

Everyman

Jerry Cain is the archetypical Everyman. At least, an American Everyman. Wife; two children, a boy and a girl; good job with benefits; twenty years to go on a thirty year mortgage for a modest three bedroom two bath house with two car garage; one nice older model sedan, paid for; and an SUV, bought just barely used, with three years left on the five year loan. Jerry had his grandfather's old .38 revolver from the war, and the .30-30 from when his dad hunted deer for a couple of years, both locked away securely.

Saturday time with the kids, Church on Sundays, Monday night football, Thursday night sex, and watch the national news every night before going to bed. Everyman. Ordinary to the nth degree.

Of course, Jerry didn't realize he fit that definition. He'd never read or seen the play. Never had it mentioned to him. He was just a regular guy. A bit smarter than most. Physically capable. Maybe a little paunch. Used to be able to fix a car, until all the electronics. Good driver, hard worker, loving husband and father. Well informed.

Yet Jerry didn't have a clue about what was going on around him in many ways. He voted every election, but often times it was just a straight ticket, because he didn't quite understand what some of the issues he was voting on really meant.

It was when Polly, his wife, asked to discuss the household budget with him that he got his first clue that things were not quite as they had appeared to him lately. In the last year, he learned, Polly had cut back on many purchases, due to higher prices. A cheaper toilet paper, cancelled magazine subscriptions, shopping at Wal-Mart rather than the department stores and chain groceries. Slightly smaller portions of food with only one vegetable rather than two with every meal. Less fresh fruit. Store brand soda. No more donations to the food bank.

Jerry thought back on it and realized that what she was telling him was true. He'd just not noticed. Polly needed at least a twenty-five percent increase in her budget. Or she needed to go to work.

Jerry winced at that. He'd always been determined to be the support for the family. Polly was happy being at home with the kids, taking care of the house, tending the postage stamp garden, and helping out with church activities. He liked it that way. Jerry always made sure Polly knew she was appreciated. Flowers and candy every birthday and Valentine's day, nice dinners out regularly. A kiss every time they met or parted. How could he ask her to go to work?

"I'll look at getting a raise, Polly," he said when Polly, near tears, completed her request. "I know you don't want to work outside the home, and I don't want you to have too. Maybe I can get a second job."

"I don't mind, Jerry. The job. I just don't know what I can get. I've been looking in the paper for possibilities. There just aren't many available with my skill set."

“You’ve got a degree in English. Surely that means something. No. Wait. Let me see what I can come up with before we talk about you going to work.”

“Okay Jerry. But we can’t wait too long. The mortgage payment is due in a week.”

Jerry didn’t know it, but he paled. The implication that they might not be able to make a mortgage payment on time hit him like a punch in the solar plexus. He was a homebody. He needed a solid base in his life. His home and family were it.

The discussion had taken place on a Sunday. That Monday Jerry went to his boss at the aerospace company where he worked as a draftsman and asked about a raise.

“You’ve been here for years, Jerry. And are very good at your job. I can make you Lead Draftsman in your section. But the title won’t come with any more money, I’m afraid. The aerospace industry is hurting badly. No spare money anywhere.”

“I understand, Gary. Any chance for overtime?”

Gary shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

Jerry nodded and headed back to his cubicle. That evening, after supper, Jerry began to look for a second job. He checked the paper first, and then went to the computer to see what he could find on the internet. He was still at it when Polly came down from putting the children to bed.

“No raise,” Jerry told Polly. “I’m looking for a second job. Don’t worry. We’ll find something. I’m sure.”

“Let me go ahead and start looking, for real, Jerry.”

“You don’t need my permission, Polly. It’s just I’d rather you didn’t have to work. I’d never limit you by making it necessary to get my permission for something like this.”

“I love you, Jerry.”

“I love you, Polly.”

Polly went to finish up in the kitchen and Jerry continued to work on the computer. He sighed finally and shut off the computer. He’d try again the next day. And the next and the next until he found something.

Polly found a job before Jerry found extra work. It was menial, and Jerry hated the fact that she needed to take it, but their bank account was down to the lowest point ever, and the three credit cards were nearing their maximums.

But Jerry found a second job shortly after. Also menial, at minimum wage, but with the hours that Jerry could work without affecting his job at the aerospace company.

The two celebrated with a nice dinner out. Not their favorite place, but a nice one. And they took the kids, rather than paying a sitter. Overall it was cheaper that way.

That was their last meal out for a long time. Things were just too tight, even with the extra income.

Jerry had always watched the news. The local TV news, plus at least one of the national network news programs. He was beginning to see things in a new light. And they disturbed him. The economy was far worse than he'd thought. And so was the world situation. Domestically, Jerry was coming to realize, things were heating up politically, in ways he'd never thought about before. At least not since civics class in high school.

More and more Jerry was tuning into Fox news. They were carrying stories that the other networks did seem willing to cover. The true state of the economy, freedoms eroding away, proliferation of nuclear weapons. Several of the commentators were suggesting, in round about ways, that Americans should prepare for the worst. There was even talk of the possible need for fallout shelters.

That was all political. Natural disasters seemed to be on the rise, with 12/21/12 being somehow a critical date. Jerry began to watch the information channels. Every one of them had at least one series on potential future disasters.

It suddenly dawned on him that he couldn't protect his family from any of the disasters, natural or human caused. Skilled on the computer and internet, it didn't take Jerry long to find websites specializing in dealing with all types of disasters. Becoming prepared looked to be a daunting task. Not to mention very expensive. How was he going to protect his family and his home when they were just making it financially?

Jerry struggled with the issue for weeks before talking to Polly about his worries.

"I don't know, Polly. What if some of those things that we've seen on the disaster shows were to happen here? Even just one of them?"

"I don't know, Jerry. But nothing has happened. No reason to think that will change, despite those shows. They just want to show exciting things to get ratings. Besides, if something was likely to happen, the government would step in and do something about it."

Jerry wasn't so sure about that, but he didn't want to upset Polly.

A few days later, as luck would have it, Jerry was in the office cafeteria having his lunch, when two men and a woman at the table behind him mentioned that they were all going to the big gun show that weekend.

Jerry had those two guns, but they weren't anything like most of the recommendations he'd seen on the prep forums. He decided then and there to go to the show and take a look around. See what was available and what the prices were.

He was stunned when he arrived and had a chance to look around the gun show. There was a myriad of choices. All expensive. Jerry went home depressed. He tried not to show it. He hadn't told Polly where he was going.

Then things seemed to be conspiring against him. Polly joyfully told him that a man where she worked was looking for a cheap hunting rifle for deer season. She told him about Jerry's .30-30 lever action and the .38 snubbie.

"He wants them both, Jerry! He said he'd pay three hundred for the two of them. I told him I had to talk to you, but since we are needing the money that you'd be glad to sell them."

Jerry was between a rock and a hard place. He'd just been looking to get something better, and here was Polly wanting to sell the only means of protection they had. But Polly was ecstatic. It was time to get the children clothes for the new school year and the money just wasn't there. He didn't have the heart to say no to the sale. He would have to come up with some other means to protect them, if something happened.

Every minute he wasn't working, sleeping, or eating, Jerry was on the internet, researching disaster preparedness. He thought about joining a local CERT group, but knew he didn't have the time for it, and from what he was reading, without his own provisions at home for safety, he'd just be leaving his family to their fate if he went out on a CERT mission. He wasn't about to do that.

He turned his thoughts to providing fallout protection in case of a terrorist act using a nuclear device or a dirty bomb in the area. He didn't even consider all out nuclear war. The idea became urgent when Iran announced that all US forces and civilians should leave Israel. It was the same as a declaration of a coming attack. And it could trigger Armageddon. All the news stations were urging people to get ready for an attack here on the US if war broke out in the Middle East.

Jerry immediately downloaded Cresson Kearny's "Nuclear War Survival Skills", probably the most highly recommended work on getting ready for a nuclear war fast and cheaply. The more he thought about things, as he read through the book, the closer to panic he came. There might really be a nuclear war and he simply wasn't ready or able to protect his family.

He checked his wallet. There was enough in it to fill up both vehicles with gasoline, buy some lumber and sheet plastic to build one of the expedient shelters in the book. He had the hand tools he would need, he was sure.

When he checked, the sedan was at seven-eighths full. That would do. He took the SUV and gassed it up. Finally, anyway. There was a long line. He filled the SUV and the two fuel cans he had for the rototiller and the lawn mower.

It was the same at the building superstore. Seemed everyone was in the same frame of mind. He was able to get the things he wanted, though the lumber had been picked through

thoroughly and only the rejects were left. He cleaned out the rack of the rather twisted pieces of dimensioned lumber needed for one of the smaller fallout shelters in the NWSS book.

He took more plastic than he thought he'd need, and all the solid core unframed doors, eight, that the place had. Though he had a shovel for garden work, Jerry decided to get another, just in case. In the same vein, he picked up several boxes of drywall screws. Yet another thought came to him and he picked up a spare battery for his cordless tool set.

Back home, Polly and the kids, Randy and Ellen, came out to see what Jerry was doing in the back yard. "I'm... uh... building a play house," Jerry said when Randy asked him the question. He knew it was lame, but it was all he could think of not to scare the children. Randy was eight and might understand a little. Six year old Ellen probably wouldn't understand and would just get scared.

Polly, having seen the printout of the NWSS manual on the desk in the living room looked more than a little upset. "It'll be okay," Jerry mouthed to Polly to reassure her without alarming Randy and Ellen.

Jerry filled the rototiller with gasoline and started it. He began to till the area where he would dig down for the shelter. It would be easier shoveling after the ground was tilled. Jerry worked until well past dark, asking Polly to keep his supper warm for him when she announced it was ready.

Just as it got dark and he was putting the tools away in the small lean-to shed against the back of the house, his neighbor, Mark Marsters walked over. "Fallout shelter?" he asked.

It stunned Jerry. "Uh... Well... Kind of a play..."

"It's a fallout shelter. Good for you. If you want, I'll lend a hand tomorrow."

"Uh... Mark... It's not going to be very big. I don't know if there will be room for..."

"That's okay, Jerry. We won't need space. We're covered. But like you, we don't have room for more than just the family."

Jerry could tell that Mark was deadly serious. The statement was a warning. Jerry suddenly wondered if Mark might be a prepper. Or even a survivalist. The second thought scared him slightly. But Mark had always been an okay guy. He'd trust him. "Sure, Mark. I'd appreciate all the help I can get."

"When I see you working I'll come over tomorrow."

"It'll be after church," Jerry replied.

Mark didn't comment. He just nodded and went back to his house.

Jerry was exhausted. He showered, put on his pajamas, and then ate the supper Polly had kept warm for him. "Are you sure about all of this?" Polly asked as she sat across the table from him while he ate.

"I have to do something, Polly. The news, even the main stream news, is talking possible nuclear war or terrorism."

"I probably shouldn't have sold those guns..."

"It's okay. We'll be fine. We're in a good neighborhood. We'll be fine."

The two went to bed, both wondering if they really would be.

The sermon the next day was about God helping those that helped themselves, and a call to get ready for war and to help the other church members to do the same.

Jerry was all for that. But he'd take care of his family first. Then, perhaps, he'd help some of the others, like Mark had said he'd help Jerry. When they returned home Jerry changed clothes and went into the back yard to begin digging again. Mark came over shortly after Jerry started the rototiller.

Jerry idled the machine down and told Mark, "I appreciate this. But I have to tell you, I can't pay you for your help. If you really don't want to help..."

"It's okay, buddy. You'd do the same for me, I think. You and your family are good people. I'd like to have you around to help, afterwards, if this goes the way I'm thinking it will."

"You think there will be nuclear war?"

"I'm sure of it. You till and I'll shovel for a while."

Jerry throttled up the tiller and began another pass. The trench for the shelter was already a foot deep, but needed to be four feet deep to provide enough earth to build up sidewalls to make the shelter taller and to cover the roof.

When they took their first break Mark asked Jerry, "How you fixed for food and water?"

"Not very well," Jerry admitted.

"You might want Polly to do a grocery run. We can add the water storage pit and fill it with tap water after we finish the shelter."

"Why are you helping me, Mark? No offense, but this is a lot of work."

"I'll tell you, Jerry. But you have to keep quiet about it. I think you will. I'm a prepper. I've been getting ready for disasters and war for years. Now, I'm not going to tell you I have a lot put back, because I don't. There is enough for my family. But the recovery is going to need good

people alive to help. I plan on being one. You and your family are good people. I'd like to see you there with me helping out others that can't help themselves."

"We just don't have the money..." Jerry admitted, his voice trailing away in shame.

"We may have a few days. Sell everything you don't have to have and buy all the shelf stable canned and packaged foods you can get. Things that don't need cooking. Include some comfort food, like cookies or candy.

"At least a few bottles of water so you can reuse them to hold the water from the water pit. And it would make it a lot nicer if you had a chemical toilet in the shelter, with plenty of toilet paper."

Jerry was listening avidly.

"It's not something I'd recommend normally. But if you have any credit left on credit cards, I'd use it for supplies."

"Okay Mark. We'll do that. And feel free to give me any more advice you think I need to know."

"Sure thing," Mark said with a grin. "I like spending other people's money."

Jerry managed a small smile. "Well, unfortunately, you won't be able to spend much of mine, since I don't have much."

"A little or a lot. One does what one must."

Jerry agreed wholeheartedly to that. He picked up the shovel and Mark fired up the rototiller and the two men got back to work.

That evening, another late one for Jerry, he talked to Polly about the situation, including what Mark had suggested they do.

"You're scaring me, Jerry!"

He took her in his arms. "I know, Sweetheart, I know. I'm scared, too. We can't let the children see it. If it doesn't happen, we'll just play in the shelter a few days and then fill it back in. And everything Mark suggested, except maybe the chemical toilet, are things we'll use eventually. We'd just be buying them sooner than normal. Do you know how much is left on the credit cards?"

Polly leaned back and wiped her eyes. "Not to the penny. Not a lot. Five or six hundred, all together."

"That's a lot more than I expected!" Jerry replied, pleased. "After you get off work tomorrow, go to that bargain place and stock up on... let's see... Mark called them shelf stable

foods. Canned and packaged stuff that doesn't have to be cooked. And what he called 'comfort food' like cookies and candy."

Polly was still sniffing slightly and dried her eyes on a Kleenex, but she nodded gamely. "I'd better get some girly stuff, too. It's almost that time."

"Of course," Jerry said. "Whatever you need."

When they went to bed, Jerry held Polly tightly until she fell asleep.

Jerry was eager to get home the next day. It was Monday, when he usually worked until midnight on the second job. But the place called and canceled the shift. He hated not to get the money, but it gave him more time to build the shelter.

They were keeping a radio going in the office and the news had been terrible. There were more announcements, this time by government figures, that preparations for nuclear war were necessary. FEMA was starting a crash program to get information to the masses. Most of it, Jerry discovered, was included in the NWSS book, and in the forums he'd been visiting every chance he could.

It was the talk of the office. Jerry didn't join in. He was afraid if he said he was building a shelter people might want to come to his house. Jerry now understood Mark's reluctance to let much information get out about his preps.

Even the children knew something was up a few days later. They'd been sent home with checklists and information on sheltering. Randy picked up on the fact that his dad wasn't building a play house. He was building a shelter.

"Daddy, I want to help build the shelter. Our teacher says there won't be a war, but Mr. McClellan, the bus driver says there will."

"But didn't your teacher give you the information you brought home?" Jerry asked his son, proud of him as he'd ever been.

"Yes. She said she didn't want to, for us not to worry about it, but the principle made her."

"I see. Well, this is pretty much big guy work..." Seeing the look on Randy's face, Jerry quickly continued, on the opposite track. "But, you know, there are some things you can help do."

"Really? What?" Randy asked eagerly.

"We'll be using lots of nails and screws. Could you keep them sorted out for us and bring what we ask for?"

"Sure, Daddy! That'll be easy!"

“Might be easy, but it’s important, because it saves Mark and me some time.”

Proudly, Randy checked the boxes of nails and screws with Jerry and listened carefully when he explained what each would be used for.

“You got a good boy there, Jerry,” Mark said quietly when Jerry came over to where he was placing the boards that would frame the entrance of the shelter.

“The long screws!” Jerry called to Randy. Randy ran over with a box of drywall screws.

“That’s the ones. Thanks,” Jerry said, taking the box and handing a screw to Mark.

“I wish mine took more of an interest in prepping. It’s really just me. The boys like shooting, and Jene is on board, but just barely.” The cordless screw shooter whined and the first two pieces of the framework were joined. Jerry placed the next and Mark screwed it up tight.

All that was left that night to do the next day was place the doors over the heightened trench and cover it up with dirt.

Just after six the next morning, while Jerry was getting ready for work and Polly was putting breakfast on the table, the power went out. “Not another one!” Jerry said, annoyed. They’d been getting occasional blackouts due to overloaded regional power grid. He finished dressing and went downstairs.

He turned on the small TV on the counter without thinking about it. “Power is off again,” he told Polly.

“Yes, I know. Jerry, do you think...”

Polly was interrupted when Mark ran up to the back door and knocked rather adamantly.

“This is it! Come on, Jerry. Let’s get your shelter finished! Polly, you might want to start moving food and gear...”

“It?” Jerry asked.

“That was an HEMP device that knocked out the electricity. The announcement on my NOAA All Hazards radio announced an attack in progress and then went down. We gotta hurry, man!”

“I’ll change, and...”

Mark gave Jerry an incredulous look. “Now?”

Jerry suddenly shook his head. "No. Of course not. It's just that this is almost unbelievable. Let's go. Polly, get started moving the food and stuff you got the other day to the shelter. Let the kids sleep until we come get them or they wake up on their own."

Polly, pale, could only nod. Jerry ran after Mark. To Jerry's surprise, Mark's two boys were in his back yard, placing doors across the trench. Mark grabbed a shovel and began to throw dirt over the first door. Jerry followed suit.

It took two hours of hard work to get the first layer of dirt placed over the doors, a sheet of plastic laid over it, and another layer of dirt put on top of the rain barrier. Mark sent his boys back home and told them to get into the shelter with their mother.

"I don't know how to thank you, Mark," Jerry said as Mark ran another screw into the frame for the Kearny Air Pump they were building to ventilate the shelter.

"Just come through this okay, and lend a hand when I ask, and that'll be thanks enough. Okay. That's it. Let's mount it and test it out. Oh. There's Polly. She needs help with the chemical toilet. I'll finish up the air pump."

Jerry ran to take the chemical toilet from Polly. "Randy is up," she said. "I have him filling the tubs with water. Is that the right thing to do?"

"Yes! It is. I should have thought of that."

When Jerry had the chemical toilet placed in the far end of the shelter, Mark started the air pump flapping. Jerry could feel the flow of air washing over him. "It's working!"

"Good," Mark said. "Now we really need to hurry. We might have days, but then again, we might just have minutes. Let's get started on the water pit."

"We're filling the tubs..."

"That's good. But you'll need water out here. I saw Polly bring two cases out. That won't be enough. I'll go get the tubing we'll need for the water pit. Start a long trench from below the outside faucet toward the shelter."

Jerry had the tiller going when Mark came back carrying a canvas bag, length of clear hose, a brick and some string. He dropped them onto the ground and grabbed a shovel. The two had a rhythm and soon had a trench fifteen feet long, the width of the tines on the tiller, two feet deep.

Mark helped Jerry spread out and place more plastic sheet in the trench, up the sides, lapping over the ground a full foot. Jerry turned the water faucet on and water began to fill the trench.

While the trench was filling with water, Mark and Jerry routed the hose into the shelter. Jerry sucked on the end of the hose until water began to flow. Mark had a small plastic valve with a barbed fitting on one end. He slipped the barb into the hose with a twisting motion.

Mark held the hose and Jerry opened the valve, directing the slow stream of water into a container placed there for that reason. Slow, but steady. Jerry cut off the valve and the two men went outside.

The trench was slowly filling. They didn't wait for it to fill completely. Another sheet of plastic was laid over the trench and the last two doors placed lengthwise over it, leaving just a small opening for the hose from the faucet to enter.

Mark reached into the canvas bag on the ground. "Okay, Jerry. That's about all I can do for you. Here's a radio and three sets of batteries. Turn it on at six every morning and six every evening starting two days after we get fallout. I know you don't have a radiation meter. You might try to make a Kearny meter, but I'll let you know what the radiation is doing as long as we can maintain radio contact.

"Leave the radio off, except for the set times, even if you hear other stuff going on. We'll keep our contacts short and sweet to avoid anyone finding us by triangulation. I'm going to join my family in our shelter. I suggest you do the same with yours. Well. After you turn off the water and other utilities in the house once the trench is full." The two men shook hands and Mark left without a further word.

It seemed to be an interminable time before the trench was full of water. While he waited for the trench to fill, he helped Polly move the rest of the things from the house to the shelter that were earmarked to take with them.

Jerry changed then, and then flipped the main breaker despite the power being off. He turned off the gas with a wrench he'd hung there shortly after getting interested in preps. After putting the long T-handle into the valve box for the water line Jerry ran back to check the level of water in the trench. It was nearly full.

Suddenly, as he was watching, the stream trailed off to nothing. Jerry ran back and turned off the stop valve with the T-handle and took the handle back to its hooks on the side of the house where it and a sewer cleanout tape were located.

When he turned around, Randy was headed toward the shelter, followed by Polly, with Ellen in her arms. Jerry ran over and helped Polly get Ellen down into the shelter. "It's dark, Daddy!"

"Here," Polly said, taking something from the pocket of her jeans. "It's a crank up flashlight. Never needs batteries."

"Good thinking," Jerry said, settling in beside her on the bench seat in the light from the flashlight. It really wasn't all that dark inside, but coming from bright sunlight to inside it had

seemed so. Ellen turned off the flashlight shortly afterwards, once her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Randy was looking over things in the shelter. He'd watched it being built but really hadn't been given a chance to see inside once it was mostly enclosed. "Wow," he said after a bit. "A real fallout shelter. Man, are the guys at school going to be jealous!"

Polly didn't think of it, and Jerry didn't have the heart to tell his son that he might not have many friends left at school, if they didn't have shelters, too.

The small crank up radio that Polly had found when she found the flashlights was placed near the entrance of the shelter, with the antenna in the entryway. All it picked up was static. An hour passed with nothing out of the ordinary happening.

"Jerry?" Polly asked. "Maybe nothing is going to happen. Maybe the power..."

Her words faded away when the ground shook slightly. A few seconds later a strong wind could be heard outside. The same thing happened again a few seconds later.

"I think that was it," Jerry said quietly. Polly began to cry and hug Ellen against her.

"What's wrong, Mommy? Why are we in the play house? I don't like it."

"I know, Honey, I know," Polly said, trying to control her emotions for her daughter's sake.

Randy moved over close to Jerry and sat down silently, his eyes huge in the faint light. Jerry put his arm around the boy and Randy leaned against him. It was quiet for a long time, but breakfast had been skipped and Randy and Ellen were hungry.

"I'm hungry, Momma," Ellen told her mother.

Polly bit her lip, but nodded. She moved over so she could get into one of the totes she'd used to pack things in to bring out to the shelter. "Cereal okay?"

"Can't we have pancakes?" Ellen asked.

"I'm sorry, Honey," Polly said, again fighting back tears. "No pancakes right now. We have Fruit Loops in the little box just for you."

Ellen's eyes lit up as she watched Polly open the package of individual cereal boxes, take out a Fruit Loops one, open a quart of Parmalat milk, and pour a portion in. Being very careful, Polly handed Ellen the box and a plastic spoon.

"May I have Rice Krispies?" Randy asked.

Polly went through the same procedure and soon Randy was eating his Rice Krispies. “Jerry?” Polly asked. He shook his head. He wasn’t hungry, and the food was going to need to last for an undetermined amount of time.

He reached over and picked up the cord that operated the air pump and began to swing the panel back and forth. As soon as he finished eating, Randy eagerly took over the pumping for a while.

The first bathroom run was awkward, but Jerry rigged a curtain at the end of the trench shelter, with the chemical toilet behind it.

The first full day in the shelter was something of an adventure for Ellen, and especially Randy. The second day, less so. Jerry eagerly turned on the walky-talky Mark had given him that evening right at six o’clock. It was a few minutes before it sounded.

“If you’re listening, Buddy, keep things short and concise. Don’t use names or say anything about anything we have or whereabouts. And we want to keep it short. You there?”

“Yes. We’re here. We’re okay.”

“Good. I’m keeping track of the fallout. Don’t go outside yet. Based on my calculations we only need to stay in shelter two weeks before we can take short trips outside. Can you hang on that long?”

“We’ll have to.” Jerry replied, looking over at his family.

“That’s the spirit. Next contact as scheduled.”

“Okay.” Jerry turned the radio off.

“That’s neat, Daddy! Can I play with it sometime?” Randy asked.

“Afraid not, Son. This is for use during this emergency. We’ll see about getting you your own set when we get out.”

Polly looked at Jerry with surprise. She wanted to ask how they would be able to get anything when they got out, much less toy radios.

The contact cheered everyone up. Despite the twice daily talks, the third day things had become tiresome. “Can’t I go watch TV, Mommy?” Ellen asked. “I don’t want to play in the playhouse anymore.”

“I’m sorry, no,” Jerry said. He knew Polly agonized every time she had to tell the children no about something now. “How about we play some word games?”

“Okay,” Ellen responded, sounding sad. “I guess.”

The time passed slowly, until the four began to sleep as much as possible. Jerry began to eat a little every day, knowing he would need his strength when they were able to leave the shelter. If they only had to stay two weeks, their food should hold out. But what about when they did go out? Jerry ate only what he had to.

It was a trial, to say the least. It wasn't just the two kids that wanted out of that trench shelter. But Jerry and Polly found it within themselves to keep them occupied when they weren't sleeping.

The day finally came when Mark told Jerry over the radio that the radiation was low enough to come out, as long as they were careful and didn't stir up the fallout dust. If it was inhaled it was still a danger.

Mark was already outside the next morning when Jerry cautiously left the shelter. Mark was dressed in a pair of protective coveralls with hood, and wore a respirator, rubber gloves, and rubber boots. Jerry was a bit taken aback before Mark identified himself.

"Didn't know if you had any..." Mark said, handing Jerry a box of P-95 dust masks. "I'd wear them while you're out, until we get a good rain to wash the fallout away. And I believe you'd be better off sleeping in the shelter for the mean time, just to reduce the radiation dose accumulation. Especially the children.

"Jerry?" It was Polly, speaking from the entrance to the shelter.

"It's okay, Polly. It's Mark." Jerry walked over and handed Polly the box of masks. "You and the kids put these on before you come out."

Polly took one of the masks out of the box and gave it to Jerry. She turned and ducked back down into the shelter. Jerry put his mask on and then looked around. Things didn't look any different to him. Though it was quiet. So quiet.

Mark's next words startled Jerry out of his reverie. "How are you doing on food?"

"Not much left."

"You didn't eat much the past two weeks, have you?" Mark asked. "You look thin."

Jerry shrugged. "Had to make sure there was enough for Polly and the kids." It suddenly struck him and he turned pale. "How am I going to feed them? The stores... probably aren't any left open, are there?"

"Well, there's open and then there's open. "I'm part of a group with a place not too far from here. I'm planning on taking the family there, but I'd really like to get more food myself, in case of delays. Therefore, I'm planning a salvage run to pick up what I can find."

Mark hesitated. "You want to go along? I could use some backup. Jene can do it, but I'd rather leave her here with the kids."

“Okay. Sure. I’d like to get a lot more food. And what about water? Winter is coming up... Heat... Sewer...” Jerry’s voice trailed away, a dejected look on his face.

“I tell you what,” Mark said, after a long pause. “You lend a hand to me, and I’ll take you with us to our bug out location. It might be tricky getting you in, but if you’ve proven yourself to me, I’ll do all I can. At the very least, it’s close to the National Forest. You’d probably be better off roughing it for a while until things settle down. You don’t have any firearms, do you?”

Jerry shook his head. Polly was standing there now and said, “I shouldn’t have sold them. I never thought...”

“It’s okay, Polly. Not everyone is comfortable with firearms in the house.” He looked at Jerry. “I have a couple of guns I got specifically to hand out to some of the group that might not have enough of their own.

“It’s not a first line battle weapon, and it’s bigger than a pistol, but in my way of thinking it fits the bill for unskilled shooters.”

“What is it?” Jerry asked. Ne knew next to nothing about guns.

“An Auto-Ordnance clone of the .30 caliber M1 Carbine developed in World War Two. It’s small and light enough to keep slung across your back most of the time, and a lot easier to handle than an effective handgun. I can have you up and running with one in just a few minutes.”

Jerry didn’t hesitate. He wanted something with which he could protect his family. He really didn’t want a handgun. And Mark’s explanation about the carbine being handier and easier to shoot than a big rifle made sense. “Okay. I’d like that. Can we do that now?”

“Absolutely. The sooner the better. I want to go get what we can as soon as we can.”

“Jerry?” Polly asked, looking concerned even with the dust mask on.

“It’ll be okay, Polly. I’ll be back as soon as possible, with some extra food. And a means to protect us.”

“From what?”

Jerry looked at Mark.

“There will be people out to take whatever they can get. That includes, I’m sad to say, women and children. The reason I’m sure you can imagine. Plus there are going to be feral animals that are starving and will attack a person that shows any fear. For the moment, why don’t you and the kids join Jene in the house? You can get a shower and change clothes. Jene can lead you through the decontamination procedure. I’ll let her know when I get the M1 Carbine.”

He was gone before either Jerry or Poly could say anything. “Jerry?” asked Polly again.

“It’ll be okay,” Jerry replied. “Mark is a prepper, not a survivalist. He’s willing to take us with him to a better place to stay for a while. You can check, but simple logic tells me that all the city services are down, not to mention the supply lines for food, fuel, and everything else.”

“Okay. I’ll get the children.”

Jerry looked over at the house. Randy and Ellen were playing with their outdoor toys. His resolve hardened even more as he looked at them. Mark was back and Polly gathered up Randy and Ellen and headed for the back door of the Marsters’ house. Jene was waiting for them.

Turning his attention to Mark, Jerry listened attentively as he went through a short gun safety talk. Then Mark showed Jerry the ins and outs of the .30 M1 Carbine.

He had a chest rig from Auto-Ordinance with eleven pouches that held two 15-round magazines each. Jerry put it on and adjusted it, and then slung the Carbine over his shoulder.

“What do you think?” Mark asked.

“I think I can handle it. I wish I could get a chance to shoot it before I need it.”

“We might get a chance. I hope so. I don’t want to have to deal with hostiles if I can avoid it. And we will avoid all we can. I plan on salvage, not looting. We only take things where it is obvious the owner is no longer around.”

“Good,” Jerry said. “I had some doubts about taking stuff from people.”

“We won’t be. Only abandoned goods. I’ll get the truck out. You have a canteen or something to carry some water in? We won’t likely be able to use what we find unless it’s bottled. You’ll need some before that.”

Jerry ran to get two bottles of water from the shelter. He set them in cup holders in Mark’s truck when Mark drove it out of the garage and stopped. Jerry unslung the Carbine and climbed into the passenger seat.

Mark asked, “Have you tried to start your vehicles? I’m sure we had a HEMP device go off. This truck is mainly non-electronic and runs fine.”

“I haven’t tried. You think the SUV won’t run? It’s pretty new,” Jerry replied.

“That’s the problem. Probably has all kinds of computers in it. Not likely to have survived the EMP. But I’d sure try when we get back. I’d like to have another working vehicle for the trip, if possible.”

Jerry knew what HEMP and EMP was from the emergency broadcasts before the war. He just hadn’t applied the knowledge to his own situation. It was disappointing to think he and his whole family might be on foot for the foreseeable future.

Seeing Jerry look closely at the houses on either side and across the street, Mark told him, "I've checked everything close. Either gone before the war, or dead. I already took what little food I found."

"Oh. Did you bury the bodies?"

Mark shook his head. "I wanted to... But even with the two of us, it would take too long to do, even if we could find a backhoe or something. We're going to be running into dead bodies. Another reason for the mask."

Jerry swallowed and nodded. He wasn't looking forward to this jaunt at all.

Jerry was tired and hungry, despite being nauseated from what they'd found, when they returned to his house with a truck load of food and other consumables. It had been bad. Not only had people died from radiation poisoning, but they saw the remains of what were undoubtedly gun battles. But they'd cleaned out two C-stores not too far away of everything Mark thought might be needed or useful. It was all in the pickup bed.

His nausea was from the dead bodies, including the two dogs he'd had to shoot to protect Mark. He'd handled the Carbine just fine, and was pleased with its performance. After all, the 200-yard ballistics, Mark had told him, were slightly better than a .357 Magnum revolver at the muzzle. He had it slung over his back when he and Mark began to carry items from the truck to the Cain house. Mark wore a pistol on his hip.

After they were finished with the Cain goods, the two began to carry the rest of the items into the Marsters' house. Polly and Jene were drinking coffee and talking. When Mark and Jerry entered the house with their first load, Jene called the boys in from the living room where they were playing board games with Randy and Ellen, and their sister, Sally.

With the boys' help it was the matter of just a few minutes to get the truck unloaded and then back into the garage. "Don't want people to get any ideas," Mark explained to Jerry.

Polly headed for the Cain house with Randy and Ellen as Jerry went into the garage to try and start their vehicles. Mark was right. Neither would start. Both would turn over but that was the limit of it. Sadly, Jerry closed the door of the SUV and went into the house from the garage.

"Your gun?" Polly asked.

"Can I see it?" Randy asked before Jerry could respond.

"Not right now, Randy. But I will show you all about it. You and Ellen both."

Polly had a very disproving look on her face, which faded somewhat as Jerry continued.

“I want you to know how to handle them and not get hurt or hurt anyone by accident. But right now, we need to eat and I want to clean up before we go to bed. For the moment it’s just hands off or you’re in big trouble.”

“We are sleeping in here, aren’t we?” Polly asked.

Jerry had to shake his head. “Mark thinks it best if we use the shelter until the dose rate is a lot lower. Especially the kids and I don’t want them out there alone.” Jerry hung the Carbine by its sling on one of the key hooks by the garage door.

After eating, Polly took Randy and Ellen out to the shelter to put them to bed and get some sleep herself. Jerry, unwilling to ask Mark if he could shower over there, stripped down and took a thorough sponge bath in the master bedroom bathroom using water from the tub. It was cool, but not cold and felt great on Jerry’s grimy skin.

He took the Carbine with him when he went out to the shelter to join Polly and the kids. He was exhausted and fell asleep quickly.

The alarm clock sounded early the next morning and Jerry got up, used the chemical toilet, and then left the shelter. Mark was waiting for him. “You up for more salvage work?”

Jerry nodded. “Let me get something to eat and a water bottle and I’ll be right with you.”

“Okay.”

Mark was waiting patiently when Jerry came back up out of the shelter with a can of Vienna sausage in one hand and two bottles of water. He was wearing the chest rig and had the Carbine slung over his shoulder.

“You’re learning. You don’t want to be without a weapon until we are somewhere safe,” Mark said. He led the way to his truck.

“You don’t think we’re safe here?” Jerry asked.

“Not really,” Mark replied. “Maybe for the time being, but not long term. There will be others doing what we’re doing. Salvaging outside of their own little world. Don’t worry about Polly and the kids. The boys are keeping an eye out.”

“They have guns?” Jerry asked, surprised for some reason.

“Of course. They have carbines like yours until they graduate to full power rifles.”

“I see. Okay. Thank you. And thank them for me when we get back.”

“Sure thing.” Suddenly Mark swung the truck hard left. A bullet hole appeared in the side glass just behind Jerry’s head and scraped along the back glass until it hit the far side metal frame of the cab.

Mark gunned the engine and the two got away from the ambush as quickly as possible. Jerry looked around and saw the bullet hole. Had Mark not swerved, the bullet would be in Jerry's head. "I didn't see a thing!"

"Gotta keep the peepers going all the time," Mark chided Jerry slightly. "Our safety and the safety of our families depend on it."

"Yeah. Yeah. I'll be paying a lot more attention now, I hope to tell you." And he did. Jerry's eyes and head never stopped moving. The goal that morning was a large sporting goods place. When they went inside through the frame of the door that was ripped off its hinges, both men had guns in their hands.

Moving cautiously, the two headed for the gun area first. Not unexpectedly, there wasn't a single gun in sight. There were big gaps on the shelves where ammunition had been taken, too. "Thought this might be the case," Mark said. "Let's load up what we can use."

".30 Carbine," Jerry said, grabbing an overturned shopping cart and righting it. He took all the .30 Carbine ammunition he could find while Mark was getting what he could find for his other guns. There wasn't any .45 ACP, .308, or 12 gauge. No 20 gauge, either. But there was plenty of 10 gauge, 16 gauge, 24 gauge, 28 gauge, 32 gauge, and a little .410 bore shotgun ammunition.

"Wow! You have guns for all of this?" Jerry asked.

"Not actually. I have a set of three H&R/NEF Pardner single shot shotguns and adapters. I can use all of this in one or the other of them with the adapters."

"Wow!" Jerry repeated. He'd had no idea such a thing could be done. After taking all the ammunition, cleaning supplies, and other accoutrements, Mark led the way toward a display of game carts.

"We're taking all of these. All models," Mark said.

"What are they?"

"Game carts. Or, in our case, evacuation carts in case the truck breaks down and we have to hoof it the rest of the way to the bug-out location. Can carry so much more on one of them than you can on your back. But you'll all need a pack. Including little Ellen."

"She and Randy have school packs," Jerry said.

"They good ones?"

"Uh... Not as good as these," Jerry said, picking up a pair of packs suitable for his two children.

Mark just gathered all of the display models up and heaped them onto the cart. "We can maybe trade some of these off. Never know."

They went from section to section, adding winter clothing, knives and other tools, life jackets, and on and on until the truck bed was heaped full. Jerry helped Mark spread the cargo net over everything and secure it.

Taking a different route, they headed for home. They were close, and had avoided the earlier sniper, when they heard gunshots from ahead. The two men exchanged a quick look. Mark brought the truck to a slow stop and took it out of gear. He grabbed his rifle when he climbed out of the truck. Mark locked the doors and disabled the engine and then told Jerry, "Follow my lead. Make sure there isn't anything behind your target that might get hurt if a bullet goes through. Not likely with the .30 Carbine, but possible. Follow me."

Carbine in hand, Jerry followed Mark toward the sound of the shots. Sure enough, the Marsters' house was being fired upon.

Mark stopped and motioned Jerry to move over to one side. Then he lifted his rifle and began to fire. Jerry only hesitated a moment. He began to fire as accurately and as quickly as he could. His family was in that house under siege and he was determined to keep them safe at any cost.

Three of the four attackers went down from the first few rounds. The fourth turned and began to fire at Mark and Jerry. But a shot from the house put him down. Jerry started forward, but Mark waved him back. With his rifle slung, but pistol in hand, Mark edged toward the closest shooter. A hard kick brought no response and Mark moved to the next one.

Jerry, having learned his lesson, was keeping watch all around, not just forward. He saw the barrel of a gun ease around the corner of the house next door. Jerry yelled at Mark and then ran toward that house, firing as he went.

Mark tried to get his rifle up again, but one of the men on the ground wasn't dead and Mark had to engage him or get shot in the back. When Jerry made the turn around the edge of the house he realized his mistake. The man was at the other corner and was waiting for Jerry.

Jerry was lucky again, and he knew it. He hit the ground rolling and came up shooting, just like a character in a movie. The man had stepped out to get a better shot at Jerry, but took a .30 slug high in his right shoulder. He dropped the gun and turned to run. Jerry was already shooting again and two bullets went into the center of the man's back. Jerry felt a little bad about that. For a moment.

He ran back toward Mark when another shot sounded, this one a pistol. Jerry slid to a stop when he saw Mark standing over the fourth of the initial attackers.

"How many of you are there?"

The man screamed. "Just us! Just five! Don't kill me, mister! I'll leave and never come back!"

Jerry jumped when Mark pulled the trigger of his pistol and the man seemed to shiver slightly as he died. It took a few seconds for Jerry to reconcile the action with the situation. He didn't mention it to Mark as the two of them began to check the bodies and gather up the men's weapons and everything else of use.

"Hey, Jerry," Mark said. He was checking the one Jerry had chased and killed while Jerry was standing guard, just in case. "You hit the jackpot. This one has a couple rolls of silver coins and a few gold coins on him. Yours by right of spoils of war."

"I don't know... Doesn't seem right," Jerry said.

"Now, if I knew he had a family, and knew a way to get this to them, and stay safe doing it, I'd try to do it. I don't', and we can't. Times are different. I won't take things from someone's mouth, but I'm not leaving anything useful behind if I don't have to. You are really going to need this at some point in time. I'm taking it, if you don't want it."

"Okay. You convinced me." Jerry took the coins from Mark and felt a little shiver go down his back. But it was gone in an instant as the knowledge that he wasn't penniless any more in these new days and times.

Leaving the bodies where they lay, Mark and Jerry carried everything they'd gathered up to Mark's house. It took two trips. On the first one Mark and Jerry had to take a few minutes to calm Polly and Jene down. The boys were still carrying their M1 Carbines and keeping an eye out.

There were bullet holes in the walls and both front windows were shattered. But no one was hurt, due to the quick action Jene had taken to get everyone down on the floor. The house had thick planter boxes up to the level of the windows. They were bullet proof up through .50 BMG and had saved lives, more than justifying the cost several years earlier.

"We need to get out of here as soon as we can," Mark said to Jerry as they carried the last of the attackers goods to the house. "This may become routine. If those five have friends and family they may come looking for them."

Jerry nodded. He wasn't sure how he and his family could go with Mark without a working automobile of some kind. Preferably a pickup, van, or large SUV. He mentioned it to Mark.

"I know. I was hoping to find something operating that would do, but we just never ran across anything I thought would fit the bill. Oh. But don't worry. You saved my life back there. I'm going to do my best to get you to the retreat and get you invited in.

“So, we’ll make one more run, get a big trailer and load it up, with everyone riding the truck. My boys and you in the bed; Polly, Randy, and Ellen in the rear seat; Jene and Sally up front with me.”

“I hate to put you out...”

“Don’t worry about it. We’re both better off with the others around. I didn’t know what I was going to do, going it alone with my family. You and your family make it easier, even with the additional requirement.”

“Thanks. I can never thank you enough for helping me get the shelter built in time. We’d all probably be dead if you hadn’t.”

“Not a problem. When I saw what you were doing, I decided you had what it takes to survive. The will, if not the immediate means.”

When they got back to the house, Mark laid out the plan. He included not only Polly, Jene, and the boys, but Randy and Ellen, too.

“Now, Jerry and I are going out to get a trailer. Each of you load up what you plan on taking with you in the packs and totes we brought back. And remember, you probably won’t be coming back this way, ever. Even if you do, the chances of anything being intact are slim. But don’t overdo it. Jene, we’ve talked about this before. You can help Polly.”

Calm now, Jene nodded. “Of course.”

“Boys,” Mark said, looking at his twins, Barry and Colin, “I want one of you with each group on alert. Leave your gear until we get back to keep watch.”

Both boys nodded. They were only fifteen, but had fallen in with their father’s prepping more willingly than had Jene. And Sally, like Ellen, was just too young to fully understand what was happening.

Mark and Jerry headed directly to the closest U-haul place, though they both kept an eye out for trouble. It was the matter of a few seconds with Mark’s Stanley 30” entry bar to get inside the office and get the keys to the locks on the trailer hitches. Jerry unlocked the largest of the trailers as Mark backed the truck up. A few minutes later and they were ready to go.

They made it back to the houses without incident. Mark stood guard while Jerry began loading up what was already packed up and sitting by the garage. When Barry and Colin had their things ready and loaded, they began helping Jerry, Polly, and Randy. Jene was entertaining Sally and Ellen and fixing a meal for everyone.

It took four hours to sort out, pack, and load up everything. Jerry did a final walk through of his house, with Polly, basically saying good-bye to their old life.

With the most important packs in the pickup bed as seats, Jerry, Barry, and Colin took their positions, with their carbines. The 98-gallon fuel tank took up some of the room, but was crucial to getting to the retreat. Mark had been keeping it full, as well as the truck's dual tanks since things began to heat up. They had not used all that much fuel in the salvage operation.

With everyone else in the cab of the truck, Mark put it in gear and eased out onto the street. Though it was a longer route and would take longer, Mark turned right instead of left. There was too big of a risk of running into some of the people that had seen them salvaging in that direction. The loaded down truck, plus the trailer would be irresistible for anyone of a mind to take things that belonged to others.

They didn't travel far, as per the plan Mark and Jerry had come up with before they left. Just to the KOA outside of the city. Many cautious eyes watched them as they pulled in. Jerry and the boys kept their carbines ready, but made no aggressive moves. These were people like themselves. People just trying to survive the aftermath of a nuclear war.

The KOA boasted a propane tank for filling portable bottles, the toilets were pit type requiring no water for flushing, and there were showers, though they no longer worked with the water out. No power either, but still better than 'out there'.

Mark found an easy spot to park. Everyone disembarked and Polly and Jene took the kids to the bathrooms, with Barry acting as guard. Most of those in the immediate area were armed, but the people were keeping them holstered or slung.

Mark had the Marsters camp set up quickly, having been camping often. It took Barry's and Colin's help to get the Cain tent up with Jerry. It was one of the items taken from the sporting goods store and totally new to Jerry.

Polly helped Jene get supper ready on their camp stove as sleeping pads and bags were laid out in the tents. Randy, Sally, and Ellen were really dragging and were put to bed as soon as the meal was finished. Polly and Jene soon followed.

Mark worked out a schedule with Barry, Colin, and Jerry to keep a watch during the night. Barry would be first watch, then Mark, Jerry, and finally Colin. It would give the two boys the maximum uninterrupted sleep possible.

Emotionally and physically exhausted, Jerry had a hard time staying awake during his watch. But he got up and moved around, staying within the confines of their two camps so as not to disturb anyone else. He wasn't alone in standing guard. He exchanged nods with the other camps' guards, visible in the bright moonlight.

It was chilly when Jerry woke Colin and Jerry suggested Colin bring a jacket. It was downright cold when Polly woke Jerry two hours later. But a hot breakfast and the rising sun soon dispelled the cold, leaving it cool, but bright and sunny.

Loaded up again, Mark headed got back on the interstate, headed for the retreat location. There were roadblocks that had to be bypassed, but they were natural, not manned to stop

travelers. Mostly vehicles that died when the HEMP device killed computers and other electronics across the entire US.

Some had lost control and there were multi-car pileups here and there. But each one was studied from the moment Mark saw one and stopped. Any indications of people and Mark would turn around and hightail it away. If nothing looked out of place, he'd drop the truck into four wheel drive and go down onto the side of the road, or the median, and go around the blockage.

It was a long, slow trip, but just at dark Mark pulled up to the gate on a county road and stopped the truck. He exited, telling everyone to stay in the truck. His hands out to his sides he approached the gate.

A man called from the edge of the forest through which the road went, "State your business. This is private property and we don't want visitors."

"It's Mark Marsters and family, plus guests."

A red light flared just slightly as the guard checked a piece of paper. "Where's your challenge coin?"

Mark opened his right hand to show a large silver round. The man stepped forward and took a quick look at the coin. "Okay. You're who you say. But you know the rules about extra people."

"I know. But they are good people. The father saved my life, and he and his family are willing to work for their keep. Ask Helen Goodrich to okay it."

The man turned toward the forest and said, "Do it."

Mark could barely hear the other man in the forest speaking softly into a walky-talky. After a couple of minutes the second man said a single word. "Okay."

The first guard unlocked and slid the gate open so Mark could drive through. "You know the drill," the guard told Mark through the open window.

Mark nodded and eased the truck up the dirt road. There were half a dozen people waiting, all armed, when Mark stopped before what looked like a lodge in a large national park. Which it essentially was, only privately owned, and set up for long term self-sufficient living for the mutual aid group that Mark was a member of.

An elderly woman walked up to the truck before Mark could get out. "Mark. You know the rules. Give me a very good reason not to have your guests taken to town and dropped off."

"Helen, I know it's frowned upon, but we did make provisions to accommodate a few extra people that we decided would be of benefit to the group."

"And how can these people benefit the group?"

“Well... They’re good people. Jerry saved my life, and has done everything requested of him from the time we got out of the shelters.”

“He had a shelter?”

“Built one of the Kearny plans in NWSS. And though not a shooter, he used one of my handout guns to good effect a couple of times. He can be trained for just about anything, I think.”

“So he has some spunk and is trainable. I suppose that’s good enough, on your recommendation. They can stay, on probation, for a month. If the council decides they go at that time, they go.”

Mark turned around in his seat and looked at Jerry through the back window of the truck. “You’ve heard it all. That okay?”

“It’s okay. And we appreciate it very much. Even if we can’t stay more than a month, it will give us a chance to get ready to go it alone.”

Helen’s left eyebrow lifted slightly, though it was too dark for Mark to see it. It meant she was at least a little impressed. Jerry definitely had some spunk and was willing to play by their rules, without any whining or begging. Just acceptance and a plan to take advantage of the situation to the betterment of his family.

“Okay. By coincidence, the unit next to yours is still empty,” Helen told Mark. More softly she added, “We have it on good authority that Johnny Parker and his family won’t be joining us.”

“Oh, no! Not Johnny! I thought sure he’d be one of the first ones here,” Mark said.

“I know. I as well. But they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Visiting a relative in the hospital in the city near where they lived.”

“Luck of the draw, I guess,” Mark said.

“Yeah. Makes it easier for your friend, but that’s the way things go,” Helen replied. “Go ahead and go over. Get settled and we’ll fill you and the newbies in on things here tomorrow. Get your watch rotation and work assignments.”

Mark started the truck and pointed it at an even more narrow track that cut into the forest. They passed five small log bungalows before stopping at one. Everyone piled out of the truck, except for Randy, Ellen, and Sally, who were still asleep. Enough of the Cain’s goods were moved into the bungalow for the night, and then Mark moved the truck and they did the same with the Marsters’ stuff.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Mark told Jerry.

“Okay. Thanks for getting us in, Mark. We won’t let you down.”

“I know. That’s why I decided to let you come along.” He held out his hand and Jerry shook it.

It took a few days for Jerry and his family to become accepted by the other members of the MAG, due in part to the fact that they were taking the place of one of the most respected members. But accepted they were, and Jerry and his family tackled the problems of the Post Apocalyptic World with a vengeance, determined to make a contribution to not only the MAG, but to civilization as a whole as it clawed its way back into existence.

End *****

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