

BOOK III

The Bloodletting Trilogy

by

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Prologue

This is Book III of the Bloodletting Trilogy. The story line is that a few powerful people in a foreign country decide to take The United States for their own. A force of well trained mercenaries is organized and shipped to the United States.

Book I begins as the General of the expedition leaves in one of several planes destined for various locations in the United States.

Our story line revolves around a simple family caught up in this madness. Tom Brown and his wife, Mary, are simple people who live on a farm in Timberlake, Iowa. They have lived happily there with their children, Albert, Marshall, Edward, and Mary II. The boys, Marshall and Edward, are commonly referred to as Two and Three respectively because of an incident that occurred with their sister Mary II.

Tom has a best friend named Carl Stoneman, who is African American. These two men were called into duty to rescue Mary and Mary II from the city where the girls had gone to visit Mary's sister Ashlee.

The men depart for the city and leave the home front in the capable hands of Albert and his brothers.

In their absence, the General's plane lands in this remote part of the universe and the invaders are miraculously repelled by the townsfolk.

The adults return just in time to help with the destruction of the majority of invaders on this plane.

Book II begins at this point

A few of the invaders survive the encounter with the townspeople. One of those is a girl named Sholing.

Book I of the series centers more or less around the activities of the single plane that lands with the General in Timberlake Iowa. We learn in Book II that the General has chosen this remote location because of the central location and because of the planned destruction along the coastline.

Book II follows the escapades of several other of the invaders. Some have come here on airplanes and some have come here in specially equipped shipping containers. Each group has a special mission and we see the methodical destruction of the American infrastructure.

In Book II we are given close up glimpses of the devastating effects of this destruction.

At the end of Book II our family learns that Carl's daughter Julliette and her new friend Sholing have been taken captive by a part of the invading army. The whole town was under the mistaken impression that they had defeated the enemy. It was decided that they celebrate with an old fashioned town feed in the city square. As the meal winds to a conclusion the pastoral setting is destroyed when several armed men intrude on the gathering and kill many of the town folk.

It is our hope that everything turns out alright for them. Read on, reader.

After leaving the family at the house, Tom decided to return to the town square. Tom drove into town using the back roads, staying off the highways. He kept the lights out and was driving way too fast. Luck was with him and he didn't kill himself or anyone else as he slowed down at the city limits. He skirted around the south part of town, the sheriff's office was on the west side of the town square and he wanted to come up to it from the south. He suspected that the men who did the shooting would still be entertaining themselves at the square, he hoped.

He parked a block south of the sheriff's office and taking his gun and ammunition in hand, ran the rest of the way on foot.

Bill was waiting in his office as he said he would be. He was seated in a rocking chair in the corner with a loaded gun in his lap. When Tom opened the door he was lucky he didn't get shot.

"Hello Tom, glad you made it back; I just thought I might take a little rest until somebody showed up. I seem to be a little tired." Bill apologized. The stress of the last few days was taking a toll.

"Tired, I guess, you just got out of the hospital. You probably should still be in there." Tom sat at the desk and loaded his gun. Tom wanted to be able to tell Bill to go on home and sleep but he dare not. He changed the subject, "got any word on these killers?"

"Nobody has come by here. Guess they figured I'm dead or something." Bill leaned the gun against the wall.

"Everybody else might be dead, Bill. We have no idea who all got killed tonight. This town has taken a tremendous hit in the last couple of days; we might need to think seriously about taking our families and running away somewhere." This was not the first time Tom had thought of retreating.

"Run to where?" Bill asked. He too had thought of retreating.

"Find a place where the odds haven't been so lopsided." Tom said as he rose and walked to the door. "You feel up to this?"

"One more shot of coffee," Bill said, as he drained his coffee cup. He really didn't feel up to this.

He stood up, checked to see that a shell was chambered in his rifle and followed Tom out the door. He locked the door behind them.

Bill led the way down the street to the alley. They ducked into the alley and hurried along it to the next main street. Bill paused here to look up and down the street before crossing it. He motioned for Tom to follow and hurried across the street and down the next alley, he ran the entire block, Tom was hard pressed to keep up with him. Tom caught a whiff of cooked meat from the smokers, it made him hungry. As they approached the end of the alley a voice came out of the darkness.

"Didn't know you had it in you Bill." It was a man's voice.

“Hey Mike,” said Bill, who was out of breath, “what’s the situation?” Bill was glad that Mike had made it.

“John and I’ve been right here since right after the shooting stopped. We was over at Betty’s place tippin a few frosties when we heard what sounded like a small range war goin’ on out here. We grabbed our guns but by the time we got here the shootin’ was over. We counted about eighteen soldiers over at the picnic tables. They came in those new four door pickup trucks parked up the street. They sort of made camp right there at the courthouse. There’s bodies lying all over the place and they don’t seem to mind.”

Mike turned in the direction of Tom, “Hey Tom,” Tom nodded.

“Tom, those two younger boys of yours, Two and Three? They’re sittin’ over in the alley behind the harness shop. They’re just waiting, just like us.”

“What are we waiting for?” Bill asked. He was pacing back and forth.

“Right now, we’re out gunned, out manned, out maneuvered, and dead tired.” Mike said. “We could take a few pot shots off in their direction, we might even get lucky and kill a couple of them but so far there’s only six of us. I like to pick the fights I have a chance of winning.”

“Let’s keep an eye on these guys, find out where they go and what they do, in the meantime, maybe we can scrounge up some more help. How’s that sound?” Bill asked. Bill was of a mind to charge on over, guns blazing.

“Sounds great to me Bill,” said Mike. “John, do you feel like watching these guys while we go round up some help?”

“Sure thing Mike.” John said as he crept over to hide behind a trash container. He stepped back from the container. “Something must have died in this one.” He whispered.

“Don’t try to be a hero now. Don’t let them see you and if they come this way just duck into that door like we talked about.” Mike sounded like a mother hen.

“Yes Mother,” John laughed.

Bill led the way back down the alley, “Let’s go get Two and Three,” he said.

“Lead the way,” Tom said, as he stepped back to allow Mike to pass.

They hurried back across the street and down the alley to the intersection of the two alleys. The men stood panting, trying to catch their breath.

“You guys wait here,” Mike said in a whisper, “I know where the boys are, I’ll run and get them and bring them back here.”

In a few minutes, Mike returned, followed by Two and Three. The young men weren’t even breathing hard. They each carried a rifle.

“Good to see you boys,” whispered Tom, “What’s your take on the situation?” Tom watched his two boys with pride. They had certainly grown up in the last few days.

“We counted sixteen, plus another four or five.” said Two. “They’re moving around a lot and it’s like trying to count minnows in a bucket.”

“They must be all supposed to be meeting up here or some shit,” said Mike.

“That guy that the girl killed in the barn was a General; he must have been planning to make this his headquarters. That means we can expect a whole bunch of these guys in the next few days. Maybe we ought to get the heck out of here.” Bill

suggested. "Right now, they outnumber us three to one." He could just imagine a squad of soldiers coming around the corner.

Bill continued, "We just don't have enough firepower to do anything about this tonight, short of plugging a few of them. I want to keep track of where they are and try to accumulate enough help to eliminate the murdering bastards. Let's let them think they have us completely whipped, which they may, and we'll regroup. I suggest we meet at my place, we'll use that as a staging area, is that ok with you boys?"

"Fine with me," Tom agreed. The others nodded agreement.

"Mike and I can try to get some people together for tomorrow morning. We'll all meet at Bill's place. Could one of you boys sneak over and let John know what we're doing? Take the alleys; he's back behind the drug store keeping an eye on them. They seem to be happy right where they are in the square." Tom said.

"I'd be happy there too," said Three, "A couple of hundred pounds of meat on ice, enough fixins to feed a city. Why would they want to leave?" He sniffed the air; it reminded him of better times.

"I'll go spend the night with John," said Two, "I've got the keys to the truck, I'll run home if anything develops. Dad, could you take Three home with you?"

"Sure thing son," said Tom, "Don't take any unnecessary chances." Tom gave Two a hug as they split up. Two hurried quietly down the alley toward where they left John earlier.

"See you boys at the house." Tom said to Bill and Mike as he and Three ran to the truck. Tom was worried for the other boy but put that fear from his mind.

When Two was within a hundred yards of where he knew John was hiding he was afraid of being shot. "John," he said in a loud whisper. "Over here," came a voice out of the dark.

Two quickly explained the plan to John. "Any new developments?" Two asked.

John spoke in a whisper. "They sent a scouting party across the street to Ned's furniture store. I could just barely see the edge of the store from here but it looks and sounded like they broke out the plate glass windows. Now they seem to be walking over there in two's and three's, I'd say they intend to spend the night in the furniture store, probably sleeping in the showroom on the beds and couches and what not. The best place to keep an eye on these guys would be from across the square, from on top of one of those buildings."

"My truck is just down the block, let's sneak on down to it and then take the long way back around to the church." Two suggested.

"Lead the way." Said John, as the two men hurried toward the truck. "I'm glad to get away from that smelly dumpster."

John and Two were both out of breath by the time they reached the truck. For the first time in his life, Two wished he had bought a stock muffler instead of that glass pack muffler. This was the first time he ever wanted a quiet truck. He started the engine and let it idle into the street, he gently pressed the accelerator trying to keep the noise down. John was watching behind them as they drove without lights through the residential area and to the edge of town. Two drove quickly and quietly clear around the edge of town, he parked the truck three blocks away from the east side of the square facing away from the square.

“It’s eerie with all these dark houses,” Two commented.

“I’ll leave the keys in the truck just in case you need to escape instead of me.” Two said. John had shut the door quietly and was moving stealthily toward the square.

As they neared the back of the buildings, John stopped a moment to speak to Two; he was somewhat out of breath. “The bell tower of the church would be the best spot, but if I was them, I’d put a couple of rifles in that steeple. We’ll get about as good a view if we climb up on the top of the hardware store. There’s an old metal fire escape that leads to the roof but we need to get to the first floor landing.”

“Jim West, the painter, leaves his ladders unlocked; we could drag one of those wooden antiques over and use it.” Two volunteered.

“Good idea.” John agreed, he laid his gun down and followed Two over to the painters shop. Both men ran stooped over.

The only extension ladder was an old forty foot wooden ladder, covered with years of splatters.

“This thing smells of paint and weighs a ton.” Complained Two, as he picked up the front half and waited for John. The two men carried the ladder to the base of the fire escape and stood it up; the men had stopped three times because it was so heavy. John stepped up a few rungs and jumped up and down on it.

“Good to go.” John said. He adjusted the feet of the ladder so that it was secure.

John and Two picked up their guns and carried them up the wooden painter’s ladder and up the metal fire escape to the roof. The old rusty metal squealed in protest. The old brick building was three stories tall and the roof was flat and covered with white gravel and hard black tar. The perimeter of the roof was a three foot tall parapet brick wall with concrete capstones.

Three large condensing units were evenly spaced from the front to the rear of the building and sat on roof curbs. A twenty foot tall antennae pole was guyed to the four corners of the building.

The two men hurried across the roof and kept their heads low until they reached the front of the building.

The two men peered cautiously over the front parapet, looking toward the west. The tall trees in the town square screened much of the view but a large gap in the trees allowed a perfect view of the furniture store two blocks away.

“Lucky thing we’ve got a full moon tonight and not many clouds.” John said in a whisper as he sat down with his back to the parapet. “In a half hour or so we should have a little more light.” He looked up to the star filled sky.

“What do you suppose is going on here John, a few minutes ago Bill suggested that since one of the dead guys was a General that maybe they all plan to meet up here or something?” Two asked. He tried to keep the fear out of his voice.

“Makes as much sense as anything I’ve heard. Bill and I were talking about it over a few beers. I sort of always figured beer would be the end of me, but they sure tasted good tonight for some reason. I had every intention of coming over here for some free eats. Those last beers saved my ass.” John thought on it a minute. “We just haven’t been able to get a real good handle on why these fellows picked this speck of the universe to pounce on. Guess it’ll take a smarter man than me to figure it out.”

John stuck his head over the parapet and whispered. “They’ve got some lights on in the furniture store; wish I had some binoc’s. You can just make out some guys lying down on the couches and beds in there. Looks like they intend to settle here for the night at least. I’m going to scoot over to the south end of the building and see if I can see past the court house building.” He got to his feet but kept bent over as he hurried to the other end. Two followed. Their feet made shuffling noises in the gravel.

“See those dark spots on the grass? Those are all bodies. They shot the shit out of those poor people. I count at least twenty bodies how’s your young eyes work in this light?” John whispered.

“I can’t see more than twenty five from here but the trees are in the way. I can just make out the tables where they were serving the food; looks like a couple of those guys are cooking. I can smell it from here.” Two said.

“Me too, smells good, just like old times. See those lights coming in from the west?” John asked.

“Just barely through the trees, I count three sets. They’re turning North.” Two stopped talking and hurried, doubled over, to the north end of the building. “There are three more trucks; they parked right in the middle of the street, right in front of the furniture store. Two, four, eight, I count twelve men. They stopped at the entrance to the furniture store and talked to somebody, now their going in. What did we figure? Twelve before, now these twelve.” Two asked.

“There was sixteen, then four, that makes twenty plus these twelve, that’s thirty two or thereabouts.” John said. His mind was a little fuzzy from the beer.

“Yeah, that’s right, thirty two. If they keep coming in like this we’ll be outgunned in a hurry.” Two said in a worried tone of voice.

“We’re out numbered right now, buddy. There’s a lot of good people been killed in the last couple of days.” John said. “Come daylight they’re going to set up a guarded perimeter, mark my word. If they have any sense they’ll put a couple of rifles in that church tower.” John pointed toward the church steeple that towered over them on their right.

“There are no windows on this side of the steeple, I never noticed that before.” Two said.

“The building committee wanted a nice clock on this side and they ran out of money. At least that’s the story I heard.” John said. “Why don’t you hurry on back to Bill’s place and tell the boys what we found out. Tell Bill they’re coming in four at a time, by tomorrow night this place might be swarming with them. I’ll hide out up here till things get too dangerous, then I’ll high tail it. If the ladder’s on the ground, I left.”

“I’ll bring some binoculars back.” Two said as he hurried to the fire escape. It felt good to be moving.

“Food and water.” John requested. He knew he was in this for the long haul.

Two gave him the thumbs up sign as he dropped out of sight at the fire escape.

He ran to the truck and drove it slowly for several blocks before he brought it up to speed. He worried that at any minute he might run into more invaders.

Bill owned twenty acres on the edge of town. His parents bought the place when they were young and it was the only home he had ever known. The place was fenced for cattle and the house was a comfortable, modest double wide modular home. There was a two acre pond for the cattle and a large work shed with a pole barn attached.

As Two drove into the parking lot, he counted at least a dozen trucks and there was quite a crowd of men at the two car entrance to the work shed. Everyone there was armed to the teeth and Bill was waving his arms trying to get the men to be quiet.

Two pulled up to the edge of the crowd, turned the truck off and ran up to speak with Bill. He wondered if he should take the gun but thought better of it.

It only took a second to evaluate the situation. Two hurried past the crowd and into the work shop and wheeled out a black desk chair. “Sit down Bill!” He ordered, ignoring the many voices speaking at once. Two thought Bill was looking pretty bad.

The garage smelled of dog food and diesel fuel.

Bill turned when he heard Two speak, and with a look of relief on his face, he sat down with an audible sigh of relief.

“Quiet a second.” Two commanded. He was surprised to hear himself speaking in his father’s tone of voice.

The crowd became silent except for a couple of good old boys on the edge of the crowd who were comparing old war stories.

“I just came from downtown. John Stephens and me climbed up to the top of the hardware store and got a pretty good look at the bastards. There’s about thirty so far but they keep coming in, four to a truck. Mostly they’re driving brand new four door pickups and they all seem to have stainless steel boxes loaded in the back. There’s a bunch of bodies in the town square and these fellows are cooking the food we left.” Two stopped when he was out of breath.

“Why are they here?” A man in the front of the crowd asked.

Two looked at Bill, who was sitting with his head in his hands. He tried to stand, but was only able to place his hand on Two’s shoulder and then he sat back down.

When the crowd saw this they were suddenly silent.

“If you guys didn’t know it, Bill was shot and he’s lucky to be alive.” Two said. He hated standing in front of a crowd.

“Near as we can figure,” Bill began in a weak voice. “that first plane load had a General on board. A few of those guys escaped but most of the rest got killed up on Danner’s ridge.”

When he said this the men began to cheer.

Bill held up his left hand for silence.

“We learned at the time that the whole plane load of soldiers was expecting a few truck loads of supplies that somehow never got here. That was an act of God, a lot of luck, and because of that we were able to beat that plane load. There must have been other planes. One of the first things these old boys did was to try to commandeer vehicles. The fact that these new fellows are all driving new pickups leads me to believe that somewhere, somebody was unlucky and a plane load or two was able to connect up with their supplies and they were able to commandeer four door pickups from dealerships or whatever. We can only assume that these old boys are trying to hook up with the General. Their communication must be screwed up or they would know he’s dead. I suppose, come daylight, they are going to search this whole area until they find him.”

“We’ve seen those trucks driving up and down the county roads all day.” One of the men said. Several others agreed.

“What’s to be done Bill?” A voice from the crowd asked.

“We can either fight or flee.” Bill said. “If we run we lose our homes. If we fight we might still lose our homes but we’ll be dead.”

“Hey Bill,” came a deep voice from the crowd.

“Yes Mike?” Bill asked.

“If our homes and families aren’t worth dying for, I don’t know what is.” Mike said.

“What about the National Guard?” Someone asked from the crowd.

“Most of those old boys were shipped over seas to fight somebody else’s war halfway across the planet.” Mike said, with anger in his voice. “We shipped billions of dollars worth of equipment, equipment that was supposed to protect our homes, half way around the world and now it’s all beat to shit.” He remembered complaining about this a year ago.

“You think somebody planned this?” A voice asked.

“Who the heck knows? The simple fact is that here and now we need men and equipment to protect our homes and it’s all gone.” Mike spoke angrily. “We’ll just have to do the best we can with what we’ve got and pray to Almighty God that it’s enough.”

“Well said, Mike.” Bill held his hand in the air again. “We need to gather up every able bodied man we can find, and every rifle, pistol or weapon of any kind and protect our wives and families. Why don’t you all guys just sit down for a minute and we’ll put our heads together.” Bill needed a minute to rest.

There was a collective sigh of relief as the crowd found stumps and rocks and buckets and lawn chairs to sit on. There was also a steady clicking noise as metal guns were laid gently on the ground.

Two found a five gallon bucket half filled with nails near the back wall. He emptied the nails into an empty box then turned the bucket upside down and sat next to Bill. While the men were getting seated he and Bill talked.

“Feeling alright, Bill?” Two asked. Two was wondering if he should take the man to the hospital.

“Not so good buddy, I was about to pass out when you brought me that chair, thanks.” Bill said. He was looking better now that he was resting.

“Need anything?” Two asked. He stood up.

“A glass of water would be nice, if it’s not too much trouble.” Bill said in a thankful tone.

Two hurried over to the house and returned with an empty glass and a half filled gallon jug.

“This jug was next to the sink, is it ok?” Two asked.

“That’s what it’s for.” Bill said as he took the glass that Two offered. He drank it all and held the glass out for another.

“Seen Dad or the brothers?” Two asked. He set the jug down beside the wall.

“They went to the house; they’ll be here after sunrise for sure.” Bill said. He sat the half filled glass on the concrete.

“Let’s get on with this.” Bill raised his voice.

“Mike, you live farther out on old hiway 40, can we use your place as an alternate if we lose this place?” Bill asked. He was thinking also that he might not make it.

“Sure Bill, tell everyone to come up to the house along the north hedgerow, the gates open. I put some booby traps beside the gravel, so don’t use the driveway.” Mike turned to make sure everybody heard.

“OK, if there are any of us left, and if this place gets overrun, meet up at Mike’s place. Tell everybody to stay off the gravel.” Bill said. “I’ve been thinking, their reinforcements have been coming up from the south, we need to set up some sort of a road block or something.”

“They come right by my place, Bill. I saw two of them yesterday come up hiway 79 and turn on 36 and come into town from the west.” Ben Weaver said. He was a big man with a full red beard.

“What do you suggest Ben?” Bill asked.

“They’ve got to cross Elm Creek just before they get to my place. The woods are real thick around the creek, we could dig a pit right at the bottom of that hill and if they didn’t see it, they’d drive right into it before they knew it.” Ben said. Several others nodded in agreement with the plan.

“How many men would you need?” Bill asked. He felt that all of these men might not be enough.

“I need an operator for my backhoe, my shoulder went out again.” Ben said. “If there’s four men to a car we ought to outnumber them two to one, so maybe eight guys?”

“We need more men and weapons? Anybody got any ideas?” Bill asked. He was beginning to think the cause was hopeless.

“That one ton box truck is chuck full of stuff from the store and what was left over at Danner’s ridge.” Mike said. “Everybody help yourselves.” Mike stood and led the way toward the truck.

“What about manpower?” Bill asked. He knew that without help they might fail.

“Lets send some people out to these other towns and try to get some men in here, would that work?” Frank Jefferies asked. “I’ll go to Redbud.”

“Thanks Frank,” said Bill, “Now could somebody volunteer to make contact with Danbury and Presston and Trumbull and Smith Center?”

“There was a fellow named Tony Wilson from Danbury at the picnic,” came a voice from the crowd, but I don’t think he made it.”

“We may none of us make it out of this mess.” Bill said quietly to Two.

Two was not worried until just now.

Tom and Three made it home before the sun came up. When they came in from the deck, Albert was awake in the chair.

Tom spoke to Albert, “They seem to be holed up for the night in the town square. There seems to be around twenty of them. We need to get a group together for in the morning and see how much fire power we can muster. We’re all going to meet up at Bill’s place. You probably ought to try to get a little sleep. We’ll keep the windows open and should be able to hear anyone coming down the driveway.”

“I’ll just sleep here in the chair if you think that’s alright?” Albert said.

“Good night, son.” Tom said. Three was already in bed and snoring.

Tom quietly slipped into the bedroom and lay fully clothed on top of the covers. Mary remained sound asleep.

Bill sat in the chair with his head in his hands, he was exhausted. Two sat beside him on the upturned five gallon bucket, worrying about Bill and watching the men in the crowd begin to disperse. Several of the men were making plans and finally loaded into their trucks and drove back to the main road. Mike stayed behind and walked toward Bill. The lights from the workshop caused his shadow to grow larger as he approached. Several of the men remained at the edge of the light, still telling old war stories.

As the men left the area, a cricket began to chirp. It stopped when Mike approached.

“Did you say that those varmints were holed up at the furniture store?” Mike spoke as he approached the two men.

“When John and me were up on the hardware store roof we thought it looked like they were bedding down for the night in the furniture store. We didn’t have any field glasses so we couldn’t tell for sure but it seemed to make perfect sense, why?” Two answered.

“Some of us old Army types have been collecting stuff for years and we have acquired a couple of anti tank rockets. We been talking about it over there and if we could get set up right on the top of the hardware store we might be able to drop a small bomb into their nest, so to speak.” Mike was shuffling his feet in the gravel at the entrance to the work shop.

Bill raised his head from his hands. “That’s not a bad idea, might kill a bunch of them while they’re in one spot, no telling what they intend to do now that they’ve gathered some strength.” This might be just what we need, Bill thought.

Two spoke, “We used an extension ladder to get up to the first level of the fire escape. John figured that come sunrise those fellows would climb up into the church steeple. The south side doesn’t have any windows so he figured they couldn’t see us from there if we were on the hardware store roof.”

“That makes sense,” said Mike. “I could take a few of the boys and one of those rockets up on the roof and give ‘em hell. What do you say to that Bill?” Mike was not going to take no for an answer.

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Said Bill in an almost whisper. He was too tired to argue.

“John wanted me to bring back some binoculars and some food and water. He said if he had to leave the roof he’d drop the ladder to the ground. Have you got a pair of binoculars and some food and water Bill?” Two asked.

“There’s a bunch of gallon jugs of water on the back porch and food on the shelves, just help yourself. There’s a good pair of field glasses hanging in a case on the wall by the back door, take them along. Look guys, I really need to get a little rest, I’m done for awhile.” Bill rose from the chair with difficulty.

“Sure thing Bill, thanks.” Two said as he headed for the house.

“I’ve got to run out to the place and load up, I’ll take the rest of these boys to help. We’ll need to set up a come-along or block and tackle or something to get them up on the roof. I bet we could blast them out of there by ten.” Mike said as he began to walk toward the group of men.

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble, Two, could you come by and get me in a couple of hours? I really want to be there for the fireworks.” Bill asked. “Do you feel like you need to get some sleep?”

“Hey, I can sleep when I’m dead, knock on wood.” Two tapped on the wood door frame. “I’ll get this stuff up to John then I’ll come back here.” Two hurried into the house.

“Better wait till I get there, Mike, if you don’t mind, just to be on the safe side.” Bill said in a loud tone of voice to the men in the parking lot. He thought there was a good chance that Mike would not wait.

“We’ll wait as long as we can Bill, but once those fellows start to move around it won’t have done us no good to blow up an empty furniture store. This here is war.” Mike spoke as he climbed into the big truck and drove off.

“Lord help us,” muttered Bill to himself, “Turn those drunk bastards loose on the town with rockets, there won’t be nothin left.” He walked slowly toward the house.

Just as Bill reached the house, Two hurried out the door with a large sack, a jug of water and the binoculars. He stopped when he saw Bill.

“Those boys may be too trigger happy, we need to make sure no innocent bystanders get killed.” Bill spoke to Two. He was nearly out of breath from this small exertion.

“I think all the innocent bystanders have already been killed, Bill.” Two held the door open for Bill. “See you in a little bit.”

Two ran back to his truck and drove toward the hardware store. He rolled the window down so he could smell the fresh night air.

Bill didn’t even try to make it to the bedroom; he collapsed, fully dressed on the couch.

As Two approached the city limits, he turned off the lights of the truck. He blinked his eyes a few times and tried not to focus on the road, long years of hunting at night had taught him that in low light situations the eyes work best just outside the point of focus. He slowed as he approached the city and experienced a sense of fear he had never known before. His right hand trembled as it went to the stock of the rifle for reassurance, this time the quarry could shoot back. He expected at any moment to be extinguished in a hail of machine gun fire. He accelerated slightly and cursed the muffler, not for the last time.

He was relieved to note, as he shut off the engine and coasted to a stop, that the ladder was still in place leading to the landing of the fire escape.

He hoisted the rifle and field glasses to his shoulder, stuffed extra cartridges in his pockets, and carried the sack and water jug to the base of the ladder. Some inner sense made him run all hunched over. He clamored to the top of the fire escape but stopped just short of climbing onto the roof. He worried about the noise made by the rusty ladder.

“John.” He spoke in a loud whisper. “John.”

He heard the shuffled footsteps approaching along the roof and was relieved to be greeted by a familiar voice.

“Glad you made it back. It’s been real quiet here, seems like they’ve all bedded down for the night.” John spoke as he approached the top of the fire escape. “Let me help you with that.” The man took the sack and the jug from Two’s outstretched hand.

Two followed John back along the roof to the front of the building, again walking stooped over.

The delicious smell of smoked food still filled the air, along with the aroma of deep fried potatoes. “That smell sure makes me hungry.” Two said.

“Been making me darned near sick to my stomach I’m so hungry.” John said as he sat down against the parapet and dug through the sack. “There’s a gentle breeze from the south west, that’s good for us, less chance they’ll hear us or smell us. I always hunt into the wind. What sort of food did you bring?”

“Kipper snacks and crackers and some fruit, the lids are all pop top and there are a couple of forks down in there somewhere. It’s what Bill had on the shelf.” Two began to peer over the parapet towards the furniture store. “Bill let me have these glasses.” Two put the field glasses to his eyes and peered over the parapet.

“It’s a king’s feast, you done good boy.” John commented as he tore into a can of fish.

Two spoke in a whisper, “Old Mike and a bunch of old boys were gathered at Bill’s place and Ben Weaver and some of the boys figured to dig up a hole in the highway over by his place. He figured to cut a spot out of the road at the bottom of that hill and ambush them as they come down the road all unawares.”

John listened intently as he tore into the box of crackers and drank from the water jug.

Two continued. “I told them about these guys holed up here in the furniture store and Mike said he had a couple of rockets or some shit that might clean out the whole nest in one swell foop. Where in the world would he get a rocket?”

“God only knows,” said John, speaking through a mouth full of crackers. “Those guys are always blowing shit up. Let’s drink a little more beer then set off some dynamite, yee hah. What’s he gonna do with the rockets?”

“Said he was gonna rig up some sort of block and tackle and get them up here on this roof and blast the furniture store. He said he figured to be ready by ten.” Two said, as he peered through the glasses.

“He better hurry,” said John, “Come daylight I expect it’s going to get pretty busy around here.”

John popped the top on a can of fruit cocktail and ate it straight from the can in three giant gulps, he put the empty can back in the sack. “You want some of this? Plenty left.”

“No thanks, John, you keep it.” Two said as he scanned the furniture store two blocks away. “Seems pretty quiet over there.”

“They’re all sound asleep, like we should be, they are the conquering army. They probably figure we’re all dead or that we all run away.” John knelt beside Two and scanned the town square after Two passed him the glasses.

“Will you be alright up here if I run back to Bill’s?” asked Two. “He wasn’t looking too good.”

“Sure sport, I be fine.” John sat back on the roof with his back to the parapet. “If Mike was headed this way he’ll need a little help, been a long time since I seen a rocket launch, wouldn’t want to miss that. I can just hear those old boys now, ‘Hey pard, let’s us get another six pack and go blow up the furniture store. Yup.’”

“Bill said he didn’t want to miss it either, he said he was worried about killing innocent bystanders.” Two said as he hurried to the fire escape. “I’ll be back.”

Two hurried down the fire escape, paused for a moment at the foot of the ladder and looked in all directions. After a moment, he ran, crouched over, back to the truck. He started the engine, cursed the muffler, and by the light of the moon drove out of town.

All of a sudden, tiredness overcame him; the thought of sleeping in a nice warm bed crept to the top of his mind. A few hours of sleep would feel pretty good right now, he thought, so he turned in the direction of home. He finally turned the lights on and accelerated, he found himself closing one eye trying to keep from dozing off.

Thankfully, he made it to the house in one piece. He nearly clipped the rear end of the black Mercedes as he sped into the driveway. He pulled the truck into the barn and sneaked into the house as he had done many times before. He paid no attention to who was sleeping where in the house, he set his wind up alarm clock for two hours and held it in his hand under his pillow and fell fast asleep on top of the covers.