

The Mechanic

“How much?” asked the customer.

“All total,” said Sterling Walker, owner of Sterling Automotive, “nine hundred eighty-seven fifty.”

The customer winced. But after a moment’s hesitation said, “Okay. Do it. But it better not be more than that.” It was more a hopeful statement than a threat.

“I’m sure it won’t be, Sir. This is the maximum.”

“Okay. How long?”

“This is Tuesday... Thursday afternoon at closing. Six PM.”

“I’ll be here.”

Sterling walked into the office of the five bay automotive shop and sighed. It was good to get the business, the way the economy was, but it sure put a damper on the type of trade he’d managed to build up over the years.

Although, first and foremost, an excellent general mechanic, Sterling had started modifying and customizing vehicles early in his career and it was now a passion. But the economy wasn’t supporting such things. The sale of new vehicles was way down, the sale of used cars up, and the repair of older model vehicles was now the bulk of Sterling’s business. He hadn’t had a custom vehicle in his shop in over three months, and no new projects for almost a year.

He’d raised his prices six months previously, to try to keep up with increasing costs. He knew they were rising, even if the federal government downplayed the inflation. He’d already made arrangements for new signs showing the new rates he was going to on January First. Thirty percent more than the current prices.

About half the increase would go to keeping the shop open, such as higher and higher utility bills and fuel costs for the two wreckers. The other half went to wages for his employees. He had excellent mechanics. All seven had been with him for years. His small office staff of three people also knew the ins and outs of a well run garage and kept all the paperwork straight.

He’d been advised to let the office staff go, and have the mechanics do the work, but when Sterling contemplated it he found himself going pale and breaking out into a cold sweat. No. The office staff would stay for as long as he could keep the doors open.

Shaking off melancholy, Sterling went to check on the mechanics working on a 1981 Ford pickup that had literally been pulled from a farmer’s personal junkyard to be repaired and

put back into use so the owner could sell his Ford Expedition and get out from under the payments and fuel costs.

With a thousand dollars of work, the moderately damaged vehicle, though it would look like a piece of junk, would be useable. Sterling had suggested a few improvements, and a new paint job, but the owner declined. He simply wanted something that would run, capable of hauling a load, with reasonable gas mileage. What it looked like was immaterial to him.

Things were coming along nicely, so Sterling went to the office to get a cup of coffee. He'd sold the popcorn maker, stopped the daily donut delivery, and the coffee service. But Sterling bought a coffee maker and personal coffee cups for everyone. He kept the office supplied with the makings. It wouldn't do not to have coffee.

With coffee cup in hand, Sterling stood and watched the traffic on the street, and the first flakes of snow of the winter.

"Boss?" asked Jennie, his office manager. "You okay? You look kinda of... funny. Not ha ha funny, but like something is wrong."

Sterling turned around and found himself admiring Jennie Craft's amazing beauty. He still couldn't believe she'd agreed to work for him in those early days when he was first starting out. Jennie could have been a model, if she'd wanted. She preferred to do the work she'd trained for. Running an office, even if it was a one person office at first.

She, like Sterling, was still single, though both had just turned forty that fall. She was still something to look at. And knew the operation inside and out.

"Just a bit worried about the future, Jennie," Sterling said.

"Ah. Going to be a rough one, unless I miss my guess. But it's been good for business. I know you prefer the custom work, but we're raking in the money right now doing the repairs to older model vehicles."

"I know. But it's not worth as much as it used to be. My grocery bill, such as it is, has doubled. And you know what the fuel prices are. And the banks. I'm more than a little worried about my retirement."

"I know someone you might want to talk to," Jennie said, moving from behind her desk to get a cup of coffee.

"Yeah? Who?"

Jennie cut her eyes over to Jessica and Sally, the other two office staff. "After work," she replied, taking the cup of coffee back to her desk.

One of the mechanics stepped into the office and said, "Need you, Boss."

As he walked out of the office, grabbing his safety glasses and bump cap, he wondered for a moment about Jennie's cryptic words.

He'd entirely forgotten them at closing time. Though the mechanics often worked late, it was Sterling's policy, that Jennie agreed with, that the office staff work a standard day shift. No working late unless it was super serious.

Jennie was waiting for him when he came into the office to close it up twenty minutes after regular closing time.

"Hey! What are you still doing here?"

"You forgot we had a meeting after hours, didn't you?" Jennie asked, smiling.

"Oh. Uh... Well... I guess so. I didn't really think of it as a meeting. You were going to give me some guy's name."

"Yes. But you and I need to talk about it first. I thought we could stop and get something to eat. I don't feel like cooking tonight."

"Oh. Okay. Where you want to go?"

Though he'd kept a definite hands off policy with Jennie, they had shared a meal or two over the years and he was comfortable with the contact outside the office. And she seemed to be, too. Besides, she had a boyfriend.

"Let's stop in the Peppermill and check out the new BBQ restaurant."

"They have a new restaurant?"

"Several."

"Okay. Give me a minute to change."

Though most of the mechanics just wore their work clothes to and from work, Sterling always wore casual clothing to and from his apartment, changing into the work coveralls that were delivered every week.

He came out of the bathroom in the shop area a few minutes later in blue jeans and a polo shirt. "Okay. I'm ready."

It was something of an incongruous sight, Jennie on the little Neo Sunshine Scooter, being followed down South Virginia Street in Reno by Sterling's rather imposing custom six-wheel-drive, six-wheel-steer, extended-crew-cab pickup truck with an extended custom toolbox bed. Even with a subdued tan/gray camouflage paint job it stood out on the city street.

The truck was an ongoing project for Sterling. He'd started on the concept right out of tech school, and made the various modifications as he had the time and money, doing all the work himself, with the occasional help of his lead mechanic, Joe Dobson.

At least the snow had stopped, for Jennie didn't like driving the scooter when there was snow on the ground. She pulled into the valet parking area while Sterling found an out of the way spot since he took up two parking spots. Jennie was waiting for Sterling at the little coffee café near the hotel lobby of the casino.

Since she seemed to know where they were going, Sterling followed along silently. There was no waiting and the two were seated immediately. After perusing the menu and giving their orders, Sterling looked at Jennie earnestly and asked. "Okay. What's this about?"

"You know what a prepper is?" Jennie asked.

"Not really. Someone that prepares?" he asked with a grin.

Jennie grinned back. "By book definition, yes. By the definition I and some of my acquaintances use, it goes further than that. Specifically to preparing for the worst that nature or other people might throw at us."

"You're a survivalist!" Sterling voiced it forcefully, but in a low voice.

"Not what the media calls survivalists," Jennie reassured Sterling. "By the original definition of the word, yes. Now, those of us with no designs on changing the government by force, but who prepare for one, caused by who knows what, call ourselves preppers."

"Okay. I got it. The media does really paint survivalists with a very dark brush."

"Exactly. Now, I'm telling you this in confidence and really don't want you to talk about it to anyone, besides me."

"I thought you wanted me to meet some one."

"I do, Sterling. But you need to understand that the confidentiality that I'm asking for is ten times more important for this guy."

"He is a prepper, not a survivalist, right?"

"That is right. But he's very low key about it, as we all are. He just takes it a step further than most of the rest of us."

Sterling nodded.

"Now," Jennie said, after their ribs were brought to the table, "how do you feel about the way things are in the world? The national economy, the world economy, global warming and other weather, the nuclear club, so on and so forth?"

“Well, you know I’m worried about the economy. Although I am getting some advantages because of it, I hate what it does to a lot of people. I’m seeing more and more people, even some families, out panhandling for food money.”

“And global warming?” Jennie asked.

“Well... that... I’m not sure. Seems like it could be like the Weather Channel special reports are saying... but I’ve seen some other stuff that says it’s just a natural phenomenon... that humans aren’t really causing it. Even that there might be an ice age instead. Or even because of global warming. I don’t quite understand it.”

“But you do see the dangers. Either way?”

Sterling nodded. “Yeah. Like now, the food prices would jump. But much more.”

“What are your thoughts on the nuclear club? All the countries that have nuclear weapons now, are suspected of having them, or are believed to be trying to acquire them.”

“It’s a mess. I don’t trust the former Republics control of their weapons. And some of the crazies in foreign governments... I can see a couple of them having a bad day and pushing the button.”

“Sounds like you have given at least some thought about some of this.”

“Well, it’s kind of hard not too, the way the news is going.”

“True. And the other stuff? Riots over food shortages, power outages because of sabotage or overloaded circuits, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, a coup...”

“Hold it. I think I see what you’re getting at. All the bad things that could happen... I don’t dwell on them, because there is nothing I can do about preventing them.”

“I understand that, Sterling. But what about surviving any one or combination of them? You do want to continue living if global warming is a fact, or if it’s just the opposite and we have a new ice age?”

“Well sure, I would like to live! But... Aren’t there things that aren’t survivable?”

“Several,” Jennie replied. “But there are dozens that are. Like your worry about your retirement. You can do things about that besides watch your IRA just slip away due to economic troubles.”

“How?” Sterling asked.

“Well, I didn’t want to get into specifics. My friend can help you more than I can. But for that particular problem, you can include gold in your IRA. Won’t increase in value much, in my

opinion, but I think it will hold value. I think gold coins will buy about the same amounts of things in several years as they do now, even if the price jumps up or down.

“If your IRA investments don’t all increase, those dollars will be worth less and less, in my opinion. What you have now, even with some increases from the holdings, probably won’t buy as much in the future as they do now. That’s a net loss. A gain would be great, but staying even is much better than a loss. And there are even better ways to protect yourself from all kinds of the problems we’ve just touched on.”

“Okay. Say I’m interested. What do I do?”

“I’ll give you some websites to check out on the internet. And the e-mail address of the guy I want you to meet. He lives outside of Reno.”

“Okay. But let me take this slowly. You know how I am. Limited time and attention span.” Sterling grinned.

“Oh, you! Limited time, but your attention span is more than enough to handle these scenarios.”

That was the end of the Preppers talk. The conversation turned to the business, and how to handle the increase.

The next morning, shortly after Jennie and the others arrived and officially opened up the shop, Sterling crawled out from under his truck in the last bay and went to the office to get a cup of coffee. Jennie told him, “I e-mailed you those links.”

“Links? Oh. Yeah. Okay. I’ll check them out here shortly.”

Jennie knew better than to press him on the issue. When he said he’d do something, he would. If he gave you a time frame, he met it. If he didn’t... well... then you waited until he wanted to do it. She set about the regular day’s work and put Preps out of her mind.

Sterling got tied up helping on a tough body repair and skipped lunch. He didn’t take a break until an hour before quitting time. That’s when he pulled up his e-mail and clicked on the links Jennie had sent him.

The first thing that caught his eye were some sections on the forums that referred to Bug Out Vehicles. BOV’s. He spent some time reading through the replies and looking at the pictures some of the owners had posted.

“Got that part of the operation covered,” Sterling said to himself. Though not intended for bugging out, his custom truck would work admirably well for the task. Then, as he read more, he became somewhat concerned. Some of the posters were touching on subjects that had crossed Sterling’s mind a time or two, but which he’d basically ignored, for lack of a way to deal with them.

Jessica and Sally were both going out the front door when Sterling left his office, and Joe Dobson was locking up the shop. "That's some interesting stuff you put me on to," Sterling told Jennie. "A lot to think about." After a short hesitation, Sterling asked her, "Is it okay to ask... do you do a bunch of that stuff? Storing water and food, the gold and silver? A bug out vehicle?"

"Usually, it's not okay to ask a person about their preps, unless they've volunteered some information. But I trust you not to spread any of this around. I do prep. I've got food and water. Gold and silver. Guns and ammo. My old Subaru is my bug out vehicle, for as far as it will go on a tank, and then on foot."

"You have a gun?"

Jennie nodded. She opened her purse and showed Sterling the compact handgun. He had no idea what he was looking at. He did know it was a semiauto pistol, as opposed to a revolver, but that was all. Sterling wasn't a gun person. Not anti-gun. He just had never had an interest in them. His rather consuming passion was automobiles.

"Is that legal?" Sterling asked, lifting his eyes to Jennie.

"Of course. I have a concealed carry permit."

"Oh. Okay. You really do believe in all that stuff."

Jennie nodded, fearing she'd scared him off by showing him the Colt Commander .38 Super her father had given her when she was thirteen.

"I saw some posts recommend a rifle and shotgun, too," Sterling added.

Jennie nodded. "Yes. I have three rifles, two shotguns, and three other handguns. You know I always take my vacation the same time every year? That's to go deer hunting. I hunt elk when I can get a tag."

"Wow!" Sterling replied. "You clean it and use the meat and all?"

"My lunch today was a sliced elk roast sandwich."

"Wow!" Sterling said again. "Hey! You have a garden, too! I remember you mentioning that a few times. You can feed yourself without a grocery store. That's pretty amazing."

"Not so much. Almost anyone can do it, even if they have limited space."

"I don't know. I've never been very good with plants. I think I might be better off buying a long food supply and then buying from people like you that can grow food."

"So you're thinking about starting some type of prep program?"

“Yeah. After some of the stuff I read... Yeah. Thanks for bringing it up. Now... About this guy you want me to meet...”

“Triple Seven is his forum name. He writes PAW stories...”

“That’s Post Apocalyptic World? I think I’ve seen some of his posts”

Jennie nodded and continued. “He occasionally will post comments on other threads, but seldom starts a thread himself. And he doesn’t post very much about what he does to prep. I’m not sure what preps he does have, but he’s helped me out quite a bit with advice on one thing or another. We got together at the Peppermill a couple of times to talk face to face about some things I didn’t want to even discuss by e-mail.”

“You think he’d meet with me?” Sterling asked.

“I think so, if I asked him to. And was there.”

“Okay. Set it up if you will. It should be interesting if nothing else.”

“I’ll let you know when we can get together.” Jennie gathered her things and left the office for Sterling to finish locking up. The weather was threatening and Jennie didn’t like to ride the Neos Scooter in bad weather. That’s what she had the Subaru for.

Sterling had a lot of things running through his mind as he locked up the office. He waved at Joe as Joe walked over to his car and headed home.

When Sterling got home, he turned on the computer and did some more looking around in the forum sites Jennie had e-mailed him. He looked for posts by Triple Seven. Mostly his stories, but there were quite a few other posts, too.

The guy was a nut for lists. Sterling read through the list of things Triple Seven considered possible in the future. It was a very long list. Sterling couldn’t see some of them happening He laughed at the last line. “Zombies/vampires/werewolves/other supernatural dangers (just kidding!)” At least the guy had a little sense of humor. Sterling had started to wonder.

Sterling looked at some of the comments for the stories. Most were positive, with a lot of joking complaints about the stories keeping people from getting enough sleep because they read late into the night. But there was the occasional one that blasted him for various things. “Definitely not everyone is too enamored of this guy,” Sterling muttered.

He started one of the stories, intending to just scan through it, since it was a long one. But the first few lines caught his attention. It was one in the morning when he finally turned off the computer, after realizing how late it was and that he’d skipped supper. He muttered a few words about Triple Seven, went to the kitchen to get a glass of milk and some crackers, and then showered and went to bed.

Up at his usual time, Sterling ate breakfast and left a little early to get to the shop. He opened the front office and went into his private office. He put in a few minutes reading the story he'd started the night before, but made himself stop when Jennie came in. It was time to go to work.

Jennie didn't mention anything for several days about meeting Triple Seven. Sterling kept reading his stories. Some he liked, some not as much. But he found most had some small thing or two that he filed away in his head for future contemplation.

Then, on Friday, just before closing, Jennie knocked on his open office door and said, "Triple Seven is going to be at the Peppermill in a little while. I told him we'd meet him there and have dinner."

"Okay. I'll be ready." Sterling took a few more minutes to finish what he was doing. Namely, checking his bank accounts. With a very good idea of how much money he had, and would likely to get over the next several months, Sterling changed clothes and followed Jennie to the Peppermill again. She had switched to her Subaru for the winter.

Sterling wouldn't have given the man a second glance, if Jennie hadn't walked up to him and shook his hand. The guy didn't look like a survivalist. Sterling corrected himself. "Prepper." He looked... well... ordinary. Blue jeans and a blue shirt. But then the man stood up, with the help of a walking stick.

"Sterling, this is Nate. Nate, Sterling."

The two men shook hands, each sizing the other up.

"I'm in the mood for seafood," Nate said. "Oceania restaurant okay with you two?" He picked up a wide brimmed hat that was on the chair next to the one he had been using and put it on.

Jennie looked over at Sterling and he nodded. The three made their way through the bustling casino, to the restaurant. It wasn't too crowded and they were seated immediately, choosing a booth rather than the counter for more privacy.

Little was said initially as they checked the menu and placed their orders. But then Nate looked at Sterling again and said, "Jennie tells me you are considering preparing for the future."

Sterling nodded. "I've been reading on the internet since Jennie brought the possibility to my attention. I like your stories, by the way."

"Thank you," Nate said simply. "Do you know what you want to prepare for? Anything in particular?"

"Well, in one of your posts, one with the list of things, you indicated you more prepped for needs than for specific events. That sounds like a good way to approach it."

“It is the way I approach things. There are specifics, for specific possibilities, such as a fallout or blast shelter for a nuclear incident. But mostly it is basics.”

Sterling nodded, and Nate continued. “Breathable air, drinkable water, safe shelter, nutritious food. Those are the key elements.”

“What about protection? From... those that might want what you have?”

“It’s right up there, but not at the top. Unless of course, the situation rules otherwise. I tend to go with priorities. Have to have air every few seconds, water every few hours, shelter from the elements relatively quickly if they are detrimental, and food every few days. A person might go for months or even years without the need for the protection arms gives one.”

Sterling nodded. “I think I understand. First things first.”

“Yes. That includes maintaining a reasonable, productive and enjoyable lifestyle. Some might want to build a bunker and crawl into it, locking the entrance behind them, but I want more from life.”

“So do I,” Sterling agreed. “I like what I’m doing... or was doing, and hope to do again. Most of my work now is repair of older vehicles. Did Jennie tell you? I’m an auto mechanic and vehicle customizer.”

Nate smiled slightly. “I am aware. I’ve seen some of your work. That truck of yours stands out.”

“You’ve seen it?” Sterling asked.

“Of course. It’s right out there in your front parking lot of the shop. Hard to miss.”

“Oh.” Sterling winced slightly. “Is that good or bad?”

Nate chuckled. “That’s one of the things that are dependent on the situation. Once you’re off the city streets, that rig will come into its own. On the city streets, it’s an eye catcher.”

“I guess I kind of wanted something to advertise the business...”

“You’ve got something that does it well.”

“I notice in your stories that some of the characters have rather remarkable vehicles.”

“True. Any of which I’d like to have myself. But most of those remarkable vehicles are owned by people like yourself that did their own work, or by people with plenty of money. I, unfortunately, have neither the money to buy one of them, or the skills to make one.”

“What do you have? Uh... If I may ask? For emergencies?”

“Sure. No problem. Just an old, non-descript Chevy LUV four-wheel-drive pickup with the diesel engine. Nothing fancy. Gets me around and will carry what I need if I have to evacuate the area. Bed mounted fuel tank for extended range.”

Silence fell when their server came up to the table with their food order. After an initial taste, Sterling got back on the subject of his preps.

“Though the truck stands out, I’m going to consider it my bug-out vehicle. The thing is, I don’t know where I’d bug out to.”

“It will do admirably, I’m sure,” Nate said. “I might have a few thoughts on that, once I get to know you a bit better. I take it you have more questions, though.”

Sterling smiled. “Oh, yeah. I mean... What do I do now?”

“Before we start, please understand something. You can’t prepare for all things immediately. The faster you do, the better, in my opinion. But the fast road takes money. Lots of it. You need to balance what you can afford, with what you want.

“Now. The main things first. Air. Water. You have a place to live, I take it.”

“I live in an apartment. Third floor. Downtown.”

“Okay. Basic shelter is taken care of. That brings us to food. Air, water, food, in that order. You do your own painting at the shop, don’t you?”

Sterling nodded.

“Then you’re familiar with protective breathing apparatus. I consider Reno a possible target for a terrorist chemical or biological attack. I would recommend a set of PPE. Personal Protective Equipment. The good stuff is a bit expensive, but well worth the money over the cheaper items, in my opinion.

“A good respirator, light and heavy protective coveralls, rubber gloves, rubber boots, chemical suit tape. You have a beard. Unless you want to shave it off, you’ll need a PAPR. A powered air purifying respirator.

“It’s a battery powered blower with filters you wear on your belt, outside the suit, with an air line to the filter connection on the respirator. With the pressurized air, even if the respirator doesn’t seal completely on your beard, all leakage is outward. All available online from several places.”

“You have a specific model in mind?” Sterling asked.

Nate nodded. “MSA Millennium CBRN respirator with OptimAir 6A rechargeable PAPR. An extra charger or two, and several extra batteries, along with a couple boxes of filters.

I'm partial to Tychem protective coveralls and BATA brand boots. It's all available at Approved Gas Masks. They have a web site

"I suggest you visit their site and see what's available before you make up your mind. I would definitely stay away from the cheap imported surplus masks. Getting CBRN filters for them is now difficult."

"You mentioned nuclear incidents..." Sterling said, his voice trailing off.

"Reno, again, in my opinion, is a target for terrorist radiation bomb or conventional nuclear explosive device."

"Uh... What's the difference?"

"What I call a radiation bomb the media calls dirty bombs. They are conventional explosives combined with radiation emitting materials. The explosion distributes the radioactive particles in a relatively small area. A regular nuclear device... Well, I'm sure you've seen the pictures and read about the ground zero destruction and subsequent fallout if it is a ground burst. The fallout can travel for miles.

"What used to be known as a dirty bomb, back in the day, was a regular thermonuclear device with some really long lasting and nasty nuclear components, such as cobalt, that produced much longer lasting fallout with much higher radiation levels than just the 'plain' nuclear device. Don't hear about them much. Like biological weapons, they can turn around and bite the user in the rear by creating very large areas that will take generations to become useable again. They aren't talked about much, anymore. I think they are now called 'salted devices,' with the dirty bomb tag used for the radiation bomb."

"I never heard of the salted bombs before," Jennie said. They were the first words she'd spoken since placing her order.

"Just one more thing to worry about," Nate said. "Same basic preps, except plan for longer in the shelter, and a higher rate of cancers in the post attack years."

"But... We really can make reasonable preparations for nuclear war?"

Nate nodded and took a bite of his baked salmon. "Yes. For just nuclear fallout, a basic shelter with simple air pump will suffice. But I believe in covering as many bases as possible with every preparatory action. Might as well counter chemicals and biological compounds in the air system for a fallout or blast shelter as just the nuclear fallout.

"There are, like the respirators, CBRN filters available as a package to provide clean air to the shelter space. American Safe Rooms is my supplier of choice, though there are several others. Just search the internet.

"Now, back on track. Air is taken care of. Water is next. You obviously don't have a well and can't install one. That means storage, and a lot of it, backed up by purification methods.

Being downtown, you are close to the river. You should be able to collect water there and treat it at home. Katadyn and Berkey make good drip filters, and Katadyn and MSR make portable ones.

“Food. Can be as simple as double buying the foods you eat every day... At least the ones suitable for preparation with minimum cooking, don't require refrigeration, and store for long periods. There are MRE's. Get tired of them really quick, plus they are relatively expensive.

“Then you have the option of Freeze-Dried and dehydrated foods, specially packaged for long term storage. LTS. Lots of other foods that aren't freeze-dried or dehydrated that are packaged for LTS. Sugar. Salt. Pasta. Wheat, rice, and beans. All sorts of things. It all depends on foods you want to store and how much, versus price.”

“Air, water, and food. With regular shelter,” Sterling said. “Doesn't sound all that bad. Or even expensive.”

“The specialized shelter can really run it up, if you build or buy your own,” Nate said. “Depending on the available public shelter spaces can be really tricky. None of the official ones, and only a handful of the private ones, are going to allow firearms. In my opinion, your best bet is to make private arrangements with someone that has suitable shelter space.

“Now, there are various expedient shelters that can be built. One of your first purchases should be Cresson Kearny's “Nuclear War Survival Skills.” Best to get a paper version, though it is available as a .pdf file on the internet. Covers more than just shelter and ventilation, but is especially good there. Not to sound my own horn, I've described a few expedient shelters in my stories.

“You need mass and distance between you and fallout. It's basically pretty simple. The hardest part is getting the overhead protection. In a skyscraper you can stay on, say, the fifth to eighth floors, away from the windows, if there are at least five to eight stories above you. You will be relatively safe from the fallout until it degrades over time.

“You need to know when there is a radiation danger. Seeing fallout will tell you that there is radiation, but not how much. At the minimum, I'd suggest a RadDetect PRD-1250 keychain alarm. While it won't give you precise readings, you will know the general range of radiation. In addition to the keychain alarm, I'd suggest you get KI4U's ‘The Package’, plus a CDV-717 remote reading survey meter at some point in time.

“Now, I think Reno will be a target of not only a terrorist nuclear attack, but a target in a full scale nuclear exchange with out enemies. So, while having a shelter here is a good idea, a better one is the ability to evacuate to a spot well away from the city, where you can have a retreat. Even a simple one. Since you own your own business you have the freedom to close up shop and head for your retreat at the first sign of hostilities.”

“A retreat?”

“They don't have to be an elaborate affair,” Nate told Sterling, seeing his doubt. “In some of my stories they are simple concrete block structures with two rows of block, spaced three feet

apart, with dirt fill. A six-inch concrete roof covered with three feet of earth, and you're done. You can go on up from there, to a huge underground bunker or dome home."

Sterling nodded. "Okay." He pushed his plate back, having finished the meal. He looked around. There was no one close. "What about guns? Oh. And gold?"

"Ah! The real meat and potatoes of preps. You a shooter, Sterling?"

Sterling shook his head sadly. "No. Not at all."

"Have a real aversion to guns, or just no experience?"

"No experience. I don't object to guns."

"Learn to shoot. Try out a bunch of the weapons you read about on the net. Decide which fits you and fits your situation. Rifles, carbines, shotguns, pistols, and revolvers."

"I can help with that, Sterling," Jennie said, putting her hand on his arm.

"Once you know what you want, try to get the items in face-to-face deals. I'm not going to tell you to do it to avoid the required background check and paperwork. That's illegal. But there sure are a lot of people doing it."

"Understood," Sterling said. "And the gold?"

"I'm one of those that gold and silver will again become common currency after a truly major event. But probably not immediately. The way I approach it is to stockpile specific goods to trade for things I didn't think to store, for medical services, conventional medicines or herbals, things I might run short of, things that might be useful for future trades. Many reasons.

The more you stockpile for yourself, the less likely you will need to barter, except for services. They can't be stored, other than taking classes and learning everything yourself, which a laudable idea, simply isn't practical. The list is posted on various forums. After you have a handle on barter and trade items, include gold and silver coins.

"It's much cheaper to buy larger denominations, especially of silver, but I maintain that the gold and silver will be used for currency. Might as well get it in that form. Therefore, I recommend US Gold Eagles in one-tenth ounce, one-quarter ounce, one-half ounce, and one-ounce denominations. For silver I think it best to stick to pre-1965 US silver coins, namely dimes, quarters, and halves, plus US Silver Eagle one-ounce rounds.

There is certainly silver in the pre-1936 silver dollars, and if you happen to have a bunch of them, fine. I don't believe in paying the numismatic premium they fetch. And the silver ratio is different than the fractional coins, making commerce based on the silver content and not the face value of the coins a little more complicated."

"Where is the best place to buy?" Sterling asked.

“Anywhere you go where there is a coin shop. If they’ll take cash, and keep no record of your name, it’s a place to buy from occasionally. If you can find one that will trust you and/or you trust him or her, you can make arrangements for larger purchases the same manner. No records.”

“Because of the gold recall in 1933,” Sterling said.

“No,” Nate replied. Sterling looked surprised. “Because of the next time they have a precious metals recall.”

Sterling smiled. “Oh. That does make more sense.”

“There are many more subjects to cover, but all can wait until you get started on the ones we discussed just now. Keep reading the forums and suppliers’ websites for information. If you would like to speak again, you can contact me through one of the forums I’m on.”

“Okay. Thank you, Nate.” Sterling stood when Nate put some money on the table and then struggled to his feet. The two men shook hands again. Sterling and Jennie watched him make his way out of the restaurant. He seemed to be having difficulty maintaining his balance.

“He has a lot of trouble getting around, doesn’t he?” Sterling asked Jennie when he sat back down.

“Ever since I’ve known him,” Jennie replied. They were interrupted when the server brought the check. There was enough money from Nate to pay his portion and leave a good tip. Sterling settled the bill, against Jennie’s protests that she would pay for her own.

“I owe you this one. I got a ton of info. Of course I should let you pay. The information is going to cost me a bundle.”

They both laughed as Sterling put the money on the tray and stood up. The two made their way out of the casino and then went their separate ways.

Sterling was on the internet until late in the evening. When he finally went to bed, it took some time before he fell asleep. He was mulling over the things Nate had said, plus what he found on the internet.

Over the next few days, Sterling spent almost every free minute on the internet, reading and researching prep topics. He put in his first prep order. He bought the Personal Protective Equipment from Approved Gas Masks that Triple Seven had recommended. Though he wasn’t sure where he’d use the items, he also ordered and received KI4U’s ‘The Package’ plus the CDV-717 remote reading survey meter.

While looking at the American Safe Rooms site, to see what they had available for a retreat air filter system, he discovered their vehicle system and ordered one for his truck. He’d wait on the shelter filter until he knew more about what he was going to do.

The food and water situations weren't too difficult. He ate relatively simply. Basically he was a meat and potatoes man. He liked and ate vegetables and fruits, and had pasta regularly, but he wanted meat every day, almost every meal. He simply went to Sam's Club and bought the same kinds of things he ate every day, except large quantities.

For water, he bought several cases of bottled water plus four seven-gallon Reliance water containers. To purify water, if it came to that, Sterling chose the Crown Berkey with five full sets of the black filters, and a Katadyn Pocket filter with charcoal after filter. The amounts of food and water were enough to fill most of the empty space in the apartment.

The gold and silver was easy, too. There were several coin shops in Reno, along with plenty of pawn shops. He hit them one after the other, with a pocket full of cash, and then, over the next several months, did it again and again. It cleaned out one of his retirement accounts, but the more he watched the news, especially the financial news, the more he became sure he was doing the right thing.

Over those same months, with Jennie's expert tutelage, he went to a firing range and rented a dozen different kinds of firearms before he decided on what he wanted. He'd based his trials of the weapons on what he'd read on the internet. One thing he found out was that, unlike Triple Seven's stories, a large number of preppers went with the 5.56 x 45 round or the 7.62 x 39 round, both mid power cartridges. There were a lot more choices in weapons for them, but Sterling decided on the more powerful 7.62 x 51 round.

One of the few things that differed from Triple Seven's stores was that Sterling chose the Springfield Armory M1A rather than the HK-91/PTR-91 that Triple Seven seemed to favor. He picked up a SuperMatch with McMillan black polymer stock, from a dealer, but managed to find two 'loaded series' rifles from an individual.

A wood stocked blue steel barreled model and a stainless model with 'railed' polymer stock. The Super Match he considered his primary gun, and the stainless model with the tricked out stock he kept in a locked box in the truck. The wooden stocked model was essentially a spare.

Another of the different choices from Triple Seven's usual armaments for his characters was a Para-Ordinance P-14 .45ACP hi-cap pistol versus the Glock 21. Sterling liked the Colt 1911 platform, but wanted a high capacity magazine model that Springfield Armory didn't offer. He bought four of the P-14's and numerous magazines. Two for carry, one for the bedside table, and one in the truck. One from a dealer and three from private individuals.

His back-up pistol, hide-out pistol, and shotgun choices were about the same as Triple Seven's characters. A Walther PPK .380 ACP for back up, and a Beretta Model 21 .25 ACP for hideout, both from individual. The shotgun was a full house Remington 11-87P with ghost ring sights, magazine extension, combat bolt handle, large safety button, larger carrier release ramp, Poly Choke, and bayonet lug. Three of 11-87P's, all three private sales from a collector that he accessorized himself. Again a house gun, carry gun, and truck gun.

With the probability that he would be hunting mule deer and elk in the future, possibly even brown bear, Sterling invested in a Remington 798 bolt action rifle in .375 H&H Magnum with a Bushnell Elite 4200 2.5-10x40 scope. It would also do for anti-material sniping if it ever became necessary.

Another Remington Rifle, the model 799 in .22 Hornet would take care of small game. Everything in between the M1A could handle with appropriate ammunition.

Sterling bought maintenance and repair kits for all the weapons, plus a huge amount of ammunition, most of which he had to store at the shop for lack of room in the apartment.

After the several months long buying jag, Sterling emotionally stepped back and reviewed what he'd done. He still had a retirement annuity he was paying into, and he'd switched the IRA over to fifty-percent gold coins, with the rest in the late Harry Browne's Permanent Portfolio Fund.

He still had two Bank CD's. Both were nearing their renewal dates. Sterling thought long and hard about whether or not to put the money into preps the way he had the last several over the last several months. He was pretty well set up, prep wise, now, except for a good CBRN shelter.

He didn't have enough money to build something suitable in Reno. Land prices were just too high, and getting around the building codes would probably be a problem. A dozen independent events came together to help Sterling make a decision.

First: At one of their bi-monthly Peppermill meetings, Nate announced that his long estranged sister had died, and surprisingly, had left her modest legacy to him.

Second: Joe made an offer on the shop. He'd seen Sterling's interest seem to wane in the rather mundane, but currently money making, repair services that were now the main business of the shop.

Third: Jennie announced that she was marrying her long time boyfriend, Jocko Martinelli, a local entrepreneur with fingers in a dozen different business endeavors.

Fourth: Within just a few days of one another, Japan, Germany, Brazil, South Africa, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela completed successful tests of nuclear devices in the one hundred to two-hundred-fifty kilo ton range, or announced their entry into the nuclear club without detectable tests.

Fifth: China shot down three target drone satellites, at altitudes just out of the atmosphere to the altitude geo-synchronous satellites fly. The detonation at 22,300 miles up was a nuclear detonation, the first nuclear warhead used in space, opening the nuclear weaponization of space can of worms.

Sixth: Taiwan announced an upcoming vote on Independence to be held within three years.

Seventh: There were brutal and bloody coups by Communist led military troops in three of the former Soviet Republics. Russia immediately recognized them, setting the stage for civil war within Russia.

Eighth: Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Japan, China, Russia, the UK, Brazil, and Venezuela individually announced that they would begin colonization plans in Africa and South America. This was after France made their announcement of the proposal to colonize an unnamed country, in an effort to combat global warming in the region and ensure a reliable source of animal protein and grains in the future.

Ninth: Russia warned all nations bordering the Arctic Ocean that all resources in the region outside a twelve mile limit in the Arctic was theirs to exploit. An active military response was possible in the event that any nation failed to respect the claim. Special emphasis was given to possible retaliation against Canada and United States if they intervened in any way.

Tenth: Despite the SCOTUS decision overturning the New York City handgun ban, the newly elected Democratic President, with a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress, declared that extreme measures would be used to override the decision in all ways possible to bring about a weaponless US civilian population by the year 2017.

Eleventh: A massive tax plan was announced to alleviate the housing, banking, investment, and energy woes of the country, refinance Social Security, redress 'ethnic injustices', and fund programs to combat global warming.

Twelfth: The implementation of a North American Union was scheduled to begin in less than five years, with full implementation by 2017. The Amero was to be the single common currency, to be converted on a sliding scale to redistribute the wealth of the three nations more evenly and correct 'social injustices.'

Sterling made the decision he'd been thinking about at the next meeting with Triple Seven. It was the first meeting that included Jocko. Like Sterling, he was relatively new to preps, but Jennie had brought him around quickly and he'd taken to the concept much like Sterling. The discussion was on retreats. All four were worried more than ever about a shooting war, probably with nukes, civil unrest, and total economic chaos.

They were all pretty much in agreement about what would make a good retreat with post apocalypse living features. The thought suddenly popped into Sterling's head that if they pooled their money, they could buy or build a very good retreat. He broached the subject.

"You know, if we weren't all so independent minded, we could go in together and do a great retreat for all of us."

"I don't know, Sterling," Nate said. "You know I'm not much of one to be tied up with a group."

“Take it from me, cooperative operations among friends isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. I’ve lost friends due to business, and lost business due to friends,” Jocko added.

“Isn’t there a way to do it independently, but together?” Jennie asked.

She turned a bit red and said, “You know what I mean!” when the three men looked at her askance.

Nate looked thoughtful. “Though... separate lots, side by side...”

“If we each did a major element...” Jennie said.

“It might be doable, with good paperwork.” That was the businessman in Jocko speaking.

Sterling nodded. “But the structure would need to be on just one of the properties, so it could be large enough for all, at the least expense.”

“Nate’s place,” Jennie said. Jocko seconded the thought.

Sterling nodded again. “Yes. To get things ready fast, which I really think we should, it would need to be on Nate’s property. As we were able, the rest of us could build what we wanted independently on our own property.”

“You guys sure about this?” Nate asked. “What if something happens to me, or I change my mind?”

“Wouldn’t matter. My lawyer can write up the agreement that would take into account what we’ve just discussed and penalties for not following through.” Jocko looked very confident.

“I don’t know. I don’t really like paperwork like that,” Nate said. “I’d rather just trust the three of you.”

“I do trust you guys,” Jennie said. “I’d be willing to do it that way.”

“Gee, I don’t know...” Jocko was used to iron clad agreements in today’s business climate. They were needed.

“I’m in on that basis, too.” Sterling said. “The major elements... The land, the shelter, a well, a septic system, off-grid power, stocking the shelter...”

“The land would be individual purchases,” Nate said, getting more into the idea. “The shelter a cooperative effort on the center property. A septic system on the property on one side, the well on the property on the other side, the off-grid power on the center property, stocking the shelter would be an individual effort for each person’s section. As time passes and nothing happens, each does their own individual systems for water, power, and septic. We would all help on building each shelter, but not any regular housing.”

Jocko was nodding. “Yeah. Yeah. I think that would work on a handshake deal. I’m in if Jennie is.” He looked at his bride to be.

“I’m in.” She held out her hand and everyone shook everyone else’s hand.

“I’ll get on acquiring the land. What should I look for?”

Nate quickly said, “I’ll work on that with you, if that’s okay.”

“Oh. Well sure. You probably know more about what we need than any of the rest of us,” Jocko replied.

Nate eased slightly in his seat. “Now. Do we want to buy or build the shelter?”

“It’s a toss up for me,” Sterling said. “I’ve looked at some of the commercial ones. Some I like. Some are a rip off. And I’m not sure we could get one on fairly short notice.”

Jocko was smiling. “Hey. Don’t forget, I have an interest in a construction company. I can get it done to your specifications, with more features, cheaper than you can buy. The labor part of the construction could be mine and Jennie’s contribution to the shelter element, if the two of you buy the concrete and other materials.”

“Of just the construction of the shelter,” Nate said. “The mutual equipment would be a cooperative effort apart from that?”

“That’s fair,” Jocko said.

“I’ll start looking for well drillers and septic system installers... I’m assuming this will be in Winnemucca...” Sterling said.

“That’s where I was thinking,” Nate and Jennie said almost simultaneously.

“Oh. I thought Reno...” Jocko said. “But for a retreat... I’m kind of new to this. Winnemucca is obviously a much better choice.”

“Will that affect your ability to do the construction?” Nate asked.

Jocko winced, but said, “No. It won’t. I’m in for the long haul.”

With the decisions made, Sterling and the others went ahead at full speed. Sterling had a few tense minutes with Joe when they discussed the sale of the shop. Joe had been assuming, very hopefully, that Sterling would finance the purchase for him. But Sterling wanted the full value of the shop now, to invest in the retreat. Joe was a little miffed, but he managed to get the financing without too much trouble when Sterling opened his accounting books for the bank to take a look at.

It took a month, but Sterling had the full price he'd asked for in the bank and was now an unemployed prepper, with a standing offer of a job at the shop. But Sterling's plans were to actually move to Winnemucca and open up another small shop to have something to do. The others in the group would continue to live and work there in Reno and come to the retreat if necessary. He moved his preps from the apartment to a climate controlled storage unit in Reno for the duration of the construction phase of the retreat.

Jocko and Nate had almost immediate success in finding the kind of property they were wanting. It was remote, with an easily closed off access road, suitable for four-wheel-drive vehicles only. There was good southern exposure.

While the four worked on the shelter layout, Sterling contracted one of the local well drillers and a septic system specialist. With the location of the shelter pinned down, if not the final design, Sterling had the oversize septic system installed on Jennie and Jocko's property, which they paid for, and a deep well installed on his, which he paid for. The well system included a solar powered pump to keep a large water tank filled. The water tank would have a pressure pump pulling from it to provide pressurized water in the shelter.

Sterling made sure a line was run to the new orchards and berry patches that were already being planted on each property, based on the advice of a local nursery as to what fruits, nuts, and berries would grow in the area.

Though they didn't own the land north of them, Sterling and Triple Seven went in together and rented first a dozer to clear the sage brush from a large area, and then a tractor and seeder to plant pastureland for future use. It was very doubtful if the land owner would complain, if he even learned about the activity. It would make the land easier to sell.

Nate was already having the elements of the off-grid power system ordered, as some of them were getting hard to find. At his request, Sterling, and Jennie and Jocko, each bought a identical diesel powered generator to set up a triple station back up power system to the solar powered system. If the time ever came, each could move their generator to their own property.

A ten thousand gallon tank was installed on each property and plumbed to the power house on Triple Seven's property. Each would provide a share of the fuel, and have fuel for their own generators if they installed them.

A design for the underground shelter was finalized. There was a common section and three individual sections, one for each of the three families, with space for ten people each. Jocko got started on the construction. Nate checked on the construction every few days, and Sterling every day. He was living in a small travel trailer he'd moved to his property.

As the shelter was built in the big hole that had been excavated, Sterling cut a private deal with Jocko to have the construction crews build his workshop and garage, with full basement and second story living quarters, while they were on site. Sterling would pay full price for that work. He had his own septic system installed to handle the needs of the shop and the living quarters.

The roof of the building was made of photovoltaic panels, which provided double the power he needed for normal operations in the shop and the living quarters, since everything was triple insulated.

Since the property was ostensibly for a commercial operation, Sterling was able to get a ten-thousand gallon propane tank installed on his property. Jennie and Jocko, and Triple Seven were limited to one-thousand-one-hundred-gallon tanks. But for the type of structures being built, a thousand gallons would last for well over a year.

With the solar hot water preheat system and similar pre-heater for space heating, Sterling's ten-thousand gallons of propane, once he had the tank filled, would last for years.

The sense of urgency to complete the project was upon the group as the world situation continued to deteriorate, and new discussions over whether there was actually global warming or global cooling going on. Another year had passed with minimal sunspots, which many thought could lead to the cooling trend.

With those thoughts in mind, all three parties began having manure stockpiled, and compost heaps created, for future use on gardens. Sterling went a step further. He had a commercial greenhouse erected, equipped, and supplied, though he didn't plant anything.

Attached to the greenhouse on one end was a solar heated, naturally cooled, earth sheltered building. One section was a large chicken coop. Separated from it, in the rest of the building, were a large number of rabbit hutches built over worm beds, and a series of fish tanks.

The chicken coop opened onto a large completely fenced and roofed chicken yard, the fencing adequate against even the coyotes that roamed the area. Like the greenhouse, Sterling had the means available, but didn't start any production of rabbits, worms, chickens, or fish.

Nate made a similar deal with Jocko to have a large barn built, with protecting the animals from fallout radiation and extreme temperatures in mind. He fenced his property to contain his small ranch operation if he needed to move it from Reno.

To provide more space for the animals, and for general security, Jennie and Jocko, and Sterling also fenced their properties.

In between the regular auto mechanic duties that Sterling did at a shop in town, he built a small scale biodiesel production facility in one corner of his shop on the property. He was able to collect plenty of waste vegetable oil from restaurants in town to supply his needs, plus add to his ten-thousand gallon diesel tank.

With some money set aside specifically for it, when he'd first had the idea, Sterling began to buy older model vehicles that seemed on their last legs, and fixed them up at his shop. He had a triple axle trailer he used to get them to and from the property, as most, even when running, couldn't use the road.

After the first three he did, he was able to keep one up for sale as he worked on another. This went on for about four months. And then, what he, Triple Seven, Jennie and Jocko had all feared came to pass.

It is debatable as to what the initial trigger mechanism was. Some said the colonial aspirations in Africa caused South Africa to launch their nuclear arsenal. Others said the preemptive attack by Mainland China on Taiwan on the eve of their independence referendum. Yet more thought it was Russia and Germany that started it, over long held grievances each had against the other. A few even suggested that the US started it, perhaps by proxy in the Middle East.

Whatever started it, the War started, escalated rapidly, and ended slowly. In some areas, the fighting would drag on for generations, just as it had before the advent of nuclear weapons, with shield and sword and spear.

Sterling, and especially Jennie and Jocko, had expected more of a warning if there were a nuclear attack. They didn't get much. Perhaps twenty minutes before the missiles were launched, giving a good forty minutes before the warheads designated for the area began to land.

Jennie, Jocko, and Triple Seven were lucky. Reno wasn't hit in the initial attack. Jennie and Jocko bugged out immediately for Winnemucca at the first warning, Jennie in her Subaru, and Jocko in their Winnebago, that Sterling had switched engines in for them. It now had a non-electronic diesel. The Winnebago was pulling a Suburban, also with non-electronic diesel engine, which, in turn, had a tandem wheeled trailer attached.

Triple Seven, on the other hand, used the time to load his stock animals into the two old stock semi trailers he had, that were attached to an old Peterbuilt semi. None of the three items were in very good shape, but Nate only wanted the one trip out of them. The third trailer, a reefer was in similar shape. It held, pre-packed, the rest of the things he wanted to take to the retreat. All he added to it was to winch the Chevy LUV onto a rack on the rear of the reefer.

All three of his hired hands took off when the warning came. All three had agreed to help Nate with the evacuation, if ever needed, for space in his shelter with their families at the retreat.

"Apparently," Triple Seven muttered as he put the Peterbuilt into its lowest gear, "they had better offers. Or aren't as smart as I thought they were."

Though Triple Seven didn't know it, the first of two nuclear devices to hit Los Vegas detonated as he left his driveway. Within seconds one hit Fallon NAS. The mushroom cloud was losing formation when the single vehicle convoy passed the nearest point to Fallon from I-80. He could see it to the east of him. And then one behind him. Reno had been hit.

Triple Seven didn't look around much. The road was littered with stalled vehicles and people milling about because of them. He had to take to the median a couple of times. Fortunately not in the area of the Humboldt River Sink. He would have mired up for sure. But he kept the rig rolling as fast as he could, twice firing his Remington 11-87P shotgun through the glassless windshield of the Peterbuilt semi.

The four-hour trip took seven. It was getting dark when Nate eased the rig up the first part of the driveway. He was met by Sterling, who was armed to the teeth. Sterling opened the gate and let Nate through, locking the gate behind them.

Sterling was tempted to push on the last trailer, the rig was moving so slowly, but knew it was a borderline psychotic idea that he could do anything to move the truck and three trailers any faster.

But Nate was finally pulling into his piece of property. Jennie and Jocko came out to help. Jennie kept an eye out for anyone that might have been following Triple Seven, while he, Sterling, and Jocko got the stock unloaded and into the barn.

Sterling didn't like the look of Triple Seven. His face was drawn and pale, and he was leaning heavily on his walking stick by the time they were done. The stock were all somewhat upset by the long ride and went directly to the watering spouts in the barn.

"I'll get them some feed in a few minutes," Sterling said. "Let's get you down into the shelter. Anything in the third trailer you need?"

"No. Just the items in the cab of the truck and the sleeper. The LUV and the rest can wait until after the fallout level is down. Any yet, by the way? My keychain alarm hasn't sounded."

"Nothing yet," Sterling replied, not quite helping Nate, but staying close enough to him to support him if needed.

Nate grunted when he sat down in a chair at the communications desk in the common area of the shelter. It was where the remote reading radiation meter was located. It wasn't showing anything yet, and there had been no sign of fallout while they were outside.

"I'll go feed the animals now, and milk the milk cows," Sterling said. He hadn't been idle since the first alarm. The people he'd made deals with to get breeding stock for his hutches, coop, fish tank, and worm farm were beside themselves when he stopped and got out of his truck not long after the alarms sounded.

Sterling insisted they keep to their deals, and sweetened them with a bucket loaded with supplies that would be needed for each family during and after the attack. Sterling made sure none of them followed him back to the retreat. The HEMP devices set off with the first wave of missiles to hit the US had yet to detonate, and there were people driving around, with no clear destination in mind that Sterling could see. He wasn't about to give them one.

So, just as he'd done with his own animals, Sterling fed Triple Seven's small herds of milk cattle, beef cattle, and hogs, plus the pack of working dogs, dipping into the feed stocks Nate had been building up over the months. He milked the milk cows and put the milk in the chiller located in the barn.

Sterling took the time to unload the cab and sleeper of the semi for Triple Seven, depositing everything just inside the entrance of the shelter for expediency.

When he went back to the shelter with the last load from the Peterbuilt's sleeper, a rather coarse dust was falling. Sterling stepped up the pace until he got to the entrance of the shelter. There he stripped out of his clothes, took a shower in the decontamination room, and put on a pair light coveralls and sneakers. The contaminated clothes went through a hatch into a lead lined receiving bin for decontamination after the radiation had declined to a safe enough level to run them through the washer and dryer.

Back in the common room, Sterling was alarmed at Nate's appearance. A glance at Jennie and Jocko showed concern on their faces, too.

When Sterling went over to the communications desk and sat down in the second seat, he saw that Triple Seven had been taking notes. Sterling wasn't sure of what, since the radios were still disconnected from power and antennas, and in the faraday cage.

"Here is all I can think of to help you with my gear and supplies," Nate said, gently pushing the yellow notepad over to Sterling. "I'm not going to make it."

"Sure you will!" Sterling said, ignoring the yellow pad. He put his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Don't think so." Nate held up the empty nitroglycerin pill bottle with his right hand. "I've taken the last seven and it's not getting any better."

Sterling noticed that Nate's left arm hung straight down. Then Nate slipped down in the chair slightly, closed his eyes, sighed, and was gone.

Sterling looked over at Jennie and Jocko. Jocko's eyes were showing his shock and surprise. Jennie had her face buried in Jocko's shoulder. Slowly Sterling stood up. "I'll... I guess I should go get one of the... bags." His words brought a sob from Jennie.

Sterling left, but returned shortly with one of the ten body bags they'd put in common storage for just such an event. Jennie was nowhere in sight, but Jocko was there to help Sterling get Nate's body in the bag. And it was Sterling that went through Nate's pockets, before zipping up the bag. He put everything on the communications desk.

It was something of a struggle for the two men to carry the body to where it would lie until they could bury Nate, after the shelter stay. When the task was done, Jocko went to be with Jennie in their area of the shelter. Sterling went back to the common area and sat down where Nate had been.

He began to read the notes Nate had jotted down just before he died. It was both will and instruction sheet. He had no family and left everything to Sterling and Jennie. There wasn't as much as Sterling had assumed. Only five guns, with five-hundred to a thousand rounds of ammunition each, depending on caliber.

Ten ounces of gold, mostly in one-tenth ounce US Gold Eagles, bought when gold was only three-hundred-fifty dollars an ounce. Two-hundred dollars face value silver coins, split between pre-1965 US dimes and quarters. Like the gold, the silver had been purchased when prices were low, several years previously.

There was a year's supply for one of military MRE's, all seven years old or older; a full year's worth for one of Mountain House freeze-dried entrees, supplemented with Emergency Essentials freeze-dried and dehydrated foods for additional protein and variety; and a five year supply for one of LTS basics, such as wheat, rice, powdered milk, and so on. The food was all in the reefer.

A large array of both packaged goods and bulk packed goods took up more of the space in the reefer, according to Triple Seven's notes.

There was the miscellanea of an old-line prepper. A large paper library, and upwards of thirty CD's and DVD's with prep information on them, with an old laptop computer in a metal faraday case to read them. Various BOB's, field equipment, camping equipment, LBE, and the, for Triple Seven, ever present game cart still strapped in tight in the back of the LUV.

Sterling sighed and leaned back in the chair. He fell asleep a few minutes later. The faint clicking of the CDV-717 survey meter finally woke him. The radiation outside was going up. More than he expected. Perhaps Triple Seven had been right and there had been nukes used against ships and subs off the California, Oregon, and Washington coasts. If there had been, off the northern California and southern Oregon coasts, Winnemucca would get fallout from them.

Connecting and then clicking on an exterior mounted camera, wireless to prevent EMP effects as much as possible, Sterling took a look around. It was raining. A muddy rain. That lent credence to Triple Seven's theories. The massive amounts of water vapor created by ocean detonations of nukes, combined with the dry surface bursts, was making radioactive mud.

If it rained enough, after the radiation decreased, decontamination wouldn't be very hard. The properties were sloped and much of the fallout would wash down to the foot of the slope. With enough rain.

If there wasn't much rain, the resulting dried mud would be a real bear to get rid of. Only time would tell which would be the case.

Neither Jocko nor Jennie made an appearance that night. Sterling continued to doze. He would wake occasionally and record the level of outside radiation. By morning, when he went to his personal quarters to get some breakfast, and, more importantly, a cup of coffee, the radiation level had reached a peak and was going down. He would use Tired Old Man's Seven/Ten Rule spreadsheet to calculate probable shelter time when he went back to the common area.

When he did return, Jocko and Jennie were there, looking at Triple Seven's notes. Both looked like they had slept very little.

“He prepared so hard, for so long...” Jennie said, stepping over to Sterling to give him a hard hug.

“We talked about it once,” Sterling said, stepping back after the hug. “He kind of thought the actual event, if it was a major one, would get him. Anything that lasted longer than two or three months. He was on a lot of medications I didn’t know about, that he couldn’t live without.

“I honestly didn’t think he’d have that much trouble. He seemed so... tough isn’t the word...”

“Prepared,” Jennie said softly, tears in her eyes.

“Yes,” Sterling agreed. “He seemed so prepared. Just not for the really long haul. Knowing what he knew, I don’t know why he planned for as long as he did. I’m afraid I would have given up, were I in his condition the last few years.”

There was a long silence, which Jocko broke. “What do we do now?”

“Wait it out,” Sterling said. “I’ll check on and feed and water the animals every few hours. Milk the cows. I’ll have on PPE so I can decontaminate easily. Shouldn’t get much exposure in the buildings, just on the quick runs between them and the shelter.”

“Maybe we should all...”

“I don’t think so,” Sterling said, cutting Jennie off. “I’m the oldest, with the least to loose. You two may still want kids. I don’t think you should have any more exposure than absolutely necessary.”

“But...” Jennie said.

This time it was Jocko that cut her off. “Thanks, Sterling. Everything else that we can do, to even out the work load, you let us know.”

Sterling nodded. Jennie looked like she wanted to say more, but held her piece. Sterling thought that she and Jocko might have further conversations about it, but he didn’t care. He didn’t want them exposed to the radiation.

The thirty-seven days before the radiation was below 0.10 r went fairly quickly for the three. Jocko and Jennie both went outside to take a look around. Sterling had warned them about the dried mud. It hadn’t rained enough to wash the fallout down the hill. They would have to suit up and use brushes and water hoses to decontaminate the area.

Sterling’s place had fared much better. He’d turned on the roof and wall wash down sprinklers on the shop, greenhouse, and his small barn each time he’d checked on and fed and watered the animals and milked the milk cows. It had washed the fallout away from the buildings, at least. The rest of his property would have to be decontaminated. One of the things

on the property improvement list had been yard sprinklers. They would have made it easy. But they didn't get installed before the attack.

The remaining month they needed to stay in the shelter most of the time really wore on Jennie. Sterling decontaminated the area just outside the entrance to the shelter and she would go out occasionally, but only for the few minutes that Sterling suggested.

But finally, with the radiation level around most of the property under 0.05 r, Jocko and Jennie joined Sterling in putting on the PPE and buried Nate. The three then began the work of decontamination. There was plenty of water from the well, and the three used it. While Jocko and Sterling used brooms to break up the mud clots, Jennie used the one inch fire hose strung from the underground pump and tank house, connected to a fire pump located there, to wash the dust down the hill.

They could only do it in sections, both due to the hot temperatures of late summer compounded by the PPE coveralls, and the fact that the fire pump would empty the water tank in three hours of steady pumping. They had to stop and let the solar well pump refill the water tank.

Though they kept a close eye out, all around and up at the sky, they saw no one or signs of anyone during the thirty days it took to completely decontaminate the three properties and the pasture that Triple Seven and Sterling had planted.

The reefer was emptied, the LUV parked in Sterling's garage part of his workshop. The contents of the reefer were stored in Triple Seven's area of the shelter.

The three sat down one evening after the evening meal and talked about what they were going to do next.

"We need to explore a bit," Sterling immediately said. "See who's alive and who isn't. Find out if there is someone in charge or not. What the community resources look like. Decide if we're going to try to salvage as much as we can, or get by with what we have and can barter for or buy.

"In this entire time there's been nothing on the Amateur Bands about Federal or State authorities trying to take over, or even maintain control. A few cities, mostly smaller ones, the local government is working to make things better for survivors. And at least one case of a War Lord type take over."

"I don't know, guys," Jennie said quietly. "We safe here, with food and supplies for years..."

"Though certainly not right now, I'd like to go to Reno at some point and see what I... Jennie and I have left there."

Sterling nodded. "What about locally?"

“I think we should check it out. There could be opportunities in town we need to look at.” At Jennie’s rather shocked look, and Sterling flat look, Jocko continued hurriedly. “You know. To be able to help people better.”

“Yes,” Jennie said. “We have it good here. I don’t intend to give the farm away, but there are undoubtedly families with children that will need help making it through the first months of the aftermath.”

Sterling nodded. “Another thing. Do you want to try to bring in some manufactured housing or stay here in the shelter.”

“The shelter is fine for a time,” Jennie said. “But I’d really like to get something above ground.”

“I don’t know, honey,” Jocko said carefully. He was already on some thin ice and knew it. “It’s not so bad in here. Perhaps we should maintain the status quo as far as housing goes and pursue other aspects of surviving the aftermath of this war.”

Jennie frowned. “We should at least be on the look out for something suitable for us.”

“We’ll do that,” Sterling said. The last thing he wanted was to get in the middle of a family squabble. “What if Jocko and I do a little clandestine exploring tomorrow, while you keep a watch here, Jennie?”

Jennie didn’t particularly like the idea, but knew it was best to have someone on the property at all times, if it was possible. “Okay. I guess that’s the best immediate course of action.”

A mutual decision to use the Suburban was made the next morning, and the two men, heavily armed, took the trail down to the dirt road that led to Winnemucca. Jocko went slowly, at first, but the closer he got to the city, the faster he went.

“Might want to slow down... In case of a road block or something,” Sterling said, rather urgently.

“Yeah. Okay. Guess I’m just a bit anxious.”

There was no road block, per se, but the two men did see several people out and about with weapons. The people looked like they were more than ready to use them. The first group they came close to, Sterling had Jocko stop.

“Hello,” Sterling told the three men. All three held hunting rifles at the ready.

“If you’re from Reno, just keep going. We have all the refugees we can handle. Don’t even think about looting any of the stores. We have people all over, keeping watch.”

“We understand,” Sterling replied, weighing his words carefully. He didn’t want to give away too much information, but wanted to make dead sure he and the rest at the retreat would be considered members of the community and not outsiders. “We’re part of three families that just moved in north of town. Didn’t really have much chance to get acquainted after we moved before the war.”

“I know him,” said the third man of the team. He’d been standing back, keeping an eye on the surroundings. “You’re the one with the stretch pickup. Worked on Juan Ortega’s junker of a truck. Got him running again. That was good work. Good price, too.”

“Yeah. A 1967 Chevy.”

“That’s the one,” the man said. He stepped forward and shook Sterling’s hand. “Holt Cumberland. I don’t suppose you can get some of these dead cars running, can you? Anything under twenty years old just won’t run. Even some of the diesel farm equipment won’t.”

“I’ll take a look at anyone’s vehicle that wants me to. Chances are it was the EMP that got them. Without parts... May not have much luck.”

“This rig seems to be running mighty fine,” said the first man. It sounded almost like an accusation.

“Got an old diesel in it. Non-electronic. EMP didn’t seem to bother it,” Sterling explained.

“We might have to borrow it, to use as an ambulance, if we can’t get ours going.” This was from the second man.

Sterling could see Jocko tense up. He didn’t like the idea of the Suburban being ‘borrowed.’ Sterling didn’t either, but now wasn’t the time nor place to discuss it.

Quickly, to change the subject, Sterling asked, “Is there anyone selling or bartering food and other supplies?”

“Barely have enough for ourselves,” said the first man. “You aren’t going to find anyone willing to let you have any food. For any price. And we have people out keeping an eye on things so people don’t try looting the Wal-Mart, the pharmacies, and other key supply points in the city.”

“Don’t blame you there,” Sterling said. He could almost feel Jocko next to him swelling up with anger. “Since we do have a working vehicle, if you plan to do some salvage on the interstate, contact us. We’d be willing to help for a small share of what is found. We monitor CB channels 9 and 19 all the time. Call for... Triple Seven.”

Sterling hesitated again. But Jennie had asked him to pass on some information. He wasn’t sure why she hadn’t asked Jocko to do it, but he’d promised, so he would do it. “Uh... If there are any babies... or small children... We have milk for trade. I mean, if they really need

it... we're okay giving some to those that really don't have anything to trade. But mostly what we want is labor to help on our property."

All three men's eyes lit up. Holt said, "There are a couple of families that are pretty bad off. If you could help them out... Well, it would be appreciated."

"It's the civil thing to do," said the first man.

The second man agreed adamantly. "Anyone that wouldn't help a kid wouldn't be welcome here."

"Now see here..." Jocko was ready to explode, but Sterling cut him off.

"Get the details to us over the radio and we'll see what we can do. Let's go, Jocko."

"What the blankety blank are you trying to do? Give all our food away?" Jocko asked as soon as they were clear of the men. "You can bloody well take it out of your own supplies if you plan on giving it away."

"That's what I was planning," Sterling said quietly, more than a little disappointed in Jocko's post attack reactions.

Jocko started to head straight back to the retreat, but Sterling suggested they take a roundabout route, to check for someone following. With a frown on his face, Jocko did as suggested. When Sterling pointed out a point where they could get off the main road and head across country, at an angle away from the retreat direction, Jocko muttered something under his breath, but took the route.

Sterling turned around and watched out the back window of the Suburban. Sure enough, an old car came to a stop at the point Jocko had left the road.

"Thought so," Sterling said and turned back around.

"What?" Jocko asked.

"Someone was following us."

"If the people in town think they can..."

"Cool down, Jocko," Sterling said evenly. "You can't blame them for trying to find out where we are and what we have. It's up to us to maintain the status quo until some form of authority develops again."

"I've got the authority right here," Jocko said, touching the FN-FAL leaning against the seat between them.

“I’d rather not get into a shooting war with the whole city,” Sterling said dryly. “It is in our best interest to work with those in the city. We’ll need them as a market for our products and as a source of labor. I don’t think we can manage all the stock and the greenhouse and the gardens all on our own, with Nate gone.”

Jocko just grunted. He didn’t say another word as they traveled back to the retreat.

Jennie saw the troubled look on Sterling’s face, and the angry one on Jocko’s. She hurried after Jocko.

Sterling headed for the apartment over his shop and garage. He’d barely set down with a sandwich in his hand when the CB radio broke squelch. “Triple Seven. Calling Triple Seven.”

“Go ahead,” Sterling said, keying the microphone of the Cobra 148GTL CB radio. It was set on channel 9. “This is Triple Seven.”

“Yeah. Triple Seven, this is Holt. You mentioned that milk. I’d like to take you up on your offer on behalf of three families. I can guarantee some labor in return.”

“How much is needed?” Sterling asked.

A laugh came from the speaker. “Any amount up to a semi-trailer load.”

Sterling laughed, too. “Sorry. Don’t have those kinds of quantities. How about ten gallons of fresh milk?”

“Fresh? You have fresh? How...”

“Called a milk cow, buddy,” came another voice. “I’d be interested in some of that. What are you asking?”

“Labor in our gardens and help with the herd. It’s not big but I’m not experienced with the animals.”

Two or three more voices broke in, asking for milk. Finally, primarily through Holt’s actions, a meeting was set up at the big grocery store on the main drag through town the next day. The arrangement was for those that wanted milk to bring containers. Sterling would bring barter slips to record the transactions. He would use his copy of the slips to keep track of who had done their promised labor. It was one of the original of Triple Seven’s ideas he used often in his stories.

Sterling finished his sandwich, and then relaxed for a bit, trying to decide how to handle Jocko’s reactions that morning, and what he might say about the milk deals. Sterling fully expected to give away as much of the milk as he traded away.

He’d been keeping the milk in the chiller in the barn when he milked the three cows that were still producing milk. Three additional cows had been serviced just before the war, according

to Nate's notes, and would be dropping calves in a few months, thus increasing the amount of milk they would have.

Sterling rotated out the oldest milk each time he milked the cows and put the fresh in the chiller. The older milk went to the hogs' feed troughs. Finally, Sterling decided to go talk to Jennie.

He found her in the gathering room in the common area of the shelter. She was folding clothes. Jocko was not present. When she looked up at Sterling, he was sure she'd been crying.

"You okay, Jennie?" Sterling asked.

She nodded her head, but didn't say anything.

"Look. I offered the milk, like you asked me. Jocko didn't seem to think much of the idea. I've made an arrangement to trade some milk away tomorrow morning. I'd rather you came along with me than Jocko."

Jennie bit her lower lip and nodded again. "He said you were too open about things. I'm sorry, Sterling. I didn't tell him about asking you to share the milk with children in need."

"It's okay. I can deal with it. It's just... Jocko was really angry, it seemed to me."

"He was," Jennie replied, a pair of pants on her lap, her hands still. Her face was pale. "At you. For... I don't know, being calm during all this."

"I see... Well, I'll just have to deal with it. You think he'll let you come with me tomorrow?"

Some color came back into Jennie's face. "It's not his decision if I stay or go. I will be going with you."

Sterling nodded, and hearing Jocko walking toward the room, made his exit.

Sterling didn't see Jocko again until the next morning. He watched from the door to the shelter as Jennie helped Sterling load up several cans of milk and some boxes into the back of Sterling's pickup. Jocko made no move in return when both Jennie and Sterling waved goodbye as Sterling pulled away from the property.

There was only small talk between Jennie and Sterling until they arrived at the grocery store. There were twenty or more people there, most carrying some kind of container. Sterling's hand was on the M1A SM when he stopped the truck and the people gathered around.

But he relaxed, slightly, when Holt Cumberland pushed his way through the crowds, trying to guide people back to form a line as he approached the truck.

“Sorry about the mob scene,” Holt said as Sterling stepped out of the truck, the M1A SM in his hand. Sterling slung the rifle over his shoulder, but his eyes were drawn to several men and a couple of women standing well apart from the others. They were heavily armed, whereas, when Sterling took a close look, he determined that only a few of the almost mob had weapons on them.

“I’m going to trust you to tell me who is really having a hard way to go, and those that can do some simple work for the milk.” Sterling looked steadily at Holt.

“Gonna make me work for a share, huh?” Holt asked, but grinned.

“That’s right. Sing for your supper... in this case, milk. And eggs.”

“Eggs, too? Fresh?”

Sterling nodded.

“Old grouch McFarland has some layers, but his family is using everything they can produce.”

“I’ll hold a half dozen back for you, and a quart of milk for helping out.” Sterling said.

Holt nodded.

“Okay, people!” Holt said again, much louder this time, as he turned to face the crowd. “Line up. You. Marian Blake. You first.”

There were three children clinging to her skirt when Marian stepped forward, holding an empty gallon milk jug.

“Is it clean?” Jennie asked.

When Marian nodded, Jennie filled the jug with a dipper from one of the milk cans. “Wait,” Sterling said when Marian started to turn away, mumbling her thanks. He handed her six eggs when she handed off the milk to the oldest child.

“Oh, thank you! And... When I can... I’ll help with any work I can do.” Sterling nodded, but hurriedly turned to the next person.

“Hatch,” Holt said. “He can work. Milk. No eggs.”

The middle aged man glared at Holt, but took and signed the barter slip Sterling had on a clipboard. Sterling gave the man his copy and Jennie filled the two empty water bottles with milk.

And so it went. Sterling was beginning to sweat a bit as the group disappeared slowly, as the milk disappeared quickly. But of the group that first appeared, everyone got some, those most in need, by Holt's indications, got four or six eggs.

Expecting not everyone would have suitable containers, Sterling had brought along all his empty water bottles. He filled two of them with milk for Holt and started to hand him six eggs carefully stacked in a small cardboard box. But the heavily armed group that had hung back was approaching and Holt set the bottles and box down.

"Okay," said the man that Sterling recognized as the first man from the day before. "We let this go on. Admittedly there were some that deserved special consideration. We are not disputing that. But if you have enough milk to give it away, we expect to get our share."

"There is no 'your share.'" Sterling said coldly. Then, to Jennie, "Get in the truck and start it."

"Hold on there, lady," said another of the group as Jennie opened the driver's door of Sterling's custom pickup.

"I have two gallons left," Sterling continued, "eight quarts. It's an hour of labor per quart. Who wants a quart?"

"I said, we want our share. You have it, you have to share it. I'm not about to work like a slave for a quart of milk."

"Ease off, Jacob," Holt said, putting his hand on the first man's chest as he pushed toward the truck.

"Get your hands off me!" Jacob almost screamed, knocking Holt's hand away with his left hand as his right went for the pistol holstered on his hip.

"I wouldn't," Sterling said, his voice as cold as ice. He had the M1A SM pointed at Jacob. Jacob froze. When someone else in the group made a slow attempt to ease out a gun, Sterling told Jacob. "Anyone else tries and I shoot you first."

"All right! All right!" Jacob said, looking scared for the first time. "None of you touch a gun. We'll get this settled."

"We sure will." Sterling said. "Start the truck, Jennie."

This time Jennie was able to get into the truck without a problem and started the engine. "Climb up here, Holt," Sterling said then.

Holt looked unsure, but when Jacob said, "You side with him and you're a dead man," Holt stepped up onto the tailgate of the truck and unslung his own rifle. It was not quite aimed at the group.

“Now, I want one thing very clear,” Sterling said. “I don’t believe in messing around. We have supplies the city residents need. And we will be fair with them. But they aren’t there just for the taking. And just so you know I play hardball...”

Sterling kicked over the last milk can and the milk gushed out onto the tailgate and to the ground. Everyone gasped, including Holt and Jennie.

“You’re crazy man!” Jacob yelled. His hand was edging toward his gun again.

“Take this as an object lesson. Anyone that tries to take what is mine and my friends’, will either die, or go away empty handed, for I will destroy what I can not keep, just to spite you. Let’s go, Jennie. Nice and easy so I can keep my gun aimed on Jacob here.”

Sterling raised the M1A SuperMatch to his shoulder and held Jacob in his sights. He didn’t fire, even though Jacob drew his pistol. Only the fact that Jacob didn’t actually try to use it prevented Sterling from shooting him.

“My family...” Holt said when Jennie turned a corner and the left the group behind.

“Don’t worry,” Sterling said. “Like it or not, you and them are going with us. You’re not safe here anymore.”

Holt nodded and guided Jennie to a house on the far side of town. Five people came out when Jennie pulled up and stopped. Holt jumped out of the truck and ran to his family. He spoke to them hurriedly and then they all ran back inside the house.

Though not too worried about anyone trying to stop them, Sterling began to fret a bit when twenty minutes passed and no one came out of the house. But suddenly the family appeared again. All of them carrying suitcases or cardboard boxes.

Sterling stacked the items in the back of the truck as each was handed up to him and the bearer ran back inside for another load. Sterling was impressed a few minutes later and the larger than normal pickup truck bed was nearly full of the Cumberland family’s possessions. He noted that several of the boxes were Ball or Kerr home canning jar cases. From the weight of them, they were full.

Finally, the family gathered around the truck as Holt locked the house door and then joined them. “Back here with me, Holt,” Sterling said. “The rest can fit in the cab.”

Just another two minutes and Jennie was taking a roundabout way out of town. Though they saw a few people, none were from the group that had tried to take the last of the milk. “You think they’ll burn my place?” Hoyt asked Sterling as Jennie headed up the track to the retreat.

“I don’t know, Holt. I hope not. You can’t have brought everything you want from there in this load.”

“The important things. I’d like to move back in, if they don’t burn us out.”

“I wouldn’t count on that, Holt,” Sterling said. “You might want to consider us going back and getting the rest of your stuff.”

“But where will we live? We can’t sponge off you for long. No one has that much food.”

“You’ll be okay. We do have a limited amount of food stored, but we have gardens and a greenhouse, and stock. We can produce food.”

“Oh. The milk. And the eggs. You obviously have milk cows and chickens...”

“Beef on the hoof and pork, too. Rabbits and fish, along with the milk, chicken, and eggs.”

“Wow! I wasn’t aware a new farm had gone in.”

“We were... discrete.”

Holt’s eyes widened. “Survivalists!”

“Preppers,” Sterling replied. “We’re preppers. Never had a thought of trying to overthrow the government, or go up against them in any way. We’re hoping that those that were in government positions will try to continue the work that is possible, and have the next elections just as scheduled.”

“That’s only about three years away. You think the country can recover that quickly?”

“Lot of good Americans died, but a lot of good ones survived. I think it can be done, once it is started.”

They were at the gate to the final stretch of the track up to the retreat. Sterling hopped out of the back of the truck and opened the gate. Jennie drove through and waited on Sterling to relock the gate and get back in the bed of the truck.

Holt’s face fell slightly when Jennie pulled the truck up to Sterling’s shop building. “Don’t worry,” Sterling told him, seeing the look. “You won’t be living in the shop.”

Holt looked sheepish, and then surprised when Jennie got out of the truck with the rest of his family and led them to an incongruous looking small building. It was the main entrance to the shelter.

“Come on,” Sterling said. “I’ll show you around before we unload.”

Sterling found the family milling around slightly in the common room as Jocko and Jennie talked just out of earshot. Almost out of earshot. Sterling could easily make out that Jocko was very angry, and explaining the anger to Jennie.

“This way,” Sterling said, Holt and his family to his section of the shelter. “You’ll be staying here, with access to the common area of the shelter. It was built with ten people in mind, so I think you’ll have enough room. It’ll just take me a few minutes and a couple of trips to take the rest of my things up to my apartment over my shop.”

“We don’t want to kick you out,” Holt said hurriedly.

“You’re not. I’ve been living in the apartment for some time now. Just too lazy to move my stuff.

A very demanding “Sterling!” had his turning around to face Jocko. “We have to talk about this! You can not...”

“Outside, Jocko,” Sterling said, pushing past him.

Jocko glared at Holt and his family and Holt wondered if he’d just gone from the frying pan into the fire. He decided to look around a bit and kill some time before they moved things in.

“What’s your problem, Jocko?” Sterling asked when Jocko came out of the shelter behind him, followed by a distraught looking Jennie.

“You! Giving our food away! Bringing more mouths up here to feed! Are you nuts? We have to keep these goods here for our own use!”

“These goods?” Sterling asked quietly. “Our food? Don’t forget who invited you in and owns over half of what is here.”

“A third. Only a third is yours,” Jocko said angrily.

“Sorry, but no. I had a third, plus the improvements I made on my own property. When Nate died he left me very specific things, amounting to about half of what he brought up here. The other half went to Jennie.”

“I speak for Jennie!” Jocko said, his voice still loud, his clenched fists on his hips.

“No, Jocko, you don’t!” Jennie said, stepping forward and declaring herself. “It was my choice to give away that milk and those eggs. You might lay claim to one-half of our original one-third, but Nate was pretty clear in wanting what he left me and Sterling doing the most good for the most people. That included us using a major part of it, but so we could continue to help people. Ten percent of Triple Seven’s trade goods were earmarked for humanitarian aid. Just like ours.”

“Yours,” sneered Jocko. “I never agreed to that and never intended to just give anything away. I... We come first, and then we make a profit on everything else. You don’t like it, I’ll take my share and leave. I can make it on my own with what I’m entitled to. You won’t like it if I leave.”

“Don’t make threats, Jocko,” Sterling said coldly. Jocko was looking menacingly at Jennie.

He turned that look on Sterling. “Stay out of this! You’ve done enough to turn my wife against me!”

“I think you’re right,” Sterling said suddenly, surprising both Jocko and Jennie. “About leaving. Your trailer was never unloaded. Get your personal things out of the shelter and be on your way with the Winnebago, Suburban, and trailer.”

“You can’t make me do anything!” yelled Jocko. His right hand went to the holster on his hip, but he didn’t draw it, seeing Sterling ready to draw his own weapon.

“I wouldn’t,” Sterling said, barely loud enough for Jocko to hear. “Not unless you intend to kill me and are successful. I’ll empty all fifteen rounds in this P-14 into you before I die, if you try to draw that gun.”

“You aren’t good enough,” Jocko said, his face white now, rather than red.

“Try me, Jocko. Just try me.”

After several long moments of the two men staring at one another Sterling spoke again. “Get his pistol, Jennie.”

“You do and I’ll kill you,” Jocko screamed at Jennie, his rage back now. His hand quivered over the grips of his pistol. But he seemed to collapse in upon himself when he looked at Sterling again. Sterling had the P-14 out and aimed at him now. Again Jocko lost color in his face. He made no move to prevent Jennie from taking the Glock he carried from the holster.

“Jennie,” Sterling said now, “Go get the Holt family out of the way. I’ll take Jocko in so he can get what he wants to take with him.” When Jennie hesitated, Sterling cut a quick glance over at her. “Go ahead. It’ll be all right.”

When Jennie moved toward the shelter entrance, Jocko started cursing Sterling and Jennie using some words that Sterling didn’t know. It was a low monotone, but gave the impression of a rattlesnake coiling up to strike.

With everyone out of the shelter, Sterling got behind Jocko and ordered him in. Jocko hesitated, but not for long. One look at Sterling’s face after the diatribe about Jennie convinced him.

Carrying the two large suitcases, Jocko came out of the shelter with Sterling still behind him. Again Jocko was outraged when he saw that Jennie had trained up the motorhome, Suburban, and trailer. All that was left was for Jocko to get in and drive. There would be no chance to try to turn the tables on Sterling in the process of doing that.

“Inside,” Sterling said and followed Jocko into the open side door of the Winnebago, still holding the P-14 steady. Only when they reached the locked gate did Sterling back away from Jocko, though the gun was still pointed at him.

“You’ve got one chance to live, Jocko,” Sterling said, his hand on the doo knob of the motorhome door. “That’s to sit there until I open the gate and then you drive through. If you have a gun somewhere in here, and try to use it, I’ll kill you like I would a rattler.”

“You’ll get yours, in time, old chum,” Jocko said. He kept his hands on the steering wheel. “I’ll see to it personally. And Jennie, too.”

It took every part of his strength of will not to pull the trigger of the P-14 then. But Sterling held onto his cool, opened the door and stepped out. Holstering the pistol he ran to the gate and unlocked it, glancing at the Winnebago every couple of seconds. Jocko, realizing how close he’d just come to getting shot, sat where he was, his hands on the steering wheel.

When the gate was opened, Jocko floored the accelerator. Sterling easily jumped out of the way as the heavily loaded rig only slowly built up speed.

Sterling watched the rig, going much faster than it should be, considering the condition of the track, disappear at the first turn in the track down from the gate. He turned and walked back to the retreat.

An anxious Jennie was waiting at the yard fence and ran out to meet him. He opened his arms wrapped them around her when she got to him. “I’m so sorry!” she cried. Sterling just held her for a few seconds and then eased her away. Now was not the time to tell her of the torch he’d carried for her for all these years. Not under these circumstances.

Instead, he said, “Let’s go settle the Cumberlands in and try to reassure them that this isn’t the normal situation here on the Triple Seven Ranch.”

“Sterling,” Jennie asked, “Do you think Jocko will try to get revenge on you?”

He simply lied. “No. I don’t think so.”

It took a while to get the Cumberland family settled in after the double whammy of being run out of their own house in only minutes, and seeing Jocko run off the ranch at gunpoint. But settle in, they finally did, more than happy at the accommodations and the much brighter outlook on the food situation. They’d been stretching their supply of food as far as it would go, not knowing when they might ever find any more.

Two weeks passed before the CB sounded off again. The man said his name was Jim Plimpton.

Holt was there and nodded. “He’s a good guy. Wouldn’t go for any kind of ambush or anything.”

“What do you need, Jim?” Sterling asked, after keying the microphone of the CB.

“Any chance of some of that milk and eggs again? I’ll even work double what you usually charge. I have to admit, me and a couple others are in dire straits.”

“At the store, in the morning?” Sterling asked then.

“There’ll be six families for sure. At least, that’s all I’ll tell. On the radio like this, there’s no telling who’s listening.”

“Yep. I’m aware of it,” Sterling replied. “We’ll be there. With bells on. I expect some help from you if there is trouble.”

Jim didn’t respond to that and Holt looked at Sterling with a worried look on his own face.

“You really going into that ambush?”

“Nope.”

“But you said...”

“I know. And we’ll make the delivery. It just won’t be there.”

“Oh. You going to fill me in on the plan?” Holt asked.

“Yeah. Come on. Let’s go get some things ready.”

It worked like a charm. With Jennie and the rest of the Cumberlands locked down in the shelter, in case Jocko decided to come back while Sterling was gone, Sterling and Holt, Sterling in his big backup, and Holt in Nate’s little LUV, made the delivery. But not as had been agreed upon.

Sterling took the lead, and went directly to the store where he was to meet Jim and the other families. He could almost smell the ambush. He slowed when he turned into the parking lot but didn’t stop. When several more people stepped out from hiding places, all armed, Sterling spun the wheel and took off.

The thick plates of high tensile steel stopped the bullets that were aimed at the back of the cab and the tailgate. Lengths of high tensile chain hung down in a triple row around the wheel wells to protect the tires, another idea he’d learned from Nate’s stories.

Not surprised to see three vehicles suddenly appear in his side mirrors, Sterling smiled and became the fox in a life and death fox hunt on wheels.

After the hidden vehicles were started up and the ambush party took off after Sterling, Holt drove the LUV onto the parking lot to the group milling around, all the individuals wondering what was going on.

“Any more around?” Holt asked, his rifle in his hands.

Jim shook his head. “They all took off in the cars.”

“Well, lets hurry up and get this done.”

Thirty minutes later Holt keyed the CB in the LUV and said, “Done, Done, and Done.”

“Roger that,” Sterling radioed back and took to the side ditch, and then up the embankment and over, leaving the cars to come to sliding stops, unable to follow the highly capable truck and unable to take another shot, since the truck was now behind a ridge.

Jacob slapped his feed company cap on his leg and glared at Jocko. “You said it would be easy. That he didn’t have the brains of a gopher. Well, he sure played us for suckers. Blew through and no one got milk. He won’t make that mistake again.”

“Shut up, Jacob. If we have to, we’ll take the place.”

“Uh... Jacob?” asked one of the other men. “Uh... another guy... guess it was Holt... he made the milk delivery at the store while we was chasing that truck. They had rabbit and chicken, too. I could sure go for rabbit stew.”

They all turned and glared at Jocko. “I’ll get him. He’ll pay. So will Holt. And that woman.”

“Leave the woman out of this,” Jacob said. “We don’t hold with hurting no women.”

Jocko was about to tell the man off, but the looks on the other men’s faces decided him not to. He’d take care of Jennie, but alone.

Twice in the next two weeks, Jocko attempted to get close enough to the retreat to try and take out Sterling or Holt, or both. Jennie he would do close up and personal. But he and Triple Seven had done an excellent job in picking the land for the retreat. There just wasn’t a good way to approach without being seen, even at night. There always seemed to be someone on watch, even at night.

Both times he was run off by single rifle shots that impacted very close to him. Jocko couldn’t tell if they were warning shots or just missed shots.

He was livid, when in another two weeks, he heard Sterling make another delivery promise to those in Winnemucca. Same place. When Jocko talked it over with Jacob, Jacob was a bit leery of trying to intercept the shipment again.

“Come on, Jacob! What’s the matter with you? What’s he going to do? We’ll just stay out of sight and let him go and catch that traitor Holt in the second truck when he tries to make the swap.”

“Don’t know, Jocko,” Jacob said. “A lot of the guys don’t really like trying to take out the guy that has the best chance of feeding us through the winter. You said yourself that it was a sweet setup and could produce way more food than just what those living there could eat, even in the winter.”

“I’m telling you, with either Sterling or Holt out of the picture, they can’t keep us from going up there and just taking over.”

“Well... We’ll give it another try, I guess,” Jacob replied. He went off to gather what had become a gang.

Jocko, on the other hand, sharpened the knife that Jennie had given him as a gift for his birthday one year. The Cold Steel Oda was razor sharp when he was done, the thoughts of it slicing through Jennie’s skin bringing a smile to Jocko’s face.

On the appointed day, with a very nervous, very large group of people waiting in the parking lot of the grocery store, Jocko, Jacob, and the gang took up ambush positions, much as they had the other time.

And, just like the other time, Sterling’s big pickup came up into the parking lot, slowed, and then rocketed off up the street.

“He can’t be that stupid,” Jacob told Jocko as the two men waited in place for the LUV to show up.

“He just thinks he smart,” Jocko growled. “No way he’s smarter than me.”

Several minutes passed and the LUV didn’t show up. What did happen was a voice called out and said, “Those wanting to trade for food head to the Red Lion Casino parking lot. Those wanting to take over, just stay where you are.”

The group began to hurry into the street, and toward the Red Lion. Jocko screamed something unintelligible and stepped out from behind the corner of the store. A shot rang out, and Jocko dived back behind the corner of the store.

Another man tried to break cover and another shot sent him scrambling back, too. Expecting to be able to rush out and surround the LUV when it showed up, the gang had chosen hiding spots with that in mind, and not with defense from a roving sniper.

Whoever was shooting, was moving after every shot. After a long quiet time, without any of the gang trying anything, and no resulting shots, one of the gang stepped out into the open, his rifle held over his head in both hands.

“Look, mister! I don’t want no more part of this! My family needs food. I’ll trade for it like the others.”

“Harrison,” Jacob muttered.

“Harrison!” Jocko screamed, “You turn on us and I’ll kill you and your family!”

Harrison looked like he was wavering, and Sterling, for it was Sterling that was doing the sniping, shouted, “Take a stand, Harrison! Help me keep these guys pinned down and you’ll have your chance for food, just like the others.”

Jocko lifted his rifle, and before Jacob could stop him, fired a shot at Harrison. But Jocko was shaking with anger and the shot missed. Harrison dived for cover again, this time cover from the gang, his back open and exposed to Sterling.

“I’m in, too!” said another of the gang members. He ran backwards a short ways from where he was, to another safe spot, keeping his rifle pointed at where the rest of the gang was pinned down. No one shot at him.

Over the course of ten minutes three more men switched sides, entirely bottling up Jacob, Jocko, and the final three men of the gang.

“Okay,” Sterling said, startling Harrison, since Sterling was crouched down just behind him. “You take the rest of these guys down to the Red Lion. I’ll keep Jocko and Jacob here until you can get food. How you handle the situation after that is up to you and the others.”

Harrison nodded and moved over to talk to the other four men, one after the other. The group of five started for the street. A rifle barrel came into view and Sterling fired three quick rounds at the corner behind which the shooter was hiding. Unlike most of the building, this add on was made of lumber. The powerful .308 rounds penetrated and the rifle fell out into the open, the body of the now dead man falling onto it a fraction of a second later.

The former gang members took off in a run to get out of range to avoid more shots aimed at them.

“Jacob!” Sterling called out after another few minutes of quickly exchanged shots. “Think about this! You really want to be on the outside looking in after this? You’ve only got two men now, and Jocko. And you’ve seen how much help Jocko is.”

The last statement brought a flurry of shots from Jocko. None were anywhere near where Sterling was.

“Only one!” came another voice and one of the two remaining gang members took off running, gun held at his side. “I’m trading for food!”

Sterling let him go. Even if he did try something at the food distribution, Sterling was sure that the group there would take care of him.

“Just the three of you now, Jacob!” Sterling called out.

“Two! Just two!” said the final man. He moved to head down the street, and this time, before Sterling could provide cover fire, Jocko popped around the corner and shot the man. The man went down, but was still alive. Three rounds from the M1A SM had Jocko diving for cover again, before he could finish the man off.

“He shot that man in the back, Jacob. You going to be next?” Sterling heard a flurry of shots and saw Jacob stagger out from behind the cover he and Jocko had been sharing. Then Jocko stepped out and put the barrel of his rifle against Jacob’s chest and pulled the trigger. It was the last thing he did.

Seeing the brutal act caused Sterling to miss the first shot that might have saved Jacob, but the second and third put an end to Jocko’s short tenure as a bandit gang leader. Cautious by nature, made more so by the recent experiences, Sterling waited for a long time before he moved. The man Jocko had shot had managed to climb to his feet, and using his rifle as a crutch, hobbled away.

Sterling finally went to check on Jacob. There was nothing he could do. Jacob was dead. With the toe of his boot, Sterling turned Jocko’s body over. Even without Sterling’s final two shots, Jocko would have died. He’d taken at least three bullets from Jacob’s rifle before Jacob went down.

Sterling shook his head, shouldered the M1A SM and headed for the Red Lion, slowing down to help the injured man.

The former gang members looked somewhat fearful when Sterling, half carrying the injured man, made his appearance. “Take care of your friend,” Sterling said, and half a dozen men stepped forward and picked up the injured man, disappearing inside the Red Lion with him.

“It’s over?” asked Holt, still handing out food and collecting barter slips promising labor at the ranch.

Jennie, working with some of the mothers and children, was watching Sterling. She paled as the implication of Jocko’s death was confirmed when Sterling said, “Jacob and Jocko turned on one another. Both are dead.” Sterling saw no need for Jennie to know that he’d put two bullets in what was going to be a dead man in a matter of a few minutes.

Jennie looked away, and then busied herself with the women and children again.

“Holt,” Sterling said, looking back at the man, “You’d better let your wife know things are okay. She wasn’t too happy being left behind on this shindig.”

“Yeah. Good point.”

Sterling took over the distribution of the food as Holt got on the CB radio. The snow began as Holt hung up the radio microphone.

Everyone looked up, fear showing on many faces. Sterling’s keychain radiation alarm was silent, and he told the crowd. “It’s not radioactive.”

There were some signs that the announcement had lessened the fear. But there was still some fear on most of the adult faces, despite the younger children running around catching snowflakes.

Sterling suddenly understood. He and his small group were well off. It would be a long, hard winter for everyone else, even with the food resource the ranch represented. Sterling suddenly wondered how many of the faces he was seeing now, he would see come spring.

With the food the Ranch produced, coupled with what other people that had food production capability provided, none of the population that took advantage of the situation died of hunger. That’s not to say there were no deaths that first winter. There were. Many of them. Freezing to death for lack of suitable heat sources, and minor medical problems that became major problems when the person couldn’t be transported to the hospital.

Even when one was hospitalized there was no guarantee of not dying. Only two doctors, one dentist, and seven nurses had survived the war and the radiation. When the medications ran out shortly after the winter started, the area was down to one doctor, the dentist, and three nurses.

With the Flying J truck stop in town, and the other service stations, there was still fuel available. The problem was working vehicles. Sterling and two other mechanics that understood the problem, with the help of the auto parts store owners, put back into service several vehicles, including an ambulance and fire truck.

The problem then became the roads themselves. The snow continued to fall and the roads were soon impassible to anything but snowmobiles, snow cats, and in a few cases, custom trucks like Sterling’s.

Keeping the city water system and sewer system didn’t go as well. With the Humboldt River within walking distance of most of the city, water wasn’t the problem it could be. And there were plenty of back yards that could be used to bury human waste from chemical toilets for those that had them, and to build outhouses for the rest.

After spring came, finally, and most of the snow melted, Sterling, with Jennie’s help, got the gardens started. Though there were a few reluctant to honor their bartering agreements for

labor in the gardens and help with the growing herds, all finally paid off their debt, with a few even building up some credit as time passed.

It so happened, that the first big bartering day of the summer, with most of the community at the parking lot of the grocery store, was the day the National Guard showed up, with absolutely no warning. Even the locals that were in the National Guard didn't know what was going on. They'd done, primarily as individuals, all they could do to help the community.

When the first Humvee pulled up and stopped, with the rest of a short convoy lined out behind it, Sterling was one of the first to approach. He still continued to carry the M1A SM, but kept it slung over his back. But the P-14 was ready in the holster on his hip.

"Who am I addressing?" asked the National Guard Captain when he stepped out.

"I'm Sterling Walker. Jennie Craft and I own a ranch up in the mountains."

"Well, Mr. Walker, I'm Captain Jamison, Nevada National Guard. Who would you say is the person in charge here in Winnemucca?"

"That'd be Jim Plimpton," Sterling said. He turned around and pointed. "That's him. We just started relying on him. He's a good guy."

"Thank you," said the Captain, and head over to talk to him.

A couple of the Guardsmen got out and where checking over the vehicles. Captain Jamison came back, motioned to the two men, who returned to their vehicles. Captain Jamison got back into the lead Humvee and the convoy took off again, much to Sterling's, and everyone else's surprise. Except for Jim.

He walked over to join Sterling, and Holt and Jennie, who had come up to Sterling when the Captain was talking to Jim.

"What's going on?" Sterling asked Jim.

"Not much, it appears. The Guard, according to Captain Jamison, is going town to town, checking on things. Helping where help is needed. Basic help. He seems to think we're okay. Except for the need for medicines, which seems to be a universal need. He's going to request a standard medical delivery for this kind of situation."

"This kind of situation?" Sterling asked. "They had a plan for this kind of situation?"

"Apparently so," Jim replied. "I guess we're some of the lucky ones. According to the Captain."

"Yeah. Lucky," Holt said. "Our good luck to have Sterling and Jennie show up when they did. We might have made without their help, but certainly not as well."

“I don’t know, we’ve only provided some food,” Sterling said.

“Yes,” Jim said, “but you also brought organization to us. Before that mess with Jacob, we were just milling around aimlessly.”

“Well,” Sterling said, “be that as it may, what do we do now?”

“We carry on,” Jennie said. “We carry on. For the next generation.” She rubbed the slight swell of her belly where Sterling’s baby was growing.

End *****

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