

"Who are you, Cowboy?" one of the men asked, holding his left elbow that had been shattered by one of the rounds.

"I'm..." Craig hesitated. He smiled slightly. "I'm your worst enemy. Stay away from the area around Sullivan. The day of the raiders is ending."

Though he wouldn't kill them in cold blood, Craig had no compunction about leaving the injured to their own devices. To live or die was up to them and God. Craig broke camp when he got back to it and moved several miles in the late evening and early night. Then he set up another camp, sure he hadn't been followed.

Craig took even more care than he had been, knowing how valuable to the Retreat the things he'd found were. It was bravado that had him tell the wounded ambusher that the raiding was going to end. But the more he thought about it, the more he was determined to see that it turned into a fact. And it would start at the Retreat.

To say the least, the members of the Retreat were surprised to see him, especially Sally. He'd left her after implying he might be gone for years. Here he was back in only a couple of months. But as soon as he spoke to her, she knew that he was only here temporarily. He would soon be gone again, this time probably for the years he'd implied before.

Quentin was a bit hesitant about sending a salvage convoy that far away, but Craig's description of what he'd cached was persuasive. Craig didn't mention the items he'd left in the vault room. Only the items he'd cached. Craig had decided that the ammunition and food that he'd left behind might come in handy some day. And it would be a shame for the collector quality arms to be used and abused if it wasn't necessary. What had use to him and to the Retreat he'd cached. The rest would stay where it was until he needed or wanted it.

When Quentin agreed to the salvage operation he didn't waste any time about getting it ready. The convoy was on the road in three days, heavily armed. Where it had taken Craig a week to bury everything, it took the salvage crew only two days to get everything dug out and loaded.

It wouldn't have taken that long, but it seemed everyone wanted to see everything that Craig had found.

Craig, after showing the team where each cache was, began patrolling the area. There were tracks all around the remains of the house, and it and the barn had been burned. Craig hadn't done that. There'd been other people around since he'd left. Not knowing if it was coincidence or someone investigating the explosion, minimal as it was, that Craig had created when he brought down the house into the basement.

There were obvious indications that someone had been digging through the debris in the basement, after the fire, but things were still so jumbled up with unburned combustibles and the various hardware and appliances that a house contained that they'd given up.

Craig debated with himself for a while about making known the rest of the items in the vault, but counted on the reluctance of raiders to expend much energy for an unknown gain. Craig kept his silence and stayed on guard.

The team was back at the retreat before the week was out, delighted with Craig's find. Quentin didn't question what Craig had kept for himself out of the caches. He could have reasonably kept it all, since he was no his own when he found the stuff. But Craig gave the Retreat over half of what he'd found, trading off another fourth to individuals for items he could use, or for the businesses.

And then he was on his way again, on horseback, a new resolve in him. This time he saw Sally watching him leave. He'd barely spoken to her while he was back in the Retreat.

There had been one small attempt made on the Retreat while Craig had been gone. It had been driven off successfully, but when Craig had been told about it he began to wonder. The raiders usually attacked in force, giving some of them enough time to harvest what they could and take any animals caught outside the compound. Craig began to wonder if the attack might have just been a probe, to test the readiness of the Retreat.

He began to backtrack the raiders. It wasn't that difficult. No one had ever gone after them before. There were just too many of them and they were too well armed. They left an obvious trail if you looked for it. Craig did.

Wherever they camped, they left a mess behind. From the looks of it they weren't eating all that well. Craig was more certain than ever that the attack on the Retreat had been a probe. It had been almost a year since the last attack. This was July. There would be no food to harvest while the MAG members were pinned down in the Retreat compound. A raid was in the offing that fall, for sure.

Suddenly Craig felt a chill go down his back. But why scout so early? It was more likely to be an attack soon. There very well could be a determined raid this time, to take over the entire Retreat. Only it wouldn't be a raid, it would be a conquering force.

The trail led back to where the raiders had taken up residence, at least some effort taken to shake off any pursuers. It took Craig three weeks of careful tracking to find the raider's compound.

It was much like the Retreat. Probably had been another MAG group retreat that the raiders had taken over. Craig couldn't leave the horses for very long, but he scouted the compound several times, with the horses and his gear left in what he hoped would be a secure area.

There were women and children in the compound and that fact bothered Craig no end. Perhaps he'd lost the original track and stumbled upon just another MAG retreat. The fourth scouting trip cleared that thought from his head. They were definitely raiders. He'd seen a party of eight leave on an earlier scouting. They came back to the compound, with much jubilant fanfare. They unloaded one truck of food. The other truck had half a dozen prisoners in it. All women.

The women of the compound made themselves scarce when the group showed up, taking the children with them. What looked like a short auction took place and each of the women was taken away by one of the raiders in the compound.

Craig rolled over on his back and fought back the bile and the tears that tried to flow. There wasn't anything he could do at the moment. "But soon, very soon..." Craig told himself. He withdrew from the area and went back to his camp, determined to do something. Soon.

Soon was the next day. Riding Clyde, carrying the M14E2 across the saddle horn, Craig made his way back to the raider's compound.

In his previous scouting trips Craig had spotted half a dozen spots he could use to snipe from. Tying Clyde to a tree out of the way, with a loose knot that he could eventually work free if something happened to Craig, he worked his way silently to one of the spots, carrying the M14E2.

He had a 100-round dual drum magazine in the gun, with two more in a shoulder bag. When he got to the spot he wanted, Craig made a hide for himself where he could go prone and be well hidden. Folding the legs of the bipod down, Craig readied himself.

Craig watched for some time, taking note of where the women and children were. When he was certain there were none in one of the wooden buildings, Craig lined the sights of the rifle up and began to dump round after round of automatic fire into the building. He worked the rifle slightly side to side and up and down to thoroughly saturate the building.

He switched to a fresh drum and began firing semi-auto at the survivors that stumbled out of the building. Though the raiders were still not returning fire or even trying to get organized, Craig emptied the second drum at targets of opportunity and then switched to the third drum. He stood, shouldered the bag with the empty drum magazines and slung the M14E2 over his other shoulder, and took off for Clyde.

He rode as quickly as he could back to his small camp, loaded up the horses and took off their hobbles. Craig left the area with his string of horses, determined to come back and work the compound over again.

Craig gave it a week, scouting out a wider area around the raiders' compound. He had two opportunities to ambush vehicles leaving or returning to the compound and took advantage of both of them, making sure it was all men in the vehicles both times.

Having heard many of the old prep hands while he was growing up, stating that full auto weapons had no place in a preppers battery, Craig decided that while they were right probably 95% of the time, full auto was a very handy thing to have that other 5% of time, such as laying ambushes, attacking vehicles, and taking on groups of assailants that tended to bunch together.

Plus there was the psychological factor. People tended to keep their heads down when auto weapons fire was aimed at them.

Craig found another place to set up camp and leave the horses when he attacked the compound again. It was much the same as the first attack. Catch a group of male raiders together, in a building or out in the open, and pour the fire to them.

There was no sign of any pursuit this time, just as there hadn't been any but a token response the first time. And there'd been no sentries roaming about, only guards at the two entrances of the compound.

The third time Craig approached he had to stop and conceal himself. When the man walked past him, Craig put Hicks' Laredo to good use. It slid silently between the sentry's ribs, into his heart. The man died never knowing what happened.

Craig took up another sniping position and watched the compound for a while. Apparently the man on sentry duty was late in reporting in. A group of eight men gathered and seemed to be talking the situation over, if Craig was reading their body language correctly, including waving arms and pointed fingers in all directions.

Not one to pass a good chance up, Craig put a long burst from the M14E2 into the group. Every man went down. This time Craig waited for more targets. Instead, what he saw was a group of women, with several children in tow make a run to one of the trucks. When one of the men tried to stop them, Craig cut him down and then shot the gate guard so he couldn't try to stop the truck. When it was clear, Craig left the area and went back to his camp. He left the area for several days again.

When he came back a month later there were new faces in the compound. The feel of the place was completely different. Sure they had a guard at the gates. The Retreat did the same thing. And women and children were moving about openly, not furtively.

Craig decided to risk contact. He stashed the rest of the horses and went back to the compound, taking the main road in to it. Stopping well back from the gate, Craig called out, "Hello the gate! I'm friendly. I'd like to talk to someone in charge."

“Just rest easy there, mister,” said the guard that stepped forward out of the woods just enough for Craig to see him. “Keep your hands there on the saddle horn, just like you’re doing. You even twitch toward any of them guns you’re carrying, I put a hole in you the size Detroit used to be.”

“No problem,” Craig replied. He saw someone running up the driveway. “I was by here a month ago and they ran me off at gunpoint.” It was only a bit of a twist on the truth.

“You’re not one of them raiders, coming back, are you?” The man held the shotgun more tightly, letting the muzzle come around a bit more towards Craig.

“Easy there, guy,” Craig said. “I’m not one of them. I just need to know you aren’t either. I’d like to do a little trading. Get a little information. I’m just passing through.”

“We’re not raiders!” The man spit in disgust. “Them that was here took off someplace else. Heard they was run off. Never even saw who it was drove them out, according to some of the women that got away from them just before the rest took off.”

“That’s what I was hoping to hear,” Craig said. “What do you think people here would want to trade for?”

“No more talk, mister,” the man said. “I’ll let Dirk Cameroon do the talking for the retreat.”

Craig nodded. “Not a problem.”

It wasn’t very long and Craig could see three men coming down the driveway into the compound. When they got to the gate the one in the middle asked, “Who are you and what do you want?”

“Just a trader, looking to do a bit of business, and get what information I can about routes west.”

“Don’t much care for someone that won’t give his name,” came the reply. “I’m Dirk Cameroon. Now state you r name or just ride away.”

Craig was a bit tempted to do just that. But the Retreat needed some trading partners and this might be a good place to start.

“Craig Davenport. I’m with a big retreat near Sullivan.”

“Sullivan, huh?” said Dirk, rubbing the stubble on his chin. “I think I heard about them. Big outfit. Been doing really well for themselves. Even do a bit of outright buying, with real gold and silver money.”

Craig nodded. "Yes. Still not many that will take precious metals, but more and more are using it the way cash was used before the war. We're looking to set up some regular trade routes with other good outfits. We're particularly looking for salt at the moment."

"We need salt ourselves. You find any, and we'll for sure do some trading. What do you have for trade?"

"Not too much with me. I'm mostly scouting for future trades. Have some premium black powder if you have any thing you can use it in."

"We got a couple of guys that hunt for us. They use muzzle loaders. Need powder and caps."

"Got a few," Craig said. "Any chance me coming in to do a trade with them?"

It was obvious Dirk was considering it. The men flanking him had not said anything up to this point, but at Craig's request both leaned toward him and whispered something, one in one ear and the other the other ear.

"Don't want to be inhospitable, but that's too big of a risk until we get to know you a bit better. We'll check with the men and if they are interested, send them down here. You're welcome to wait."

"If it is okay, I'll get off Clyde here, and stretch my legs a bit while I wait."

"Keep an eye on him," Dirk told the guard, and then headed back up the driveway.

Craig threw his leg over and stepped down off the saddle, careful to keep the Calico hidden under the duster he now wore in lieu of the Drover's coat, which was too hot to be wearing yet. But the duster performed the same tasks as the coat, and was much lighter and cooler, and still took the chill off at night. The weather patterns had changed. They were still getting hot summers, but short ones, with short fall and spring seasons, too. Winter was on the land for five months out of the year now.

Craig stepped to the edge of the woods and relieved himself, stretched and passed back and forth a bit while he waited.

"Hey," said the guard. "My name's Gary. You got any tobacco to trade?"

"Little. You looking for some?"

"Yeah. Tough habit to break." He gave a little laugh. "I been holding some good shine, for somebody that has tobacco."

Craig neither smoked nor drank. But he was a natural born trader. It took a couple of minutes to dicker, but Gary had his small can of tobacco and a booklet of papers, and Craig

added the moonshine to his saddle bags. The pint bottle that the whiskey was in went in the saddle bag next to three small bottles of Everclear he'd brought for trading.

The two men stood silently for the rest of the time it took for Dirk to come back with two poorly dressed men. Both were carrying vintage style black powder rifles that looked a lot better than the two men did. Apparently they took the kind of care of the firearms that they demanded to stay in working condition.

"Dirk here says you got black powder," said one of the men as soon as they came to a stop at the gate. "Any good?"

"Ball mill ground using willow charcoal. Screened out FF, 2F, 3F, and 4F if you have a flintlock. Welcome to try a shot if you want."

That surprised both men. Craig went to Clyde and opened the saddle bag again. He took out a one pound bag of FF powder. He went to the other side of the horse and opened the saddle bag on that side. He took out a small flat box containing #11 percussion caps, thanks to Hicks.

"One shot on me," Craig said, handing the first man a cap and opening the powder sack so he could take a bit out to charge his rifle. He capped it after the patched ball was loaded and raised it to his shoulder. Taking aim at a tree some distance off, he fired.

Bark flew off the tree and the man grunted slightly. After checking the barrel for residues the man said, "Okay. It's good stuff. Burns clean. Not much residue. What are you asking?"

"Roll of silver quarters, if you got it. If not, make an offer," Craig replied.

The two men stepped back and whispered to one another for a moment. Finally one of them said, "Got a spare .32 flintlock squirrel rifle, now that we have some caps, but it'd take more than a pound of powder and a box of caps to get it."

"Two pounds of powder and another box of caps, if you've got a bullet mold for the .32," Craig immediately said.

Again the two men talked it over quietly.

When the negative shake of the head began, Craig said, "And I'll throw in a pint of quality moonshine, small box of tobacco and some rolling papers." The guard looked a bit taken aback.

"Done!" said one of the men. The other man didn't look too pleased, but he didn't object. The first man told the second, "Go get it. Mold and all."

As the man headed back up the driveway, Craig got out the items he was trading to the men. He held onto them until the man returned with the rifle and accessories. Craig checked out the rifle quickly. The men knew good black powder arms. This was one.

Craig handed over his trade goods to the first man and took the rifle and accessories from the second. "Unless someone has another trade in mind, I guess I'll be off," Craig said. He gave Dirk a frequency and added, "You can contact my people on that frequency if you want to set up something permanent, retreat to retreat."

Craig climbed back up on Clyde, balanced the rifle on the pommel of the saddle and slowly rode off, just a bit tense. There was still the possibility they could shoot him in the back. But it didn't happen and Craig breathed a sigh of relief when he went around a bend in the road and was out of their direct line of sight.

After making his way back to where the horses were hobbled, Craig got them ready to move and headed back out, still angling southwest, parallel to I-44.

But he didn't stay on that route for more than a couple of days. He thought about the salt that had been mentioned. The Retreat had laid in a large supply before the war, but there were a lot of uses for it. Their stock, while not critical, was getting to the point where they had to start taking measures to conserve what they had and find a source for more.

If he was remembering one of the history lessons his mother had taught him correctly, salt had once been produced in central Arkansas, near Little Rock. He headed south with that goal in mind.

Traveling slowly, again to allow plenty of time for the horses to graze, stopping occasionally to trade what he could for fresh food. He was getting plenty of game, but craved salads and vegetables. And fruit. He missed the fruits the Retreat produced in quantity.

Those fruits would probably one of the trade items the Retreat used to get the things they needed and wanted, along with Craig's steady production of quality black powder. Without the raiders to contend with, assuming another group didn't form, the Retreat should be able to triple their production of just about everything.

Especially the biodiesel. They still had plenty of the chemicals to convert plant oils to biodiesel, but planting and harvesting the oil crops had been severely limited by the risks from raiders. The major oil crops were grown on property some distance from the Retreat.

Even with the usage to make the trips for trading, there should be a significant amount for trading. Though, with the possibility of a refinery coming back on line in Texas, they might have to concentrate on trading the biodiesel to the north.

Craig was somewhat surprised at the positive reaction to the idea of regular trading routes. He came to wonder if it wasn't as much to have outside human contact, rather than just the radio contact through the network of Amateur Radio Operators that became the major source of news for the surviving population of the world.

But every community seemed to have some special resource of one kind or another that other people could use. That was reason enough for the trading to progress as far as Craig was concerned.

Craig found that the Sullivan area wasn't the only one that still had trouble with raiders long after the war. There were many retreats in the Ozarks of Missouri and Arkansas that had weathered the war and aftermath. Nearly every one of them kept regular armed guards around to protect their compounds, fields, and workers from attacks by raiders. Most of it was small scale and manageable.

But there was a large group of raiders based somewhere south of Harrison Arkansas. At least according to the reports Craig was hearing. And apparently they were as vicious, or more so, than the group that had been harassing the Retreat for so long.

"I just may take a look at that situation," Craig muttered as he headed south again after having spent a few days talking to people from several retreats along the upper reaches of Bull Shoals Lake.

It was no longer a 'maybe' idea after Craig ran across the remains of a family that, from all the remaining evidence, was in the process of relocating from somewhere north, to somewhere south of the point he found them. What was left of them.

The three adults and three children had been butchered. Literally. Their remains had been ravaged by animals, Craig could tell. He'd seen it before. But there were signs that a knife had been used on the bodies. And there weren't enough bones left. Only torsos and heads. The arms, legs, and pelvises were missing. From all six bodies. No animals would have taken the same body parts. Craig got sick and threw up at the side of the road at the realization that the family had been attacked by cannibals.

Craig had discounted the whispered allusions to cannibalism he'd heard at a couple of the retreats he stopped at recently. He was a believer now. Craig took the time to bury what was left of the bodies, but headed straight for Harrison as soon as he was done with the grisly task.

He made himself slow down. The cannibals had left ample evidence of their route south. He didn't want to be too hard on the horses. It wasn't right. He'd catch up to the raiders eventually. And he needed to be careful of an ambush. There was no way he wasn't going to see justice done. That meant he had to stay alive to see it happen.

As Craig got to Harrison and continued south he came to the realization that there were some people not necessarily in the gang that benefited from its activities in some way. Rather than outrage at their activities there were a few people that were more than a little evasive when the subject came up. He heard the phrase 'people gotta live' several times.

If there were family members of some of the gang feeding information to them Craig was probably on their radar by now. He pushed on, avoiding further contact, glad he always cached his goods and hid all the horses but the one he was riding at the time when he went into a town, or up to a property away from the towns. He was pretty sure no one knew exactly what he had.

Craig swung wide and circled the area south of Harrison, looking for where the raiders might be holed up. When he had no luck after circling the town twice, it suddenly dawned on

him that this particular gang might actually be based in one of the small towns in the area. That was going to make it much harder.

He decided to rest the horses for a few days, so they would be up to a long run if things went bad in town. When he was ready Craig saddled up Clyde, and after considering it several times, left the M14E2 cached and took only the Cowboy weapons, Glock, PPK, and Calico in with him when he visited the first town.

He would stay in town for a few hours, do a trade or two if he could, asking a few questions, and then go back to move his camp. He entered several towns and actually made some good trades and contacts. He found out where he could get salt, some distance further south, but north of Little Rock.

Every town was different now, these years after the war. But as soon as he entered the fifth small town in the area, he felt more than the usual cautiousness of life after the war. He'd run into a few evasive people in the area, but he was immediately made very unwelcome.

One man sitting outside a small diner that was apparently open watched Craig as he rode down the street, talking to anyone that would talk to him. Craig saw the man watching him and rode up and stopped. He didn't get off Clyde, but sat there a moment, looking at the man. The man had the chair leaned back on two legs, and had a AR-15 leaning up against the wall beside it. There was a pistol in his waistband.

"What'cha looking at, Cowboy?" the man said. He was picking his teeth.

He'd had a plan, of sorts, to try to get some idea of who might have knowledge of any of the members of the gang, but Craig suddenly decided on a different way to handle the situation.

"Looking at you. I need someone to spread the word for me. I thought you might do it for... say... a half pint of whiskey."

"Do I look like a town crier, you dipstick?" The chair thunked down and the man stood up. "But let's hear a little more about that whiskey. You got some to trade?"

Moving slowly, Craig reached into the inside pocket of the Drover's coat and pulled out the sample bottle of alcohol he'd taken to carrying to break the ice when he went into a town. "Sure do. Still need that someone to spread the word for me."

Just as slowly as Craig had moved, the man casually leaned over and picked up the AR-15, not pointing it at Craig, but positioning it were he could in a moment. "I told you that I'm not your town crier. Just hand over that bottle."

"You mentioned trading..." Craig replied, more calm than he thought possible.

"Yeah. Your life for that bottle."

“Sure,” Craig said, and tossed the bottle directly toward the man’s face. The man dropped the rifle to catch the bottle with both hands before it could hit him in the face.

The man started cursing but fell silent when Craig said, loudly, for those ears he knew were listening from out of sight, “Might want to spread the word anyway. I’m looking to take out all the cannibals in the area.” With that Craig giggered Clyde with the blunt spurs he used, and Clyde was off like a shot. It was a good thing, for several shots rang out after him. Craig heard the sound of one wizz past his ear, much too close for comfort, but none of the rounds hit him or Clyde.

Craig left the road as soon as he cleared the edge of town and entered the woods. He pulled up short and dismounted, quickly tying up Clyde and running back to the edge of the road, swinging the Calico out from under the coat. Sure enough, two vehicles came roaring out of town. Not willing to take a chance on killing an innocent, Craig showed himself.

The drivers of both vehicles slammed on their brakes, and the passenger in one of them fired a shot at Craig. Sure now he wasn’t firing on innocents, Craig cut loose with the Calico, riddling both vehicles with the .45 ACP rounds. The men in the vehicles didn’t get off another shot.

Craig wasn’t sure if he’d killed them all, but he emptied the 85-round magazine. He turned and ran back into the woods, changing magazines as he went, careful to make sure the empty went well into the pocket of the Drover’s coat. He couldn’t afford to lose even one of them. There would be no replacements.

Climbing back aboard Clyde, he took off in the opposite direction from his camp. He had to be careful of his time, since he wouldn’t let the other horses stay hobbled more than a few hours, but he was careful to take a roundabout route back to the camp.

He roamed the area around the town the next several days, moving his camp at least every two days. He hoped to catch some of the gang of raiders he was now sure were using the small town as their home base out looking for him.

Either he missed them, or the gang leader had decided to let Craig’s attack go as a one time thing, despite what Craig had said. Since they wouldn’t come to him, at least at the moment, Craig decided to go after them again. There was just no good scouting spot he could use to watch the town from some distance using his binoculars. He would have to go into the town again.

This time Craig went in under cover of darkness, leaving Clyde well back in the woods surrounding the town. He went looking for activity. Hard working people scratching out a living would not be up, wasting fuel, late at night. They’d be in their beds, trying to get enough sleep to carry on another day.

It didn’t take long to find what he was looking for. A house lit up like Christmas, with lots of noise coming from it. Taking one cautious step at a time, Craig scouted around the entire neighborhood, finally making a circle around the house. There were no signs of sentries.

About ready to make his move anyway, the sound of breaking glass and a woman's scream spurred Craig into action. The Calico held in his right hand, Craig used his left to try the front door knob. It wasn't locked. Pausing to take a deep breath and let it out slowly, as another scream cut through the loud cursing going on inside the room, Craig opened the door and stepped inside.

He took the scene in quickly, noting the three women in various stages of dress and the eight men that were in for the shock of their lives. Craig fired first at the one holding one of the women, in the act of slapping her. He died without knowing what was happening.

The other seven men either went for guns, or tried to get away. The eighty-five rounds in the first drum of the Calico were more than enough to take down five of the men, those standing and going for guns first, and two that tried to scramble for a window to leap through.

The other two men had dropped to the floor, hands over their heads and were crying and begging for mercy. Before Craig could react one of the women grabbed the pistol that one of the gang members had managed to get out but not shoot, and fired it point blank into one of the men's head and then into the head of the other.

The three women then huddled together, staring at Craig in disbelief. Craig didn't take time to do anything but say, "Spread the word. I'm after the cannibals," and then he was back out the front door, fading into the darkness as several people came running toward the house.

After swapping magazines in the Calico, Craig stopped in the even deeper shadows of darkness of a huge tree two houses down from the one he'd attacked. He raised the Calico to his shoulder and fired half a dozen three round bursts into men he saw carrying firearms. Even though the Calico was suppressed, Craig didn't press his luck. He headed for the edge of town and Clyde while pandemonium still reigned.

Several shots rang out suddenly and Craig hoped they were at shadows and not innocents coming out of their houses to see what was happening. He made it back to his camp in a blowing snowstorm that had been building all day.

The next day Craig decided to call it quits for the winter. It would be far too easy for someone to track him down by his tracks in the snow. Craig thought about staying and just going into the town for more attacks when it was threatening snow, so new snow would cover his tracks but decided the option was too risky.

It was time for him to find winter quarters. And he knew just the place. Craig saddled up and packed the horses and left the area, headed north into the snow that continued to fall slowly. His destination was the Mark Reed farm right on the border with Missouri. The man had offered Craig a full time job when he'd stopped to do a little trading, having heard that Mark was one of the good ones in the area.

Craig declined, other things on his mind, but the offer had been left open. Now he decided to take the man up on it, if Mark was still willing.

A week later and Craig was riding into the farm, first having scouted it for possible changes in ownership. One never knew in this day and age who might be overrun by the raiders. Mark was more than happy to have Craig winter over with his family and two farm hands. As a matter of fact, he put Craig to work the very next day cutting wood for the winter. The job had taken second fiddle to the task of getting the crops harvested before the snow flew. As it was, Mark, his son Josh, and the hands were busy getting the last few acres of wheat combined in the snow while Craig cut wood.

With the last of the wheat in the storage bins, the others began helping Craig with the wood cutting. When Mark decided they had enough for even a longer than the new usual length winter, he put everyone to work butchering and preserving that year's crop of animals.

Finally, with hundreds of pounds of meat canned, dried, smoked, or salted, everyone breathed a sigh of relief and settled in for the winter. Other than staying out of the clutches of Mark's sister-in-law Ruth Ann, who was staying with the family, Craig spent most of his time in the bunkhouse with the hands, rotating the work of caring for the animal in the barns with them.

He did spend some time with Josh, who had a bad leg from a fall from the barn while putting up hay. The young man had taken up leatherwork again while laid up, recovering from the fall.

Josh told Craig, as Craig watched him in the barn working on a hide, "I did the leather kits when I was a kid. Always liked it. The doc said my leg is going to give me problems the rest of my life, so I decided to pick up the leatherworking as a second career, for when I can't do the farm work. I just wish I could get some more hides. As things wear out, there is going to be a good market for quality leather goods."

"We just might be able to work a deal," Craig said. "There is no one close to us that can do leatherwork. At least, not quality work. We haven't had any problem preserving hides when we butchered, but don't have a market for them. I'm sure the Retreat would be willing to trade you hides for finished goods. I know I personally will."

"Really?" Josh asked, intrigued with the idea.

Craig nodded. "Any chance you know a saddle maker? Our herd of horses is outgrowing the supply of saddles from the old days. Oh. And boots. It's getting hard to find good boots."

Josh smiled. "I'll learn. We've got one old saddle we don't use any more. It was a really good one, but it's really old and worn out. Got left out in the weather for two years by accident."

"Ouch!" Craig replied.

"Yeah. But I can take it and reverse engineer it and add saddle maker to my list of talents. Same with the boots." Josh's eyes suddenly brightened. "I just thought about Crazy Joe Gutterman. He has some experience with leather work and tack. I bet he could and would help me. He needs something to do that's productive. He's on the verge of starvation most of the time. I hope he makes it through the winter."

“If you are sure he would be a help, I’ll do my best to see that he does make it through the winter in shape to start working as soon as I can get some of our hides down here.”

“Really? You’d do that?”

Craig nodded. “I believe in long term investments. He sounds like an asset worth cultivating. How far away does he live?”

“Not too far, actually. His little place is just over the ridge beyond the south forty. If you want, we can take a ride over there when it stops snowing.”

“Absolutely. In the mean time, I have some work I’d like you to do, if you have the leather for the projects.”

“I still have a small supply, plus this hide.”

Craig described the items he wanted made and Josh said there would be no problems. They began working on them, Craig more just watching than helping. When the current snow storm blew through, Craig saddled up Clyde and Mule Ears, and the two went to visit Crazy Joe, taking enough food for one person to make it through the winter, that Craig took as part of his minimal pay for helping on the farm.

Craig wondered if the man would make it through the winter, even with the food. He’d never seen anyone so bone showing skinny, except in the pictures from World War II of the German Death Camps he’d learned about in home schooling.

Even as bad off as he was, it took some long, persuasive talking on Craig’s and Josh’s parts to get Joe to accept the food before doing any work, which he was more than willing to do. But finally he accepted and Craig and Josh went back to the farm.

That winter Josh made every one of the items Craig had wanted, plus a couple that Josh said he could make that hadn’t occurred to Craig to ask for.

The first item was a leather holster for the tomahawk, so it could ride alongside the Laredo and Whippet. A much better holster for the Whippet was next. While Josh was working, and Craig watching, Josh asked Craig, “Why do you carry the old fashioned stuff?” Josh had seen Craig’s modern weaponry.

Craig turned a bit red. “I don’t know, really. Gives me a certain goofy look that has given me that split second advantage of surprise when I pull the Calico or M14E2 instead of drawing the single action or the Marlin. People just aren’t expecting it.

“And since I can make the black powder to reload the .45 Colt and .45-70 I use them to hunt with mostly, to save the cartridges that are smokeless powder only. I’ve got that vierling, that I love to use, that I told you about, back at the Retreat.

But I'm kind of hanging onto it and the ammunition for more peaceful days where I can hunt at leisure without needing to worry about getting ambushed. Same thing with the .32 flintlock squirrel gun and the 10-gauge flintlock fowling piece when I run out of primers.

"You really think we'll ever have those days again? Peaceful where you don't have to worry about your back all the time?"

Josh saw the glint in Craig's eye when Craig said, "If I have anything to do with the matter, we will." Josh believed him.

Another item Josh made for Craig was a shoulder holster assembly for the Calico. It allowed the gun to hang under Craig's left arm, with the stock collapsed, for easier access than Craig's hanging down his back on a string. The harness carried a spare helical magazine under his right arm.

Craig had Josh make several fancy tool worked leather slings for the fancy guns, like the vierling. Also a belt slide ammunition carrier for it, to hold extra 12-gauge, .30-'06, and .22 Hornet rounds.

With pigskin from the previous year's butchering, Josh made Craig another set of gauntlets and two pairs of work gloves. The family kept all the skins of the game they took, so Josh was able to make two pairs of warm rabbit fur lined gloves for Craig.

As the winter wore on, Josh, with some help from Crazy Joe, made Craig two sets of boots. One pair was shotgun style boots with cavalry toes. The other pair was lined with sheepskin Josh got from a neighboring farm, with Craig doing a trade for the skins.

Since Craig did almost as much walking as he did riding at times, the boots were soled with used tire tread. Even though it wasn't the best for riding, since Craig's saddles both had tapaderos to keep the rider's feet from going too far through the stirrup, he opted for the better traction when afoot.

One day when Craig was in the bunkhouse, carefully mending some of his clothing Josh came in to get him and saw what he was doing. When Craig looked up he noticed Josh's face turn slightly pink when he spoke. "You know, Craig, I know someone that does repairs and even makes new clothes from fabric she makes herself."

"Really?" Craig asked, amused at Josh's sudden shyness.

"Yes. Her family does lots of stuff the old ways. Lola told me they got to the museum first and got a bunch of tools and stuff that the pioneers had used to make their own stuff."

"You kind of like her, I'm thinking," Craig teased Josh.

"Well... Yeah... But..."

“Perhaps you could take me over and introduce me. I wouldn’t mind getting some new clothes, and setting up a trading partner for the Retreat back home.”

“Sure! Just whenever you say!”

“Let’s wait for the snow to stop for a bit,” Craig said, rather dryly, noting the eagerness in Josh to go visit a woman he obviously had feelings for.

“Oh, well... Yes. Of course.” Josh turned to leave, but remembered what he’d come in for in the first place. “Need you to help Aaron move some hay for the stock.”

“Sure thing,” Craig said, putting away his sewing. He put on his Drover’s coat, with the lining in it, slapped the Rogue River hat on his head and cinched up the chin strap to keep it on his head in the wind. His work gloves were already in a pocket of the coat.

When spring finally arrived, after the hard winter, Mark convinced Craig to stay on a few more weeks to help get the spring ground work done. Craig couldn’t refuse and put off his trip down to find the rest of the cannibals.

But three weeks later, the horses all a bit fat and sassy, about like Craig was feeling, he headed south once again, a little lighter of trade goods, but well clothed, equipped, and supplied.

He felt a pang of guilt when he ran across a small town that had been hit by raiders just the week before. But he probably had helped more people by getting Mark’s farm going to supply food for people than he might have saved. And that was a big if.

The people of the town gave him all the information they had on the group of raiders. One of the things they told him was that though there were fewer of them than in the past, they’d been even more vicious in their attack. It was only whispered that they might be cannibals. Craig was pretty sure it was the group he was looking for.

He got on their track, which wasn’t that difficult, despite the fact that they made rudimentary efforts to conceal it. It lead him straight back to the town he’d been at before. His heart as cold as the winter had been, Craig picked up where he left off the previous fall, sneaking into town in the early evening, looking for the members of the gang.

The first three times it was easy and he managed to kill half a dozen of the gang and wound at least that many more. But he got careless and paid a price. The bullet holes in the Drover’s coat were matched by a pair in his left arm. Fortunately the round had been a small caliber jacketed pistol bullet that missed the bone in his upper arm. He doctored himself up and laid low for several weeks, though he continued to watch the main road into and out of town.

The continued surveillance paid off. A small convoy left the town one day and headed north. He got on Clyde and followed at a distance, on the watch for an ambush. He carried the M14E2 across the saddle horn, at the ready. Fretting a little at leaving his camp for such a long time, though the horses were in a rope corral now and could get to water and graze a little bit, Craig continued to follow until the group stopped early in the afternoon.

Craig waited until their camp was set up. He watched the process carefully. There were no women or children, and every one of the men was heavily armed. Still not willing to just open fire on the camp, Craig set up the M14E3 in the fading light and then hollered to the camp. "I'm here to kill some cannibals. Anyone that isn't has two minutes to come out with your hands up."

Pretty sure that no one would come or that the group would wait for two minutes to do anything, Craig took up the slack on the trigger. Sure enough, the words were barely out of his mouth when the gang members started shooting. Only one was firing anywhere close to where Craig was lying prone, one 100-round magazine in the auto-rifle and another sitting ready. He raked the camp with the auto-rifle, using the entire 100-rounds in a series of short bursts.

As he was reloading, the return fire from the camp starting to come close, Craig heard a sound behind him and then a gunshot at close range. Either Craig had missed seeing a guard circling the camp, or the man had managed to locate Craig and circled around behind him. Either way, it was very fortunate that the man was both scared, and a horrible shot to start with. The first round missed Craig, hitting the ground right by his cheek.

Craig rolled away from the M14E2, grabbing the Calico where it lay beside him. On his back, Craig fired a long burst from the Calico up into the man's center of mass. The guy got off another shot, but it went Craig knew not where. It was only some time later that Craig found the bullet hole in the stock of the M14E2.

The man fell heavily, half on Craig. Craig shoved him off, holstered the Calico, and picked up the rifle. There were survivors in the camp and they knew where he was now. At least approximately, at first.

Craig laid down some covering fire with the remaining rounds in the drum, causing the rest of the gang to take to the ground. He shoulder slung the rifle and took the Calico out again, running in a curved path away from and slightly around the camp.

Deciding not to press his luck any more than he already had, Craig kept going as the night darkness deepened. Taking a circuitous route back to the well hidden Clyde, Craig headed back to his camp. The horses were glad to see him and he spent a bit of time with them as a sort of apology for having been gone so long.

He took up a position outside the camp, and settled down to doze on and off the rest of the night, on the slim possibility that one or more of the gang had followed him back in the dark. Stiff and sore the next morning, Craig took care of the horses, packed up and changed camp locations.

Waiting another day to investigate, Craig finally went back to the site of the ambush. All three vehicles were there, out of commission until some work was done. Craig had intentionally disabled them, but did so with the idea of getting them running again sometime so the town would have them to use.

Besides the vehicles and remains of the camp, there were eight dead bodies, including the one at the edge of the camp clearing that had almost got Craig. The bodies had already been stripped of anything useful, including all the footwear and some of the clothes. The gang members that survived hadn't bothered to even try to bury the bodies and they had suffered severe depredation by wild animals.

Craig took up his vantage point overlooking the road, doubting if he'd be able to do another attack like he'd done. To his great surprise, a week after the attack, Craig saw someone walking down the middle of the road, carrying a white piece of cloth tied to a broom handle.

Following the man's progress through the binoculars, Craig kept checking the man's back trail for possible ambushers. Craig hurriedly shifted position, to get to the edge of the road that was just around a bend in the road.

Craig thought for a moment the guy was going to have a heart attack when Craig softly said, "You looking for me?" Craig was behind a tree, his eyes shifting from the man to the bend in the road.

"If you aren't alone, you'd better just turn around and go. I won't kill you under a white flag, but if I'm ambushed, you'll be the first to go, white flag or not."

The man didn't move. "I'm alone. I promise. Can I put my hands down?" He'd lifted them automatically when Craig had spoken.

"Keep them where I can see them. Now what do you want?"

"We want to help you," said the man. "I'm Walt Gruber. Some of the honest folks in town want the raiders out of our town, but we haven't been able to do anything but get killed trying. With your help..."

Craig cut him off. "Why should I help? You know they are raiders. Did you know they were cannibals?"

The man turned white. "Rumors! Just rumors!"

"No, they are not. How could you allow them to live among you?"

"It's just so hard," the man said, almost whimpering. "They shared some stuff with some of the people of the town... Not everyone wants them to leave. But I do and so do many others. We'll help you. Just tell me what to do so I can tell the others."

"Take up arms. Kill them. You obviously know who they are."

Again the man's face turned white. "They took our guns."

"I'm sure," Craig said, not able to hide his disgust. "I'd bet everything I own that there are plenty more than enough guns in that town to do the job. People just aren't willing to take the risk."

Walt didn't say anything, and Craig was silent for a moment. Then Craig asked, "Do you know when they plan for another raid?"

"I don't know," Walt said slowly. "A group left a few days ago, but only a few came back, all shot up. I don't know when they might chance another try."

"What about getting them all together in one place, if your people aren't willing to gang up on them one at a time?"

"Well," said Walt, "They are mostly staying in just two places now, and only leave in groups of three or more. They've begun taking back... Uh... taking food from us."

"I see," Craig said, his voice cold. "Tell me which houses."

Walt gave Craig two street addresses. "Go home and keep your mouth shut," Craig told him.

"When are you going to come in and do it?" Walt asked, his eyes shifting more than Craig thought normal under the circumstances.

"Tell everyone you don't want killed to be off the streets the night of day after tomorrow."

"Ok," the man said. He turned and hurried away without another word, holding the flag at his side.

"Quisling!" Craig muttered under his breath. He didn't trust Walt Gruber one whit. Craig was getting set up for an ambush, and he knew it. But suddenly he smiled a small smile. Just perhaps the ambushers could be beat at their own game.

Craig waited with mounting tension for the night to come two day's later. The task was going to be very risky, so he turned the horses loose. They would stay right close to where he left them if a bear or cougar didn't spook them. At least for a while.

He worked his way to the edge of town just before dark, so he could get one good look at the route he would take to get to the two houses. The streets were silent and empty. When full dark came, Craig began working his way, not to the two houses named, but others. The ones next to each of the designated houses.

Using all the stealth tactics he'd learned hunting, Craig approached the first house. Nothing. He tried the house on the other side of the designated house. Sure enough, there was a sentry standing on the back porch, trying to stay concealed, watching the house Craig was supposed to enter.

Moving back just as quietly as he had approached, he checked the houses flanking the other house Walt had told him members of the gang would be in. Like the first one, the gang wasn't in the house stated, they were in one flanking it, with a sentry watching for Craig to try to enter it.

Making two assumptions he hoped were true, Craig prepared the two black powder bombs he'd made up the previous day. The first he placed under the front porch of the house with the gang members in it just waiting for the sentry to alert them to Craig's presence. Being as quiet as possible, Craig put the second on the side of the house away from the target house.

He lit the homemade fuse of the second bomb, and then hurried back to light the fuse of the first bomb. Moving carefully, but in something of a hurry, Craig headed toward the other set of houses. Stopping at the corner of the street where the other houses were, Craig took the M14E2 off his shoulder, opened the bipod, and went prone with it, the auto-rifle aimed down the street toward the other houses.

A few seconds later the two black powder bombs went off within seconds of one another. A few seconds after that, men burst out of the house down the street and came running toward the site of the explosion. It was like shooting ducks, and it made Craig a little ill, but he mowed down the group of gang members running toward him, catching them all with a long burst. Some bullets went through two or more of the men before they stopped, the men were so close together.

Getting up and carrying the M14E2 at the ready, Craig ran back to the bombed house. There was little left of the house that wasn't knocked down and burning. Not wanting to waste the ammunition, Craig watched from the shadows for a bit before deciding everyone in it was either dead or long gone.

People started coming out of other houses and Craig turned the rifle toward them, but held his fire. "I've done what you should have done. I don't know if I killed all the cannibal gang, but I know you know who they are. It's up to you what you do to any survivors. And be aware that Walt Gruber sent me in here into an ambush."

Craig started to lift the M14E2 up to his shoulder, but someone beat him to it. Someone in the crowd, with a rifle, fired three times and the plump body of Gruber fell, sliding to an ignominious stop.

The same man stepped out of the group, making sure his rifle wasn't pointed anywhere near Craig. "We'll take care of it now. What's your name, Cowboy?"

"Doesn't matter," Craig said. "The town is now yours. Make what you want of it. I want no part of a place that would allow what's been going on here to happen."

"Listen, you..." said another person, but Craig just turned and began to walk away, not in the least interested in hearing what she had to say.

Craig broke camp the next day and headed south. It took him a little while to get to the area where people were still extracting salt from the hot springs that were common in the area. As always, he scouted out the area before making human contact. He found a relatively peaceful area, with quite a bit of local trade going on. It was peaceful enough and with enough commerce going on that Craig was able to take a rental room for a few days while the horses were boarded and cared for.

It took those few days to convince the management of the most likely of the several salt operations to set up a trade agreement between them and the Retreat, with the Retreat not only getting salt for its own use, but enough to act as a distributor for salt.

Their local Amateur Radio operator contacted the Retreat and Craig got the guy with the salt operation talking to Quentin, to set up the deal, with Craig getting a life time supply of salt and a small piece of the action for working as the Retreat's expeditor on the deal.

With two of his primary objectives taken care of, Craig wondered what to do next. He didn't wonder long. He really needed a reliable long term supply of high grade sulfur for his black powder operation. There were plenty of willow trees around Sullivan and he planted as many as he cut, getting a grove of them started for coppicing, to insure the supply of charcoal he needed.

There was plenty of nitrate for the operation in the many caves around Sullivan. Bat guano converted into excellent quality nitrates. Only the sulfur was starting to become a problem. A little went a long way in making the black powder, and his Mother had early on cornered the market for sulfur available through local salvage operations.

So, with sulfur sources on his mind, Craig headed south again, toward the Gulf Coast. They extracted sulfur as a side product from several operations there. "Might just get myself a lobster to eat, too," Craig said to himself. He'd heard his Mother talk about some of the meals that had been available before the war. Lobster had been her favorite.

Craig became accustomed to the looks he got with his horses, Drover's coat or duster, and the old weapons that they saw him wearing and carrying in the saddle scabbards. Along with the looks came the obvious 'Hey, Cowboy' greeting. But he kept it up. It was role camouflage that continued to give him an edge in reacting to dangerous situations. Besides, it was fun. Craig fully understood the appeal of Cowboy Action Shooting before the war.

It took a couple of months to get to the coast. Craig stopped often, to allow the horses to get plenty of rest, and so he could look around areas that might provide trade opportunities in the future. He continued to do a bit of trading here and there, as often as not moving items he'd traded for earlier. It was just instinct with him to trade.

He used a little of the gold and silver he'd acquired. It was becoming fairly commonplace the further south he went. When he reached the Louisiana Gulf Coast, between the short section west of New Orleans, that had been nuked, and the area far west, which had taken a lot of fallout from Houston, much of the trade was being handled with an agreed upon standard for an ounce of gold. Craig got his lobster, and found more sulfur than he could ever use.

He even found someone to deliver a few tons of it to the Retreat outside of Sullivan. It would go by boat up the Mississippi River, and then overland to Sullivan. Craig penned a letter telling Sally to pay the man the remaining half of the gold that Craig would owe him. The man had wanted the full amount up front, but Craig wasn't a fool. He paid him half.

His main business done, Craig decided to look around a bit and see what else he could turn up. It suddenly struck him that Louisiana was also known for oil production and sugar production. "You idiot!" Craig said to himself. "You should have been thinking of these all the time, beside just the sulfur and getting some fresh seafood.

Like Texas, some Louisianans had got one of the smaller refineries on the coast working and was producing diesel, kerosene, and small amounts of gasoline. Craig got Quentin involved and was able to set up a regular delivery of all three fuels for distribution in the Midwest. Like the sulfur, the fuels would go up the Mississippi River and then overland.

Three weeks later, Craig had an almost identical trade set up to provide sugar for the area. Both the deals required payment in gold. The Retreat could trade the goods for what they wanted, but both producers wanted gold in payment. A private conversation with Quentin and Craig convinced him it was doable. More and more people were using precious metal coins to conduct business. The more that went into circulation, the more people were willing to use them.

Craig thought about heading east when his business on the Gulf was done, but the massive destruction of the nuclear attacks east of the Mississippi would make it problematical to make a trip without having to take extreme measures to avoid hotspots. Besides, there was a rumor that a rough gang was operating on the Texas Oklahoma border, doing a lot of horse and cattle rustling. "I ought to fit right in there," Craig mused, swinging his leg up and over Clyde, in preparation of leaving.

With the destination in mind, Craig drifted west and slightly north, taking his time, stopping regularly to trade for fresh food for him, and grain for the horses, primarily trading his considerable capability as a skill laborer in return. He did a few trades, picking up a couple of extra horses once, trading them away two weeks later, for items of much more value to him than what he'd given for the horses.

One could never have too many open pollinated seeds. He got enough to load the pack horses to their maximum capacity until he traded off a few of the heavier items in the panniers. So it took him quite a bit longer on the trip to Wichita Falls than initially planned. He took it real easy on the horses until he traded off the six cured hams and several pounds of salt he'd picked up in other trades in Arkansas.

He began to see quite a few other men outfitted much as he was outwardly, when he got to cattle country. He talked to a few of the buckaroos. They were slow to open up, thinking he might be part of the gang that was operating as far south as they were.

But Craig was able to convince them that he was actually on the look out for them himself. "You aiming to do something about them, Cowboy?"

“I own horses. Of course I’m going to do something about rustlers,” Craig would answer when asked the question or one of its variants. He was offered jobs several times, but turned them all down, but again was able to set up a couple of trade agreements for small numbers of additional cattle for the Retreat. Some for breeding to increase the genetic diversity of the herds, with more for butchering and meat to be trade about the area, which the Retreat would be able to expand with the additional cattle available.

Craig spent two months reconnoitering around Wichita Falls. Making friends. And, he guessed, making a few enemies. Though he thought he was being careful, he was shot at from a distance when out scouting. “Must be getting close,” he muttered, looking at the two holes in the arm of the duster a few hours later after he’d made it back to the ranch where he was staying.

He’d found the place through the grapevine. In return for a bit of hard money, Craig was permitted to use the ranch as his home base, where he could keep the animals safe, and he could have a safe spot to rest and recuperate after the long hours out looking for the rustlers.

It was only after two weeks of suddenly finding less and less information about the rustlers that Craig came to the conclusion that he need not look further than the ranch that he was on for the rustlers. He’d been bamboozled for the last three weeks.

Craig wondered why they hadn’t just killed him and disposed of the body. They could have easily gotten rid of the horses. People were more than willing to buy good horseflesh, without asking too many questions. That’s why the rustling was so effective. There had to be a reason they were keeping him alive.

He woke up in the middle of the night, that night after he decided he would be leaving the next day. “They want a trade deal for stolen stock! I can’t believe it!” Craig came up with his plan during the rest of the night, getting just a few hours sleep before he got up, ready to implement it, still not sure why they hadn’t broached the subject.

Feigning mild illness, Craig stayed around the ranch for three days running. Sure enough, he saw people come and go that he could see no real reason to be there. Frank Holloway, the owner of the ranch, asked him up to the ranch house to talk to him the fourth day after the epiphany.

“How you doing? Didn’t know you were sick until this morning.”

“Just a touch of the flu,” Craig replied, accepting the cup of real coffee Frank’s wife served them. “Thank you,” he said, looking up at Katherine and smiling. She smiled back.

It was a complication Craig had to figure out how to deal with. This wasn’t the relatively simple situation with the cannibals. The whole group had been bad. They used people, but had no tight relationships. Craig had no way of knowing if Katherine knew of the rustling or not.

“Well,” Frank said, having no inkling of Craig’s thoughts, “I’ve been meaning to talk to you. I hear you have a deal with a couple of ranches down south to supply beef back to Missouri and Arkansas.”

“Sure have. Only a few head a year, but it will help. People are hungry for beef. Most of what is being produced by local ranchers is consumed by them or people in their immediate area. Not much left for, if I may use the term, consumers.”

“You know, I think I’d like to be part of that. How much beef do you think you could move? And what about horses?”

“Kinda hate to open up competition to my own horse breeding work, but yeah. There is more of a market than I and the other local breeders can fill. As to the beef, I think the area would support as many as twenty-five head a month, if the price was right.”

“Really?” Frank looked to be thinking about it. “I think I could supply that, without any problems.”

“Wouldn’t you have to increase your production? And what about rustlers. Moving cattle across country would make them really vulnerable.”

Frank smiled a smile that was rather secretive looking to Craig. “Well, with your help, I think I can guarantee delivery.”

Going along with the charade, Craig said, “Well, I’m certainly trying to do what I can, but I’m not having much success.”

“I’m not even sure why you are looking in to it,” Frank said. “What business of it is yours, anyway?”

Craig shrugged. “Kind of a hobby with me. Life is hard enough without predators like rustlers making it harder. I’ve got friends to help protect. I’d rather go out looking for the troubles than wait for them to come to me and mine.”

“I guess I can understand that. But I haven’t had much trouble with the rustlers. Let me be your supplier and I think we can take care of business.”

“It’s tempting. Of course, I’d have to clear it through the Retreat Administrator, and let the council decide if the price is right or not. Be nice to get a herd started that way before winter. The other ranches can’t do anything until next spring.”

“I’ve got some cattle up on the high range. I could have them brought down and start a drive right away. Need to get paid in gold, though. Is that doable?”

Frank was greedy, and it showed. Craig had dropped a baited hook and Frank had snapped it right up. Not wanting to make himself an immediate target of opportunity, Craig didn’t mention that he had more than enough gold with him to buy just about any size herd of

cattle was available. Instead, he said, "It would have to be on trust. You'd get paid when you got there."

Frank didn't seem to like it, but he was still tempted. Suddenly he said, "You make the deal with your people and I'll get my men rounding up the cattle. Up in the high country."

"You have a communications set here?"

"Of course." Frank took Craig to what would pass as a study in the old days and pointed out the Kenwood HF Amateur Radio set.

"I'll get ahold of Quentin just as soon as I can," Craig said. "How much for how many head?"

Frank told him and Craig managed not to show his surprise. Frank was more than greedy.

Frank left the room, a big grin on his face when Craig nodded and said, "Sounds okay. I'll get right on it."

Craig fiddled with the radio and actually was able to make contact with the Retreat. At least for a moment or two before the signal faded out. Craig went back out to the living room and waited for Frank. He didn't have to wait long.

Still smiling, Frank came back in and asked, "What did they say?"

Craig gave Frank a thumbs up.

"We're going up right now to bring down the herd. Should be back in a couple of days," Frank replied, the smile even wider than before.

"I'll get saddled up and go with you," Craig said, getting the immediate reaction he was expecting.

Frank's smile was gone in an instant and he was hurriedly making excuses for Craig to stay on the ranch. "No... Uh... Man, you are still sick. Shouldn't be out and about right now. Besides," Frank continued, the thought suddenly coming to him, "You'll be going to Missouri with us won't you? So you'll need to rest up."

It wasn't really a question. Frank was used to giving orders and have his men jump to obey them. It was more than a bit difficult playing the upstanding citizen. Craig played right along, despite the flash of anger at Frank's authoritarian attitude.

"Perhaps you're right," Craig said, hesitating a convincing amount of time.

"Okay, then. I need to get ready to go with the men. I'll see you in no more than three days."

“Okay Frank. I’ll go back to the bunkhouse and get some rest. You’re right about me needing to conserve my energy.”

Craig went to the bunkhouse and began getting ready. As soon as Frank and all of his men left, Craig saddled up and loaded up the pack horses. He was gone less than an hour after Frank and his men.

He made his way to the nearest ranch and got permission to stable the horses for a couple of days. “Boy, these guys like their gold,” he said to himself, when the rancher indicated that keeping the horses for Craig wouldn’t be a problem. For a bit of gold. Craig forked over the coin and then climbed back on Clyde and went hunting Frank and his rustling gang.

Craig still had a touch of doubt about Frank being the rustler, but it was soon dispelled when the tracks of Frank and his men turned from the route to the high country and turned toward another ranch.

They were moving quickly and with the later start that Craig had, there was no way Craig could get ahead of them to warn the ranch that a raid was going to happen. Besides, Craig couldn’t be sure which ranch would be hit until the gang made their move.

With the timetable Frank had given Craig, it seemed that it was a ranch some distance away. Craig was sure of it when the men stopped and set up camp near a river. Craig did the same, staying with a dry camp and no fire to avoid detection. He was up before dawn the next morning and ready to follow Frank and his men after they breakfasted, saddled up, and hit the trail again.

Frank had called the timing pretty close. The gang hit the small ranch just before noon, going in shooting. Craig saw the ranch hands diving for cover and hoped none of them were hit. In order to reduce the chance for injuries to the rancher, and his hands and family, Craig let Frank and the gang get the herd started and then dropped in behind them.

Craig had almost brought the M14E2, but had been doubtful it would be reasonable for use in the endeavor. It wouldn’t have been. Neither was the Calico. What Craig was doing called for close up handgun use to avoid injuring any of the cattle. Firing a rifle from atop a running horse at any range but pointblank was just asking for a miss. Besides, there was no point in stopping the rustlers if all the rancher’s cattle were dead.

With a slight flick of the reigns Craig had Clyde up to speed. The big Barb gained on the rustlers. The herd, though running, was no match for Clyde. Craig didn’t just start shooting as he came up on the men. One of them was slightly behind the others and he rode up beside him, Craig’s hand going to the smooth wood of the Ruger .45 Colt Revolver in the right hand pommel holster.

“Stop!” Craig yelled over to the man. It wasn’t one of Frank’s hands that Craig had met. And the man was none too smart. He pulled a gun from his waistband and tried to shoot Craig. But Craig was quicker. He pulled the trigger of the Ruger and down went the rustler, his horse angling off and slowing down without the rider to urge him on.

The first two shots were enough to speed up the herd slightly and alert the other rustlers that there was someone trying to stop them. In the full light of day a battle royal ensued with the rustlers leaving the herd and heading off to get away from Craig. If they'd stopped and faced him as a group they would have had him. But each one was looking out for himself.

They didn't start to split up, shooting over their shoulders, the rounds going wild, until Craig had dropped two more of them from close range right behind them.

Frank was still in the lead and he reigned over, breaking away from the three men left in the group. Craig managed to down one more, with what he knew was a lucky shot. He holstered the Ruger and drew the left hand Ruger from its pommel holster, giggling Clyde a bit and turning him to go after Frank.

Craig saw Frank drop the magazine from the pistol he was using and ram another home. He turned and began shooting, but the shots were wild. But even a wild shot could hit something. And that was what happened. Clyde took a round across his left hip. He shied and came to a sliding stop, Craig almost going off over Clyde's head.

But Craig got Clyde stopped safely, with Frank getting further away. Immediately Craig dropped the Ruger and drew the Marlin 1895. He sighted the rifle on Frank. It took five tries, with Frank getting further away between each one, for Craig to finally get a hit on him. Frank went off the horse head first.

Craig checked the shallow groove in Clyde's hip and then calmed the horse down enough to get back on after picking up the Ruger he'd dropped. Keeping the rifle at the ready, Craig rode up to Frank. He wasn't moving. Not trusting him, Craig slid off Clyde the rifle still in his hand and walked up to the body. For that was what it was. A body. Frank was dead. Not from Craig's rifle shot, not directly, for it had hit him high in the shoulder. But the shot had caused Frank to lose control and when he fell off the horse he broke his neck.

The herd had slowed down and finally stopped, exhausted. Craig circled them up and started drifting them back toward the ranch from which they'd been taken. He saw a couple of the dead rustlers, and at least two of them limping away from the herd's line of travel. Craig had hit them, but not killed them.

Seeing the dust cloud nearing the herd from the direction of the ranch, Craig made sure to keep his hands in clear view as five men rode up to him, slowing from a gallop to a sliding stop just a few feet from Craig.

Between not making any dangerous movements, and the fact that he'd talked with the rancher while making his early inquiries, Craig managed not to get shot as a rustler himself. The men allowed him to explain what had happened.

When he explained what he discovered, one of the men exclaimed, "You just lived right there with those snakes to get evidence! And then chased them down! Man, you are some tough Cowboy, fer sure!"

Craig let the rancher and his fellow ranchers in the area take it from there. He didn't need to know what happened to the rest of the now identified rustlers, or Frank's wife. Feeling more than a bit weary, and very lucky not to have been injured or killed, Craig headed for the ranch he'd stabled the horses.

He packed up again and left the area the next day, headed for Wyoming now, wondering about maybe rounding up a few buffalo, if the herds had grown. Just because.

Cowboy - Chapter 4

Winter was approaching as Craig headed northwest. He began looking for a good situation where he could lay over until spring. It wasn't until he got to Amarillo that he found an operation needing a hand for the winter.

It was another small ranch needing a little help handling the stock. It was owned by a very young couple with a baby. Alfred and Gwen Jennings, and little Stevie. They'd squatted on the abandoned land and set up a ranch. Having come out of a very successful retreat in Amarillo, the couple had big plans. They had the wherewithal to acquire stock and set up a fairly self-sufficient operation.

Their eyes were a bit bigger than their abilities. They ran out of money and tradable items about the time late fall rolled around. There was no way Alfred could take care of everything by himself. Gwen was pregnant again and in no shape to help, between that and taking care of Stevie.

They'd tried to hire hands for future shares, but people needed sustenance now, not in a couple of years. But Craig just needed a place to stay, something to do to keep him busy, and feed for the horses. He had enough trading goods, not to mention gold and silver, to get the provisions he needed for him.

So, when he heard about the desperate couple, Craig rode out to the ranch to see what kind of deal he might make. He nearly got shot in the process. Alfred was out with the stock, and a very nervous Gwen shot first and asked the questions after Alfred showed up a few minutes later at a gallop, having heard the shots.

Craig was sitting quietly on Clyde, just out of sight of the ranch house when Alfred rode up, the horse sliding to a stop. Alfred ran into the house, and a few minutes later, called out, "We're armed! Move along and you won't get hurt!"

It was sheer bravado. Alfred's voice had been quivering when he yelled out the warning. "You realize, don't you," Craig called back, his voice just loud enough for them to hear him in the house, "that if I was intent on harming anyone I could have shot you down when you rode up. I'm here about the job you've been advertising."

"How do we know that's the case?" Alfred called back, his voice a bit more under control.

Controlling Clyde with knee pressure, Craig rode back into sight of the house, his hands held up so they could be seen. "You don't, really," Craig said calmly, "But if you give me a chance to talk to you, I'm sure I can convince you."

It was Gwen that made the decision. "Al, maybe I over reacted. He was just riding up calmly. And he has a whole string of horses. He didn't shoot back or anything, just turned around and waited for you."

Alfred stepped out on the porch of the house. "Okay, mister. Come ahead. But keep your hands where I can see them until I'm sure you are what you say you are."

Craig did as instructed. Alfred was impressed with his ability to guide Clyde without using the reins and the well mannered string of pack animals following him on a lead rope. The bandits that had plagued Amarillo in the early days after the war, when Alfred and Gwen were children, had traveled hard and fast and light. Despite looking like an outlaw, Alfred was getting the feeling that Craig was anything but. But he still held the rifle pointed at Craig.

When he reached the house, Craig swung down off Clyde, and before Alfred could react, had the rifle out of his hands, the magazine dropped and the round in the chamber ejected. Strictly in passing Craig noted the gun was an AR-15 tricked out M-4 style. He handed it back to Alfred and said, "I've had a lot of guns pointed at me lately and am a little shy around them. I'd appreciate being heard out with the gun in my face."

"It's okay, Al," Gwen said, taking her husband's arm to keep him from trying anything foolish out of embarrassment of being disarmed like that in front of his wife.

Craig bent down and picked up the ejected round, handing it and the magazine to Alfred. "Sorry," he said, "I'm just a little jumpy around guns."

"I had to be sure," Alfred said, managing to keep the whine out of his voice.

"Of course you did," Craig replied, slightly regretting his actions. He should have handled it differently. But it was water under the bridge. Just have to make up for it in some way. "Now I don't mind talking out here, but the door is open and I doubt you have heat to spare."

"Well... I suppose you could come on in and we could talk. If you're really here about the ranch hand's job."

"I am for a fact. But just for the winter. I'm on my way to Wyoming next spring."

Alfred and Craig followed Gwen into the house, and Gwen offered Craig a seat. Craig took it and the Drover's coat slid back a bit, exposing the Ruger, Whippet, and derringers Craig wore.

Alfred blanched and so did Gwen. They both suddenly realized that Craig could have done anything he wanted if he had been so inclined. He hadn't, and despite being in the presence of a heavily armed man, the two relaxed.

"I should say up front," Alfred said, "That I can't pay very much. We were really wanting a full time, long term hand that would take a small cut when we begin selling off some of the cattle and horses next spring."

"That's okay," Craig said. "All I want is a bed under a good roof, and a barn and feed for the horses for the rest of the fall, the winter, and early spring. I'll provide my own provisions. But sure would appreciate having them prepared for me. I'm not much of a cook."

“Excuse us for a moment,” Gwen said, again taking Alfred’s arm. This time she led him into the kitchen.

Craig looked around the living room as the two of them whispering back and forth. It was obvious that one of the couple had come from a very well to do family, particularly for after the war. The room was fairly simply appointed, but everything looked to be of the best quality.

His perusal of the room was interrupted when Alfred and Gwen came back into the living room. Immediately Alfred said, rather forcefully, “You’d have to stay in the barn,” But his voice was a little less aggressive when he added, “There’s an office in there with a bathroom... It really shouldn’t be too bad.”

“That’s fine,” Craig replied. Though he didn’t say it, the idea of staying in the house with them, especially with one baby in the house and another on the way, was way down on his list of preferences.

“And it will be really hard work. I would hate to be let down in the middle of the winter if you found the work too hard.”

Craig smiled slightly. “Oh, I don’t think you’ll need to worry about that. What say we give it a couple of weeks and if you don’t like the quality and quantity of my work we’ll just call the whole thing off and I’ll saddle up and ride off, with no hard feelings.”

“Well...” Alfred said slowly.

Gwen, however, immediately said, “You’re hired.”

What could a husband do but nod in that situation? Alfred nodded.

“If you’ll show me the barn, I’ll get my string put up and you can get me started on whatever needs done first.”

Alfred, perhaps just a bit reluctantly, led Craig outside. Craig whistled at Clyde. He’d drifted, with the other horses, out onto the lush grass of the lawn and was grazing. Clyde looked up and headed toward Craig, the other horses obeying the whistle as much as the lead rope looped around the saddle horn of the saddle on Clyde.

“You have a way with horses,” Alfred said, more than a little impressed.

“Fairly newly acquired,” Craig admitted. “But we have been on the trail for some time.”

Craig looked over the place as he followed Alfred over to the barn. It was set quite a distance from the ranch house. It had obviously been an equipment barn before the war. Now it was an animal barn. Most of the concrete floor of the large, slope sided metal building was covered with several inches of earth.

There were half a dozen horses already stabled in the barn, but there were plenty of empty ones available for Craig's horses. Craig had to give Alfred credit. He had big ideas.

The office in the barn was more than adequate for Craig's personal use. The large leather sofa was a hide-a-bed, and the bathroom had a shower. For someone used to living outdoors for long periods of time, it was a luxury suite.

"We run the generator for two hours in the morning and two at night. The rest of the time you'll have to make do."

"No problem. I can find my way around for now," Craig said, anxious to get the horses stabled and fed. They were smelling the grain stored in wooden bins built along one wall and were ready for it. They knew what staying in a barn meant.

"Come over to the house and we'll get you started after you get settled in," Alfred said, turning and leaving without another word.

Craig chuckled. Alfred needed to get a little of his own back. Craig could understand it and let the little things go. One after the other, Craig unloaded and unsaddled the horses, putting each one in a stall, after leading them down the occupied stalls so the horses could all touch noses and familiarize themselves with one another.

After stacking all the panniers and pack saddles in another of the empty stalls, Craig took his saddle bags into the office and began to rearrange a few things to suit him. He went back to the pannier that held more of his limited personal gear and took the old duffle bag to the office and tossed it in a corner.

"Home, sweet home. For a while." Craig said, and headed for the house as a blustery wind picked up, blowing swirls of leaves from the many trees that grew around the house.

He expected the first job to be a hard one, and Craig wasn't disappointed. One of the constants in the post apocalyptic world was cutting firewood. Fortunately, with the greatly reduced human population, new growth was coming in faster than wood was being cut, despite so many people needing it.

"There's a good stand of trees we're harvesting about a mile that way," Alfred said, coming out of the house with Craig. He pointed, and then said, "We'll take the truck. The firewood stuff is already in it."

Craig had seen the old Ford pickup sitting in the driveway of the house. With some pride, Alfred explained. "Got a rebuilt diesel in it. My father makes biodiesel on his farm the other side of Amarillo, so I have a good supply." He looked at Craig when they got into the truck. "We still limit the use to real needs. Don't expect to do your work in it," Alfred warned.

Craig nodded. It took a few minutes to go the mile. Alfred was right. It was a good stand of trees, growing along a small stream. "You replanting was you cut?" Craig asked.

“Uh... well... we haven’t.” Then very quickly he added. “But we plan to start. Got to have plenty of firewood for these longer winters.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Craig commented and then fell silent.

When they reached the trees, Craig saw where a couple had been felled, but not cut up. That was what they did first, using the Stihl chainsaw Alfred took from the bed of the truck. “Pop had contacts on the coast. We get a little gasoline and oil from time to time. Enough for cutting wood and a couple of other things. Plus the lube oil for the diesel engines.”

Alfred finally fell silent when he fired up the chainsaw. As Craig used the double-bit axe to trim the smaller limbs, Alfred cut the larger, and cut the trunk up into the correct lengths for the stoves at the ranch house.

They worked the rest of the afternoon, taking the occasional break. Several more than Craig would have taken on his own. When they stopped, a bit before dark, the pickup was loaded down with wood, and there were several stacks ready for transport to the ranch house.

Craig was prepared to unload the truck when they got back to the house, but Alfred said they would do it the next day. Craig shrugged.

“Get cleaned up and come to the house for supper.”

Craig nodded and headed for his room in the barn. The power suddenly came on. He showered and put on fresh clothes before going to the ranch house. Gwen let him in after he knocked and he met Stevie for the first time. He was a rolly-polly, happy little fellow and Craig couldn’t help smiling and wondering what kind of babies he and Sally might produce. He put the thought out of his mind and joined Alfred in the dining room when he came out of the bathroom.

“Where is the best place to get provisions?” Craig asked as they ate a hearty meal. Gwen was an excellent cook. And she didn’t short the portions.

Gwen and Alfred exchanged a look, and then Gwen said, “My parents run a trading post in Amarillo. Things run short in the fall, as people stock up on the staples, but I’m sure Mom can scrape up enough for you for the winter.”

“We’ve put by quite a bit this harvest,” Alfred said. “We can supply you with quite a bit ourselves.”

Gwen gave Alfred a look that Craig recognized. It was one his Mother had used on him a few times when he did something she thought was incorrect or impolite.

Ignoring it, Craig said, “I’ll have to trade for it or pay gold or silver, since I can’t work it off.” Craig laughed, trying to ease the sudden tension.

“But...” Gwen started to say something, but Alfred cut her off.

“That is fine. Be easier with gold. I doubt you have anything to trade we might want.”

“Sure thing,” Craig said. Then he thought to himself, “Boy, is he going to get it from Gwen. She is not a happy camper!” Glad that the act of eating hid his slight smile, he made a mental note to himself to deal with Gwen when he paid for the food.

The next day, after breakfast, the first thing Craig did was bring in his current supply of provisions and gave them to Gwen while Alfred was outside doing something. He pulled out the leather poke that Jason had made for him and opened it. “How much for the winter’s provisions, Mrs. Jennings?”

“I’m not sure...” She looked at the back door that Alfred had gone out a few minutes earlier. Then, with a resolute look on her face she told Craig an amount of gold coin.

Craig counted it out without comment, more than pleased with the bargain he was getting. Alfred never mentioned the transaction, but he rather pouted the next several days, even as he put Craig through the ringer work wise, Starting with splitting the wood they’d harvested.

With the amount of work that needed doing, Craig wondered what the small family would have done if Craig hadn’t shown up. “Probably gone back to one of their families,” Craig mused. It would have been a shame. The kid knew cattle and had acquired some prime breeding stock as well as feeders the previous year. The losses would have been severe if the Jennings had just walked away from the place.

Craig just worked away, until he decided he’d shown what he could do without complaint. He told Alfred one evening at the dining table that he was going to go to Amarillo in a couple of days and would pick up anything he or Gwen needed while he was there.

Alfred didn’t like it much, but Gwen quickly produced a small list of items for him to try to find for her. One of the items was salt. Craig still had several pounds of it and brought some of it in the next morning and gave to Gwen.

“How much do...”

“Nadda,” Craig replied. “Just my contribution to the provisions.”

Craig, just to keep things amicable waited for three days before he saddled up Clyde and put the panniers on two of the pack horses, ready to go into Amarillo to get the rest of his winter supplies.

Gwen waved from the front porch of the house. Alfred just stood there. “Be back in two days,” Craig said and clicked at Clyde. Clyde hit his long range, ground covering stride and they were off, the pack horses following along on their lead, keeping the proper distance from each other to make travel fast and easy.

Unlike Gwen, Gwen's mother drove a hard bargain. Craig enjoyed the negotiations and when the final tally was done he was more than satisfied, as was Alice. Craig had his winter's worth of staples and Alice had a little gold, some silver, and a few trade items.

It took Craig most of the next day to find everything Gwen had on her list, which had lengthened somewhat when Alfred, a bit reluctantly, added a few items to it. Despite his bartering skills, he paid or traded somewhat more for the items than Gwen had given him for her and Alfred's needs.

As he was traveling back to the ranch, he decided that he'd just leave the difference unsaid, unless Gwen or Alfred made an issue of it. "Best to keep the peace," he told Clyde. Clyde's ears flicked back toward him and then forward again. Craig had a tendency to talk to him when he rode but Clyde had learned the difference between ramblings and instructions, and acted accordingly.

It started to snow while Craig was still a few miles from the ranch, but he pushed on. The horses knew the barn and some grain was waiting. They'd been through plenty of snowstorms with Craig and were more than willing to keep going.

Craig stopped the horses at the back of the ranch house and Alfred and Gwen both helped him unload the food and take it down into the basement under the house. Craig saw that, yes, they did have quite a bit of food put up, but the way they ate, it would have been barely enough to get just them through the winter, if it would, indeed, last that long. Craig's contribution would more than make up the difference. He'd had a feeling their estimation of their reserves might have been overly optimistic.

"Thank you," Gwen told him when he gave her the items on her list. "Do I owe you any more?" she asked.

Appreciating the gesture, Craig just shook his head. Gwen didn't press the matter. "Come in as soon as you take care of the horses. Supper is ready." Craig nodded and led Clyde and the pack horses to the barn while Alfred closed up the outside entrance to the basement.

In pre-war days, the Jennings would have been yuppie conspicuous consumers. They were the equivalent in the post war world. Craig just shook his head at their wastefulness. Apparently they could afford it. They obviously thought they could. Alfred often explained, in great detail, the plans he had for the future. Craig wished him well and went about his work.

Craig was talking about leaving the next spring, but stayed on the ranch for three weeks alone when Alfred took Gwen and Stevie to Gwen's mother's for Gwen to have the baby.

Despite the renewed offer, made rather passionately by Alfred, with Gwen's eager input, for Craig to stay and become part of the permanent ranch staff, for a percentage, Craig was packed up and ready to leave late the next spring. He was eager to be off. The short summers that were the norm now put a lot of pressure on anyone doing much traveling to get it done as quickly as possible.

Craig went into Amarillo again to restock his traveling supplies before he left the area, but was soon heading northwest again, bound for Wyoming, as the weather finally began to warm up.

He was in Colorado, traveling parallel to US 287 and then US 40, when he began hearing tales of a group of bandits working I-70, which was once again a major route of travel between the Rockies and the Mississippi River.

“It just never ends, does it?” he asked no one in particular when he’d stopped in Limon to take a break and do a little investigating. He was at a truck stop with mini-market that had been turned into a trading post for travelers on I-70 and was getting an earful from some of the locals.

He traded a few things off, replenishing his coin supply, and decided to drift east, along I-70 and see what he could turn up. When he intentionally made his intentions known he was warned repeatedly that the bandits would have his head. Not to mention his horses and all his goods. Craig, again intentionally, shrugged it off, saying he didn’t much believe in rumors.

All weapons cleaned and loaded, Craig headed east, despite the fact that it was away from his current goal of going to Wyoming. “First things first,” he told Clyde.

He let himself be seen from time to time, but did most of his traveling well away from the Interstate, picking locations to hobble the rest of the horses and taking one over to the Interstate to do some surveillance.

Craig was surprised at the number of semi trucks he was seeing. Denver was toast, and anything coming this way out of California had to bypass it and several other cities on the route. But trade was picking up.

He noticed that the trucks tended to run in convoys, with, at the very least, a ten-wheel tanker truck of fuel accompanying them, since fuel was so hard to come by. There was almost always a couple of smaller vehicles ahead and behind the convoy, with well armed guards riding in them. Some of the convoys had full tank trailers accompanying them.

From what he’d heard, those convoys didn’t get hit too often. But they did get hit. The main targets were the occasional lone truck or two truck convoy, with one of the trucks pulling a two axle pup of fuel.

There was some private travel, too, and they were often the targets. A few of those, like Craig, were on horseback. Craig talked to a few people on the road, mostly at the Interstate rest areas, which were getting as much, if not more use, than they had before the war.

Craig, taking more time to surveil than to travel, took three weeks to reach the Kansas border. He stopped at the nearest rest area for a few days, gathering information. Still with little to go on, Craig headed back west, traveling the same way he had before, watching more than traveling.

He found what he was looking for, when he was almost back to Limon. There were signs of travel off the Interstate to the south. He'd been traveling north of the Interstate going east. There were signs of horses, but also off road vehicles. The stories he'd heard had mentioned both, but as separate entities. Seeing what he saw, Craig thought it might be two elements of the same group. That would make his task easier.

Craig went looking for a nearby farm or ranch where he could leave the horses for a few days and finally found one. It took some gold, but he was able to make the arrangements. He took Clyde out and scouted the faint trail to the south. When he didn't find anything after two days of riding, he decided he would just set up an ambush site and wait. If he went much further south he would be too far from his supplies to make staying out possible.

So Craig went back to the little truck farm where his horses were and re-supplied. Then he set up a long term observation point south of the Interstate. He had to fork up a little more gold to extend his stay in the area, but since it had been quite a while since the bandits had struck, Craig decided that an attack would be forthcoming soon.

He wasn't wrong. Two groups passed his observation point above the trail. Both were traveling slowly, to minimize their dust trail. And sure enough, there were two groups. One in vehicles, and one on horseback. Like Craig traveled, the horsemen had several pack horses with them. From the way the horses were traveling, most of the pack horses were carrying only their empty panniers.

Craig climbed up into the saddle on Clyde and began to follow them. The two groups split at the Interstate, the horse mounted group turning west toward Limon, and the vehicles going east. The vehicles, no longer needing to travel slow enough for horses to keep up, put on some speed when they got on I-70.

Turning west, still south of the interstate, Craig shadowed the group, sure they were bandits, but not willing to either just open fire on them, or go up to them and simply ask. But he didn't have long to wait to find out for sure.

The group had let a few groups pass them by, but when one of the medium size convoys appeared in the distance, the group's lead scout came galloping back and the group took to cover on the side of the road, just below the crest of a ridge that the road went over.

Craig ground tied Clyde down in the bottom of a swale and made his way back, carrying a heavy load in the leather haversack Josh had made for him. Taking up an overlooking position of the ambushers, Clyde went prone and set up the M14E2. He was almost two hundred yards from the ambushers.

He saw the scout at the top of the rise signal his companions that the convoy was almost there, and then take up an ambush position himself.

Craig waited for the first shot from the ambushers and then raked the fully exposed ambushers on his side of the interstate with auto fire from the M14E2. He saw the scout break for the top of the ridge and shifted aim. He fired a long burst and saw the man go down.

The convoy had accelerated when the first shot had been fired and made a good account of themselves with return fire. But the attackers had some heavy firepower of their own and despite Craig having decimated the group on his side of the Interstate, the attackers on the north side of the road were able to bring the convoy to a halt. But not before it had mostly cleared the center of the ambush site.

Craig began to lay down fire, dropping the rounds just over the edge of the pavement in hopes of catching the attackers staying down. He gave passing thought to the MM-1, which would have been invaluable for this attack, but it was at the retreat and that was that.

Changing drums, Craig switched to semi-auto fire and started picking his shots as one ambusher or another showed themselves while trying to either get away, or press on the attack on the convoy.

Members of the convoy were shooting back and the attackers gave up and tried to get away. But there just wasn't much place to go. The attackers had to highline themselves on the ridges as they retreated and Craig and the convoy guards cut them down without mercy.

Craig had lost sight of the ambushers for just a few minutes when they were approaching the road and hadn't seen where they had held their horses. But he knew the approximate location where they had to be. Leaving the mop up to the members of the convoy, Craig whistled for Clyde.

The horse came running up and Craig mounted him, leaving the M14E2 behind, pulling the Calico. He giggered Clyde into a hard run toward the area he knew the ambusher's horses had to be, expecting only one man to be there holding them ready to come forward and load up the spoils of war the bandits were expecting to collect.

But there were three men instead of one. Clyde ran right over one of them that had edged up the slope to try to see what was going on. The other two were mounted and took off as soon as they saw Craig.

Much as had happened with the rustlers, Craig directed Clyde to pursue the one closest and let loose with a burst from the suppressed Calico when he was in range. The man went down, and to Craig's great dismay, so did the horse.

Unable to do anything about it, Craig took after the other man, but he had too much of a head start and Craig was unwilling to try a Hail Mary burst to try and get him, fearful of hitting the horse the way he had the other one.

Craig turned back. The bandits' horses had scattered due to the gunfire from the bandits guarding them and Craig let them go. He'd do something about that later. He went back toward where the convoy was stopped. Craig rode down to join the men of the convoy, moving slowly so none of the jumpy men would shoot him.

"Was that you up on the ridge, Cowboy?" asked one of the men.

Craig nodded. "You got a handle on things?"

"Yeah. Got a couple injured, but no one dead, thanks to you. How did you get all those guys? And what's your name, anyway?"

"Doesn't matter. Got some business elsewhere, so I'll be on my way." Craig rode off before anyone else could ask him anything. He checked the dead and wounded on the south side of the road and picked up a few items useful to him, and then climbed back up on Clyde. He stopped to pick up the M14E2, the spent drum, and all the brass he could find, just as he always did, then headed back toward the east at an easy lope.

He left the Interstate where the bandit's trail met it and he set up his ambush at the point where he'd been watching the trail. Craig was debating whether to get up and go to Clyde to get something out of the saddlebags to eat when he saw headlights approaching as darkness began to fall.

Craig saw the two semi rigs, one pulling two box trailers and the other a box trailer and full size tank trailer. They were in between two sets of the original vehicles of the bandits. Not knowing if the semi truck drivers were bandits, or the original drivers being held hostage, Craig dumped all of his fire into the cabs of the two leading vehicles. One was a pickup, the other a large SUV.

Switching his fire to the trailing vehicles, both of which had cut off the trail and were bumping their way away from the ambush, Craig again kept his fire through the upper portions of the vehicles. One stopped immediately, the other kept going for some little distance.

A man jumped out of the passenger seat of the front semi and began shooting at Craig with a pistol. It was almost humorous. Craig took a bead and shot him down. The two drivers of the semis climbed out of the trucks. They were on the far side from Craig, but both men walked around the front of the trucks, their hands up.

Leaving the M14E2 behind again, Craig hurried cautiously down to the convoy. It was getting dark and he could easily be shot from cover of darkness in the open the way he was. But no shots rang out and the two men held their positions, their hands up, until Craig got to them.

"We're not bandits!" one was yelling as Craig ran up.

The other one, a bit more calmly, said, "There is people in the back of my truck. We need to let them out. They're captives, too."

"Put your hands down. Where's the other guard?" Craig asked.

The first man replied, "He crawled over me and took off."

Craig nodded and then motioned toward the back of the truck. Craig watched carefully as the man went over to the dead bandit that had been shooting at Craig and took a key out of his jeans pocket.

“Key,” he said, holding it up so Craig could see it. He went around and opened the lock securing the trailer’s double doors.

Craig stayed ready, his right hand on the pistol grip of the Calico, which was still in its holster under the cotton duster. When the man opened the doors, Craig saw several people crowded back against the load in the trailer. They were obviously terrified.

“Okay,” Craig said. “Get them out.”

Going to the head of the convoy, Craig checked inside the vehicles. Both were bloody messes inside. The one gun Craig would have taken was damaged beyond repair by one of the jacketed slugs from the M14E2. He took what little ammunition there was, and headed for the vehicles that had been the rear of the convoy.

The closest vehicle looked much like the first two. They were gory inside. But one of the dead was still holding a blood covered M1A similar to the one Craig had carried at one time. More importantly, there was a whole shoulder bag full of loaded magazines for it that would work in the other M1A and the M14E2.

Craig picked up a few more things from inside the rig and walked over to the one that had almost escaped. Of the four men in it, the two in the back seat of the SUV were dead. So was one behind the wheel. The front seat passenger, however, was still alive. Barely.

“What are you going to do with me?” the man asked, his head lolling to one side.

“Nothing,” Craig said coldly. “You’re on your own, at the mercy of the people you ambushed.

Craig reached in and took the Para Ordinance P-14 semi-auto pistol that lay in the man’s lap, and fished out the spare magazines the man had in his jacket pockets. The man moaned in pain, but Craig ignored it.

He found two more weapons worth taking, along with some ammunition and three pillow cases of dried foods, mostly jerky and dried fruit. Craig walked back to join the others, clustered between the two semis.

“What are you going to do, Cowboy?” someone asked him.

“Nothing,” Craig said. “I’ve got somewhere I want to be.” He started to turn around and head up the rise to get the M14E2 and Clyde, his arms full of the spoils of war. “I’ll let you take care of the others.” He’d barely taken two steps when the question he was expecting came.

“What’s your name, anyway? Who should we thank for saving us?”

“My name doesn’t matter. And I’d suggest you thank God for being saved.” As the darkness became complete, except for the headlights on the lead semi, which caused as many shadows as it created areas of light, Craig trudged up the hill with his heavy load. Clyde wasn’t going to be happy. But he’d carry the load long enough to get back to the farm where the other horses were.

Just to be fair, Craig walked part of the way, with Clyde trailing behind. Clyde grunted heavily when Craig finally swung aboard, the M14E2 and M1A slung one over each shoulder, the rest of the items he’d recovered in and on the saddle bags.

Craig took a couple of days to round up most of the horses the bandits had used. He was able to get all his coin back from the farmer, and then some, in return for the horses. He took a couple more days to rest up and clean up the bloody spoils of war he’d taken before he once more headed out. Instead of heading for Wyoming, the way he’d planned, he found himself turning south, following the trail of the bandits to their home base.

It took him several days and he was glad he hadn’t kept on the trail the first time he was on the track. When he finally reached the bandit’s base, Craig scoped it out from a distance. It was a ranch out in the middle of nowhere. He saw no activity at all the first day. The second he saw a Mexican looking woman hanging out laundry. There was no other activity, at the house, barn, or bunkhouse.

The third day, again seeing only the woman tending to a small garden, Craig decided to approach the ranch. As standard procedure, Craig hobbled the rest of the horses and then rode slowly up on the ranch, on the road that led in to it on the south side, away from the faint trail north.

He helloed the house and the woman he’d seen before came out the front door. “Go away, if you’re smart. We ain’t buying any.”

“I was looking for work. Is the boss in?”

“Boss and the hands are gone. Now get gone yourself.”

“What would you say if I told you your boss and his gang of bandits weren’t coming back?”

“I’d say good riddance to bad trash. Are you telling me this is true?”

Craig nodded. “Saw it happen myself. Both groups got ambushed trying to ambush people on I-70, up north.”

“Serves ‘em right. My boy was one of them, but he turned into a bad’un. I’ll grieve, I guess. But not right now. What do you think would happen if I took the only horse left in the stable and took off? Maybe taking a few things for back pay?”

“I’m not going to stop you,” Craig said.

“You lend a hand? I can’t get a saddle on that old nag by myself.”

Craig smiled at the woman’s matter-of-fact approach to the news. “You gather up what’s yours and I’ll get the horse saddled.”

Not totally convinced of her innocence, Craig made sure not to turn his back on her, and kept a sharp eye out as he found the horse and saddle in the large barn. He could see why the horse was still in the barn. It was ready for the glue factory. It was a shame. It looked like it had been a good horse at one time. The woman would be lucky to get where she was going on it.

The saddle wasn’t much better than the horse, but use it, Craig did. He had the horse saddled up in a few minutes and had it tied to the rail of the front porch of the house. It was only a few minutes later that the woman came out of the house carrying two loaded pillow cases and a battered old suitcase.

She was also wearing a gunbelt over her dress that held a holstered single action pistol that looked much like the horse and saddle. But the brass of the shells in the loops on the gun belt gleamed brightly. If that was what she wanted, so be it. Craig wasn’t her keeper. He was still pretty sure she’d been a part of the operation, even if that was only acting as gardener, cook, and housekeeper.

“You riding with me?” she asked as she brought the horse closer to the porch so she could step in the saddle from its height.

“No, Ma’am,” Craig said. “I plan to hang here a few days and rest up before I continue on my way.”

“Good luck to ya, Cowboy. This is an evil place and you’d be well put to leave it as soon as you can.”

Craig nodded, but he stood there and watched her ride away. He gave it a few hours and then went to get the other horses. There was enough grain in the stable to give the horses all a good bait.

There wasn’t much in the barn when Craig looked it over in more detail. Same with the bunkhouse. Besides wanting to make sure there wasn’t someone hiding out in it, Craig wanted to check it for trade goods. He figured it was all part of the spoils-of-war.

Craig had a feeling that the members of the gang didn’t trust each other much. There wasn’t much in the bunkhouse worth having. Some clothes that would fit him, that would need to be boiled before being worn, but that was about it.

Like the barn, the house wasn’t in good shape. The woman... Craig suddenly realized he didn’t know her name. She hadn’t even asked his. The woman might have tried to keep up the large rambling ranch house, but it was much the worse for wear and lack of care.

Craig checked the kitchen. Seeing the empty shelves, he was pretty sure the woman had cleaned out all the food she could carry. There was still a sack of flour and a few jars of home canned beans. The flour was infested with worms and at least one of the jars of beans was showing some bubbles. Not a good sign. Craig brought his own food in to prepare supper.

He'd looked the house over quickly after the woman left, before he lost the light and picked the bedroom he would use. It was cleaner than the rest, though the smallest of the rooms in the house. Craig guessed it was the one the woman had used. There were a pair of good deadlock bolts on the inside of the door and closed and locked-on-the-inside shutters on the lone window.

Craig made up the bed with clean linens he found in the tiny closet, after checking the bed for bugs. It was clean. He left the detail inspection of the house for the next day. His sleep was restless. He didn't actually like being locked inside a room, even if the locks were on his side of the door and window.

Still a bit tired the next morning, Craig was up early and took a cautious look around the house and property again before he checked the horses and then fixed himself breakfast. Then, not expecting to find anything, Craig searched the house with a fine tooth comb, just in case. Bandits were like pirates. Sometimes they buried their treasure.

He wasn't about to start digging up the yard on the mere chance they might have actually buried something, but Craig was a practical man. If there was something of value here he aimed to find it and make it his.

It took him three days to find it. He'd almost checked it first, but it was so obvious he ruled it out. But since he hadn't found anything anywhere else, Craig started taking a very close look at the large fireplace in the living room of the house.

He couldn't be sure if more than one of the bandits had the same idea, or if just the leader hadn't wanted to risk losing everything if a hiding place was found. But there were several caches, all of them small, except for two. Tapping the bricks, one-by-one, Craig found the small stashes.

Now, it was years after the war, and much of the commerce was still one commodity traded for another. But there was some money changing hands, in the form of gold and silver. So most of what the bandits had taken in their days had been consumed, or traded off for consumables required to sustain life. And there was none of it to be found in those stashes. But the one thing of value that wasn't consumable was the gold and silver coins that the bandits had taken over their years of operation, that hadn't been spent for more of the consumables required to keep them alive.

That was what Craig found. A few coins behind one brick. A few more behind another. And so on. He had quite a pile coins when he thought to check under the fire grate. The house had been built not long before the war, and it had many modern construction techniques used to construct it. That included an outside air intake for the fireplace.

When Craig moved the fire grate he saw the grill covering the air vent. Sure enough, when he worked it free, was an ash covered leather bag pushed well back into the pipe. “No wonder there is so much smoke damage on the face of the fireplace. It hadn’t drawn well with the bag in the pipe. But it had drawn enough cool air to keep the bag from being more than just scorched.

The bag held as much as Craig had taken from the other stashes. On a hunch, Craig went outside and found the inlet to the fire place air inlet. The cover was already loose. It took only a moment to remove it, reach in, and drag out a leather bag nearly identical to the other one, just as full.

Craig almost stopped there. But he decided to check the fire brick on the inside of the fireplace just as he’d checked the bricks in front and in the hearth. He had no luck and was about to give it up, but he reached up and checked the smoke shelf. There was something there. It wasn’t a bag, and it was far too heavy to be a brick or piece of brick that had fallen down the chimney.

With a hard tug to clear the lip of the smoke shelf, Craig had the object free. It nearly knocked him out when it hit him on the head because he wasn’t fast enough to dodge away from it when it fell. The goose egg he got lasted for days.

But Craig considered it worth it. Like the first leather bag that held as much as he’d already found at the time, the box doubled what he’d already found, including both bags. Perhaps even more than doubled it.

“Why?” Craig wondered aloud. “Why? Why would they keep it up, with this much coin stashed?” He was silent for a while, his head aching from the blow and from the question. And then he spoke to no one again. “It had to be sheer greed for more. And bloodlust to kill and torture that kept them going.”

Craig loaded up the coin, along with the rest of his goods, and headed out, again to the northwest. He still wanted those buffalo. He went back through Limon, on his way to Wyoming, and the destruction of the bandits was all the talk.

He’d thought about staying around a day or two, but someone talking about what had happened out on I-70 said, “Yeah. They say it was a cowboy.” The man looked at Craig and continued. “Dressed kinda like you.” Craig decided it was time to hit the trail. The buffalo were waiting.

Craig took it easy through the mountains, giving Denver a wide berth. The Mile High City was now a series of still hot craters. The same nuclear warheads that had destroyed Denver had caused tremendous amounts of fallout east of the city. Though he had a radiation meter, and checked it regularly, Craig circled well east of the city on general principles, unwilling to go into an area of radiation if he didn’t have to.

He made it to Cheyenne without incident. There weren't many people in the area. Between the mountains that were harsh anyway, and the new, much more severe winters, eking out a living was difficult. There were few remote retreats. Most of the human activity was in and around the cities and small towns, Craig found. It was suggested to him several times that he turn back and head for warmer climes. It didn't set well with him on general principles.

As he moved north during the summer, his question's about locating some buffalo were met with what could only be called hostility. The buffalo were making a real comeback, from the captive herds that had survived and escaped captivity. Craig was able to develop a real taste for it, as it was more common than beef in the area. It just increased his determination to take a small breeding herd back to Missouri.

When he was east of Casper, near where I-25 turned west, Craig ran into a road block. It was in a canyon that the road went through that was by far the easiest way for Craig to continue. Since he continued to travel with possible ambush in mind, Craig spotted it before he came up on it.

Watching from up high, with the binoculars, Craig began to wonder what was going on. It didn't seem like those at the roadblock were stopping anyone. They just seemed to be waving people through without even slowing them down.

Though he still hadn't come up with a reason for the roadblock where it was, Craig went back to his horses, made his way down to the Interstate, and turned Clyde toward the roadblock. He thought he would be waved on through, but as he passed through the narrow opening, six men leaped at him, dragging him down off Clyde, while others scrambled to control the horses.

It took a few seconds to realize that every one of the men was of Native American heritage. He'd never paid much attention to a person's ethnicity. His mother had taught him it didn't matter. What a person did was what mattered.

Two men were holding Craig's arms up behind his back so tightly he had to stand on his tiptoes to avoid the pain. The men made no move to disarm Craig, merely waiting on someone to come up from a vehicle parked a ways down the road.

When the man got to them, with two more men flanking him, Craig was sure they, too, were Native Americans. "So, Cowboy," said what was obviously the leader of the group. "You finally got here."

Craig's eyes widened. Apparently they had been waiting for him. He looked around. The roadblock was being dismantled. Him and only him, perhaps. Craig looked back at the man.

"I'm Chief Joseph. No relation." The second part was said with a smile.

"Okay, Chief Joseph, you obviously wanted to talk to me. Have I made some transgression? If so, I will willingly apologize and do what I can to correct the matter."

The Chief's smile faded. "There will not be another case of white men from the east coming west and taking away our way of life. You have stated many times since you came into this area that you were looking for bison to take back to Missouri. We will not allow that."

"I can certainly change my mind, then," Craig said. "Though I must say, I've never had any intention of taking away your way of life. I'm not a hunter out here to kill indiscriminately, the way it happened before. I just wanted to take a breeding herd to Missouri to develop a high quality meat source that can handle the winters better than cattle. We wouldn't be coming out to get more. We'd grow our own."

"I understand that, Cowboy. But the bison is, and will continue to be, a resource for us."

"You willing to sell me a few?" Craig asked and went back up on tiptoes when the two men holding him again applied upward pressure on his arms behind his back.

"Are you trying to be funny, Cowboy?"

"No sir," Craig replied, around a groan. "Bison being sold is still a resource. A good one."

"Not if you take them back and begin a breeding program, as you said you want to do, and that we have already done."

"Okay. How about selling me the products, after processing? Or setting up a process center near the Retreat I'm from and bringing the animals yourself. Be easier to do on the hoof than shipping the finished goods. You could control the process the entire way."

"You are making a business proposal to me while being held captive?"

"Sure. Why not?" Craig said and tried to shrug, but couldn't.

"You actually think we would do that?"

"Not to repeat myself, but sure, why not?"

The Chief looked around at his men in wonder. Looking back at Craig, he said, "And what do you say we would get out of this? Beads, perhaps?"

Many of the other men around them laughed.

"Gold beads, maybe, if you're so inclined."

A man stepped forward and planted a fist in Craig's belly, just above the gun belt.

"That's enough of that!" the Chief said, pulling the man back himself before he could strike Craig again. "We don't abuse prisoners any more. Those days are over."

Giving Craig a hard look, he continued. "Don't be facetious, Cowboy. It demeans both of us."

"Sorry. That was out of line," Craig replied after he caught his breath. "Of course, what I meant, was that the payment could be in gold coin. Or goods that we make. Whatever you want to set up."

"You really are serious, aren't you," the Chief said, his wonderment obvious.

"I am. I'm a horse trader, so to speak. I make all kinds of deals for myself, and as lead man for our Retreat."

"And you would do this as you said? Pay us in some way for bison products. Products that we make."

"Well, up to a point. Some of the products would probably be finished in some way, into other products, but yes, for the most part."

"Release him," the Chief said, waving his hand at the two men holding Craig. They hesitated and the Chief sudden anger was evident in his repeated, "Release him!"

They turned Craig loose and stepped back. Craig worked his shoulders and arms and the man that had hit him quietly warning him, "Make a move I think is threatening and I'll slit your throat."

The Chief spoke to the man, angrily, in their native language. Craig didn't have a clue as to what tribal organization the group belonged to, much less the language. But he heard the disciplinary tone of the Chief's voice.

"Come sit with me in the Suburban. The air here is chill, and we have had to go back to herbal medicine. As good as it is, I miss the days of Excedrin for my aches and pains."

"Look," Craig said softly, so only the Chief could hear, "I can disarm if it would make you feel better. I'm really not out to hurt anyone."

"No. Your audacity intrigues me, but I don't fear you." Suddenly there was a very modern Glock semi-auto pistol in the Chief's hand. It was very much like the one in the holster in the small of Craig's back. "And I can fend for myself if need be." The pistol disappeared again. Craig couldn't tell for sure just where it was.

"Okay by me. I prefer negotiating from equal footings."

"Is that true?" the Chief asked, sliding into one side of the Suburban and motioning Craig into the other. "You are a true horse trader, making trades as much for the sake of the trade than the result of the trade?"

Craig nodded. "Something like that, yeah."

“As am I. That being the case, make your pitch with the idea that it is indeed possible to do something similar to what you say.”

Craig and Chief Joseph dickered for almost an hour, as the roadblock was removed and the rest of the men with the Chief getting into vehicles to wait as what little traffic there was slowed to try and see what was going on.

Finally, Craig and the Chief struck a bargain, pending Quentin’s approval. “Here’s the frequencies we use,” Craig said, handing Chief Joseph a small piece of paper with the Retreat’s information on it.

“Lots of obstacles in a deal like this,” Craig said and Chief Joseph got a wary look on his face.

“Is this going to be another white man’s loophole to allow you to do pretty much anything but what we just agreed to?” the Chief asked.

Craig looked surprised. “No. Of course not. I just wanted to seal the deal with some earnest money.”

He started to reach inside the Drover’s coat for his poke and the Glock appeared in the Chief’s hand again. “Carefully. Very carefully.”

Craig nodded and used his right hand to open the coat just slightly to reach into the inner pocket and take out his leather poke. He opened it and asked, “Ten ounces of gold okay?”

The Chief, surprised once again, put the Glock away and nodded. “I had not expected any prepayment, but if you are willing, I am certainly not going to turn it down. These are still difficult times and many things can happen.”

“That’s the way I approach things,” Craig said, counting out ten of the gleaming gold coins into the Chief’s hand.

“You really like to push it, don’t you?” the Chief asked, when he took a close look at the coins. All but one were the last US gold coins minted before the war. The Buffalo 24 carat one-ounce coin, with a standing buffalo on one side and the profile of a Native American on the other.

The Chief pointed out the portraits on the coins. “Oh,” Craig said, “Those.” He looked up at the Chief and said, “I can give you different coins if you want. I didn’t realize...”

The Chief shook his head, slipping the coins into a pocket, and with an amused smile said, “I wonder how you managed to make it this far from home.”

“My good looks?” asked Craig. He rather liked the Chief.

Chief Joseph laughed. "I think not. There is more substance to you than that, obviously. Now, is there anything I can do for you before you leave our territory?"

The message was plain to Craig. He was expected to leave, and leave soon. "Well... If it is possible, I'd like to do some trading. I came out here looking for buffalo and I'd like to be able to take some product back with me, if that is possible."

"I suppose that could be arranged. Follow us back to town. There is a trading post there that most of us use as an exchange point."

Craig opened the door and walked over to where Clyde was tied to the back of a stake bed flatbed Dodge truck. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the Chief apparently laying down the law to the man that had punched Craig. The men that had ridden horses to the roadblock climbed aboard their horses, as did Craig.

They all waited for the few vehicles to get turned around and headed up the road before the trailed along behind at a steady pace. The vehicles were long gone. Craig started up a conversation and was already making trade deals when they rode into the small town that was the base camp for Chief Joseph and his people.

Craig made his trades, spent the night in the motel that the Chief owned, forking over a bit of silver for the privilege, and left early the next morning. After much thought, Craig decided against going further west. Instead he turned northeast, with the intention of picking up I-90 and going east to Lake Michigan to see what he might be able to turn up in profitable trade agreements.

The weather was a nagging worry and he kept a sharp eye out for a good situation where he could lay over in relative comfort for the winter, working for his keep, as he had in the past. Craig was a very good judge of the post apocalyptic world weather normally. But he badly misjudged the coming of this particular winter.

He said more than one prayer of thanks for being where he was when the first big snowstorm caught him out in the open. Fortunately he had been taking it easy a couple of days for the very reason that he was able to stay where he was when the blizzard started. All the things the valley offered.

He'd found a large, currently uninhabited valley in the Black Hills west of Rapid City, South Dakota. The valley floor was covered with waist high wild grass. Craig wasn't a hundred percent sure, but it looked like oats growing wild with the grass. True or not, the horses loved the just cured grasses.

There was a small stream right down the middle of the valley, paralleling an old, mostly overgrown, gravel road leading somewhere up into the higher hills. There was one copse of trees near the road and the stream, and Craig set up camp in a tiny clearing inside the copse.

He cut down a few saplings and made a pair of large lean-tos facing each other, about three and a half feet apart. Craig dug a small fire pit between the lean-tos. The area between them

was roofed over with more saplings, small limbs, and thatched grasses, high enough up to allow the smoke to escape without any going into the lean-tos. He began cutting wood for a fire that wouldn't go out for months.

Since he was going to be stuck there for the winter anyway, Craig didn't beat himself up very much for taking the two weeks he had when he killed a large grizzly bear out getting that last little bit food in its belly to hold it over the winter in hibernation.

Craig had just hit the edge of the Black Hills range when he spotted a small herd of antelope. He pulled the Marlin out of the scabbard, ground hitched Clyde, and began stalking the antelope. It took him three hours to ease up on them. They just went over the ridge.

Afraid he'd lose the chance, Craig ran the rest of the way up to the top of the ridge and started to take a shot at the nearest antelope. They were about to disappear into a stand of trees. Craig got ready to fire at a range of just under two-hundred yards by his estimation. When he fired, the antelope dropped like a rock and the other antelope began to run in a panic.

Craig was amazed that they were running toward him. Never one to pass up an opportunity, Craig dropped another at close range as it ran almost up to him. The rest of the antelope sped past. Craig wouldn't take another. Two were enough.

Then he saw why the antelope had run toward him and not down the slope away from him. An extremely large, and extremely disturbed grizzly was running at full speed after the antelope, having started his charge just as Craig had shot the first time. But when it saw Craig standing there, it made the slight change in course and headed for Craig.

There was no tree to climb close, and there was no way he could outrun the grizzly. The grizzly slowed some, due to the distance it was traveling at a run, but showed no signs of stopping. Craig waited, rather nervously, for the bear to get a little closer, and then began firing the Marlin as quickly as he could work the lever.

His prayer to heaven for it not to hurt too much was passing his lips when the still running bear dropped, its nose plowing to a stop a few feet from Craig. Craig suddenly sat down. His legs wouldn't support him. It took some little time for him to recover and get up. He checked the bear carefully. It was definitely dead. So were the two antelope. Craig walked back and got the horses, finally his normal calm self.

He'd never intended to have that much meat at one time, but Craig wasn't one to waste anything. Times had been tough right after the war and the lessons learned stayed with him. So Craig took the time to skin out and butcher all three animals. He brain tanned the hides, and cut up all the meat.

There was no way he could carry the hides and all that meat the way it was. He was packing a fair load as it was. So more time was taken to preserve all the meat he could. The antelope, both of them, were mostly converted into jerky on racks he built in place, with a slow fire under them.

He built a smoke house and smoked most of the bear, trimming out the massive amount of fat and rendering it for future use. It all went into the cleaned out intestines. It took more time than it normally would, using only the iron skillet and Dutch oven that Craig carried.

As it was, he had to leave some of the less desirable cuts of meat of all three animals, and travel much slower than usual, because of the heavy loads that the horses were carrying. Craig stopped more often, as well, traveling only a few hours a day. Craig quit switching between Clyde and Mule Ears as Mule Ears was carrying a good pack load on the saddle.

Between the delays, and the actual misjudging, Craig found himself snowed in for the winter, in about as good of shape as one could ask to be in such a situation. The few fresh potatoes, carrots, and onions he had with him didn't last all that long, despite rationing himself harshly. The dried fruit lasted longer, as he rationed that even more harshly.

Fortunately he did have the meat from the antelope and the bear, along with all the buffalo jerky, pemmican, and pinole he'd traded for as future trade goods.

The mostly cured bear skin went down on the bedroll tarp under one of the lean-tos, with the buffalo robe used for extra cover when Craig slept, using his regular bedroll wool blanket on top of the bear skin.

The two antelope skins were hung from either end of the roof between the two lean-tos. With them in place, and the thatching of the lean-tos covered with a thick layer of leaves, and then snow on top of that, Craig was as snug as a bug in a rug.

Besides the corral he made inside the copse so the horses had some protection, he built a couple of wind walls to cut the bitter wind even more. He took them out just about every day for them to graze on the grasses of the valley outside the copse, and to water them and get water for himself.

As the snow accumulated, the horses had to paw some to get to the dried grasses, but they seemed well able to do it and get more than enough to eat. They actually gained weight during the winter. Their coats were long and shaggy. Between that and the cover the wind breaks and the copse provided, they weathered the winter without suffering.

The small stream ran well into the winter, but finally froze over. Craig was able to chop a hole in the ice to get to the small amount of water still flowing for the horses to drink and for him to fill his several canteens when needed.

Craig was just getting ready to shed the Drover's coat and climb into the bed for the night, one very cold night in late January, if his calendar keeping was accurate, when the horses started acting up.

The horses were seasoned travelers and caused Craig few problems. If they were disturbed, there was a good reason. Craig grabbed his wind up flashlight, gave the crank a few turns and then picked up the Marlin and stepped out into the dark, to see what was going on.

The corral was just a few steps from the lean-tos and the horses moved toward the man and the light, comfortable with both. Craig went one way around the corral. The horses stayed where they were, near to the lean-tos, still riled up.

Craig suddenly saw why the horses were agitated. Light was reflecting from animal eyes several feet away, in the trees. At first, Craig thought it was a wolf, but suddenly doubted there would be just one. He was easing the Marlin up into position when the animal charged him. Craig dropped the flashlight, snap fired the Marlin, worked the lever and fired again.

But the cougar was on him. The animal raked Craig with a paw as it knocked him down and kept going. Scrambling to his feet, Craig worked the action of the Marlin again, squatted down cautiously and picked up the flashlight. He followed the tracks of the cougar out of the copse and into the valley on the side toward the closest hill.

Craig didn't go far. The cougar was lying on its side, breathing heavily, unable to move. Pulling the derringer from its belt buckle holster, Craig put the animal out of its misery with a shot in the back of the neck.

Deciding to deal with the carcass the next day, Craig turned around and headed back into the copse to his camp to calm the horses some more. He saw the blood trail of the big cat. Both rounds from the Marlin had hit it. The blood was obvious. It was right in the line of the cougar's tracks.

But Craig saw the small spots of blood in his track. "Why is there..." Craig's voice faded away and he looked down at his chest. His shirt was ripped in three parallel lines. Blood was dripping from two of the tears. Craig said a bad word and ducked into his lean-to shrugging out of the Drover's coat and putting it down by the Marlin he set handy. He took off the gun belt and set it by the Marlin.

Starting to feel the pain, Craig eased the shirt off and looked at his chest in the light from the windup flashlight. There were two jagged rips in the skin in the middle of his chest, with one scratch parallel to the deeper wounds. Craig washed the wounds with soap and hot water, and then fished a bottle of whiskey out of one of the panniers.

Holding the cuts open wide, Craig poured some of the whiskey into each one, gritting his teeth at the intense pain. The whiskey hurt far worse than the washing had, but Craig was afraid not to do it. An infection could kill him. His first-aid kit was little more than band-aids that wouldn't stick anymore.

The shirt he'd been wearing he'd put on just that morning and was still clean. Craig cut it up with the scissors on his Swiss Army Knife, and made a bandage and wrappings out of it. Craig took a little nip of the whiskey and put the bottle away. He was already getting stiff.

Craig stretched out gingerly on the open blanket and pulled the other half up and over him. He pulled the buffalo robe over himself and finally fell asleep a few minutes later.

He didn't awaken until late the next morning. Stiff and sore, Craig put on his other shirt and then the gun belt. He shrugged into the Drover's coat, picked up the Marlin and went outside to take care of the horses. They all seemed fine, except for being somewhat eager to get to water and some feed.

While they fed, Craig went back through the copse and walked over to the dead cougar. Meat was meat, and a pelt was valuable. Despite the pain and awkwardness, and the fact that the big cat had frozen solid during the night, Craig clenched his teeth, pulled out the Laredo, and began to skin and then butcher the cougar.

He was weak and sick to his stomach when the task was complete. He couldn't do much with the pelt with it this cold, so he stretched it out and hung it from a tree, to be dealt with in the spring when he could work with the pelt.

Craig took it easy for the next two months, the only strenuous thing he did being the cutting of more wood for the fire. With plenty of meat available, now including the cougar, he ate all the protein he could get down, to help the healing process. With the few vegetables and fruit long gone, Craig harvested a bit of the grain that was growing with the natural grasses and added a bit of carbohydrate and roughage to his diet.

With a foot of snow still on the ground in the valley, and the horses feeling sassy, a nearly healed Craig packed up and saddled up in mid-March and headed east, to pick up I-90 east of a demolished Rapid City.

He spend an excessive amount of silver the first place he found that had fresh vegetables and dried fruit left from the winter. Craig ate himself sick one day, came to his senses, and left the little town well fed, and a bit poorer, but with a goodly supply of root vegetables and a small amount of dried fruit, obtained by trade and not coin. He still had much of the buffalo, having eaten the less well preserved antelope, bear, and cougar, though he did keep some of the antelope jerky and smoked bear meat, for variety in his diet.

There was still the occasional snow as he traveled easy, staying mostly on the I-90. He traded for the sake of trading, and keeping his food supply up, in the small towns across South Dakota. Craig discovered many totally abandoned towns. The fallout had been heavy in the area from the nuclear attacks on the missile silos in Montana.

Many of the survivors, located here and there all across western and central South Dakota had to band together to make life possible and moved to the nearest small town that had a decent surviving population.

From what Craig was hearing, there hadn't been as much banditry in the northern states as he'd run into down south. Craig kept traveling east, hooking up with one group of people migrating over to Lake Michigan to look for a better life on the lake shore.

None of the people were well equipped or very experienced in the kind of travel they were doing. Craig found it hard to believe that several of them had planned to use vehicles, diesel admittedly, to go the whole way, refueling as they went.

Unlike I-70 much further south, there wasn't the kind of traffic that had extra fuel available, in amounts that were adequate for the group. Craig gave a teenager some extra provisions for him to ride Mule Ears and lead the pack horses for him while he roamed north and south of the highway, looking for game and fuel.

He found plenty of game to supplement the rations the group had, but very little fuel. He was able to arrange for the purchase of some extra horses and a couple of trailers for those with the vehicles that they could no longer keep supplied with diesel.

Craig came to the conclusion, based on the attacks he'd suffered by the grizzly and cougar, and the number and kind of animals he was seeing, that since the war, due to the severe winters, and lack of human population in the area, that animals, both predator and prey, had multiplied and moved southward.

While there might not have been much banditry in the years since the war, the slow, inexperienced wagon train was too good of a target to be let go by someone with the least bit of larceny in his heart.

Craig was able to save the members of the wagon train, mostly relatives of each other, from the scams and hustlers that tried to take advantage of them. He started doing all the buying and trading for the group so they wouldn't lose everything they had.

Aside from the larceny, the group was openly attacked twice. A small number of the group had firearms and made a heroic attempt to protect themselves and the group, but it was Craig's skill and the firepower from the M14E2 and Calico that saved the day, both times.

The group didn't even know about the three times Craig was able to head off attacks before they came while he was out scouting.

Craig got the group to the western shore of Lake Michigan and left them there to their own devices. Several of them had learned much under Craig's tutelage and he didn't fear too much for their success without him.

From what he got from the wagon train in payment, which wasn't much, what he had left, and what he managed to trade for at a good advantage, Craig was able to restock both his ammunition supply and stock of trade goods, both of which were lower than Craig liked to have on him. He'd been able to trade the empty cartridge cases he always picked up after a battle, if he could, five to one for the loaded ammunition. He used only a small portion of his coin reserves during all the bartering.

Feeling a bit better after the trading spree along the lake, Craig began looking for deals for the Retreat. One of the places where Craig had traded for some excellent cheese, he was able to get to contact Quentin about supplying the Retreat with cheese. The Retreat members made enough for their own consumption and a bit more, but there was a market for much more. Craig thought the Retreat should be the one with the supply for that market.

Finally deciding to head for home, Craig turned Clyde south. He swung wide around what little remained of Chicago. It, like several other major US cities, had taken multiple warheads, from multiple countries.

But as he reached a point southwest of Chicago, his mind turned to fresh fruit, as he chewed on a slice of dried apple. "Michigan is known for fruit..." Craig told Clyde. Clyde turned left, due to the unconscious knee movement Craig made.

A rather surprised Craig again spoke aloud. "You understood that? Clyde, you're a wonder." He leaned forward and patted Clyde fondly on the neck. "If you agree, it must be the right thing to do. Of course the Retreat produces a lot... But you can never have enough, if you are trading it away."

Craig went on alert when he caught movement out of the corners of his eyes. Keeping an eye out for any kind of cover, he picked up Clyde's pace slightly. Whoever, or whatever, it was didn't follow them, as far as Craig could tell. But the same thing happened as he went east while still south of Chicago.

Craig nearly ran into the camp of a group of people on the southwest side of Chicago, far enough away from the city to be safe from radiation. He eased back, found a place to cache his goods and hide the rest of the horses. He turned Clyde back toward the group. Craig checked them out, which wasn't difficult. The camp didn't have very good security.

Convinced it was a simple salvage party, Craig approached and made contact. Several weapons came into view, but it looked cautionary to Craig. He would have done the same thing. "Come on in. Keep you hands where we can see them," said a man. From his demeanor, Craig took him as the leader of the group.

"Passing through," Craig said, "Saw your camp and thought I'd see if there was news of how Michigan was faring now."

"We just happen to be from Michigan." The group leader's voice was more than a bit brusque. "We don't need any cowboys up there, Cowboy. Got plenty of our own people to take care of."

"I see," Craig said softly, his back up a bit at the man's attitude. "Well then. I'll just move along." He started to turn Clyde around, but his conscious wouldn't allow him. "Just so you know, there are some skulkers around. Haven't had any tro..."

"We don't need you to tell us about security," said the man. "We know all about the skulkers, as you call them. They're harmless. We've been coming here for years to get things from the city and we've never had any trouble with them."

"I see," Craig said again. "That's good to know." He just couldn't help it. Before he turned Clyde he just had to ask, "Anything you all need? I have a few things to trade."

Before the leader could urge Craig away, one of the women near the back of the group spoke up and asked, "You have any salt?"

"A little," Craig said. He looked at the leader and asked, "Okay if I do a little dickering here?"

Before the leader could say no, several people moved forward and began asking Craig what he had and what he wanted in return. He always kept a few things in his saddle bags and made a few small trades and then heard one of the men say, "Sure wish we could find sugar. Don't suppose you have a couple tons of good sugar in those saddlebags?"

It was the opening Craig needed. Their need for salt might or might not have been enough to get a trade route going with someone in Michigan, but by the comment, Craig realized sugar very well could be. He wondered if it was to preserve their fruit harvest.

Craig didn't have to wonder for long. The same man spoke again. "We need sugar by the ton to make jelly and preserve some of our fruit. And salt so we can preserve fish and meat."

"Now, listen up, folks," the leader said, wading into the group to confront Craig. "We don't need to be discussing group business with a stranger. It's none of his business." Looking at Craig he ordered, "Get on your horse now, Cowboy, and be on your way."

Craig saw that the man had enough power over his group that they wouldn't interfere any more. He started to swing aboard Clyde, intending to hurry a bit and get to Michigan to see what kind of deals he could set up when a clear voice came from behind the crowd. "Wait," was the only word said.

It was enough to open a path between Craig and the woman who had spoken. And it was a woman. She was old, Craig could see, but still had quite a presence. Craig glanced at the Leader. He didn't like it, but he wasn't doing anything about it.

"Sir, if you are of a mind to do business with us, other than simple trades, please come to my tent and we will discuss it over a cup of tea."

"Mother!" the leader said, in protest.

"That is enough, Raoul. You take care of your responsibilities and I will mine. Come along, Cowboy. Some one will tend to your horse."

Craig had a difficult time not making a childish face of triumph at Raoul, but decided it would be unwise. He followed the woman to a large, family camping style tent. She held the flap back and Craig entered.

The tent was furnished simply, with a small table and four chairs in the center section. There was a cot in each wing of the tent. The curtains to close off each wing were tied back.

"Please sit."

Craig did and she sat across the table from him. “Now, sir, what do you have in mind?”

“I act as representative for my home, a Retreat near Sullivan, Missouri. We’re in need of some things on an on-going basis, such as salt. I’ve been traveling around, setting up initial trade routes that I hope will expand to the point of having a true economy going again, with resources from widely spread areas available to all.”

“I see. A very ambitious endeavor.”

“Not so much. It all starts with one small deal and provides opportunity for others to join in.”

“And do you have many of these trade routes open?”

“A few. A very good one for salt. Another for sugar. I would certainly like to set up trades for your fruit and fish. We have a pretty good thing going for meat.”

“We could use a bit more meat. Our consumption has held pace with the increases of game. Moose gets rather old after a few years of it. And certainly the salt and sugar.” Looking at Craig rather intently, she continued, “You sound very positive about being able to get us sugar. You say you don’t make it yourself, or the salt. Very presumptuous of you to offer in trade what you do not make yourself.”

“I believe my suppliers will come through on their end of the deals. I’m very good at what I do,” Craig said simply.

“I think you probably are. We are a week away from going back to our family holdings. If you would assist us in our salvage work, and then accompany us back home, I can make you a good personal trade. And you will have a chance to see what we have to offer as a community.”

“Just have someone tell me where to put my camp. I’ll go get the rest of my rig.”

“So you do have more than the clothes on your back, and what you carry on your horse.”

“That I do.”

The woman dismissed him and Craig went out. Raoul immediately entered the tent. Craig hurried away and found the man that had spoken up about the sugar. “The lady...”

“We just call her Mother,” said the man.

“Well... Mother asked me to join you for a while. Where should I set up camp to be out of your way?”

The man laughed. “One man and a horse isn’t going to be in the way.”

Craig smiled. "I have a small pack train hidden away near here."

The man's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh. I see. Well then, Cowboy, I think we'd better put you over on the downwind side of our camp."

"I'll be back," Craig said then. He mounted Clyde and headed off to get Mule Ears and the pack horses with his gear and supplies.

Raoul didn't like Craig's presence, but Mother kept him in check. Plus Craig made a point to avoid him as much as possible. Raoul really didn't like it when Craig made the same deal that the Retreat used for salvage operations with Mother. Those doing the work got a share of the spoils, or the equivalent in other goods, and had a reasonable amount of time to salvage on their own. For Mother's group, it was all for the group. Except for Craig.

Another thing that upset Raoul was Craig's refusal to go close to areas that still showed moderate levels of radiation. Several members of the group willing did so. To Craig, the risks were nowhere worth the few things they found useful in the badly damaged areas just outside the craters.

Craig worked just as hard for Mother's group as he did for himself. He had a knack of interpreting yellow page listings, finding sources for items that simply didn't occur to those in the group, despite their years of salvage work around Chicago.

From what he was hearing at the end of the week of salvage operation, the group had doubled what they'd located the prior three weeks they'd been there, primarily due to Craig's assistance.

Craig did well for himself, too, when he was working on his own. He gave the group things they were looking for when he found them when he was on his own time. It was just right, Craig decided, despite Raoul's constant badgering. None of the group asked him about the items, taking them eagerly, without questioning how he managed to acquire some of them.

One of the first things Craig did on his own was to find a welding supply shop that hadn't been completely stripped. It was more than a bit awkward getting an oxygen tank aboard one of the packhorses for use with the burning bars he'd been looking for.

Using the burning bars, or thermal lances as they were called by some, allowed him to keep the small stock of black powder he had, and still get into well secured buildings and vaults.

Chicago had been in the throes of total elimination of firearms just before the war and had very few gun stores left in the suburbs. Craig hit every one he could find, despite being told, gleefully, by Raoul, that they had cleaned them all out years before.

Craig checked anyway. Sure enough, two of them had vaults that hadn't been breached. The thermal lances took care of that chore easily. He gave the group most of the guns, and a bit of the ammunition he found, keeping a few guns to take with him, along with some ammunition.

He found a good place to cache the rest. Chicago wasn't that far from Sullivan. He'd be back for the rest of the guns and ammunition.

He had the same kind of luck with coin and jewelry shops. Though he wasn't specifically looking for one, Craig ran across a beautiful engagement ring and wedding set that really caught his eye. He pocked it. It wasn't for sale or trade.

The quality jewelry he bagged up. There wasn't all that much of the really good stuff. He took all the jewelry making equipment from one of the stores, and all the loose stones and raw materials and cached them, too. Sometime in the future people would again buy jewelry. Might as well have the means to make it as not.

He was disappointed in the lack of gold and silver coins in the shops he found. While he knew he had plenty, one could never have too much gold and silver. So Craig looked for it on his own time. The shops showed the signs of looting, with high dollar numismatics littering the floor. But they were coins with no precious metal content.

Craig expected the displays to be empty, but he found three coin shops with intact vaults. The inventories were very low. Craig decided to check the sales records he could find in one of the stores where he found a few bullion coins.

Sure enough, in the days preceding the war, the coin shop had sold down their stock. Apparently some people had decided on the worth of having gold and silver. Just in case. And this time, the just in case came true. He took what there was and didn't worry about it any more.

When Mother's group was ready to head back to their holdings in Michigan, Craig was ready to move along with them. They traveled differently than the other groups Craig had been with. The vehicles loaded with the salvaged items, and most of the salvage team, took off at their own speed, leaving those on horseback, including Craig, to get there at their own slow pace.

Craig kept a careful watch, but those in the horse group assured him that there was little, if any, banditry in the small section of Indiana they crossed to get to the Michigan border. And assured him further that there were even fewer problems in Michigan. Except for around Detroit. That was a bad place and more than one of the group had warned Craig about traveling that direction.

It wasn't so much that there was a group or two of bandits, it was more that it was just mean town to be in. As the bad element had been chased away by the locals all up and down the Lake Michigan side of the state and the central and northern areas, many of them wound up going east, taking up residence near the partially destroyed city of Detroit.

Craig thought about setting out on a campaign, but decided to let predators fight other predators. The good people of the area were holding their own. If those in and around Detroit preyed on each other. Craig didn't care. They would eventually die out. As it was, several of the group said there weren't nearly as many 'over there' as there used to be.

Craig had to admit he was pretty impressed with Mother's holdings when he got to the place on Lake Michigan, west of Kalamazoo. One of the men of the horse group had taken to Craig and was a willing well of information.

While the winters were even more ferocious than before, the Lake tempered them somewhat, and the varieties of fruit in the area continued to produce, though with more losses than before the war. There had been heavy losses in the UP of Michigan, and the northern areas of the section of the state between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron.

There were a few people eking out a living in the northern areas, but it had mostly reverted to wild woods, with good populations of wild game, especially moose, which was the meat staple for many in Michigan, if they didn't raise beef themselves.

Shortly after the horse group and Craig arrived on the holdings and got settled, Mother summoned Craig. She got right down to business. Craig gave her the communications protocols of the Retreat and Craig got Quentin involved immediately

Mother was a hard negotiator and Craig had to work for what he wanted personally and for the Retreat. But they finally cut a deal for the Retreat to get plenty of fresh and preserved fruit for distribution in the area, in return for steady supplies of fuels, salt, beef, buffalo, and sugar. The sugar was the deal breaker. If Craig couldn't come up with a steady supply, the deal would eventually fall through. Though the Retreat was getting plenty of sugar for local needs, and to supply the wider area around it, they didn't have the quantities that Mother wanted.

Craig packed up and headed for southern Louisiana. He almost veered west enough to stop at Sullivan but decided business came first. The sugar producers were surprised to see him again, at the least. It took some fast talking and some coin to get the owner to make the changes in production that would provide the new, much higher quantities that Craig now wanted.

With Sally and home on his mind, Craig turned Clyde northeast. "Never know what kind of horseflesh we might find in western Tennessee and western Kentucky." There was always quite a bit going on along a major river, like the Mississippi.

He could see what he could do, trade wise, just because, and take a look around the western side of Tennessee and western tip of Kentucky before crossing the Mississippi River at Cairo, Illinois, for the final leg of his journey to Sullivan, Sally, and his home.

Indeed there was some activity along the river. At least until he got to the border between Louisiana and Mississippi. He was warned about traveling the east side of the River through the southwest side of the sate. It was too dangerous.

When Craig asked about bandits, every person lowered their eyes as they responded in the negative. He couldn't get anyone to tell him what was dangerous in the area. Craig, assuming it was bandits, despite what he was being told, and determined to break up any gang he ran into, set out north, keeping the Mississippi River in sight much of the time.

The area had taken a lot of fallout from the attacks on Dallas and Fort Worth, and was sparsely inhabited. The few people he met were far more stand-offish than Craig expected, considering his stock of trading goods. When he asked the locals about the rumors of bandits in the area, they just exchanged glances with one another and shook their heads.

Confused, and not a little annoyed, Craig pressed northward along the river. He was west of the abandoned town of Fort Adams when he found the answer he was seeking. He had the shock of his life when he discovered it. It was the middle of August, and despite the changes in the global weather patterns, southwest Mississippi, along the river, was more than just hot and humid. It was stifling.

Craig was taking it easy on the horses. He had just let them drink from the river and turned back when Clyde shied, almost dumping Craig off. It so startled Craig, since Clyde was usually so steady, that he didn't notice what had caused it at first. Then he heard a sound that he shouldn't be hearing. It was the sound of an elephant trumpeting.

Holding a tight reign on Clyde, Craig finally looked up and forward to see a rather large elephant, complete with large tusks, flapping its ears and trumpeting in anger. Growing up, part of the home schooling was watching DVD's of Animal Planet and Discovery programs. Craig knew what a bull elephant ready to charge looked like, with a small herd behind to defend.

Turning quickly, Craig gigned Clyde. Clyde didn't really need the touch of the flat spurs. He was more than ready to leave the area of the elephants. So were the other horses. Craig let Clyde find his own path through the trees at a gallop. Craig could hear the elephant behind them for a few seconds, but the sounds faded almost immediately.

Craig eased Clyde to a walk, having to reign him in firmly. The other horses, on their lead ropes, tried to get around Clyde, but Craig was able to calm them down finally, as they kept moving away from the area.

Looking around, Craig began to notice the condition of some of the trees. Limbs fairly high up had been stripped of foliage. The elephants were living in the area, Craig decided. It took him longer to figure out a reason they were there at all.

"Clyde, it has to be either zoo animals turned loose when the attack began... or maybe circus animals... or both... or... I guess it could be animals from one of the animal preservation refuges..."

Craig vaguely remembered something that had interested him as a kid. Refuges had been set up before the war to get breeding populations of endangered species going in safe refuges in the US, for repopulating the areas that were their natural habitat, once conservation efforts restored those habitats.

Looking around warily, Craig searched the surrounding thick forest. There'd been other animals besides elephants in the refuges. And zoos. And circuses. Like lions, and tigers. Leopards. Rhinos. Hippos. Monkeys... Craig couldn't remember everything. That had been many years ago, with him just seven or eight years old at the time.

The point was, that there seemed to be exotic animals in the area. If the elephants were here, others very well could be, too.

Craig was convinced of it when he heard the sounds of a jungle at night, that night when he set up camp. He noted the horses staying even closer than usual, stirring at the loud sound of what Craig was sure was a leopard on the hunt.

Suddenly remembering the .460 Weatherby, 10-gauge double rifle drilling he'd found, and the thought of elephants that had crossed his mind at the time, he rather wished he hadn't left it at the Retreat, having come to his senses, leaving it behind since there weren't any elephants in the United States.

He kept the Marlin .45-70 and the M14E2 close at hand during the night. He might not have an elephant gun, but he did have some firepower. It was several days before the horses went back to their old routine, and he ran into people again. He got some curious looks when he rode up to a small town, coming out of the wilds south of it.

He did a little trading, mostly for fresh fish, staying only a day. When he was ready to leave, he told the small group that it might be a good idea to warn people traveling south of the town that... well... it was dangerous. Like many other people, Craig couldn't quite come to say there were jungle animals in the forest south of the town. He wasn't sure he would ever tell anyone. Who would believe it, if they didn't see it?

Craig certainly did believe the reports that started to become common, as trade increased, of other exotic animals roaming in various areas of the United States.

Aside from some locals eking out a living along the river, Craig didn't find much of interest the rest of the way north in Mississippi. Wanting to see a bit of Tennessee, Craig swung west of Memphis.

It had been hit with only one nuke and while much of the city was destroyed, Craig was able to do a bit of salvaging, mostly looking for high value items. He didn't find much. The place had been picked over heavily. And the people in the area turned out to be territorial. More than once he ran into highly aggressive groups of people manning roadblocks at the edges of their territories.

After the fifth such encounter, and three sniping attacks that were unsuccessful, though enough for Craig to get Mule Ears and the rest of the horses into a gallop to get away from the danger, Craig turned due east to get away from the city. There wasn't much reason to try to stop activities that were a way of life. It couldn't be done, especially by one man.

There weren't very many people out away from Memphis that he could find, so Craig decided to just head for Kentucky and leave west Tennessee to its own devices. Though, as he traveled further north, after getting back to the river after bypassing Memphis, Craig began to find people a bit more sociable. He spent a couple of days with people from Dyersburg, Tennessee that had set up a presence on the Mississippi at the I-155 bridge head.

Besides harvesting fish, game, and wild fowl along the river, the city sponsored several people with boats in river transport work up and down the river between St. Louis and Memphis. There wasn't a great deal of traffic, but there was some.

Craig did a bit of trading, just for the sake of trading, and to lubricate peoples' tongues a bit to find out if there was anything worth investigating in the area. People were doing fine, but Craig couldn't find anything to suggest a major deal.

Though he did make note that it was a very good place to cross the Mississippi. All the bridges in Memphis and St. Louis were down. There weren't many places between the cities to cross. The I-155 bridge was one of them. With the small settlement that had grown up at the bridgehead, travelers could take a rest at the inn and tavern that had been built for such purposes. Craig took advantage of the inn and slept a couple of nights in a real bed and took a real shower.

Craig thought about crossing the river and heading home, but Kentucky was beaoning. "Might as well see it while I have the chance," he told Clyde as they left the settlement and headed north again, along the river.

Much to his surprise, Craig ran into almost exactly what he was looking for, not long after he crossed the state line between Tennessee and Kentucky. While the area around Sullivan had quite a few horses, thanks in part to Craig, there was only a tiny handful of dray or draft horses. St. Louis had been checked for the Clydesdales not long after the war, but none had been found.

Though there was diesel available, increasingly so, farming with horses was still growing much faster than powered equipment farming was. Craig wanted a source of good draft animals. He found it in the western tip of Kentucky.

His thoughts that there wasn't much going on east of the Mississippi wasn't entirely accurate. There were several horse ranches in the area, with most of the stock going east. There was life well east of the Mississippi. Some ranches raised riding and light harness horses. Craig didn't want the competition from them. He concentrated on the draft animals.

Craig found both Clydesdales and Percherons being raised in the area. He cut deals with four different ranches to import some animals to Sullivan, with the intention of starting his own breeding ranch, with the ranches providing genetic diversity in the breeding.

Since it would be a few years before he would have animals for sale, the deal included trained animals in good numbers to get the use of the animals established and help create a market for the draft animals for farming, rather than the much lighter riding and light harness horses that were being used, since they were all that were available.

Quentin okayed the deal and asked when Craig might be headed back. Craig heard the quiet concern in his friend's voice. He obviously didn't want to talk about it with the others present on Craig's end of the radio, but Craig was sure something was up at the Retreat.

The deals made, with a hefty down payment in gold to get the process started, Craig saddled up Clyde and loaded the other horses. It was time to go home. For a variety of reasons.

As he headed for Cairo, Illinois to cross the Mississippi, Craig began to wonder if he'd done enough to earn his place in post apocalyptic society. If he was contributing as much as he was taking. Smiling slightly, Craig patted the ring boxes in the inside pocket of his duster and urged Clyde into a slightly faster gait. It was time to get home to the Sally, and building a home for them and their children. And to see what had Quentin worried.

Cowboy - Chapter 5

Craig took the most direct route possible between Cairo, Illinois and Sullivan, Missouri, stopping only to allow the horses plenty of rest, and to hunt a bit to supplement his traveling provisions. There were a couple of trades for fresh foods made on the way, but as more time passed, the more worried Craig became.

The horses seemed as eager as Craig to get to Sullivan. Perhaps they sensed they were getting near home and a long rest. Craig let them set the pace, actually holding them back a bit at times when the going was good.

Craig, his hair down to his waist and a full beard, dressed in the Drover's coat and well worn Rogue River hat, had to have the guard at the lower gate radio for someone to come identify him before the guard would let him past.

Something was definitely up. There hadn't been this kind of security since just after the war. He was pacing, Clyde ground tied nearby, with the pack horses on their leads, grazing, when two horses came galloping down the drive.

Both slid to a stop and Quentin and Sally hopped down from their respective horses and hurriedly got the gate open. Sally was in Craig's arms before he realized it and Quentin was pumping his right hand in a powerful handshake, saying, "I am so glad you are back."

The guard, looking a bit embarrassed, handed Clyde's reigns to Craig as Quentin and Sally moved back to their horses. "Sorry," the guard muttered.

"Don't be. Security is important. Keep up the good work."

Quentin and Sally waited for Craig to come up to them and they rode up the drive side by side, silently. They passed the inner gate without stopping and Craig headed for the storage barn to unload the pack horses into his storage room.

Still with only minimal conversation Quentin and Sally helped Craig unload the horses. "I'll take them over to the barn and make sure they are taken care of," Question said, taking Clyde's reigns.

Craig started to protest that he could do it himself, but Sally had taken his hand and was leading him out of the storage barn. Craig turned toward the fifth-wheel trailer he'd used since the family had moved into it.

"No," Sally said. "This way." Sally led the way to a single wide park model trailer at the end of a line of similar units. "This one is ours."

Craig's eyes cut to Sally. "I got it a year back when we started a housing improvement project. I moved your stuff from the fifth-wheel. One of the unmarried women has your old trailer."

“I see,” Craig said.

Suddenly Sally was in his arms again, her head on his shoulder, sobbing great wracking sobs, crying her heart out. “I’m missed you so much,” she managed to say after a few minutes of Craig just holding her.

She stepped back and looked at Craig’s eyes with an intense stare. “I hope... you haven’t changed your mind about us... You’ve been gone so long... I’ve wondered...”

Craig took the engagement ring ring box from the inside pocket of the Drover’s coat, and as snow began to fall, opened it and handed it to Sally. “No,” he said softly. “I haven’t changed my mind.”

“Oh, Craig! It’s beautiful!” Her hands shaking, Sally handed the box back to Craig and took the ring out of the box. She slid it onto her ring finger and was suddenly in Craig’s arms again, this time tears of joy. She kissed him several times, but was finally interrupted by Quentin, who came up and stood for a few moments, before making his presence known.

“I know this is important, but I really need to speak to Craig, Sally.”

“I know,” Sally replied, stepping back. She bent down and picked up the two sets of saddle bags and the pommel bags Craig had dropped when she’d launched herself at him. She turned to Quentin and held out her hand to show him the ring. “And you said I should have been married long ago.” There was a big grin on her face. She turned and went up the steps to the trailer.

Quentin was more than a bit red when Craig’s eyes finally left Sally, since she had gone inside.

“Craig... About that... It wasn’t personal... It’s just...”

“Don’t worry about it, Quentin. I know you were just looking out for Sally’s interests. There was a very good chance I wouldn’t make it back. There are some places out there...” his voice trailed away.

“We have it pretty good here, don’t we?” Quentin asked as they walked into the community building.

“Compared to some, very much so. But there are other groups like this that are making a go of it. Trying to get back to... Not normal. That’s not the word. But to some semblance of society that allows communication, social interaction, and trade between the remote groups.”

“I think, from the few conversations we’ve had over the last few years, is that you are doing a great deal to bring that society into being.”

Craig chuckled. “Just trying to make my way in the world, and make a profit at the same time.”

“You’ve certainly done that!” Quentin laughed in turn. “Not only have you done yourself proud, I’m sure, but you’ve made this area a trade hub... Or it would be... If...”

“I take that ‘If’ is what has you so worried.”

Quentin nodded, all humor gone. “The troubles we’d been having stopped for the most part not long after you left that second time.” Craig didn’t bother to tell Quentin why that was.

“But for the past year, as some of your deals have brought more trade to the area, we’re hearing about some pretty bloody raids taking place on I-70 north of us, and even have had some incidents out here. Mostly probing raids, I think. One or two people, taking out a sentry and then sniping for a few minutes before disappearing. No concerted attacks. I think they are just checking out our responses to attacks.”

“I see,” Craig said. “Any guess as to the source?”

“I think it is some survivors from around Fort Leonard Wood that have migrated to Columbia. We know the base was hit, and between that and the heavy fallout from KC, there weren’t many survivors. We’ve had salvage parties that for southwest on I-44 and there were no signs of habitation at the remains of the base or around it.

“Columbia didn’t get hit, and was cleaned up after the fallout, from what some people have said. The general consensus is that the survivors from Fort Leonard Wood took over the city. And Craig, there are some rumors that heavy weapons are being used.”

“They’re using heavy weapons? Tanks and the sort, or...”

Quentin cut him off. “No tanks or APC’s that we’ve heard about, maybe some Hummers, but machine guns and lots of grenades. And maybe mortars. They are destroying as much as they take. Killing when it isn’t necessary.”

“That is a problem,” Craig said. “That I-70 corridor is important to opening up the Midwest again. Any idea how many there are?”

“We’ve heard anything from twenty or thirty to a couple of hundred. From what they’ve been doing, I’d say it was more than the lesser number, but much less than the higher.”

“The buffalo we were expecting have been delayed. So, too, the fruit coming down and salt, sugar, beef, and fuel going north to Michigan. Everyone is afraid to get anywhere close to the nearby section of I-70.”

Craig, already planning what to take with him, said, “I’ll look into it.”

Quentin’s eyes were wide. “Just like that? You’ll look into it? Shouldn’t we be setting up better defenses and such?”

“Yes, we should,” Craig replied calmly. “But I prefer to take the battle to the attackers’ territory than have that battle here. Looks like you’ve strengthened security. Keep it up. But we need hard intelligence. My first priority will be to find out exactly what we’re up against.”

“How will you do that?”

Craig smiled slightly. “I have my ways. I’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Leave? But...”

“It needs to be sooner than later, Quentin,” Craig said, cutting the older man off.

Quentin shook his head. “I suppose you know best how to use your talents. I was counting on you to help us defend the Retreat.”

Craig was fairly certain that Quentin hadn’t meant it quite the way it sounded to him. The words stung more than a little. The implication was that he was leaving the Retreat undefended while he went out on his own, for his own reasons.

“I’ll be here when I’m needed,” Craig replied softly. “Now. I need to talk to Sally and then get things ready for an early departure tomorrow.”

Quentin felt bad about what he’d said, having seen Craig’s reaction to it. But he couldn’t bring himself to withdraw or soften the words in some manner. Craig was needed here.

After a very long talk, and much crying on Sally’s part, Craig explained what he was going to do and why. Leaving her at the trailer, Craig went back to the storage room to sort through the still unpacked panniers. He rearranged several things, putting together a load for two packhorses and Clyde and Mule Ears, after making a trip to the Retreat armory to get a few things.

Sally slept in Craig’s arms that night, with the shared promise that there would be more once the situation was settled and he was back to stay, and after they were married. The next morning, for the third time Sally watched Craig leave the Retreat, wondering if she would ever see him again.

Craig didn’t waste any time. This wasn’t a trading mission. It was a surveillance mission, and if the opportunity presented itself, a search and destroy mission. Craig kept Clyde’s nose, and then Mule Ears’ nose headed toward the Missouri college town of Columbia.

When he got close, Craig set up a set of campsites in a section of the Mark Twain National Forest that was southeast of the city of Columbia. He left the horses where they could graze and get water, inside a large rope paddock in the woods. The rope wouldn’t stop the horses from leaving, if they were spooked or attacked, but barring that, they were well trained for the situation.

Going north, staying west of the city, Craig cut I-70 and turned west. Sure enough, there was a roadblock, manned by several men. Craig pulled up well short of the roadblock and studied it through binoculars. It didn't look good. He turned Clyde and headed back the way he'd come.

Circling the east and south sides of the city, Craig found a place to leave Clyde and headed into Columbia on foot. It wasn't much of a problem getting into the city. Only the major roads had any indication of roadblocks and he didn't see any signs of armed patrols in the city.

There were people about here and there. Craig had a few trade items in the leather haversack on his back and he did a bit of unnecessary trading, fishing for information. After three days doing the same thing, Craig was pretty sure he knew what was going on.

The city itself, as a total group of people, wasn't involved with the group controlling the access to the city and to I-70 in particular. The gang was tolerated simply because there was no one that seemed willing to do anything about it. As long as the group left the citizens alone, they left the group alone. It was an old story, Craig knew, having happened probably hundreds of thousands of times in thousands of cities the world over, since humans became human.

Still, Craig didn't like it. People should stand up for themselves. And he knew, that if he did do something about it, there would be people waiting for the chance to help. Craig smiled and left the city at the end of his third trip in, with a plan.

Much as he'd done before in another situation, Craig began to do to the gang in Columbia what they had been doing to the Retreat, and undoubtedly other potential targets. He had the Barrett M82A1 with him and put it and the Raufoss ammunition to good use. The other M82A1 shooter at the Retreat had filled Craig in on its capabilities.

Over the course of a month he hounded the roadblocks, more than once able to ignite vehicle fires with the Raufoss ammunition impacting a vehicle with fuel in it. When the group began roving patrols out away from the city, Craig began sniping at them. After the loss of seven men that way the patrols stopped and the roadblocks were fortified and manned with more people.

Craig sneaked back into Columbia to see if he could find out what his activities might have stirred up. He had been wearing just nondescript clothing the other times when he went into the city, eschewing his warm Drover's coat for a ragged parka, and carrying only his concealed weapons.

This trip was different. Craig had found a fairly safe way in and out of the city. He went in in full cowboy regalia on Clyde, and made sure he was seen and heard by enough people that word of what he was doing would get back to the members of the gang, now made up of as many non-military as ex-military.

He spread the message that he was out to eliminate the gang, and any innocents should take care to stay out of the way of his attacks. With a piece of chalk brought for the possibility, Craig left a radio frequency with a time and a date scrawled on walls here and there.

Not wanting to waste any of the 25mm grenades for the Hawk MM-1 he didn't use it until he was ready to leave for the winter. It was too much of a risk to be moving about in the winter, primarily because he might be tracked in the snow, besides the normal hazards of the PAW winters.

With the horses packed and with him, Craig made a circle of Columbia, traveling fast, stopping only to lay in a barrage of the 25mm grenades into each of the roadblocks. "Let them stew on that during the winter," Craig told Clyde as he headed back southwest toward the Retreat, going well out of his way to leave several false trails.

When Craig got back to the Retreat, he filled Quentin in on what he'd accomplished. Quentin wasn't particularly impressed. "What about the Retreat? What if they attack?"

"I'm almost counting on it, Quentin," Craig finally told him.

Quentin was outraged until Craig got him calmed down and explained what he had in mind.

"With the winters as severe as they are, and the lack of reports of attacks away from Columbia during the winter, I think we are safe from attack for the duration of this winter. Next spring, when it is almost a sure thing that the group will head out to raid and get what they can, I plan to have a force trained to intercept them and wipe out the majority of them at once. Before they can attack us or anyone else."

Quentin didn't much like the idea, but he put it to the advisory panel of the Retreat and they approved it. Craig began additional training for the security force, with his plan in mind. But there was additional training to add people to the security force to stay behind and defend the Retreat if the gang got past Craig. Quentin was pleased that they were at least doing that, and wasn't quite as brusque with Craig.

Craig and Sally had a Christmas Day wedding, attended by most of the members of the Retreat. Craig splurged a bit because he could afford it and put on a feed much more like the Thanksgiving feasts that they had after a good harvest. Sally moved into the trailer with Craig, having taken up residence with her brother after Craig came back in early winter and started using the trailer.

Keeping a radio watch on the frequency he'd posted, Craig got a few inquiries over the winter. Several were offers to aid in any attack, others were pleas to leave the situation alone. Things were getting tough in the city. The gang had cracked down on the citizens and began extracting a 'tax' on food, it mainly being a collection of a portion of whatever food people had.

Craig was sure that the gang was listening to the radio chatter. He was a bit ambivalent about the possibility that the gang would triangulate his signal and locate where he was. In a way it was good, for the expected attack would be on the Retreat, which was probably better equipped to handle it than anyone else in the area. But was it right for him to allow the Retreat to become a target because of him? It worried Craig more than a little.

He had a couple of different versions of the activity in Columbia as spring grew near. The timing of Craig's planned ambush would be tricky. The gang could easily leave before Craig and his group were in the area, ready to set the ambush when they found out which direction the gang would be going.

With supplies for a month, Craig headed toward Columbia with his team of trained ambushers. They traveled by horse back, for the ease of traveling cross country if need be. And fuel was still scarce enough to avoid losing as much as they would if they took vehicles and lost them.

Craig set up a camp in the National Forest again and went into Columbia to find out what he could. Things were tense. He wore nondescript clothes much as he had initially. Even so, things were tense and very few people would talk to him, many turning and leaving as soon as they saw a stranger to them.

What Craig did find out was that he was none too early in arriving. Everything pointed to the gang heading out very soon. Within days. But Craig wasn't able to pin down the exact day. He put watchers on each of the major access points into and out of the city. Each had a radio and would report anything they saw.

Craig had a gut feeling and set up an ambush on US Highway 63 South out of the city. If they didn't come this way, Craig would have to push his men for some hard riding to get ahead of the group, no matter which way they went.

But Craig's instincts were right on. Less than a week after the ambush was set, and before Craig's group could become too lax to execute a proper ambush, the gang came out of town as a long convoy of mixed vehicles. The bigger trucks were all riding light on their tires, an indication they were empty and meant to hold the spoils of the attacks the gang was planning.

The leader of the gang was no dummy. He sent scouts out, in every direction, to find any ambushes. But Craig had read extensively during the winter and taught what he had learned about ambushes to his team. The scouts were allowed to go through without being attacked.

Radio reports came in that the scouts that had gone all directions but on 63 south had returned and were on their way to catching up with the convoy. The man he'd sent after the scouts that had gone through the ambush site reported that they had stopped and were waiting.

Craig gave the word to get ready. He'd kept it simple. It was a classic L-set ambush, around a blind bend in the road. Craig had handed out all the full-auto weapons he and the Retreat had, except for his Calico. The M14E2 and BAR were placed where they could do the most damage, as had both Barretts. All the full auto Thompson SMG's were on the firing line. Even the AA-12 was in the foot of the L, as a stopper. Craig kept the Hawk MM-1.

Then it was simply a waiting game. The vehicles were moving slowly. There were no horses. It took a bit of time for the lead elements to get to the L-end of the ambush. Craig drew a bead with the MM-1 and dumped a 25mm HE grenade into the lead vehicle. His men began to

fire. He hit the truck again with another grenade, as it was still rolling slowly. It exploded, the full fuel tanks going off, and thoroughly blocked the road.

Craig then used the remaining sixteen grenades to devastate more of the vehicles in his range that were trying to get out of the kill zone of the ambush. The MM-1 grenades weren't the only thing stopping vehicles. Craig had made up almost a hundred black powder bombs. They were used by the best throwers on the team to get the vehicles that Craig couldn't.

The gang didn't give up easily. They fought back. But Craig's team had the high ground and the ambush was perfectly laid. Though it was over in seconds for many, others thought it took forever for the shooting to stop. It finally did, and the Retreat team slowly, carefully, began to take stock.

Not everyone had come through unscathed. Two men were dead and four wounded in various degrees. The team's medical personnel were at work on them. Craig, the MM-1 left behind and his old M1A again in his hands, approached the carnage that was the remains of the convoy.

Some of the explosions, which were much larger than the 25mm grenades could produce on their own, told Craig that there had been some heavier munitions carried by the convoy.

It took a bit of digging and kicking around some still burning debris, for Craig to find the remains of at least two 60mm mortars, and several M-16/M203 combination carbine/40mm grenade launchers. He found the remains of an M-249 SAW. There could have been more, but it was enough to know that the rumors had been right.

His men were beginning to round up those of the gang that weren't dead. There weren't many, and all of them were wounded. Three of those gathered died of their wounds as Craig walked up to the prisoners.

"What are you going to do with us?" said the bravest of the men. The others simply knelt with their heads down, expecting the worst.

"Give you to the town, after we take care of the rest of the group that stayed behind," Craig said. "If you cooperate and give me useful information to round up the rest with minimum bloodshed, I'll put in a good word for you."

The man spit on Craig's boots. But the other five couldn't start talking fast enough. Craig listened, took notes, and then let the medical people tend to the gang members as he rounded up the team that was to go into Columbia for the mop up. One of the men was too injured to go, and Craig picked a man to replace him from the many that stepped forward when Craig asked for volunteers.

Craig picked up the MM-1 and reloaded it, dropping the empty cases into a bag he had for that purpose. They would be reloaded. With the others strung out behind him, Craig guided Clyde north.

The MM-1 25mm grenades and Barrett .50 BMG Raufoss rounds took care of the men manning the nearest roadblock from a distance. Craig's team went all around the city, traveling quickly, taking out each of the roadblocks. The last two were abandoned and Craig decided not to use his ordinance up.

As soon as they rode into the city, people began to tell them who in the gang was left and where they were likely to be. Craig didn't need the information from the prisoners. Residents of the city had captured a few and Craig left them guarded by one man and led the way to the building where the majority of the rest of the gang was holed up.

While the 25mm grenades weren't the most powerful weapon in the world, they were enough to drive most of the gang members out of the smoking, dust filled building after Craig had put a few of the grenades into it. Most of the gang. There were still some hold outs. Again Craig decided to hold onto as much of the MM-1 ammunition as he could for possible future needs.

With the Barrett gunners ready to shoot anything that wasn't wearing a Rogue River hat, Craig went into the building alone, the Calico in hand. There were several shots, from a variety of weapons, over several minutes, but the men had been instructed to wait for Craig to come out or for twenty minutes before they brought the building down with black powder bombs. None but the men on the wrong end of the Calico heard Craig's return fire from the suppressed Calico.

Only eleven minutes had passed, by one team member's watch, when Craig stepped out of the building, sooty and dusty, but alive and uninjured. He was replacing the Calico's magazine with one from the pocket of the Drover's coat.

"We're good to go," Craig said, walking up to a small group of people that looked important. At least, to Craig, they looked self important. It didn't matter. They would do. "It's up to you to take care of the trash. In the future either take care of problems like this on your own, or call us to take care of it before it gets out of hand the way this gang did."

"What's your name, Cowboy?" asked one of the group.

"Doesn't matter," he replied. "I've got a wife and a home to go to, so good-bye." Craig rode away, stopping only long enough to see that the prisoners were transferred to the city officials, including the ones that still lived from the ambush site that had been brought into the city.

It was growing dark when the team rode into the camp in the Mark Twain National Forest. They rested up two days, nursing what wounds they had, and then went back to the retreat, the victory bittersweet, due to the loss of the two men. Such things were the reason Craig preferred to work alone.

Craig winced when the team rode into the compound of the Retreat. There were two families standing together, weeping, off to one side, waiting for their dead. The rest of the compound was in victory mode, with much whooping and hollering. Craig didn't feel like doing much of either.

A quiet Sally took him into her arms for an embrace and then helped unload the horses, put away his gear, and tend to his horses. She sat quietly and listened while Craig told the tale of what had happened to Quentin and his advisors, quickly and concisely. He ended with, "I think we are out of the woods for a while, as it pertains to raids and attacks. We will still need to keep a well armed and well trained security force, but I think the future is a good one."

Craig and Sally left the meeting room in the community building hand in hand, through a crowd outside that were whispering quietly to one another about a rumor. A rumor about a Cowboy that had been riding around the middle of America, getting people started on a new path. Some wondered, if maybe, just maybe, it might be their own Cowboy.

End *****

Copyright 2007
Jerry D Young