

Just In Case - Prolog

Justin Case's parents had a slightly warped sense of humor. Thus Justin was the name Allen and Dorinda Case chose for their son's name, with no middle initial. But there was more than just humor involved.

Allen and Dorinda were believers in the saying, Just In Case. They were preppers from way back, and raised Justin to be the same. So he didn't mind the ribbing, much, anyway, that he received while growing up.

He wore the name proudly as an adult. Justin inherited his parent's preps when they died in an automobile accident when he was twenty-three. He already had an impressive set of equipment and supplies himself when they died. Once the house was emptied and cleaned up to be put on the market, Justin was in very good shape, prep wise.

With the money from the sale of his parent's house, he was able to fill the major hole in his preps. Namely, a good multi-purpose shelter. There was enough money to build a not quite, but close to, his idea of an ideal shelter.

Justin, twenty-five now, had equipment and supplies, just in case of a multitude of possibilities that would result in the demise of the society he grew up in and was living in at the moment.

Just In Case – Chapter 1

“Please, Mary?” Justin asked. “I really think you’ll enjoy it.”

“There is no way I’m going to shoot a gun. You know I hate them. And you know why.”

Justin sighed. Mary’s younger brother had been killed with a handgun during a robbery at the convenience store where he was the night clerk. Her hatred of guns dated from that time. “I’m worried about things, Mary. You are on your own a great deal. I sure would feel better if you kept a gun handy and knew how to use it.”

“Absolutely not. I think you should leave.”

With another sigh Justin got up from the sofa and headed for the front door of Mary’s apartment. He looked back with his hand on the door knob. Mary had a stony look on her face. “You pretty much stepped in it this time,” Justin muttered as he took the elevator down to the parking garage under the apartment building.

Justin’s cell phone rang just as he was pulling out of the garage. It was Mary. The call was a short one and one sided. Justin heard Mary say, “Don’t come back,” and then the click of the call ending.

“I guess that is that,” Justin mused. He shook his head. “Probably for the best.”

But Justin was down when he stopped into the bar he occasionally frequented, Cleveland’s Bar. He still didn’t know how it got its name. It wasn’t anywhere near Cleveland. He took the booth in the back, as was his wont, and waited for the cocktail waitress to come around for his order. Justin only noticed the waitress when she spoke. “What can I get you?”

“My regular,” Justin said, looking up. “Oh. You’re new. Guess you don’t know my regular, do you?”

“Afraid not. But tell me now and I’ll know in the future.”

Suddenly Justin wasn’t feeling as low as he had been. The waitress was something to look at. Pretty face; slim, trim body; very nice eyes. And dimples when she smiled.

Justin smiled back. He couldn’t help it. She was just one of those people that brought a smile to one’s face.

“Oh. The drink. A snifter of Hennessy VSOP.” Justin couldn’t stop looking at the woman as she walked away.

“Hey, Justin! Long time, no see!”

Justin looked around. One of his few friends, Dirk Stonehouse, had slid into the booth across from him. He was carrying a bottle of beer.

“Hello Dirk. How’s it going? Been a while, for sure.”

“I’ll say. Been up to my eyeballs. People are buying and selling coins like there’s no tomorrow. Not just bullion coins, either. Numismatics are coming in like crazy. Whole collections. People taking advantage of the high spot prices now. What do you think of the new waitress?”

“Never slow down, do you? Dirk. Good to hear business is so good. And I don’t really have an opinion of the new waitress. Just saw her for the first time.”

Both men looked up when the waitress returned with Justin’s snifter of cognac. Justin brought out his wallet and paid her, leaving his usual twenty-percent tip.

“Why, thank you very much!”

Before she could turn around, Justin asked her, “What’s your name? If you don’t mind me knowing.”

“I don’t mind. It’s Dorinda.”

“You’re kidding!” Justin said, surprised. “My mother’s name was Dorinda.”

“Well isn’t that just a coincidence,” Dorinda said. “And what would your name be, if I might be so bold as to ask?”

Justin smiled. “Justin. Justin Case.”

“Ain’t that a name for ya’!” Dirk said. “Just In Case. Like the saying. He doesn’t have a middle initial. It’s just Just In Case.”

“Dirk has an annoying sense of humor,” Justin said with a sour look.

“I think your name is cute. Like you. Gotta go. Customers await.”

“I don’t believe it,” Dirk said as the two men watched Dorinda walk away. “She was flirting with you. She’s nice to me, alright, but brushes off any flirtation other guys try.”

“She has good taste,” replied Justin, his eyes back on his friend’s face. “And besides, what would Margery think?”

“Funny. Not.” Dirk shook his head. “You know I don’t flirt... anymore. You’d better watch it. I’ll tell Mary.”

“Don’t bother,” Justin said. “She just told me we are no longer a couple.”

“Oh. Sorry, man. Didn’t know. What happened?”

“Tried to get her to go shooting with me again. I guess it was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Too many hours at work without calling her, my...” Justin lowered his voice, “My preps. She considers me a hoarder. We just really aren’t compatible. I guess it’s good to know now, rather than later.”

“That’s the truth. Margery and I had some rocky times, early on, before she finally came on board with the idea of being prepared... Wait for it... Wait for it... Just In Case!” Dirk laughed long and loud. Several people looked around.

“Come on, Dirk. You’re making a scene,” Justin said, his voice low.

“Aw, come on, Justin. You know it’s funny.” He wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. But he did lower his voice. “Okay. So, speaking of preps, how well are you set up? You’ve seen the gold and silver prices. And the dollar down. Everything going on overseas. The strange weather. We’re good for at about six months, if we’re careful and the ‘gubmint’ don’t wind up taking much of it.”

Justin nodded. “About the same. Well. It’s for two people, so I guess I have food for almost a year. Wish it was more. Especially the gold and silver. I was buying regularly, but stopped when the price went over twelve-hundred for gold and twenty for silver.

“Should have bought more when the price was still reasonable when I got the money from the house. Shoulda, coulda, woulda.”

“I know what you mean,” Dirk replied after taking a swallow of his beer. “I stopped quite a bit earlier. Be nice to have more,” Dirk couldn’t prevent a slight chuckle. “Just in case the economy really does tank.”

“I don’t think it is a matter of if,” Justin replied. “I think it’s a when thing. And a soon, when thing.”

“I sure hope not. I’ll take a physical disaster over a financial one, any time.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Justin said. He took a small sip of the cognac. “You know TOM, over at Frugal’s, says God has a sense of humor. You might just get what you wish for.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dirk laughed.

“Don’t laugh. If there is a physical disaster, it could well lead to a financial one. Worst of both worlds.”

“You sure know how to rain on a parade, old son.” Dirk finished the beer and put the bottle on the table. “That’s my limit. I gotta hit the road. Margery will seriously maim me if I’m late getting home tonight. Her old high school girlfriend is in town and the collective ‘we’ are taking her out to dinner. That of course means I’m paying.”

“I’ll see you at the range Saturday?” Justin asked.

“Plan on it,” Dirk replied. He gave a wave and left the bar.

Dorinda was already at the booth, clearing the bottle away when Dirk went through the outer door. “Heard you mention a range. Is that as in ‘shooting range’? I’m new in town and I’m looking to get in some practice sometime soon.”

“You’re a shooter?” Justin asked. “And, yes, it is a shooting range we mentioned. Just outside of town. I can give directions if you want.”

“I shoot some. I’d appreciate the directions. I’ll get a notepad and pen.”

“No need,” Justin said, withdrawing a Write-in-the-rain pocket notebook and a Fisher Space pen.

Dorinda watched as Justin wrote in his small, tight script. When he tore out the page he handed it to her. “Dirk and I are shooting this Saturday at eleven, if you want a spotter.”

“Thank you!” Dorinda said, slipping the paper into her waitress apron after taking a quick look at it. “It’s a date.” She hurried away when a patron signaled her for another drink.

“Date?” Justin muttered. “I wasn’t asking for a date. Was I?” He took the last swallow of the cognac and put the empty snifter on the table, half covering the additional hefty tip he left.

Justin wondered the rest of the week whether Dorinda would actually show up or not. He didn’t mention anything to Dirk when they got to the range. Dirk saw the vehicle first. “Wow! Would you look at that Jeep! Makes my Blazer look piddly. You have some competition in the vehicle area now, Justin.”

“So I see,” Justin replied. He parked the Suburban and the two stopped a moment to admire the heavily customized Jeep Commander. Like Justin’s Suburban, the Jeep Commander had custom front and rear bumper assemblies and a custom roof rack. All three racks had fitted canvas covers very similar to the way Justin carried his.

“Like to meet the guy that owns this,” Dirk said as they went into the shooting range office.

“Well, I see you made it,” Justin told Dorinda when he and Dirk entered the office. She was talking to the pro-shop clerk.

“You knew she’d be here?” Dirk asked Justin.

“Arranged it that day at the bar,” Justin said. Then he asked the clerk, “You know who has the custom Jeep Commander out front?”

“Actually,” Dorinda said, raising one hand slightly, “That would be me.”

“Nice rig,” Justin said.

“I’ll say,” Dirk added. “You and Justin must read the same prep forums. Your Commander and his Suburban look like they could be twins, except for the make and model.”

“You guys ready to shoot?” Dorinda asked. “I have to go to work at three this afternoon.”

“Sure,” Dirk said, hoisting a long gun case and a pistol case.

Justin was pulling a wheeled Hardigg iM3300 two-gun hard case. He nodded and the three headed for the roofed firing area behind the office and shop. Dorinda was carrying a single long gun case and a pistol case similar to Dirk’s.

They were able to take adjoining firing booths and began to unpack their guns. Dirk took out his FN-FAL 7.62mm x 51mm from the long gun case, and took two handguns from the pistol case. A pair of Colt 1911A1 .45 ACPs.

Justin opened up the iM3300 and removed the soft case from within it. He then proceeded to take out the two long guns it contained. One was an M1A Super Match black polymer stock with stainless steel barrel. An aftermarket flash hider with bayonet lug was installed, as was a bipod.

The second long gun was a highly customized Remington 11-87 12 gauge shotgun set up for tactical use.

Justin removed two pistols from one of the pouches on the soft case. A Para Ordnance P-10 Warthog .45 ACP and a Para-Ordnance P-12 .45 ACP. From another pouch Justin brought out a full size Para-Ordnance P-14 .45 ACP.

He removed loaded magazines for the rifle and all three pistols from another set of pouches on the soft case, and removed a box of 12 gauge shotgun shells from another.

Justin and Dirk watched with interest as Dorinda uncased her guns. The first one both Justin and Dirk thought was an M1A at first. But once it was completely out of the case, both realized that it wasn’t.

“Is that a BM-59?” Justin asked, running through his head a list of likely weapons. It was the only thing he could think it might be.

“Sure is,” Dorinda said. “Most people mistake it for an M1A or M-14. It’s one of the semi-auto only models, with, as you can see, the tri-comp, grenade launcher sight, and bipod.”

“Very nice!” Justin said. “Don’t see many of those around. Right up there in the cream of the crop status.”

Dorinda smiled. "Not to make you salivate or anything... This one is one of seven consecutively serial numbered BM-59s my uncle bought for the family when they were first available. Five-hundred magazines and two-hundred-fifty-thousand rounds of GI surplus FMJ ammunition in stripper clips. Uncle Greg was trying to get the family ready for the next world war he believed was coming. Nuke war."

"Holy moley!" Dirk exclaimed. "How much is left?"

"Almost all of it," Dorinda replied. "Just used a few thousand rounds of the ammunition over the years."

"Do you have any idea how much that set up is worth?" Dirk asked then.

Dorinda smiled. "I do. But it isn't for sale. Any of it." She grinned at Justin. "Everything is for one of those Just In Case situations."

Dirk slapped Justin on the back and laughed. "Ha! She got you good, Justin."

"Yeah. Funny. Ha, ha." But Justin was laughing. He looked around and lowered his voice when he told Dorinda, "You might not want to spread that information around too much. People might be tempted to steal it, or even worse, in my opinion, figure out you are a prepper."

"Did I give it away with the nuke war thing?" Dorinda asked.

"Yeah. Sorta," Justin said. "I'm a little surprised you did. I would have thought you were more security conscious than that."

Dorinda's eyes sparkled and her left cheek dimpled when she said, "Oh, I had a pretty good idea you guys were okay. Did a little checking before I decided to show up today. You both have good, solid reputations. Especially you, Justin."

"Hey!" Dirk exclaimed.

Dorinda smiled at him, too. "Oh, you have a very good rep, too. Just not quite as well known as Justin here."

"Oh, really?" Justin asked. "I thought I was keeping my preps a secret pretty well."

"There was no mention of preps. Just a good guy willing to lend a hand when a friend needed it. The Suburban kind of gave the prep thing away. Don't think anyone would think twice about it, except someone that is already into preps. Hope not. Mine looks a great deal like yours."

"Dirk commented on that very fact," Justin replied. "Perhaps we should drop the prep talk." Justin was looking around. Several more people were showing up on the firing line.

“Good point,” Dorinda said. She proceeded to open the pistol case and took out two handguns, both semi-automatics. One was a Para-Ordnance P-14 .45 ACP, and the second was a Beretta Tomcat .32 ACP.”

“You don’t mess around, do you?” Dirk asked. “Full power MBR and .45 ACP. Bet you shoot 12 gauge, too.”

“Yep.” Dorinda put on her shooting muffs and glasses and got ready to shoot.

Dirk and Justin hurriedly did the same. When the okay came down to begin firing, all three did so, with their rifle of choice. Justin only fired a few rounds from the M1A. It was enough for him to know the rifle, and he, were still in tune. Every shot had sounded the one-hundred-meter gong.

He watched Dorinda out of the corners of his eyes to avoid disturbing her. Like Justin had, Dorinda was taking spaced, aimed shots. But she was shooting at the two-hundred-meter gong. And hit it every time.

Justin looked over at Dirk. As usual, he was peppering the steel targets at every range, missing as often as he hit. It didn’t matter the distance. He missed as many short shots as he did long, and made as many long shots as he did short. Dirk just wasn’t consistent.

Dirk was still firing when Dorinda stopped. She looked over at him, and then turned her eyes to Justin. Her eyebrows lifted and Justin shrugged. Dirk was Dirk. He did it his way.

The three switched to handguns and began to fire after the fire signal was given. All three ran a magazine through each of their pistols and began to put them away. After that round of firing was done, the three carried their cased weapons back to the pro-shop.

“I have to get to work,” Dorinda said. “Can I expect you in for an after shooting drink? First one is on the house.”

“I’ll be there later,” Justin said. “Have to take care of a few things first.”

“I’ll be there,” Dirk said.

The three walked together out to their vehicles and put away the gun cases. Dorinda watched Justin as he and Dirk got into the Suburban and Justin drove it away. With a smile on her face, Dorinda got into the Commander and headed for home to change and then get to work.

Justin went home and put away the guns in his gun safe. He shook his head at the small collection he had. Just on rifles alone, Dorinda outclassed him. He wondered about the Para-Ordnance. “I wonder if there is a story there, as well. And what about shotguns?” Justin shook his head. Perhaps Dorinda would go to the range again sometime with him and he could ask.

Weapons secured, Justin went back upstairs and set up the Diamant 525 grain mill and began grinding enough wheat from the six-gallon Super-pail of hard red winter wheat that was in the pantry to last the next week.

When he was done with the flour grinding he cleaned up everything and put the grinder and bucket away, and stored the resulting flour in the stainless steel canister in the baking supplies cabinet in the kitchen.

He checked the other canisters and refilled those that needed it from the other buckets in the pantry. Bringing out the All American 7502 can sealer, Justin set it up for # 2½ cans and proceeded to can several pounds of Brach's Bridge Mix, several pounds of Starlight Mints, and several pounds of Butterscotch disks, four cans each of Bigelow Earl Gray Tea bags and Emergen-C, packets, and eight cans of Swiss Miss Dark Chocolate hot chocolate mix packets.

The candy put away in the basement food storage room, Justin changed out the # 2½ parts for #10 can parts and canned Copper Top batteries he'd picked up on sale. Not that they needed the protection, but it made storage so much easier if things were in one of half a dozen types of containers that Justin used.

Finished with the can sealer he put it away and brought out the Cabela's CG-15 vacuum sealer and sealed up some clothing items that were going into long term storage. Finally he added water to the custom drip water purifier he had built using the Sawyer Point Zero Two Absolute water purification cartridge.

Finished with his planned tasks, everything put away, Justin locked up the house and headed for Cleveland's Bar. He met Dirk just coming out of the bar. Looking him over carefully, Justin asked, "You want me to take you home?"

"Naw. I'm fine. Took the breathalyzer test and I'm okay. That Dorinda is something, isn't she?"

"I suppose so," Justin replied. "You be careful going home. It's supposed to start raining any minute."

"You worry too much, Justin." Dirk turned and headed toward his full size Chevy Blazer. Though not as tricked out as Justin's Suburban or Dorinda's Jeep Commander, it had its share of improvements for use as a bug out and post apocalyptic world vehicle.

The booth Justin normally took was occupied. The place was fairly busy and it took Justin a minute to spot an empty stool at the bar. He had just taken his seat when Dorinda walked up behind him, a tray of drinks on her right hand and arm. She stopped and whispered, "I have a couple of friends here. Come on over to their booth. I'll be on break in a few minutes."

Justin left the stool, which was immediately taken by someone that just came in. Justin's steps slowed when he saw where Dorinda was taking him. It was the booth next to the one he usually used, but there were two women there, both looking him over with interest.

“This is Justin. Justin, Margo and Trina. Don’t let them bully you.” Dorinda moved on to the next booth and began setting drinks on the table.

“So, Justin,” Margo said, “How’d you catch Dorinda’s eye?”

“I don’t know,” Justin replied. “We just got to talking a bit in here the other day.”

“She said,” Trina said, “That you went shooting together. I don’t know if she has ever done that before.”

“Wasn’t really a date or anything. We just have some similar interests.”

Margo leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Preps? All three of us are preparing for what might happen. Kind of a small MAG. You know what a MAG is?”

“Mutual Aid Group. And, yes, Dorinda and I do have preps in common, I suppose.”

“But you’d rather not talk about them,” said Trina.

“I’m not real comfortable discussing them with someone I don’t know too well.”

“Well, we got some information from Dirk, before he left.” Margo laughed. “Though I don’t think he told us all his secrets... or yours, we did learn a few things.”

Justin shook his head. “Sometimes Dirk talks a bit more about things than I would prefer.”

“We were hoping...” Margo said, after a look passed between her and Trina, “To find a couple more people to join our MAG. People speak well of you, Dorinda says. When she took this job, she asked around about who might be trouble.”

“And my name came up?” Justin asked, a more than a bit bothered by the thought.

“Oh, no!” said Trina. “Just the opposite. She also asked about who she could count on if there was trouble of some sort. That is when your name came up. Terms like ‘he’s solid’, ‘someone you can count on’, ‘he’ll cover your back’, sorts of things.”

“Oh. I see.” Justin shook his head. “I appreciate the fact that I’m considered those things. I like to think I am. But what if I wasn’t already into preps?”

Margo replied. “In that case, we would have coached you through the process. Helped you get up to speed. If you would be willing.”

“Just how many people are in your MAG?” Justin asked.

“Five, all together,” Trina informed him. “All women.”

“Women can do pretty much anything men can do. Why are you asking me... And, I’m assuming, Dirk, to join?”

Margo sighed and said, “It’s good to know you think women are equal, but there are some things that having a guy around make easier.”

“It’s just the way of the world,” Trina added.

“And, besides,” said Dorinda, sliding into the booth beside Justin, “We can’t find any more single women to join our group. If we want to expand, it pretty much has to include some men.”

“Wouldn’t married couples be better for the situation? You wouldn’t have any trouble from me, and probably not much from Dirk, but still...”

Dorinda smiled. “Bringing in couples to a group of single women is asking for trouble. Bringing in single guys has a few problems, but not nearly as many as couples.”

“Oh. I see. I think,” Justin replied. “What about Dirk? He’s married.”

“And loves his wife,” Dorinda said. “I’ve seen him in here alone. He doesn’t flirt or hit on any of the women, even with they are offering. And when his wife is with him, it is clear he adores her and she loves him.

“It’s not that it can’t work with couples and singles, we just think it needs to be limited, unless there are quite a few. Then it’s okay again.”

“I see. Makes sense.” He looked at the drink he was turning around and around in his hands. “I’m flattered... But I don’t know. It’s always been just me, and recently, me and Dirk and Margery. Don’t know how I’d fit in with a MAG. What are the requirements?”

“Having certain prep items on hand, a plan of action, and a willingness to help others in the MAG in case of need. Not necessarily supplies or equipment, but information and training.” Dorinda was watching Justin closely.

“Sounds reasonable. Let me think on it for a while?”

“Sure,” Dorinda said. “No rush. And if you’re concerned about needing to carry us, prep wise, I’ll be glad to run down our preps. Only not right now. Have to get back to work. Jenny is signaling me.”

“Okay,” Justin replied. He drained his cognac and started to stand, but Margo put her hand on his arm and said, “Stay. Have another. Trina and I can fill you in on what we have and what we have planned.”

Justin sat back down. Trina was signaling Dorinda.

“While we’re waiting for the drinks,” Margo said, “I’ll give you a rundown on what Cammy and Veronica have.

“First off, they each have a three month supply of regular grocery foods, and a one-year Deluxe food storage unit for one from Walton feed. They don’t have grinders for the wheat, but Trina has a cheap one and Dorinda has a Country Living Grain mill.

“Other consumable supplies, mostly eight months to a year. Except water. Just a two week supply each and pretty good filters. They both live in apartments, so don’t have any provisions for growing food.

“Though Dorinda has offered to equip us with one of those BM-59s she has, I’m the only one that shoots one, beside Dorinda. Trina, Cammy, and Veronica all have Ruger SR-556 .223 Carbines with plenty of magazines and a thousand rounds of Winchester White Box ammunition.

“Marginal camping equipment, but both are working on that. Slowly. Oh. A couple of decent knives each. No NBC gear at all. If it’s nukes, Dorinda has a shelter at her house, but it is tiny.”

“Anything else you would like to know about their status?” Margo concluded.

“Handguns or shotguns?” Justin asked.

“No. Not for them. They have just the Carbines. Trina has a Browning Hi-power 9mm and I have a Ruger SP 101 .357 Magnum with four speed loaders. I have a Remington 1100 20-gauge shotgun. I’m not sure what Dorinda has in the way of shotguns.”

“What about you two on food and water, other consumables?”

“We each have the same Walton Deluxe one year supply for one that Cammy and Veronica have. Six months of regular foods, A good month of water each and MSR Waterworks EX filters with extra cartridges and a good supply of Katadyn MP-1 micropur water treatment tablets. Six months to a year of the other important consumables.”

“I see,” Justin replied thoughtfully.

“We’re right in line with what Dirk and you have, aren’t we?” Trina asked when Justin didn’t continue.

“With Dirk... yes... What about hard assets and trade goods?” Justin asked.

“We each have a little silver and mostly large stocks of feminine needs for trading,” Margo said. Veronica and Cammy the same. I know Dorinda has some gold, but don’t know how much.”

“Any land that can be farmed in a long term situation?”

“Just Dorinda’s place. She has a huge backyard and a small orchard of fruit trees. Some berry patches. But she isn’t growing a garden right now.” Trina shook her head. “I was thinking we were in pretty good shape. Not as good as I was thinking.”

“Any of you have a good prep library?”

“Dorinda,” Trina and Margo said almost together.

Justin nodded. “What about skill sets?”

Eagerly Margo said, “Cammy is a nurse.”

“That’s good,” replied Justin. “How is she set for supplies? And the rest of you?”

Trina sighed. “Not nearly as well equipped as we’d like. We all have good first-aid kits, and Cammy has some trauma items. Dorinda... Well, she probably has the best first-aid kit over all.”

“I’ve seen Dorinda’s Jeep Commander, though not how it is equipped. How are the rest of you set up?”

“I have a Subaru wagon,” Trina said.

Margo added, “And I have a Jeep Wrangler. Cammy a new Subaru wagon and Veronica a little pickup. A GMC, I think. Four wheel drive, though. I’m sure of that.”

“All gasoline engines, pretty new?”

Margo and Trina both nodded.

“Except for Dorinda’s. Hers is a diesel,” Justin said. “Non-electronic or I miss my guess.”

“I think you’re right, Justin.” Trina looked thoughtful. “I’m sure I heard her mention something about that. And it sure does sound like a diesel.”

“We’re not shaping up to be all that good of a group to become associated with, are we?” Trina’s voice revealed her disappointment.

“Your group sure is a great deal ahead of the game, compared to many others into preps. You do have an actual MAG, and that isn’t all that common.”

“Going to be up to what Dorinda has, isn’t it?” Margo asked, also visibly disappointed.

“Not exactly,” Justin said after a moment’s thought. “I think I am already willing to work with your group... But as a full member... I don’t know. Even with Dirk, we’re just friends that lend a hand when the other needs it. I’m willing to go forward like that.”

Margo and Trina both looked a bit more cheerful. “That’s something, at least,” Margo said. “Any help... mostly advice... you can give us will be most appreciated. That and being handy when being male makes a difference.”

Justin smiled. “I’m not sure what type of instances you are referring to, but I’ll help where I can.”

Dorinda made an appearance to see if Justin, Margo, or Trina wanted another drink.

“I’d like a cup of hot tea, if you have it,” Justin said. “I don’t drink too much and I’m at my limit when I need to drive.”

“Tea coming up,” Dorinda said. “You two?”

“Another for me, since Trina is driving,” Margo said.

“Coffee,” Trina said.

The discussion drifted into what was happening in the world at the moment. Justin had his tea and then took his leave. Before he left the bar, Dorinda asked him, “Would you consider getting together one day next week so we can discuss the MAG further?”

“Sure. Lunch on Tuesday okay?”

“That’ll be fine. Olive Garden?”

“I’ll see you then,” Justin said. He was smiling when he left.

Justin made his living writing adventure stories aimed at youth. He’d been taking it a bit easy after turning in his last manuscript, but it was time to start another. His books sold well, but the royalties for each one weren’t as high as most people thought, and he needed to release at least one and preferably two per year to make ends meet the way he wanted.

So on Monday morning he was hard at work at the computer. He often wrote for long hours without a break. And the story he was working on was one that was coming to him rapidly. It was only at ten in the morning on Tuesday that Justin remembered he was supposed to meet Dorinda at the Olive Garden at noon.

Fortunately he was at a good stopping point in the story and hurriedly took a shower and got ready. His stomach was rumbling when he pulled into the restaurant parking lot. He’d only snacked for the twenty-six hours he’d been working. He would probably crash after lunch and pick the story up again the next morning.

Justin was tempted to go ahead and order when Dorinda hadn’t shown by ten after twelve. But he saw her come into the restaurant and look around. She spotted Justin, waved, and made her way toward the table.

“Sorry I’m late. We had a plumbing problem at the bar. I had to get a plumber in and make sure things were ready for our lunch crowd.”

Justin was surprised. “You take care of things like that for the bar? I would think the owner or manager would do it.” He held her chair for her as she sat down.

“Oops!” Dorinda said softly. “Me and my big mouth. Actually, I own Cleveland’s Bar.”

“You own it?” Justin asked, trying not to look too surprised.

“Yep. I had some investment money burning a hole in my pocket a year ago and it came up for sale. I don’t like people to know I’m the owner. I have good managers and staff, and prefer the lower profile of just working there.”

“I see. Wow. I wouldn’t have guessed. You’re a great cocktail waitress. Don’t know why the idea of you owning a bar surprised me.”

“Don’t feel bad. I go a little out of my way to keep it a secret. Margo and Trina know, but Cammy and Veronica don’t. I don’t think any of my regulars know. I’d just as soon keep it that way.”

Justin smiled. “No problem for me. And I’ll make it a point not to tell Dirk. He’d love knowing a bar owner and wouldn’t be able to keep it quiet.”

“Thank you. Nothing would really come of it, I’m sure. I just prefer not to deal with the customers on an owner’s level when I don’t have to. But I do like keeping an eye on how things go. Working a few shifts lets me do that.”

“I can see where it would. I don’t blame you. Not too many people know what I do. It’s just easier to collect the check and not have to deal with a public. It would jeopardize my anonymity when it comes to preps, I’m afraid.”

“Okay if I ask what you do?”

“Sure,” Jason replied. “I think I can trust you. I’m a writer. I write juvenal adventure stories for the junior high school and high school level readers.”

“Wow! I’m impressed! Wouldn’t being in the public eye be better for sales?”

“Possibly,” Justin replied. “But it would really expose me to inquiries into my background and lifestyle. I’d just as soon make a bit less and be able to spend it the way I want to, without controversy. Or the wrong people knowing about my preps.”

“I do understand. I guess we have something in common besides preps. Keeping our real jobs secret.”

Justin had to return the conspiratorial smile Dorinda gave him. The server arrived and both gave their orders before continuing the conversation.

“Margo and Trina said you’re okay with the idea of associating with the MAG, and lending a hand when we need it for some things, but you aren’t quite ready to actually join.”

“That sums it up pretty well,” Justin replied. “I hope you don’t take offense.”

“No offense taken,” Dorinda said. She took a sip of water before speaking again. “I’m hoping what I tell you today will change your mind.”

“Is having a guy involved really that important to the MAG?” Justin asked.

“Perhaps not for some groups. They might have a skill set in their MAG that covers everything. Aside of the physical things that need to be done that you can obviously do more easily than any of us, there is the knowledge you’d bring to the MAG.

“And what Margo and Trina were saying the other day... Being male opens some doors that just aren’t too easy for a woman to open. To coin a phrase. One thing we’ve had trouble with is with our vehicles. I knew exactly what I wanted, but had to really hammer on the shop crew where I took it to do what I wanted. Did you have any trouble getting your Suburban tricked out the way you wanted?”

“Can’t say as I did,” Justin said thoughtfully. “I remember my mother complaining about mechanics trying to take advantage of her when it came to keeping her vehicle running the way she wanted it. I thought that things like that were a part of the past.”

“Perhaps it happens less often, but it still happens. And out at the range the other day, you and Dirk were the first two guys that didn’t try to tell me all about my selection of guns and why I needed something different. Several of them I was never able to convince that I had a BM-59, not an M1A.” Dorinda shook her head. “It gets annoying.”

“I would say I understand, but I guess I probably don’t, since I’ve not been in a situation like that.”

“I was pricing some silver and gold the other day and the coin shop owner did his best to sell me some at fifty percent over spot. I’d just seen him sell a gold eagle for spot plus seventeen percent. Not a great rate, but a great deal better than the fifty percent he was trying to get me to pay. I finally just walked out. Wasn’t that interested in getting it for myself, but the others all need to get some when it is possible.

“That brings me to something I wanted to let you know.” Dorinda’s eyes cut up to the server when he set down their salads and bread sticks and she fell silent.

But when he was gone, she continued. “My family are... were... preppers from way back when. As you can tell by the BM-59 rifles.” Dorinda blinked her eyes several times rapidly, fighting back tears.

Very softly Justin asked, "You lost your family?"

"A bit over a year ago. One right after the other. Mother, father, sister, three Uncles and two Aunts. Botulism at a restaurant, two car wrecks, lost at sea trying to rescue someone out in a hurricane, and cancer. I'm sorry. If you'll excuse me..."

Justin stood when Dorinda did. He watched her walk hurriedly toward the restrooms before he sat down again. The soup was on the table when Dorinda returned and Jack seated her again.

"I'm okay," Dorinda said before Justin could ask. "I thought I was over it. Guess I won't ever really be over it. We were a close knit family. It was a real blow. I still wonder why I was spared."

"I'm sorry Dorinda. I do understand. I lost my only family, my parents, two years ago. It's been tough."

"I'm sorry," Dorinda replied. "But it is important that you know a little about my family. They were survivalists before the word was even coined. Started back right after the Korean War. I've inherited a great deal of my preps from them.

"We weren't rich, by any means, but we were all well off. My Uncle Greg was the driving force behind the family's preps. He's the one I told you about getting the BM-59s for the family. He was one of those that saw what the refugees went through during World War and Korea.

"The way he started wasn't getting guns and ammunition. It was getting portable wealth. As the saying with ammunition goes, buy it cheap and stack it deep, so Uncle Greg did with US silver coins long before the changeover to the clad coins.

"He didn't just start saving his silver change. Uncle Greg had a really good relationship with his banker at the time, and asked him to bring in one-thousand-dollar face value bags of silver coins. Five each of dimes, quarters, halves, and silver dollars. That was in 1961 to 1963. Twenty-thousand dollars worth. When the Silver Eagle became available, he bought five-thousand of them at under six-dollars an ounce.

"And he already had a good numismatic gold coin collection. When it became legal to own gold Krugerrand coins, he converted the numismatics to Krugerrands, and then, when the gold American Eagle became available, he converted all the gold Krugerrands to American eagles in one-ounce, one-half-ounce, one-quarter-ounce, and one-tenth ounce denominations.

"Well over twenty-five-hundred ounces total. That was in 1972. When gold was under one-hundred-dollars an ounce.

"Twenty thousand ounces of silver purchased for approximately a little over an average of two-fifty an ounce and twenty-five hundred ounces of gold for under one-hundred dollars an

ounce. Total investment of three-hundred-thousand dollars now worth approximately three million.”

Justin whistled. “Okay. I am impressed!”

Dorinda sighed. “Yeah. The couple of people that know are after me to sell everything and take the profit.”

“But you prefer to keep it, just in case,” Justin said with a smile.

“Yes. My other preps, also mostly inherited, include ten years worth of freeze dried, dehydrated, and regular foods and consumables, all packaged for long term storage, for twenty-five people. Everything except the Mountain House freeze dried beef steaks and pork chops rotated out two years ago and replaced with new production. My father kept the freeze-dried meats that you can’t find anymore. We figure they are good for another few years.

“Now, I am thinking about selling off the group of M1 Garands that the BM-59s replaced. Uncle Greg kept the ten he’d picked up right after the Korean War when he bought the BM-59s. For unskilled people that might come into the fold, I think they are too much gun for them to handle.

“Uncle Greg didn’t think of everything. The plan was always family only. But now, I’m thinking to get some new Auto-Ordnance M1 Carbines with the proceeds of the sale of the Garands. I figure two carbines, plus plenty of magazines and ammunition for each Garand.”

Dorinda looked at him questioningly. “What do you think?”

“I think it is a good plan. I have four of the Auto-Ordnance M1 Carbines myself for the same reason. You haven’t mentioned handguns or shotguns.”

“Much the same thing happened. Uncle Greg wasn’t real big on shotguns, but he bought Remington 870s early on. But when the Remington 11-87 came out, he sold off all but a couple of the 870s, and bought six of the 11-87s. He had them customized for combat use. Very much like yours, actually, just by the look of it. Conventional grip polymer stocks rather than the pistol grip stock like you have.

“I’ve added side saddles and a couple more improvements recently, when they became available.”

Justin nodded. “Good choices again, in my opinion.”

“For handguns, Uncle Greg got ten stock Colt 1911A1s. Then, influenced by Mel Tappan, he had all of them worked over to the Tappan recommendations. As much as he liked them, he liked the Para-Ordnance conversion when it first came out and got one. When the complete guns were available the custom Colt 1911A1s were sold and P-14s were bought to replace them.

“I’ve kept the group of six Heckler and Koch HK-4 multi-caliber pistol complete sets. Don’t know if you are familiar with them...”

Justin shook his head.

“They use the same frame and slide but have different barrels, recoil springs, and magazines for four calibers. .22 Rimfire, .25 ACP, .32 ACP, and .380. He bought extra magazines for each caliber. I like them, but I prefer the more compact Beretta Tomcat .32 ACP for my hideout gun. I’ve got a couple of them. And Uncle Greg got two Browning Hi-powers just to have something in 9mmP.”

When Dorinda fell silent, Justin asked, “What about hunting guns? Anything special there?”

Dorinda shook her head. “Nothing special. A couple each Remington bolt actions in .375H&H Magnum, .30-’06, .308, .270, .243, .223, .22 Hornet, and .22 Rimfire. The 11-87s, with the twenty-six inch barrel and poly-choke are good hunting guns, and the two 870s have twenty-six inch barrels, too, also with Poly-choke for all around use.

“I have the equipment and supplies to load all the calibers and gauges I use. I just don’t do much of it. Never seem to have time.”

“I know what you mean. I noticed the lack of .223 guns, except for hunting guns.”

“Uncle Greg liked the heavy hitters. He bore a grudge against the military from the time they adopted the M-16 for general issue until he died. I don’t think about them much, but I did pick up two of the Ruger SR-556 carbines when I got together with the others and they decided on the .223 in that model. Magazines and ammunition, too. Just to have a backup they are familiar with.”

“First-aid?” Justin asked.

“I’m weak there. A very good first-aid kit with a trauma kit. But not any extended supplies. We never had anyone in the family in the business, or on the kind of terms you have to have to get the important things.”

“I’m not too bad of shape, there,” Justin said. “

The server arrived with their entrees and cleared away the other dishes. When the server was gone again, he continued. “I have a really good working relationship with my doctor. Anything within reason and she’ll help me get it. She understands the need for others to have the equipment and supplies that she might not have access to otherwise.”

“Sounds like a woman to know,” Dorinda said. She gingerly tried a bite of the steaming dish. “I haven’t even tried with my current doctor. I should, but it is a hard subject to bring up.”

“I’ll say. Several of the things we’re discussing would cause an outcry if the wrong people heard us.”

“Yes. I was trained from a young age to be closed mouth about preps, and several other things. There are a couple other things you probably should know. We’re thinking about bringing in a couple more women. Women with skills none of the five of us have. One of them has a piece of property that might do as a retreat location. But I don’t know if she’d be open to putting any permanent structures on it.”

“That would make it difficult to build a retreat with a shelter,” Justin said. “With the thorough preps your Uncle Greg did, I’m surprised he didn’t make arrangements for a retreat.”

“He did, for a time... But the city encroached on the property and my father sold it off and invested the money. Before any decision could be made on an alternant, they all died.”

Dorinda looked down at her plate. “I’ve just been stalling on finding some land. I’d take it upon myself to build a retreat and shelter system to handle maybe twenty, twenty-five people.”

“I know you have supplies. But a working farm would be the way to go. Supplies only last so long.”

“I think so, too. But none of us have any idea what to look for. Seems like all the PAW stories the lead character finds the perfect place and then improves upon that.”

“Not too many really ideal places around. I’ve been keeping my eyes out, too. But so far, no luck anywhere around here close. There is a spot Dirk found, but the owner won’t even talk to me about selling it.”

“Why?” Dorinda asked.

“I’m sure... But I think she just doesn’t like men. From what little she did say when I first contacted her, she’s had a hard life, because of the men in her life, reaching all the way back to her grandfather.”

“That’s a shame. You think I might have a chance at getting the property?”

“Possibly. If it hasn’t already sold. It’s not what I’d call ideal, but it does have potential. If you want, I can take you out there this weekend. As long as I stay out of sight, she might talk to you.”

“Okay. I’ll plan on that. What else do you need to know to make me convince you to join the MAG?”

“Other than the actual retreat, you are in really good shape, prep wise. But you might want to know a bit more about mine before you really commit,” Justin said.

“I’ll listen to anything you want to tell me,” Dorinda said.

“I do like doing things my own way. I’m not one to sit back and just take orders without some kind of major input. As for preps, I’m in good shape for weapons, food and water, transportation, PMs, medical supplies, trade goods, an excellent library, CBRNE, and wilderness bug out locations for minor situations.

“I have a decent shelter at home, but no real bug out location or retreat with good shelter space. I do have the money saved to put on a retreat, but not enough to get the land, do the basics... water, sewer, and power... and also build what I consider a suitable shelter.

“I guess I should also ask, since it hasn’t come up, what’s the buy in price for the MAG? Margo and Trina said there was a certain level of preps...”

“You more than meet it already,” Dorinda said.

“If I remember correctly, one of them also said you have a piece of property with a large back yard, suitable for a garden, and have nut trees and such. I’m surprised you haven’t turned it into a retreat.”

“Couldn’t get by with it,” Dorinda said. “I’ve looked into it. It is in an old neighborhood that doesn’t like change. It would have to go through the permit process. Everyone and their brother in the area would know. If I could do it on the sly, I would. But I can’t. I have a tiny improvised shelter in the basement, but it’s only good for one. Two if they’re really close.

“I’d be willing to sell the bar, if I found the right place and I could get a local job to meet current expenses.”

“You’re willing to invest your livelihood?”

“Yes. For the right situation. The Bar was something of an impulse buy. Something to do until I decided on what to do with the rest of my life.”

“Have you decided?”

Dorinda shook her head and pushed back her empty plate. “That was good.”

Justin finished the last bite of his meal, and also set the plate out of the way. Before either could say anything else the server and bus person were there to clear the dishes and see if either Justin or Dorinda wanted desert.

Both declined desert and put money on the table to cover their own meal. When the server and bus person were gone, Justin spoke again. Let me think about this. And you take a look at that piece of property I mentioned. This Saturday at nine?”

Dorinda nodded and rose. “Pick me up at Cleveland’s. See you then.”

Dorinda headed for the front door, Justin behind her. Both entered their respective vehicles and drove away, in heavy thought.

Justin put things out of his mind when he got home and got back to work on his newest story. Dorinda did much the same at the bar, falling right back into her normal routine.

When Saturday rolled around, Dorinda was waiting for Justin inside Cleveland's, talking to the bartender. He'd barely entered the bar when Dorinda waved, said a last word to the bartender, and went to join Justin at the door.

"Good morning," Justin said, and Dorinda replied in kind.

"Any major changes in your thoughts?" Dorinda asked Justin when they were on the road.

"No. I'm kind of waiting to see about this property. I'm thinking about trying again to get it if you aren't interested."

"Being female, perhaps I could put in a good word for you," Dorinda said with a smile at Justin.

"And you were wanting a male to help with things. You really don't need me at all." Justin laughed.

"I don't know. Men really are handy to have around. Some of the time."

Both fell silent as Justin made the turn onto a county road and headed up into the hills on the west side of the city. It really wasn't that far, but the county road petered out fairly quickly, leaving only a poorly maintained gravel road.

Besides the change in road, the surroundings were quite a bit different. Instead of mostly deciduous trees, there was now a mix of evergreens and deciduous, with only the occasional open area.

"Big difference in things," Dorinda said. "I didn't know there was such a contrast this close to the city. This would be almost impassable in the winter without four wheel drive."

"I know. It's one of the reasons I like it. This is the only real way in. The other side of the property is owned by a lumber company, growing trees, and one side backs onto the State Forest, and the third side is just mountainous terrain pretty much impossible to get through with a vehicle. It's a twelve mile hike from the other side of the mountains to the property, with most of it being almost straight up and down."

"I see," Dorinda said. She was studying the lay of the land and liked what she saw. Suddenly Justin slowed down. She looked over at him.

“The house is just around the bend up there. I’ll wait here while you go talk to Mrs. O’Brian and see what you think of the place without my influence.”

Both got out of the Suburban and Dorinda hurried around to get behind the wheel. Justin waved when she drove off and then found a handy outcrop of rock and sat down; glad he’d dressed for the altitude and attendant weather. He’d noticed right off that Dorinda had, as well.

Justin stayed very quiet for a long while and finally spotted a couple of squirrels chattering away at the edge of the forest. He thought he saw a deer move deeper in the forest, but couldn’t be sure. Dorinda was coming back and the animals disappeared when the Suburban showed up.

Grunting just a little from having sat so long in one position, Justin got up and went to the passenger door of the Suburban, much to Dorinda’s surprise. “You want me to drive back?” she asked.

“Might as well. Get a feel for the road. This is one of the places on my BOL list. Not Mrs. O’Brian’s property but the State Forest and the lumber company land.”

“Oh. Okay. That sounds reasonable.” Dorinda cut her eyes toward Justin, and then back to the road. “You want to know what Mrs. O’Brian said?”

“Eventually,” Justin said, smiling. “When you get around to it.”

Dorinda laughed. “Okay. Sorry. The land is for sale. Only to another woman. Single.”

“And your perceptions of the property?”

“We walked around the area some. Were you aware of the orchard back in the forest right behind the house?”

“Orchard? No. I never got a look back there. She didn’t mention anything to me,” Justin said. He shook his head. “But that isn’t surprising.”

“The orchard is huge, but it’s in kind of poor shape. Hasn’t been cared for since Mrs. O’Brian’s husband died. Not even had any of the fruit or nuts harvested.”

“I see. And the rest of the property. Did you find out what kind of shape the well is? And septic?”

“Septic is shot,” Dorinda replied. “But there are three good wells. Two for the orchard and garden plot that is not used anymore, either. Can only assume they are still good, until tested. And the well for the house, which is working okay. She said there haven’t been any water supply problems. Just waste removal. She’s looking for a female plumber to do some work on it.”

“Ah.”

Dorinda looked over at Justin and then back to the road, such as it was. “There’s no power. She pumps water by hand and uses kerosene lanterns. Burns coal for heat and cooking. She hasn’t had a coal delivery in years, but her husband had really stocked up not long before he died. She only keeps part of the house opened up. The rest is kept closed off to conserve heat in the winter time.”

“That means a large investment in a permanent power system,” Justin said thoughtfully. Oh... What about selling it? Is she willing?”

Dorinda flashed Justin a grin. “Yep. To me. She said ‘Some young buck came up here a year ago and tried to weasel me out of it.’ Sound familiar?”

Justin shook his head and sighed. “I’m pretty sure she was talking about me.”

“Well, don’t think I think poorly of you. She doesn’t like guys. The offer I made was less than what you offered, and she accepted.”

“She accepted? Just like that?”

“Just like that. All I have to do is find her a place to live in town and she’ll finance the sale. She just wants enough to live on comfortably for the rest of her life. I actually feel a little bad about actually taking advantage of her.”

Dorinda looked at Justin again. “But not enough to not go through with the purchase,” she said. “Mrs. O’Brian understands completely about how much it will cost to get power run up there. She’s been trying for years, but the power company will only do it if the customer pays for the line and guarantees a much higher rate of use than she would have. No phone, either, but there is a cell tower somewhere on the lumber company’s land. She does have cell service.”

“You going to need to think about this some? Whether or not you want in on the retreat?”

“Not really. I want in. But I’m just not sure how deep and how we’d arrange the ownership.”

“Think on that, and if you come up with an idea that won’t disadvantage either of us, come in to the bar and we’ll discuss it.”

“Fair enough,” Justin replied. Both were silent until Dorinda parked the Suburban in Cleveland’s parking lot.

“I’ll be here next Saturday, either way,” Justin said as he got behind the wheel of the Suburban after Dorinda got out.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you Saturday.”

Justin gave it the idea a lot of thought over the span of the week, when he wasn't writing. It was only on Saturday morning that he finally came up with an idea that he thought Dorinda might go for.

When he reached Cleveland's he was surprised to see Dorinda, Margo, and Trina, along with two other women sitting in the large booth in the back.

It was Margo, not Dorinda, that hailed him and waved for him to come join them.

"Justin, this is Veronica, and Cammy. Ladies, Justin Case."

"Just in case what?" asked Veronica with a straight face.

The sour look on Justin's face brought laughter, even from him when the others did.

"That's Veronica for you, Justin," Dorinda said. She slid over some to let him sit down beside her. "You come up with something?"

"Hopefully?" Cammy said. "Dorinda was raving about the place."

"It is a good place. And I'd like to join the MAG, with three conditions."

Four of the five faces fell. Only Dorinda looked expectant. "And they would be...?"

"I'd like to sponsor Dirk as another member. I'll guarantee his buy-in as to the appropriate preps. He doesn't have quite enough, at the moment, but I have more than enough I can give him to make up for the lack. Once he's in, he's on his own, and subject to the rules of the MAG."

"We don't have any rules, per se," Margo said.

"That's the second condition. We write up a basic set of rules for everyone to follow to remain a part of the MAG. Including procedures to add more members, and reasons to be ejected from the MAG."

"Sounds logical to me," Dorinda said. "I always figured that since Dirk knows about your preps he'd be involved. And the third condition?"

"The way the ownership of things is set up. I was thinking one-half sweat equity and one-half cash to help pay for the property and permanent installations. Then set up the systems so there are at least two sets of everything with either capable of taking care of the retreat. Dual power systems, at least. Either one capable of handling... say... just over one half of the power requirements, as long as it can power one-hundred-percent of the critical items.

"A person leaves, voluntarily or not, they take their installations with them. That gives us back up capability, and lets everyone contribute what they can, more or less when they can."

“Okay,” Margo said. “I understand the power thing. But what other kinds of things are you talking about?”

“Just about everything. “There should be provisions for sewing clothing. If two people invest in sewing machines and equipment for everyone to use, and then, if for some reason one of them goes and takes their machine and supplies, there is still a machine for the rest of us to use. Things like that. Two freezers. Two refrigerators, two heat sources and fuel supplies. That’s at least. There are some things I think we should triple up on or even have four options.”

“I see what you are saying,” Dorinda said. “Could you give us a minute to discuss this?”

“Sure. I’ll get a round of drinks,” Justin said. He moved toward the bar as the women put their heads together. He took his drink from the tray after he paid for them, and began to throw the house darts at the dart board.

But it wasn’t long before Dorinda came and got him. “It’s a plan. You’re in,” She said when he slid into the booth beside her. “Cheers!”

The six clicked glasses and took a swallow of their drink. “How soon can we get started on this?” Justin asked.

“We five will have Mrs. O’Brian moved by next Tuesday. You and Dirk, as well as the rest of us will have access to the property then. I thought Margo, Trina, Veronica, and Cammy could work on the rules while you start figuring out the basic shelter plans. Meet back here next Saturday afternoon?”

“I’ll fill Dirk in, and his wife Margery, and have him here, too,” Justin said. “I appreciate the offer to join you. Again he raised his glass and the others touched the rim with theirs. Justin downed the last swallow and headed home, anxious to get on the plans. He committed at least four hours per weekday to writing and wouldn’t violate his self-imposed rule for getting out the books that paid his way.

There were a couple of calls, back and forth, to clarify some details, but each group did their own work. When Saturday afternoon came, Justin, with Dirk behind him, joined the women in the same booth they’d used previously.

“The bar has a new name,” Dirk said immediately. “Anyone know what happened? It’s been Cleveland through three owners.”

“Sold,” Dorinda said. “At least in process. The new owner is taking over completely while the sale is in process.”

“Wow,” Dirk replied. “Hope the owner got a good price. This is a good place. Better even than it was under the owner before the one that just sold.”

“Why, thank you, Dirk,” Dorinda said, smiling over at him. “I’m the one that bought, and am now selling the place.”

“Wow. Cool!” Dirk replied.

Justin had a leather portfolio with him and was handing out computer generated drawings and text to the others. “I’m looking at four options,” he said when the others had a chance to look the papers over.

“Everything in one big facility, three or four moderate sized facilities connected by tunnels, or individual shelters, with or without tunnels. That’s the shelters themselves.

“As to regular housing, do we want it? Should it be individual bungalows, individual bungalows with a lodge type building, or just a lodge where everyone has their own room and shares the common areas if we do want it.”

Justin fell silent and looked at the others. They were comparing the various plans. “I’ll go get a round of drinks,” Justin said.

“You looked at these, Dirk?” Asked Dorinda.

“Just now. I’m just one of the group,” he said, grinning. “No special privileges.”

The five women smiled and brought him into the conversation.

When Justin returned, carrying the drinks, everyone quickly make a place for them, setting the papers out of the way. “A consensus?” Justin asked as he sat down.

There was some chuckling around the table. It was Dirk that said, “No. no consensus. Someone likes each one of the ideas.”

“I’d like to hear your thoughts on the subject,” Dorinda said. “Not just possibilities. But what you would prefer.”

“I tend toward making the most of the matter of scale. We can get more under a single roof, that we can the same square footage individually. But I’m reluctant to have all the eggs in one basket, so I would also have smaller, above ground shelters that could be used both as extra storage room, and shelter space, while being suitable for short stays for individuals.

“A multi-bedroom lodge with individual bathrooms, a common kitchen suitable for multiple cooks, with a full shelter below. A thick walled above ground shelter set up as a small cabin for individuals that prefer to shelter alone, or not use the full facility for some other reason.

“Everyone contributes to the lodge and main shelter and each is responsible for their own small shelter. If we group the individual shelters in a two-hundred-seventy degree arc around the sides and back of the lodge, with gated access in front, we’d have a good start on a defensive perimeter. Especially if the small shelters were connected to each other and the lodge with tunnels and walls. But that is going to take some investment.”

“If we prefer to use the lodge... Would we have to build an individual shelter?” asked Veronica. “I don’t think I could afford to do both.”

“Dorinda?” Justin asked.

“I think... How about a section of wall and tunnel? You could add the small shelter later, perhaps?”

Veronica bit her lip. “I think so. I’m afraid it might take me a while.”

“Same here,” Trina said. “I do like the idea. It’s almost like a fort.”

“I thought forts were old hat, now,” Dirk said. “General Patton and all that.”

“Perhaps, in a war between organized armies, and I’m not all that sure on that. There are still field fortifications being used. One of the main situations that bring about that saying is the Maginot Line. From what I’ve read, that fortification did exactly what it was supposed to. It kept the Germans out.”

“But they invaded France! Successfully!” Margo said.

“Not through the Maginot Line. They went around it. Again, national army versus national army. I think the probable attackers we may face won’t have the means to break through our defenses if we plan carefully and have time to get them all into place. We’d need a bug-out plan, of course, in case the place was being overrun. No place is one-hundred-percent proof against attack, given enough time and resources.

“With firing points along the wall, and on the roofs of the individual shelters we have an outer ring. If it is breached we take up readied positions in the lodge. If all else fails we take the escape tunnel and head for some other place we’ve agreed on beforehand.”

“I like the idea,” Cammy said. “I’m just a little worried about the money end of it. I have equipment and supplies, but my I’m budgeted for only so much each month.”

“I think we’re all in that boat,” Justin said. He didn’t know how much the others knew of Dorinda’s situation, but he wasn’t going to mention it.

“With the property purchased, I can use what I’ve been saving for a retreat for myself, to get things started. And I’d like to decide on whether or not we can, if we can, get new members that need to buy in at a certain price, to help fund the project, as long as they meet the other requirements. I think that can wait, but I’d like to see it kept on the table.”

“I’m okay with that. For some point in the future.” Dorinda looked thoughtful. “Okay. I’ll put up the property.”

“We have workable water wells,” Justin said. “I’ll get the basic water system ready, along with my contribution to an off-grid power system. Dirk and I both worked construction to pay for

college and we can do much of the dirt work and building ourselves, with some of you helping, and a pickup crew or professionals where required.”

“I don’t like the idea of other people knowing about this place,” Cammy said firmly.

“If we get crews, they’ll be from out of town. And it will on be for things we can’t do ourselves. We’ll make it a point to not have certain things visible when those crews are there.”

“I guess that would be all right,” Cammy replied, relaxing a bit.

“The first thing we need to do is raze the old house and barn, salvaging everything we can to either sell or incorporate into the new construction.” Justin looked over at Dirk. “When can you lend a hand, Dirk?”

“Just about every weekend, a couple of hours each evening and every other Friday. I pretty much need to be there if Margery is there, so her contribution won’t be great in the building phase.”

“And I’ll adjust my writing time to evening hours so I can have days available for the work. There will be lots of labor type jobs available for a long time for whenever any of you can lend a hand.”

“I’ll probably keep working here on Monday through Thursday,” Dorinda said. “Just to have some money coming in. Three day weekends I can work in unless I have to cover a shift for someone.”

Each of the others committed what time they thought they could contribute. After another round of drinks and discussion of a few details of the construction, Justin said, “I’ll work on a set of plans based on what we’ve discussed and have them ready by next weekend if that is all right with everyone.”

It was and the group broke up. Justin found that being excited to be involved in the project had his creative juices flowing and he was able to write effectively in two or three steady hours in the evening that it had been taking him four hours a day during the daytime.

The rest of his time was spent either on the site, or at suppliers’ places of business getting the details he needed to do the part he’d committed to.

The three day weekends where Dirk and Margery were available were the most productive. With Dorinda helping, and occasionally one of the other women, the old house and barn were dismantled, with much of it going in the to-use pile, and the rest to the county dump.

Margery mostly kept everyone supplied with food and drink, and did some limited fetch and tote of things she could handle. She wasn’t showing yet, but she was pregnant and with her family history, had to be very careful.

To make things easier, Justin leased some equipment. A dump truck with heavy duty equipment trailer, and a back-hoe for the heavy work, and a couple of Bobcat skidsteer utility machines for the lighter work.

After discussing it with the others, Justin brought out an arborist to look over the orchards and recommend what needed to be done to bring them back into full production. With everything else they were doing, Justin decided to pay the arborist to do the work, and leased the equipment the husband and wife team needed so they wouldn't have to bring in and take out their own equipment when they were working other jobs.

With the basic layout approved by the others, Justin spent long hours digging in the hard ground with the back-hoe, getting the septic system installed, the fuel tanks that would be part of the power system, and trenches for the various piped and wired systems that would be installed.

One of the things that made it more difficult was the location. Justin would have put in forty-thousand gallon diesel fuel tanks, but there just wasn't a good way to get them to the site. A heavy lift helicopter was considered, but it was expensive.

Justin opted to put in six ten-thousand gallon tanks and four two-thousand gallon tanks, plus four three-thousand-three-hundred gallon propane tanks. Five of the ten-thousand gallon tanks would be for diesel, and eventually biodiesel when they could make the arrangements with a farmer to make it. One ten-thousand-gallon tank would be for gasoline, with two each of the two-thousand gallon tanks for diesel and gasoline.

Two more ten-thousand gallon tanks suitable for potable water were dug in, and plumbed to allow for a solar pump in the house well to keep them filled, and a pressure pump system to provide pressurized water to the property.

The relatively large pile of existing coal for the old house's heating and cooking stoves was moved, a set of bins dug in and built, and the coal moved back to one of them. Additional coal would be brought in at some point in time for the dual wood/coal burning auxiliary heating units that would be part of the individual cabins, the lodge, and the shelter.

Foundations were installed for a set of antenna towers, an eventual set of six power generating windmills, and earth sheltered facilities for a four unit installation of diesel powered generators, and a battery and electrical power control facility.

The facilities would be part of the encircling wall that would help surround the lodge. Everything was set up for future expansion. Justin would install the first windmill, two generators, a set of solar PV panels, and a set of submarine batteries with the control systems needed to tie everything together to have full 120vac/240vac electrical system. For maximum efficiency, all the DC inputs were 48v, including the windmill, PV panels, and battery bank.

When he was working by himself, or just with Dirk, Justin started work on the two earth sheltered cabins that would be Dirk's and his. The rest of the time was spent on joint projects. Justin noticed Dorinda watching him one day when the last tank was installed. He'd not

mentioned any prices of the things he was purchasing for the retreat. She hadn't asked, but Justin had a feeling she was wondering about it.

Foundations were finally dug, installed, and allowed to cure for the subsurface basement that would be the shelter. Dorinda did ask him about the size of it, since the foundation seemed to be quite a bit bigger than the plans for the lodge that would sit on it were.

“Yes. There will be supports for the foundation of the lodge at the agreed upon size. But it will essentially be free floating. There are rooms all around the outside limits of the lodge footprint for storage, bunkrooms, a small independent generator, the air handling and treatment equipment, other utilities and so on. I wanted the entire footprint of the lodge available as shelter proper.

Everyone breathed a great sigh of relief when Justin asked them all to come up to the place one Sunday late in the year. There was snow on the ground, but everyone made it all right. It had been decided not to improve the lower section of the road to prevent easy access to the retreat. It was pretty much left to the vagaries of weather and traffic during the construction phase.

Justin showed everyone the power and utility systems, and the enclosed, but unfinished, basement shelter, broken as it was by the many columns that carried the weight of the concrete roof and five feet of earth cover.

Margo immediately asked how they were going to get everything down into the shelter, since the main entrance was a set of stairs that would open into a back room of the lodge.

Justin walked over to a wide opening in one concrete wall. There was a wall behind it, with a set of steps and an inclined floor going upward to the right.

“There will be a locking set of camouflaged doors at the top that will essentially be sealed off once the shelter is finished. I wanted the thing enclosed as soon as possible. You've all seen what is going on in the world. If need be, everyone could bring their gear up here and we could camp out in this shelter as it is now. We have water, sewer, air filtration, and power. Just none of the niceties.”

Justin pointed out where the various rooms were and what they were for, that were outside the lodge footprint supports. There were chalk marks on the floor of the large main room, connecting, for the most part, a set of columns that would eventually be individual rooms. Much of the area would be left open, with the occasional actual room isolating other spaces from general view without creating too much of an enclosed feeling.

The ten foot ceiling height helped, as did the initial coat of concrete sealer and white paint on all the concrete surfaces.

Next, Justin took them all back up to look at his and Dirk's cabin/shelters. Cammy and Trina had never quite been able to envision what they would be like and were more than pleased with the design that Justin had come up with.

Essentially a rectangle with one end walled in. The smaller area had a three-quarter bath and a small bedroom. The rest of the area was open, with a couple of columns to hold up the earth covered roof. A kitchen area on one side, the heating unit on the other with wood box and coal box, left the middle area clear for whatever furniture or fixtures each individual would want.

With the entrance an earth sheltered hallway with right angle turn into the shelter, the question was raised about emergency egress. Justin showed everyone the escape hatch built into the ceiling along the bedroom wall. Just by releasing the hatch, the sand in a box in the roof would drain into the room, and one could climb a fixed in place ladder out onto the roof.

The only down point of the celebration was the fact that there wouldn't be much, if any, work done during the rest of the winter. But they all did have viable emergency shelter space available now to everyone in the group. It was a much better situation than they'd started the summer with.

All were ready to head for the place just before Christmas of that year. News centers of regular TV broadcast stations broke into regular programming and the news networks made it the story of the day when a single missile was destroyed high in the sky over Washington, D. C.

It was quickly discerned that the weapon had been a nuclear device, launched from some point well offshore. The debris from the explosion contained highly radioactive components. Before it was discovered, hundreds of people received doses of radiation from handling the pieces. A few fatal doses occurred, but weren't known for some time.

Instructions were broadcast to leave anything unidentified in the whole area alone, no matter how small it was. Teams were quickly put together to locate and recover all the pieces that could be found.

It was the last scheduled day of Congress, before their Christmas break and just about every major player was in town. D. C. was pretty much a political ghost town the day after the failed attack.

Justin headed for the bar. He spotted Dorinda talking to Cammy and Margo. All three looked frightened.

“Justin! Good. What do you think?” asked Margo. “Should we go up?”

“I'm not planning it for the moment, but if the group wants to, I'll go along. Once we go, in mass, the secret is probably going to be out of the bag. If push comes to shove, I can take everyone at my place. Be tight, but as a temporary situation, it's doable.”

“You have shelter space at home?” Cammy asked. “Why'd you join with us and spend all that money?”

“Because something could happen right here. And working with a group is going to be critical for survival after the fact, unless I miss my guess. There will be lone wolves, but it’ll be difficult on them, I think.”

Trina, Veronica, and Dirk all showed up about the same time. Taking their usual booth, the subject was discussed again with the newcomers.

All left after a single drink, each headed home to prepare things, in case the worst happened and they did need to go to the retreat. All now had Justin’s address, just in case something happened that did not give them time to get to the retreat.

Justin, as was his normal routine, kept the Weather Channel on when he was writing. Any major disastrous event would be covered immediately. He was able to finish his edit of the latest story and get it ready for electronic submission the next day. If he was lucky, things would hold off for several days and he could get the book submitted, approved, and get his advance before anything else happened.

But nothing else happened during the next few days, except the cleanup of the destroyed missile parts, and the continuing cases of radiation sickness in those that refused to believe the danger.

A week after the initial event, the group got together again at the bar to discuss the situation. It was decided to do a large group order of consumable supplies, plus some equipment for the retreat, by pooling what extra money each had at the moment.

Two days later Justin, in charge of making the arrangements called everyone and told them that all the supply centers were back ordered for months, and requested another meeting for that weekend.

But international events intervened. The UN had been in near constant session since the incident. What at first had been an inquiry had turned into a series of accusations and counter accusations. Within the Security Council, first the Russians withdrew from the talks, and then the Chinese. The US Ambassador walked out shortly after that, leaving the room behind in an uproar.

The only thing that had been determined was there were no confirmed reports of submarines in the area, nor surface ships. But that didn’t mean there weren’t any, just that none were confirmed by the US Navy or Coast Guard.

Not long after the Security Council breakup, the Russians, Chinese, along with several of the other members of the nuclear club, went to high military alert status. Shortly after that, the warning sirens blared in the communities that had them, and the NOAA alert radios sounded their emergency signal.

Justin was at home, writing, when his NOAA radio went off. He waited a few seconds for the announcement. It was a warning message that an attack was likely, and for all citizens to prepare to seek shelter if so ordered.

The telephone system was still up and Justin used it to contact the members of the MAG. Each one agreed to head for the retreat, with everything they could carry.

Justin carefully shut down and locked up the house, starting with the shelter hidden door, closing the last of the security shutters over the garage door after taking out the Suburban. He watched the traffic. People were driving frantically. The day before Christmas Eve and the roads were heavily travelled anyway. The panic of the announcement just made it worse.

Driving carefully, Justin was almost out of town when his cell phone rang. It was Dorinda.

“Justin! Justin! Can you hear me?”

“I hear you, Dorinda. Just barely. I hear screaming in the background. What is going on? Why aren’t you on your way up?”

“Veronica and Cammy wanted to grab some more things before they headed for the retreat. We’re in the middle of a riot at Costco and Veronica is hurt.”

“I’ll be there as quick as I can,” Justin said. He quickly found a spot to turn around and headed for the Costco. Fortunately it wasn’t too far away. Justin had to swerve to avoid Dorinda when she leaped out from behind a car and waved her arms at him.

“Over here!” she yelled when Justin lowered his window. She began to run down a line of parked vehicles. Justin followed, having to stop several times when cars cut him off leaving parking slots or trying to get to them.

Justin saw Dorinda’s Jeep Commander, and then Cammy’s Subaru, and Veronica’s GMC Sonoma High Rider compact three door pickup truck. The pickup had an enclosed cargo trailer attached.”

“We’ve tried to get an ambulance,” Dorinda said when Justin hopped out of the Suburban, leaving the engine running and the driver’s door open.

“I’m okay!” Veronica insisted, as Justin and Dorinda stepped over to where she was sitting in the open hatch of Cammy’s Subaru.

“I’d really like to get her to a hospital,” Cammy said. “She took a hard blow to the head and one to her left shoulder. It’s not broken badly, if at all, but I can’t be sure without X-rays.”

Veronica rotated her arm and should. “See. I’m okay. I have a tremendous headache, but you said there aren’t any of the other signs of a concussion. I just feel so stupid insisting on stopping here. Look at the place. And it’s not as bad as it was.”

Veronica's eyes suddenly widened and Justin, Dorinda, and Cammy all spun around. A group of three men and two women were approaching. "Move out of the way!" yelled the biggest of the men. "We want that stuff!"

"Not today," Justin said. He had drawn his P-14 as he turned around. He noted out of the corner of his eye that Dorinda had done the same. Cammy moved over right next to Veronica and reached inside the back of the Subaru, pulling out her Ruger SR-556 carbine.

The group looked at the weapons and the hard look on Justin's face and hurried away, the same man that had yelled originally, yelling over his shoulder, "You'll get yours!"

"We need to decide. Quickly. Veronica, can you or can you not make it in the GMC?"

Standing up, Veronica had a determined look on her face. "I'll make it." She grunted, went pale, and sat back down. "I don't know... Maybe not."

"All right. Get a hold of Margo. She has a tow bar on her Jeep. She can drive the GMC and I'll tow her Jeep," Justin told Cammy and Dorinda.

Veronica protested. "But..."

Justin cut her off. "We're not leaving you behind, and you can't make it on your own. You'll want your gear, so we work it my way. It's what the MAG is all about. Have any of you heard from Margo or Trina lately?"

"Yes. They are already on their way up," Dorinda said. She pulled out her cell phone and dialed. "Circuits busy," she said, more than a little annoyed.

"Keep trying," Justin said. He moved away from the vehicles as another small group of people came toward them. But Justin's presence, armed with the obvious pistol, avoided him, going well around to get to their vehicles. None of them had more than one bag or box, and none of them looked heavy.

Justin stood guard and Cammy monitored Veronica and Dorinda kept trying to get Margo.

"Got her!" Dorinda shouted. Keeping a wary eye out, Justin moved closer. He heard Dorinda explaining the situation, but couldn't hear the other end of the conversation."

Justin looked up as huge snowflakes began to fall and the afternoon light began to fade to twilight.

"I'm sorry," Veronica said. "It's all my fault." She started crying. Cammy stayed with her and tried to comfort her.

Dorinda stepped up to Justin. "Margo said Dirk and Margery are with them. I got them just in time. They'd be out of town in another few minutes. Shouldn't be too long."

“Okay. Good. Let’s get Veronica settled in the passenger seat of Cammy’s rig and I’ll get turned around and parked so Margo can just drive right up to my rear bumper. Keep an eye out.”

In the few minutes it took to get Veronica situated and Justin’s Suburban parked so it would be easy to hitch up Margo’s Jeep, Margo, Trina, and Dirk and Margery all showed up. Like Veronica, Dirk was pulling a trailer with his old full-size Chevy Blazer.

Justin unlatched the tow bar of Margo’s Jeep and guided her to the Suburban to make the tow connection. He plugged in the lighting cable and then motioned to Margo that everything was set.

Trina and Margery were talking to Veronica through the open window of Cammy’s Subaru as Dorinda kept a careful eye on the area. Everyone jumped when a shot sounded. “Time to get out of here,” Justin said. “I’ll lead. Cammy and Veronica behind me, and then Dirk, followed by Trina, with Dorinda bringing up the end. That okay with everyone?”

There were quick agreement and everyone entered their vehicles. Justin set a steady pace, avoiding getting the convoy separated in the heavy traffic. It was full dark now, with a heavy snow coming down. It was actually easier when they made it to the county road, and finally their dirt track.

Justin slowed way down to allow Dirk and Margo to go as slow as they needed to handle the trailers on the rough, muddy drive. When they reached the site, Justin drove around to where the heavy use access stairs and ramp were and parked out of the way, so his headlights and roof lights would illuminate the area.

Cammy took Veronica and Margery down into the shelter, saying, “I want to check them both out a bit better.”

“That’s good,” Justin said. “We’ll take care of all the gear.” He turned to the others and they began unloading Veronica’s Subaru and trailer, Cammy’s Subaru, Margo’s Jeep, which Justin unhitched from the Suburban, and Dirk’s and Margery’s Blazer and trailer.

It took considerable time and Cammy came up to help with the last few things. Dorinda only had a large back pack and a duffle bag. Justin handed his back pack to Dirk, and began checking each of the vehicles for keys, locking them up after making sure the keys weren’t inside.

Justin waited for the others to go down the stairs before he closed the hatch that covered them. The snow would have it covered in no time. He hurried around and went into the primary entrance and exit, locking it up behind him.

He went back up the other stairs and secured the hatch from below. When he reentered the shelter proper, Justin took a look around. There were piles of gear here and there. The others were gathered around the table made from sawhorses and left over lumber. Dorinda was asking Cammy, “How they doing, Cammy?”

“You okay, Sweetie?” Dirk asked Margery. “You look a little pale.” He looked over at Cammy, “How’s the baby doing?”

Cammy draped her stethoscope around her neck and said, “They are both fine. The baby is fine. Good strong heartbeat, and no signs of distress. Well, except for possibly being in the middle of a nuclear war. Veronica’s headache is already fading. There will be bruises on her arm and shoulder, and there will be a sensitive lump on her head, but she should be just fine.”

The others sighed in relief. “But rest will help them both. Let’s get some beds set up for them so they can lie down.”

One of the last things installed before construction in the shelter halted had been the metal bunks for the bunkrooms. The chain mesh mattress supports were in place, but there were no mattresses. Digging into their respective camping gear, self inflating mattresses were allowed to inflate and sleeping bags were placed on them.

Dirk and Margery would normally have one of the smaller single rooms for themselves, once finished, but there was no bedding or anything so it was easier on Margery to use one of the bunks. Cammy would be close. Dirk would sleep in one of the other bunkrooms, as would Justin.

Just had a portable radio connected to one of the simple wire antennas that were about the only part of the shelter communications system installed. He listened to first one broadcast station and then another. Nothing of consequence was being said. Mostly conjecture, wild guesses, and repeats of the warning disseminated by the NOAA National Weather Service radio system.

He checked the weather frequencies. Only the normal weather information was being broadcast, though in rather hushed, tense voices. As Justin was checking for information, the others were setting up their own bedding, and then camp kitchen equipment to make a hot meal.

He took the plate Margo handed him and began to eat mechanically, constantly running the shortwave and amateur bands, looking for information on what was happening. Many of the normal shortwave broadcast stations weren’t broadcasting. Amateur radio traffic was slower than Justin expected. Nothing from overseas, and within the US it seemed most of the traffic was requests for information. With none forthcoming.

Justin stayed up well into the night, as the others drifted off to bed. About one in the morning, Dorinda, dressed in sweats, brought him a cup of coffee and sat down beside him on one of the empty five gallon paint buckets still in the shelter.

“Thanks,” he said after accepting the coffee. “Didn’t mean to keep anyone up.”

“It’s okay,” Dorinda said softly. She had a cup of the steaming brew, as well. “I slept for a while, but I’m too keyed up to rest more than a few hours at a time. I hate not knowing. Is there anything at all?”

Justin shook his head. "There is some traffic, but it is all the same. Asking what anyone else might know about the situation. Nothing on the regular night time talk shows except speculation. Nothing concrete. Nothing on the NOAA NWS weather radio except normal announcements."

"You think we were premature to come up?" Dorinda asked.

Justin was shaking his head. "No. I don't. We can always go back if it turns out to be a false alarm. At least for me. I don't have the daily commitments the way the rest of you do. Jobs and such."

"I know. Margo, Veronica, and Trina all have to consider job security. They could lose their jobs if they take time off and nothing happens. Cammy is okay. Her position at the hospital will take her back under just about any circumstance. I'm like you. Don't have to be anywhere special any particular time.

"Why don't you get some sleep, Justin? I'll keep an eye on things and monitor the radio."

Justin hesitated for just a moment, but said, "Okay. I think I will. Thanks."

"Sure thing," replied Dorinda.

Quietly Justin broke out his camping gear and set up his sleeping bag on the lower bunk bed across from the one Dirk was using. He stripped down to his shorts and slid into the bag. He thought he'd have trouble falling asleep, but the thought had barely formed when he was.

Even as late as he went to bed, Justin was the first one up the next morning. He slipped on his pants and headed for the bathroom nearest the men's bunk rooms. Justin nodded at Dorinda. She was still sitting, listening to the radio. She gave a little wave, and covered her mouth with it when she yawned.

Showered, shaved, and dressed, Justin began breakfast preparations as Dorinda watched and kept an ear on the radio. He went to one of the side rooms and came back carrying a stack of #10 cans in his arms.

"Guess we don't have to worry about having to do separate guy/girl things. You look like you know your way around a kitchen."

"Long term bachelor with a stingy wallet and healthy appetite. Learned to cook so I wouldn't starve, and found I enjoy it and have a slight knack for it."

He laughed and Dorinda's dimple showed when she smiled. "Of course, heating water to rehydrate things isn't haute cuisine by a long shot."

"No, but knowing the good combinations is important. When did you move some of your supplies up here?"

“Couple of weeks ago,” Justin replied, cutting a glance at Dorinda. “I didn’t want to have to try and move a bunch of things at once if the worst happened. I moved most of my food preps to my cabin, and brought a few in here to have for just such a situation. No point in using individual serving camp meals if we don’t have to.”

“Sure makes it easier. And I suspect a better selection. You have freeze-dried strawberries there?”

Justin grinned. “I do. A weakness?”

“Minor... well... not really major, anyway.”

Justin scooped out a few of the berry pieces into a cup and carried them over to Dorinda. “Here you go.”

“Thanks Justin.”

“Sure thing.” Justin looked around. The others were stirring, headed to and from the four big bathrooms the shelter was equipped with.

Dorinda continued to sit and listen to the radio while Justin dished up food onto plates and handed them around as the other began to gather around the makeshift table. “Dorinda made coffee,” Justin said. “Help yourselves.”

“Is there hot water for tea?” asked Margery.

“I’ve got some heating. Should be ready in a couple of minutes. You have some tea bags? If not I can go get some from my stores in the cabin.”

“No, I have some. Thanks, Justin.”

Veronica, looking much better this morning, helped Trina do the kitchen clean up while Justin ate his own breakfast and the others began sorting out their belongings that had been set haphazardly here and there near the utility entrance.

Dorinda took a short nap, and then all gathered around the sawhorse table again to discuss the situation.

“If nothing more happens,” Margo said, “I will need to get back to work in a couple of days.”

“Same here,” Veronica said. “I’ve got some vacation time accumulated, but I don’t want to burn it all if nothing happens.”

Trina just said, “Ditto.”

“It’s not critical, but I’d like to get back to the shop. Stanley gets a little antsy when I miss more than a couple of days. He won’t fire me, but he’ll give me a stern lecture about letting down customers by making them wait when there’s only him there.”

“I understand,” Justin said. “I just don’t have any good advice to give. I won’t say it might be nothing, because there already is something. But I know the need for staying on good terms with employers. I’ll go along with whatever you all want.”

“Let’s give it another day,” Dorinda said. “If we don’t know anything more by then, we can all go home, but stay on alert.”

There was general agreement. Justin went back to monitoring the radios and the others found things to do. Mostly planning for future use of the shelter, and checking out the current systems in detail so all would know how to keep the shelter functioning if Justin wasn’t around.

They were packing up things a day later when the NOAA NWS radio began an announcement. It wasn’t a presidential statement, but it was from the head of Homeland Security.

“Despite on-going risks, the risks associated with the continued state of readiness are becoming clear. I strongly urge you to go back to your normal routines until further notice from this office. If additional warnings are warranted, you will be notified as expeditiously as possible.”

“Guess we’re making the right decision,” Margo said.

“I hope so,” Justin said. “I do think I’m going to start the finishing touches to the shelter, anyway.”

“Just in case?” Dirk asked with a grin.

Justin shook his head, but smiled. “Yes. Just in case.”

The others laughed and continued packing up what they planned to take home with them. Justin noted that Veronica and Dirk were both leaving much of what they’d brought up in the trailers in the shelter.

Even the others left a few things behind. Justin was the last one out of the shelter and locked it down as the others watched. “Merry Christmas, everyone,” Justin called out before he got into the Suburban.

The others called out the same, and then the convoy was on the way back to the city on Christmas Eve.

Justin wasted no time in following through on his statement that he was going to keep working on the shelter. He was up every other day, with a trailer load of materials, to close in the various rooms now just delineated by chalk marks on the shelter floor.

He considered for a few days, as he worked, and finally decided to start using some of his conventional savings to continue, with the thought, "I just don't think the money is going to be worth much in a little while."

After the first week, Dorinda began to join him on his alternate days at the shelter. She, too, had come to the conclusion that paper wealth might not mean much, very soon. With her funds, combined with Justin's, the completion of the shelter went fairly quickly. Especially the weekends the others could help.

The only major disappointment was the back log of orders for long term storage foods. All the members of the MAG had orders in, but the delivery dates varied from two months to a year.

The MAG didn't have that time. Nor the time to even start the lodge or the rest of the individual shelter cabins. What machinations went on behind closed doors in a dozen nations were lost to posterity, but the effects of them would be remembered for centuries.

A few seconds after midnight on January First of the new year, the NOAA NWS radio that Justin had in his pocket sounded. He didn't realize it at first, for he was in the bar with the rest of the MAG, just celebrating the New Year when it happened.

When he did realize it, he quickly stepped away from Dorinda, who had just kissed him on the cheek, and pulled the radio out of his pocket so he could hear. He never did understand the words being said, but he was able to figure out what it meant when the radio suddenly squealed and died.

The radio wasn't the only thing that died. The lights in the bar went out, and looking outside, all the streetlights were out, and the other buildings on both sides of the street were dark.

Several people screamed. But Justin, Dirk, Dorinda, and Margo all pulled small flashlights from pockets or purses and lighted up a small area.

Justin looked around and made sure all the MAG members were handy. "Time to go, I think," he said quietly enough so that only the MAG members could hear. The group moved en masse to the front door of the bar.

As they were the only ones with lights other than the occasional burning lighter, there were some protests and requests for them to stay. Justin hurried the others out when someone suggested someone else take one of the flashlights.

There were a few people milling around on the street, a few with flashlights, a few with lighted lighters. Justin waited as each of the others tried to start their vehicles. There were several ashen faces when only Dirk's Blazer, Dorinda's Jeep Commander, and Justin's Suburban started.

None of the other vehicles would start, though a couple turned over a few times, and some had lights that worked.

It didn't take long for Veronica, Trina, Cammy, and Margo to transfer the items from their vehicles they wanted to take with them. Justin didn't like the look of the crowd gathering and hurried them up some.

"I need to stop at home for more medical gear," Cammy told Justin.

"Okay. Get in and guide me. I'll tell the others."

As those without useable vehicles took seats in the working vehicles Justin hurriedly told Dirk and Dorinda where they were going first. He breathed a sigh of relief when he led the way out onto the street from the bar parking lot without further incident.

Everyone pitched in and quickly had the rest of Cammy's medical gear and supplies loaded. Rather reluctantly, each of the others, except Dorinda, asked to go by their residences to pick up a few last items.

Justin didn't resist. He understood the need to have everything possible at hand, considering it could be weeks, if not months, before the chance to get them might come up again. If ever.

Dirk attached his trailer to the Blazer and it was loaded with a few things from his and Margery's house. But there was plenty of space left since they'd moved much of their stuff to the retreat already.

The space was put to good use at the other places. Though it wasn't needed at the moment, Veronica's trailer was hooked up to Dorinda's Jeep Commander for possible future use.

At each stop, those that saw the operating vehicles became a bit more aggressive than those at the earlier stops. But it was only at the last stop, at Margo's, that Justin and Dorinda had to pull their handguns and warn off people at the apartment complex.

They continued to stand guard as the others, minus Margery, hurriedly brought down the things Margo wanted to have with her. She apologized the entire time for putting everyone in danger.

The crowd was getting ugly, with several people blocking the apartment building parking lot entrance when the group was ready to go. Justin keyed the microphone of the FRS/GMRS radio he carried. Each of the others had one, as well.

"Plug your ears, close your eyes, and hold your noses," Justin said. He put down the radio and flipped three switches on a panel he exposed under the front seat console. Suddenly a painfully loud screech sounded, brilliant strobes began to flash, and a terrible stench drifted away from the Suburban.

The crowd just couldn't stand the combination. They broke and ran to get away from the sound, sight, and smell. Justin dropped the Suburban in gear and pulled out of the parking lot. He flipped the switches off and the disruptive effects stopped. "Let's go," Justin said into the walky-talky.

Only Dirk had known what to expect, but Dorinda had taken Justin at his word and closed her eyes and held her hands over her ears. They were both able to immediately follow Justin.

Despite being in the vehicles and partially protected, the others in were still a little disoriented from the sound and light effects. The smell had barely penetrated, thankfully, or they might have been gagging and throwing up the way several in the crowd were.

Justin maintained a good speed, with not only his regular headlights on, but powerful long range lights mounted on the front bumper and on the roof rack turned on to allow him to see the people milling in the streets, and the cars stalled everywhere, well down the road.

Twice more Justin flipped on the disruptive sound and light systems, though he didn't use the gag-gas again. People dodged away from the painful sight and sound coming from the Suburban, leaving a clear path for all three vehicles to get through two tight spots.

Finally, they were on the road out of town and Justin was able to pick up more speed, though he still had to dodge people on foot and stalled vehicles. More than one stepped into the roadway and waved their arms to get him to stop.

Push come to shove, Justin would have stopped if the people had not dodged out of the way when it appeared he would run them down. There were angry shouts and waved fists. At one spot, Justin thought he heard a gunshot, but wasn't sure about it. None of the others said anything so he didn't mention it.

The rest of the trip was uneventful. It was the matter of only a few minutes to get everything and everyone secure in the shelter and the shelter systems turned on. It was a far cry from their first use.

All the interior walls were up and equipment installed. Cammy immediately ordered Margery to bed. Her due date was only a few days away, and the stress was telling on her. This time it was a real bed she was in.

Between them, Cammy and Dirk had her propped up on pillows, another behind her head, a cup of herbal tea within reach on the bedside table within a few minutes of the time she came down into the shelter.

Fearful of another HEMP event, Justin left the radio gear unplugged, the antennas grounded and power leads disconnected, the cover down on the Faraday cage that protected the shelter's communication electronics from EMP damage.

As the work had been accomplished, each of the MAG members had made a specific area of the shelter their own. With little to do, everyone except Justin went to bed. He continued to

attach the probe cable of the remote reading radiation meter to the meter and check for fallout for a few minutes at a time, until Dorinda got up and urged him to go to bed while she took over.

Justin nodded, showed Dorinda how to connect, disconnect, and ground the outside probe of the radiation meter, and how to record the readings, if any.

“Get me up if the radiation starts to go up,” Justin said. He covered a yawn with a hand and then turned toward the bunkroom he was using.

Dorinda made herself comfortable in the communication station’s leather upholstered office chair after getting a cup of coffee from the pot Justin had prepared earlier.

Dorinda knocked on the open door of the bunkroom where Justin was sleeping at a little after four in the morning. “Justin? The radiation is going up.”

“Be right there,” Justin said after a brief silence.

Dorinda went back to the chair and began connecting the probe cable again. Justin, wearing just his pants, walked barefoot over to join Dorinda. He took a look at the meter and whistled.

“When did it start?” he asked.

“About an hour ago. Really light. Then, about five minutes ago it really started to jump up. That’s when I decided to wake you.”

“I’m glad you did. Any indications of another HEMP event?”

Dorinda shook her head.

“I’m going to hook up one of the cameras temporarily. See if there is anything going on out there.”

Dorinda nodded. “Should I keep the probe connected?”

“I think we’re okay. I don’t see them using another HEMP right away.”

While Justin went into the small enclosed area that was where the various electrical and electronic conduits entered the shelter and went to appropriate distribution boxes, Dorinda continued to monitor the fallout radiation.

Justin opened one of the electrical boxes, removed a camera lead from where it was grounded, and plugged it into a connection to the communications desk. “You have video?” Justin asked, sticking his head around the door frame.

Dorinda flipped on one of the monitors and asked, “Which camera?”

“Number one. It’s the one on the antenna tower that gives a three-sixty-degree view.”

“Okay. Got it. I don’t think... Oh... Wait... I guess it is just dark outside. I can see the vehicles,” Dorinda said as she operated the joystick control of the camera. “And the fallout. I thought it would look like snow for some reason. It doesn’t. Just dust.”

“Okay,” Justin said. He closed up the electrical panel again and joined Dorinda at the desk again.

“If you’re okay for a few more minutes I want to get a shower and get dressed. I doubt if I can go back to sleep for a while.”

“Sure. I’m good for a while.” She yawned. “A few minutes anyway.”

Dorinda found herself watching Justin’s lithe form as he walked away. She shook her head and looked back at the radiation meter. It was still clicking softly and the needle crept up just a hair more as she watched.

More tired than she realized when she got to the bunkroom she was sharing with Margo and Trina, Dorinda crawled back under the covers of the bunk, rather than getting the shower and changing clothes as she’d decided to do.

When she got up later, everyone else was up and breakfast was being served. Margery, wanting something to do, was monitoring the radiation meter and the video monitor while the others did breakfast.

“Well,” Justin said when Dorinda joined the others at the table, “There is no question about it this time. We’ve been nuked. Radiation level is peaked, I think, about an hour ago. At one-hundred-fifty-five R.

According to the seven-ten rule, we should be able to go out in about four or five days for a good look see, if we don’t get more fallout. About three weeks and we shouldn’t have to worry about radiation right here. Elsewhere, I’m not so sure. It’ll take an exploratory trip to find out, if we can’t find any local amateur radio operators on the air in the meantime.”

“We did all this for just four or five days?” Trina asked. She sounded a bit annoyed.

Justin smiled slightly. “Well, I’ll be sleeping down here for some time to come to avoid higher than necessary radiation doses, even after the radiation is relatively safe. Under 0.1R. The four or five day mark the radiation will be just under 1.0R. Low enough to go out and look around for a few minutes. But still too high to be safe. The less radiation the less chance of radiation sickness. Even at 1.0R, you can get enough to make you sick.

“Oh. Well... I just thought...” Trina looked sheepish and the others laughed.

“I sure don’t consider it a waste,” Dirk said. He had taken a chair over to sit beside Margery.

The smile on Margery's face suddenly faded. "Cammy?"

Cammy left her place at the table and hurried over to Margery. "Okay. I think the time is near. Let's get her to the other bedroom. I set it up last night, just in case."

Justin stayed out of the way. Dirk looked more pale than Margery. Cammy suggested, gently, that he find something to do. "Boil a big pot of water," she finally said.

"I can do that," Dirk replied, very seriously.

Cammy winked over at Justin and Justin smiled slightly.

"Need some help with that, Dirk?" Justin asked when Cammy went back into the bedroom set up as infirmary.

"I got it. Thanks Justin."

Margo, with the next most medical experience, helped Cammy as Trina, Veronica, and Dorinda cleaned up the breakfast things, letting Dirk stay close to the stove to watch for the water to boil. Dirk would look over at the door to the room where Margery was, but stayed where he was.

It was Margery's first child, and it took a while. The labor wasn't as long and drawn out as some, but it was several hours before Cammy called for Dirk to come into the room. He was grinning to beat it when he came out and told Justin, "It's a boy! A boy! He's beautiful!"

All had eaten the light lunch Justin had prepared, as the other women went into and out of the room Margery was in to lend moral support.

Everyone was much more bright and cheerful due to the successful birthing, especially in light of the circumstances. But things quieted down quickly after the evening meal. The women insisted that Justin take the night off while they each took a turn at watch. Dirk was exempted so he could be with Margery during the night.

Justin knew better than to argue. Not only were the women capable of standing a watch, they needed to get into the habit, because it very well could become important in the days ahead.

Just In Case – Chapter 2

Only Justin and Dorinda had adequate gear to go out after the first four days of the shelter stay. Suited up in Tyvek hooded coveralls, Millennium CBRN respirators, rubber boots and gloves, and armed with a rifle and handgun apiece, the two checked the area with the camera before leaving the shelter.

The fallout wasn't obvious, with the thin layer of snow that covered it, but the survey meter indicated there was still plenty there. The reading was just below 1R.

Justin and Dorinda checked the vehicles and found no signs of anyone having tampered with them or the main shelter entrance that wasn't concealed. They discussed doing some decontamination with water hoses, but talked themselves out of it. There simply was no reason for the exposure. Once the level was down, the decontamination would go quickly, since the area around the shelter was landscaped to make it easy.

Carefully decontaminating each other, they stripped out of the protective gear, hung it in a locker in the hallway from the entrance to the shelter, and reported what little they'd seen to the others.

The next three weeks passed slowly for the group, despite the attributes of the shelter. Most of Justin's small DVD collection was there, with a player and TV. Everyone had brought books of one kind or another, and much of the time was spent reading. The rest of the time was meals and sleeping, with someone always monitoring the camera feed, the multi-band scanner, and the remote reading radiation meter.

But the day finally came when the radiation around the shelter dropped to less than 0.1R. Everyone was ready to get out of the shelter, but Justin, with Dorinda's support, convinced them to stay inside until they had a chance to decontaminate around the shelter.

It was cold, and there was a bit of a problem with the water from the hoses freezing, but Justin and Dorinda managed to wash all the snow and fallout away from the shelter and parking area. They decontaminated the vehicles and the paths to Justin's cabin and Dirk's cabin.

Finally the others, bundled up in winter clothing, came out, except for Margery and the baby. There was little to do except look around and get some unfiltered fresh air. The need to be outside for a while fulfilled, everyone went back into the shelter, feeling much better. Gathered around the kitchen table, they began to discuss their options.

"I think a recon trip is in order," Justin said. "There still isn't any contact with local amateur radio operators. I'm sure everyone wants to know the status of their homes."

"I need to check in with the hospital," Cammy said. "If I can help, I have to. It's part of my oath."

Justin nodded. Each of the others chimed in, wanting to check their personal possessions and to find out if they had a job of any sort left. But not everyone would go at once. Justin and Dorinda would switch off taking people in, two or three people each day. The first trip would be just them and Cammy. But all the homes would be checked to see if they still existed, though only the ones of those going would enter, and then only if it looked safe.

Cammy packed a pack to sustain her for a few days and climbed into the rear passenger seat of the Suburban. With Dorinda in the front passenger seat, armed with a shotgun, her other weapons at hand, Justin got behind the wheel and they headed down to the city.

They stopped at Cammy's apartment building first. With Justin keeping an eye on the Suburban, Dorinda and Cammy went up to her apartment, Dorinda with the shotgun held at the ready. Cammy, thought Dorinda, took it fairly well when they found that the apartment had been broken into and ransacked.

Cammy had not left much behind, but every scrap of food was gone and the place simply torn up for no good reason she or Dorinda could fathom, except for the fact that some of those in the complex had probably seen her loading the Suburban with prep items from the apartment that first night.

They decided to leave the vehicle check for later and went directly to the hospital. It was quieter there than Justin had expected, especially with the number of people milling around in the hallways. There was no source of heat in the building and spare blankets and sheets were hanging across windows to try and keep all the heat inside being generated by the people's bodies and the few makeshift heaters that were burning on each floor.

Justin went back outside to stay with the Suburban again when curious people left what little warmth there was in the hospital to check it out.

Cammy was welcomed back, somewhat begrudgingly by a few, but with open arms from others. "I'll be okay here for a few days," Cammy told Justin and Dorinda several minutes later, out at the Suburban. "Head Nurse Mayhew said the National Guard is supposed to be around with some supplies in a day or two."

"How did they get into contact with the National Guard?" Justin asked.

"She said a group came through two days ago counting heads, taking inventory, and promising help."

Cammy and Dorinda looked at the cautious look on Justin's face. "That's a little quick and a little too pat," he said, seeing them looking at him. "I may just be paranoid, but I'd suggest you keep a low profile if they do show up again."

"You think it could be renegades posing as National Guard?" Dorinda asked.

"Possibly. Could be the Guard just doing their work. But I'm leery. They may be looking for whoever has the best supplies to set them up for a while."

“It sure won’t be here,” Cammy replied. “They’ve salvaged everything they could find for a fifteen block area in the way of food. There’s enough here for who is here, for maybe two more weeks. After that, it’s going to be pretty tough.”

Justin nodded. “We’ll be on the lookout for things the hospital can use. You take care, Cammy,” Justin said. “I think we’d better be on our way.”

Dorinda hugged Cammy and when Cammy hurried back inside, Justin and Dorinda quickly got into the Suburban and Justin drove away, leaving a crowd behind watching silently.

Dorinda’s place wasn’t as bad as Cammy’s apartment, but it was close. Dorinda put up a good front, Justin thought, but the invasion into her home bothered her more than she was letting on.

“You okay?” Justin asked when Dorinda carried out a couple of totes, one after the other. “All that’s left of my supplies that I didn’t already take to the retreat. They didn’t get much, I guess, but they did get some. I guess I shouldn’t begrudge them too much. We’re on a mission to do the same thing to others that they’ve done to me.”

Justin didn’t respond, except to help Dorinda load the totes into the back of the Suburban. The next stop was at Justin’s. There were signs of attempted entry, but the security shutters had held, and the place was still secure.

Keeping a wary eye out, Justin and Dorinda went around to the other residences, to get a feel for what the others would be facing. It wasn’t good. On the way back to the retreat, Justin told Dorinda, “I think you’re going to need to take an extra person along for security when you come in tomorrow. I don’t like the looks of Veronica’s place, or Margo’s.”

“You volunteering?” Dorinda asked.

“I will, if you need me to. But I’d like for one of us to be at the retreat all the time from now on, when the other one is away.”

“I understand,” Dorinda replied. “I think that is a good idea. The others are great, but they look to the two of us for direct leadership.”

“I know. I sure hope that is okay with you. I have no intention of taking over the group. It is a joint effort. In my mind, you are the one in charge.”

A slight smile curved Dorinda’s lips. “Well... I guess that’s okay. I do need someone to lean on at times, though. Like at the house. That really spooked me.”

“I understand. I’ll do all I can to help.”

They were silent the rest of the way back, except for the time Justin pulled off the road, turned around, and watched the road they had just travelled.

“Looking for anyone that might be following?” Dorinda asked.

Justin just nodded and continued to look through his binoculars at the long open stretch of roadway. A few minutes later, when nothing was spotted, Justin took them the rest of the way to the retreat.

The others were disappointed in the report that Justin and Dorinda gave. But there was nothing to do except wait for the next day when Dorinda would take in Dirk, Veronica, Margo, and Trina.

Trina’s small apartment was just as she’d left it. All she did was pack up a few more clothes and she and Veronica went back down to the Jeep Commander. Veronica, as Justin had feared, had more trouble.

Not only had her apartment been broken into, it was still occupied by those that broke in. Veronica was furious, but as several additional people gathered around rather menacingly, Dorinda took Veronica’s arm and eased her back outside and down to the Jeep Commander.

Trina, Margo, and Dirk were standing around the rig, rifles at the ready as some of those in the apartment building joined three already standing near the Jeep Commander, talking heatedly with Dirk.

“You got no right to have what you got and we have nothing! We want that Jeep!”

“No way, Dude! This is our lifeline,” Dirk said back, his voice elevated slightly, but not shouting the way the other man was.

Dorinda got Veronica into the Jeep and then Trina and Margo. Dirk stood his ground until Dorinda had the Jeep going. He eased backwards into the left rear passenger seat, still holding the rifle ready.

Dorinda gunned the engine and those standing in front of her moved sideways, out of her path. She dropped the Jeep Commander into gear and took off. It was none too soon. Someone was yelling from the second floor walkway and all those in the Jeep heard the sound of a string of shots. The rear hatch glass crumbled and Dirk finished closing his door, spun around, and fired several shots out the back, over the heads of the crowd.

“Anybody hit?” Dorinda asked over her shoulder.

Margo said, “I’m okay.”

“No,” Dirk replied, after touching Veronica’s arm and getting her shake of the head. “I’m sure I didn’t hit anyone. I was shooting over their heads.”

Veronica was huddled over against the door when Dorinda stopped at Margo’s. The other four left her alone, with Dirk and Trina standing watch and Dorinda and Margo going up to

Margo's apartment. It took a while, since Margo lived on the fifth floor of a large apartment complex.

They were a little surprised not to see anyone, but not a soul was in evidence. Quickly Margo packed up a few more things she wanted, knowing it was unlikely she would be coming back to the place.

Dorinda carried down one bag, on her shoulder, keeping her shotgun in hand. Margo had two bundles banging on her hips as the two made their slow way down the emergency stairs they'd climbed a few minutes before.

Again it was eerily quiet when they made it back to the Jeep. "Nothing stirring," Dirk said. "Though I sure feel like I'm in someone's sights."

"Let's not chance anything," Dorinda said, tossing the bag she was carrying through the busted out rear hatch.

Margo did the same and they all got back into the Jeep Commander and Dorinda headed toward the shopping center where both Margo and Trina worked. Margo as a paralegal for an attorney, and Trina as the head of the women's department of a large local department store.

Everyone could tell something was wrong before they reached the mall. Once they were closer it was Margo that asked, "Where's the department store?"

Another few yards and they all got a good view of the burned out remains of most of the buildings in the mall. There was little left. And little to be said. Dorinda headed for where Veronica worked. At first, it looked just as it had before the attack. But when they got closer, it was obvious that the place would no longer be doing business.

After carefully looking around the area and seeing no threats, Veronica and Dirk got out of the Commander and went to take a closer look. The front door had been knocked down, and all the windows broken out. Someone had tried to torch the place, but the fire had not caught for some reason.

Walking gingerly on the broken glass, Veronica went inside, her carbine up and ready. After looking into one of the open office doors, Veronica turned and marched outside grimly. Dirk looked inside the room. A woman sat in the chair behind a large desk, slumped in death, a small hole in the right side of her head.

Dirk moved over and looked around more closely. Among the littered remains of insurance policies, he saw a small pistol lying on the floor. Dirk picked it up and stuck it in his hip pocket. He checked the other two offices. They'd been ransacked, too, files pulled from file cabinets and thrown around.

Stony faced, Veronica got back into the Commander, followed a few seconds later by Dirk. He said nothing about the pistol he'd found. Dorinda headed back to what was now

becoming their new home. Dorinda radioed in that they were on their way back. She heard the relief in Justin's voice when he acknowledged her call.

As Justin had done the day before, Dorinda stopped and watched the back trail for several minutes. "We have a tail," she said quietly. She reached for the ignition switch and started up the Jeep as the others looked back at the road.

"Don't see anything," Dirk said.

"They just made it around the far corner of the road and backed up. I'm assuming they saw us stopped here," Dorinda said. "What should we do?"

"Let's get home and tell the others," Veronica said angrily. "Get everyone armed and come after them."

"Uh... I've got an alternate idea," Dirk said. "Pull on around the next curve and I'll drop out. If they are trouble, we'll have them in a cross fire. Radio Justin to come arunnin'."

"You sure, Dirk?" asked Margo. "That's quite a risk."

Dorinda already had the Jeep moving. "I think it's best, too," she said. She stopped a few feet past the next turn and Dirk quickly exited the vehicle. He was surprised to see Veronica get out on the other side, her SR-556 in one hand and her LBE vest in the other.

"Don't argue!" she said, rather loudly, directing the words to all three of the others.

"Just follow my lead," Dirk said and faded into the trees on his side of the road. Veronica did the same. Fortunately it was a windswept area and they left no tracks on the cold, hard ground.

Dirk could see Margo using the radio as the Jeep pulled away as Trina looked at them through the back hatch.

He didn't know how Veronica was holding up, but he was getting cold. But that was all forgotten when a light blue pickup truck drove slowly up the road and then past where Dirk and Veronica were hiding.

Both immediately started jogging after the truck, making sure to stay one turn behind them so they wouldn't be seen by those in the bed of the pickup.

Suddenly there were shouts and shots ahead and Dirk and Veronica broke into a run. Both slid to a stop, one in each roadside ditch and began to fire on those in the blue pickup. There was heavy rifle fire coming from the next bend forward.

There were three heavy caliber weapons being fired and Dirk suspected that Justin had joined the fray with Dorinda, Margo, and Trina. Taking careful aim, Justin dropped one man in the bed of the truck.

Veronica fired three times and another man went down. It was only then that the group realized they were in a crossfire and tried to abandon the truck. It was too late. The firing stopped and screaming began.

Dirk held his place, but Veronica ran forward, despite his call for her to stay put and let Justin check it out.

The screams faded away to moans, and then there was sudden silence after Veronica fired her carbine three times.

“Come on up, Dirk,” Justin called.

Justin, Margo, Dorinda, and Veronica were standing around one of the men on the ground. He was muttering, his bloody hands clutching his chest, where more blood was seeping through two bullet holes.

“Anyone else know you were coming out here?” Veronica asked.

The man managed to shake his head.

“Any last words?” Veronica asked then.

Whatever they were going to be, expletives Dirk suspected, were lost to time when Veronica pulled the trigger of her carbine again before the man had barely opened his mouth. The others looked at one another and at Veronica.

She had a stony look on her face as she saw their looks. “What? You weren’t going to put him out of his misery? Let’s see what they have that’s useful. Just like those that took my stuff.”

Silently the others helped Veronica go through the men’s pockets and then the truck. They didn’t find much. Just the weapons and ammunition, some water bottles beginning to freeze, and two bottles of whiskey. The engine of the truck was still running and Dirk reached in and turned it off.

“What do we do with the bodies?” Dirk asked.

“I need someone to help, but I’ll take care of them,” Justin said.

“I’ll help,” Veronica said. Her look said not to try and prevent her.

Dirk, Margo, and Dorinda walked up the road to get Trina where she was waiting with the vehicles, and Justin and Veronica soon heard the Jeep Commander pull away.

“We’ll strip the bodies, toss them out well before our turnoff, and bring the truck and their stuff back. Might as well get some use out of it since it still runs.”

Stony faced, Veronica helped Justin do just as he'd suggested. When they had the bodies loaded into the bed of the pickup truck it was starting to get dark. Veronica almost resisted when Justin told her to get the Suburban and follow him in the pickup. But seeing the bloody seat of the truck, she quickly did as he suggested.

Using some of the clothing to cover the seat, Justin started the old truck and turned it around. They saw no one on the road and at a very conspicuous spot on the highway, Justin stopped, with Veronica behind him. They threw the slowly freezing bodies out of the truck into the road ditch and then hurried back to the vehicles. It was getting really cold now.

Veronica let Justin set the pace in the pickup, just in case he had trouble with it and had to abandon the thing. But it made it all the way to the retreat and Justin parked it out in the trees, out of easy sight from the entrance to the retreat area.

Dorinda was waiting for them, well bundled up, at the entrance to the shelter. Justin could hear the sobs start when Dorinda asked Veronica if she was all right. At a loss as to what to do to help, Justin let Dorinda lead Veronica into the shelter and then into the bunkroom she was using.

"I'm taking a shower and getting out of these clothes," Justin said to no one in particular, hating the feel of the cold, dried blood on them. They went into the wash, with Veronica's a few minutes later after each had showered and changed.

Justin didn't have any trouble eating the dinner that Trina had prepared, but Veronica opted out and just went to bed. Dirk and Margo had explained what had happened at Veronica's apartment building. The others simply nodded. They could understand her feelings.

Considering what had happened the day before, Justin insisted that only he and Dirk go in to check out Dirk's and Margery's place. It was an unnerving trip. The snow was coming down off and on, heavily at times, clear at others.

When they reached the block where Dirk and Margery lived, Justin brought the Suburban to a stop. The entire block lay in ruins from fire. Something had started it, and without fire equipment to stop it, the fire had spread rapidly.

Justin drove around the abandoned cars, and more than a few partially snow covered bodies lying in the street until he was in front of what was left of Dirk's and Margery's house. Dirk made a token effort to try and recover a few things while Justin stood guard, but gave up after just a few minutes of finding only burned and broken items of their past life. He looked up at Justin and shook his head.

Silently Dirk got back into the Suburban. "You think there is any need to check on the shop?" Dirk asked.

"You know you won't be at peace until you know about Mr. Carmichael, Dirk."

Dirk nodded and Justin put the Suburban in gear. He drove a circuitous route to get to the other side of town, partly to throw off anyone that might be following, and partly because it was

the best route, considering how many vehicles were in the way on what had been busier streets when the attack came.

White faced, Dirk experienced a similar scene to that at Veronica's the day before. The security grate over the door had been pulled loose from its fastenings. It was still lying where it fell, a log chain still fastened to it. The door was knocked halfway off the heavy hinges that carried it.

The small shop was ransacked, the glass display cabinets all broken apart. Dirk decided there were as many coins just strewn about as had been taken. Justin brought his pistol out when he saw and pointed to the bullet holes in one of the counters.

Fearing what he would see, Dirk looked over the remains of the counter. Just broken glass and discarded coins. Now with both of them carrying pistols in hand, they approached the back room. That was where they found Mr. Carmichael. He laid dead, half in and half out of the open vault door. He hadn't died easily, despite his age. There were two other dead people in the small area, besides him. One woman and one man.

There were bullet holes everywhere, with marks on the vault door where bullets had skidded off the heavy metal. It was Justin that picked up the guns that had been used. Two handguns and several magazines from the two perpetrators, and a mean looking double barrel whippet shotgun.

"I don't know, Justin," Dirk said after moving Mr. Carmichael's body from its position in the vault door. "It doesn't seem right."

"We'll leave it then, Dirk. I don't want you to do anything you aren't comfortable with."

"But it could be so important, later," Dirk whispered. "And he always said he was going to leave me the shop..."

"Might be a moot point, anyway," Justin said. "The vault door open... It may already be picked through."

Dirk seemed to come to some conclusion in his mind and turned around to enter the vault. "You're right," he told Justin when Justin followed him into the small vault. The shelves were all bare.

"He didn't have much stock left," Dirk said. "I guess they got it all. Except... I wonder..."

Dirk shifted a few things around to get to a spot beneath one of the shelves low to the floor. The shelf moved easily and Dirk handed it back to Justin to put out of the way. Justin was keeping a close eye out the door of the room, through the windows of the shop, on the Suburban.

When he turned his head back to look down at Dirk, a round floor vault lid was open and Dirk was setting things out of it. "Geez! These are heavy!" Dirk set five cloth bags behind him, and then, with one bag more in each hand, turned around.

"It's his personal goods. Not shop stock," Dirk said. He used to kid me about it. I never really thought it was true. And he said he had a little put by. I had no idea he had this much."

"I'm getting antsy, Dirk. We've been in here a long time. Let's load up and go. Check it out later."

"Yeah. You're right," Dirk said.

Justin picked up two of the bags and they hurried outside. The bags were deposited in the back of the Suburban and Dirk ran back inside for two more. Justin started to go with him, but saw a vehicle coming and instead reached into the Suburban and brought out his M1A.

"Hurry it up, Dirk! We have company!" Justin called.

Dirk ran out with the last bag and threw it into the back of the Suburban. It wasn't fastened well, and with the weight of its contents the bag flew open. Bright gold shone where the coins slid out.

Dirk ignored it and hurried to get his rifle. Both men dived into the Suburban when shots came from the other vehicle as it barreled toward them.

Justin had the Suburban started in no time and had it in gear. He took off, putting the coin shop between the Suburban and approaching vehicle. He weaved back and forth between cars in the parking lot of the huge strip mall. When he reached a street on the far side of the mall he turned right and took off at even higher speed. He took the next left, and then a right, hoping to lose those following.

He never looked back. Justin left that to Dirk. After several more turns and Dirk's "Nothing. Still nothing," litany, Justin finally slowed down.

Justin turned toward the far side of town, and when Dirk asked him why, Justin said, "I want to make sure they don't get on our trail when we head for home."

"Good idea," Dirk said. He kept a close watch behind them as Justin continued to drive a confusing course, stopping occasionally to check their back trail more thoroughly. Finally satisfied that they had lost those in the vehicle, Justin took them the rest of the way home after radioing in where they were and that they were coming in.

There were some curious looks when the two men carried the bags down into the shelter. With all the bags on the kitchen table, Dirk opened one and then the others. Three contained one-ounce Silver Eagles, and the other four contained single denomination gold coins. A bag of one-tenth-ounce, one-quarter-ounce, one-half-ounce, and one-ounce Gold Eagle coins added up to over four hundred ounces of gold and three hundred ounces of silver.

With the money on the table, Dirk took Margery to one side and they talked for several moments before returning to the table.

“Half goes to the MAG,” Dirk said. “Margery and I’ll keep half. Is that okay with everyone?”

“There is no need,” Dorinda said, but the looks on the other women’s faces stilled her words for a moment. When she continued, she said, “Thank you, Dirk. Margery. We will use this for the good of the MAG.”

The others offered up their thanks, and though Veronica was more subdued than the rest, she thanked the two, as well.

The next few days were spent planning for the future. With not a single actual job available for any of them at the moment, it was critical to come up with a way to ensure their continued survival for when their stored supplies ran out. That would be quite some time, but the fact needed to be addressed immediately.

“It all boils down to availability,” Dorinda said finally. “We are going to have to go looking for opportunities. They aren’t going to find us here.”

Justin nodded in agreement. “But we need to be very careful about leading anyone back here. I have a few things still at my place in the city, but pretty much everything else is here. I’m thinking we should set up a presence in the city, using my house as a base. If it is compromised, we still have the retreat.”

Amidst a couple of objections to just using Justin’s house like that, Justin said, “I consider it a MAG asset now.”

“It would let us spread out and let us seek out opportunities,” Veronica said. “How many of us should be there?”

“I think there should always be two here, besides Margery and the baby,” Justin said. “Between regular bedrooms, the basement, and the shelter, up to five can have private quarters at my house, though, like here, probably a minimum of three at a time.”

“What kind of rotation?” Dorinda asked.

“I suppose a couple of weeks at a time,” Justin said. “At least three people at the house, too.”

“Once we set that up, what is our first goal?” Margo asked.

“I think get all the vehicles up here, if we can,” Justin said.

“I thought the HEMP fried them,” Trina said.

“It did, but we can trailer them up here and start looking for replacement parts while we’re out salvaging. We might get some of them running again. It’s a matter of checking auto parts places until we find what we need, while we’re looking for other things, of course.”

“I think salvage should be our first order of business,” Veronica said. “If we don’t get things first, others will.”

“I think it will be an ongoing thing,” Justin said carefully. “We take what we can use that’s obviously abandoned. Pay for or trade for other things.”

“Whatever,” Veronica replied. “I aim to replace the things I lost at the apartment.”

To divert the situation Dirk asked, “What about getting ready to start farming? Shouldn’t we look for farm equipment?”

“I’d prefer to try and get a working farm on board with us, before we start farming ourselves. There are bound to be some farmers that survived that will need help with getting by until a crop can be planted and harvested next fall. That’s assuming we don’t get the proverbial nuclear winter. I do think we should locate and install a greenhouse here, to get at least some fresh foods to supplement our stored foods.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Dorinda said. “I have plenty of seeds.”

“So do I,” Justin said. “So finding a greenhouse we can salvage or buy should be one of the things we look for first.”

“I’d like to set up a clinic,” Cammy said. “Have a few things with me to do what I can. I’d like a salvage run to pick up medical goods and supplies. Maybe find a doctor that can help. One that has his or her own place to live. I don’t think we should take in more people into the MAG, unless it is really advantageous to us.”

There was more discussion and a list of items to be looked for first was compiled. And it was decided that Justin, Dorinda, Cammy, and Veronica would take up residence at Justin’s house for three weeks and begin the hunt, after finding a trailer to bring the two Subarus, the Jeep Wrangler, and the GMC Sonoma up from the parking lot at the bar.

The three took the Suburban and Jeep Commander to Justin’s a day later. There was additional evidence of attempts to get into the house, but the security shutters had done their job. Justin opened up the rear door shutter and the three moved a few items from the vehicles inside.

It took three days to get the other vehicles moved, but there were no incidents in the process. One person was always at the house while the other two were out working. Every other day Justin and Dorinda would take Cammy to an immediate care clinic not too far from the house to set up a nurse’s station so she could help those that could be helped. Much of the equipment had been wantonly destroyed by addicts looking for drugs. But it was still better than working elsewhere.

Justin, Dorinda, and Veronica all insisted she ask for some type of payment for her work. Just about anything useful, including glass canning jars and medical supplies, as well as silver or gold coins, fuel, and food. It was up to her what to charge, and she did have the option of not charging at all in some circumstances.

She put out the word that a doctor was wanted to help at the clinic. She would provide the supplies and equipment and see to it that the doctor was fed and sheltered adequately.

The snow continued, as did the frigid temperatures. Cammy was dejected after three weeks of slowly losing patients to the weather, lack of food, and radiation sickness. Too many people had left what shelter they'd had from the fallout way too soon. Though they had not immediately become sick, the doses received were enough to cause illness and death after a few weeks.

Veronica was like a robot when she went out with either Dorinda or Justin on salvage hunts. Both tried to guide her into getting more useful things, but she was determined to replace everything she'd lost when her apartment was taken over.

Cammy insisted on staying on when Dorinda and Veronica went back to the retreat and Trina and Margo came down in Margo's Jeep, which was the only vehicle of those zapped by the HEMP that they had been able to find the electronic parts to get going again.

Their first dedicated salvage run for medical supplies managed to acquire not only first-aid type things, but significant other supplies and equipment, including a small generator that could be used to power some of the medical equipment.

On that same trip they discovered a doctor hiding out near the supply house. It didn't take much to convince her to lend a hand, for a safe place to stay and decent food and water. Justin set up a bedroom in the clinic for her to stay in, and did a few additions to the security of the clinic to ensure her safety.

Someone might get in, but unless they had some heavy equipment, they wouldn't get to Michelle if she managed to get to her fortified bedroom. She refused a gun, but did agree to only work when Cammy and one other reliable person was at the clinic. The rest of the time she would rest. She'd taken a non-lethal, but somewhat debilitating dose of radiation, but with the quality food and rest she was getting now she quickly began to recover.

After five weeks the word got around about not only the clinic, but that someone was supplying it. People came looking. Dorinda radioed Justin as soon as she saw the small group of people approaching the clinic one cold Wednesday afternoon.

Dorinda was barricaded at the front door of the clinic and Cammy was covering the rear door when Justin stopped the Suburban and got out behind the group gathered in front of the clinic.

He heard Dorinda call out to the group, "We've barely keeping the clinic going! All of you just leave, unless you're ill. We'll do what we can, but we will not be forced to do anything!"

"You've got food in there! And a generator!" someone in the crowd screamed out. "We want it! We're starving!"

"Either give us what we want, or we come back with more people and take it!" That came from a large man at the forefront of the group.

"Is that a threat?" Justin asked, having made his way to one side of the crowd so he could see who the main instigators were. The big man was obviously one of them. But Justin's eyes cut to another, much smaller man. The smaller man was bundled up to his eyeballs. He had one hand in a coat pocket, but his right hand was inside the coat itself.

Several people whirled around at Justin's words, including the two that Justin was watching so closely.

"You're cotton picken' right it's a threat!" said someone deeper in the group. The big man shot a glance in that direction, but brought his eyes quickly back to Justin.

"Doesn't concern you. Just take off and you won't get hurt," said the big man.

"Well, you see," Jason said, his tone soft, but his words strong, "I'm part of this party. Leave now and you're right. No one will get hurt."

"What do you think you can do against all of us?" It was the little guy. "We'll take that gun away from you and make you eat it!"

"So it is a threat," Justin said. "Have it your way." Justin had been holding the M1A down along his leg. He raised it one handed rapidly and triggered four quick shots. Two took the big man in the belly, and one hit the little guy along his right side.

The group started to scatter, but the little guy stood his ground, bringing out a handgun. He got off one shot before Dorinda drilled him from behind her barrier.

Three more people in the group pulled guns and were shooting as they ran away. Justin and Dorinda each got another, but the last shooter got away.

Only when Justin noticed the blood on his left hand gripping the fore stock of the M1A did he realize he'd been hit by one of the shots coming out of the crowd. He looked over at his left shoulder, and sure enough, there was a small flow of blood coming out of the hole in his heavy coat. It was dull red and oozing, so he was sure an artery had not been hit.

"You better check them," Justin told Dorinda. "I'm hit." He joined her at the barricade. She started to take him inside for Cammy and the doctor to look at, but Justin insisted it would wait until the weapons had been gathered up and those shot checked to see if they were still alive.

Dorinda hurriedly set about the task as Justin kept an eye on the buildings nearby. With her arms full of a rifle, shotgun, and three pistols, Dorinda hurried back to the clinic and dropped them behind the barrier. "They're all dead," she told Justin. "Now go in and let the doc and Cammy take a look at you."

"Right," Justin said. He didn't resist when Dorinda took the M1A from his right hand and gave him a slight shove toward the door of the clinic.

With many glances at the door into the clinic, Dorinda kept a close watch outside. She breathed a huge sigh of relief when Cammy came out and told her Justin was going to be all right. "It is the proverbial flesh wound. No arteries or bones involved. He'll be okay as long as no infection sets in. Though we do have some antibiotics if it does."

Dorinda, when Justin came back outside, his coat flipped over his shoulders, said, "I'm taking you back to the house so you can get some rest."

"I can ma..."

"I'm taking you back to the house," Dorinda said forcefully. She looked around at Cammy. "Lock down and wait for me to get back."

Cammy nodded and closed the plywood covered door. Dorinda and Justin both heard the bolt turn, securely locking the reinforced door into place.

When Dorinda got to the house, Trina was waiting to help Dorinda get Justin to his bedroom. He shook off their help when he was inside the bedroom. "I'll be okay. Stop fussing. Please."

The two women exchanged a look, but did as Justin asked.

It was two weeks before the others would let Justin do much of anything. Though he did stay busy on the radio. He counted it successful time spent when he called for a pair of meetings, one with those at the retreat, and one with those in the city. The two meetings were essentially the same.

"I've been working the airwaves," Justin said at the first meeting, there at the retreat. "Actually have some fairly good news. First, there are plenty of survivors. The species will go on. And more importantly short term, there are enough people with skills that should allow a local population to continue.

"There is a government, but it is weak. The bad news is that there are the marauding bands roaming some areas the prep and PAW fiction writers usually included in their stories. It does seem like the National Guard unit that showed up at the hospital was one of them. But they've been stopped in their tracks at a small town to our west. We still need to be alert, but that is one group we don't have to worry about.

“Even better news, for us, I think, is that I’ve found a farm not too far away that is going well. They are willing to trade for the products they produce. It’s a pretty slick operation, at least from the information I have, so most of our immediate food worries are okay.

“They’ll take gold and silver, and diesel, but want labor, too when the time comes. And I’ve made a tentative deal to get stock from them when we are in a position to handle it. The same with seed to start some crops we’ll need.

“If it is agreeable, I’d like to keep the retreat as our home base, finish it the way we planned, and get a working farm going over the next two years.”

Then Justin grinned. “And I found a surviving log home manufacturer desperate for business. We can get the basic lodge prebuilt, dismantled, delivered, and reassembled by next August if we give the okay within the next few days and put down a down payment. In food if we want, or they’ll take a mix of food and gold. I think we should do it. I also think we should continue with the original building program, getting shelter cabins completed and the tunnels and fencing put in.”

Everyone was pleased with everything, except the cabin, tunnel, and fencing project. Veronica was the most vocal opponent. “We don’t need them. The deed is done. What else can happen? We’ve made it clear we aren’t to be messed with. And we have the guns and ammunition to fight off anyone that may try.”

There was additional discussion, and Veronica, after some arguments, gracefully acquiesced to the plan. Justin and Dorinda geared up the next day and headed for the farm to finalize the trade arrangements, taking Dirk’s trailer with a small load of food basics that Justin provided from his stocks in his shelter cabin. They carried some of the gold that Dirk had contributed to the MAG.

The farmer and his family were happy to see Justin and Dorinda. Though they had food to get them through the rest of the winter and spring, they had little else that could be traded that wouldn’t put them in dire straits to keep the farm going. The gold Dorinda counted out would buy them the supplies and time needed to get going in the spring. Justin made arrangements to transfer diesel from the retreat tanks to the farm. It would be replaced with bio-diesel that would be one of the farm’s secondary products.

As happy as the farmer and his family were to see Justin and Dorinda, the log home business owners were far more so. Three brothers, two whom were married to sisters, with a total of seven children of various ages, all looked gaunt and drawn.

Justin noted the huge accumulation of logs already dried and ready for use and was satisfied that the group could do as they promised. With Dorinda’s okay, Justin negotiated to have not only the lodge built, but two large log barns, as well.

Besides the MAG gold, both Justin and Dorinda had brought some of their personal holdings, too, just in case. Between the three amounts, only a token final payment would be needed to cover all three structures.

The family was grateful for the food and eagerly fed Justin and Dorinda and put them up in one of the display cabins for the night. There were several of the display structures and the extended family had taken up residence in them to be at the site to protect it from marauders out to get the all ready cut and dried timber to just burn for firewood.

Justin and Dorinda spent an extra day, going over the plans Justin had brought with the owners, and drawing up the plans for the barns. When they left the following day, both were in a good mood. They had accomplished a great deal, assuming all the plans went through as projected.

They found the two groups at home a bit subdued when they returned. Veronica was missing. She'd found the parts she needed to get the GMC Sonoma High Rider running and took off the day after Justin and Dorinda had.

"Any idea where she was headed?" Dorinda asked.

"None," Margo said. "The only thing she said was that she would be back."

"I take it she went armed and had plenty of food and fuel," Justin said.

The others nodded. Cammy came up to Dorinda and Justin after they had talked to the others.

"I think I should tell you she took some of the guns and ammunition we've accumulated since The Day."

Dorinda's eyes widened. "Why on earth would she..."

"Couple of reasons," Justin said musingly. "Trade goods. Or armament for some like minded people."

Justin watched Cammy's face closely when he said, "You know her the best. Is there any chance she could turn on us and try to take the house and the retreat?"

"By herself? No way!"

"What about with a few others that now have guns that probably didn't before?"

"Oh," Cammy said. "No. She won't turn on us. I don't know what she is up to, but she won't do anything to hurt any of us."

Justin nodded. "That's good to hear."

As Justin and Dorinda walked away, Dorinda asked Justin, "You believe her?"

"Don't you?" Justin asked, a bit surprised.

“I do. But I know Veronica, too. You’ve only seen a couple of sides of her. She can be a wild card sometimes, but she won’t hurt us.”

“Good enough for me,” Justin replied.

During the two days that followed, Justin, with Margo’s help, found and transported the equipment needed to dig the tunnels and the foundations to the other cabin shelters. The ground was still frozen hard, so he didn’t start the digging, He just got the equipment moved.

Veronica showed up three days after Justin and Dorinda had returned. She was alone, but the back of the High Rider was piled high, the cargo covered with a large tarp.

“You’re back,” Veronica said, appearing in high spirits.

Justin and Dorinda nodded.

“How’d it go? Get the deals made?”

“We did,” Dorinda said. “Are you okay? It’s dangerous to be out and about alone.”

“Oh, I’m fine. Just needed some time alone. I was wondering... Would it be alright if I brought a small travel trailer up here and plugged into the utilities until we finish the cabin shelters? Leave more room for everyone else in the shelter.”

Justin and Dorinda exchanged a look. “Don’t see why not,” Justin said. “Be glad to help. I’ve got a semi working now. We can even bring a mobile home up if you want, instead of a travel trailer.”

“Nah. I like the idea of portability. I want something my GMC will pull.”

“Okay,” Dorinda said. “Just let us know what we can do to help you.”

“I will,” Veronica said and headed for the shelter.

“You didn’t ask what was in the truck,” Dorinda said to Justin.

“Not my business. As long as she doesn’t bring up strangers or something that would harm us, I’m okay with it.” Justin watched Veronica go into the shelter and then headed for his cabin shelter, saying over his shoulder, “I’ll be busy for a couple of hours. You still planning to go down to the house later?”

“Yes,” Dorinda replied.

“Okay. I’ll be ready. I’ll be taking the semi and trailer down to get some more things for the fencing.”

With one of the others helping, Justin began to strip a building supply place on the outskirts of town of the materials they would need at the retreat to complete the projects. As the winter progressed, Cammy and the doctor had fewer and fewer patients. Not because people just weren't coming in, but because they were dying off.

After talking to the other MAG members, Cammy asked Michelle Dumont if she wanted to join the MAG, as resident doctor with full privileges for providing health care to the others in the MAG.

Surprised at her reluctance, Cammy asked, "I thought you would be pleased. There just isn't enough reason to stay and risk another attack."

"It's just... Well, you remember the guy that came in about a month ago. Looked really bad?"

"Yes. I remember him. I wasn't sure he'd make it."

"Algernon made it. We've sort of been seeing each other. He's been helping me with medications."

"Helping you? How?"

"He's a pharmacist, but more importantly, he's an herbalist. Knows all about alternative medicine, especially medications."

"Let me talk to the others. Can you have him available to meet with Dorinda and Justin tomorrow?"

"Yes. Oh, I hope you'll let him join! He's a really nice guy and has been a great help to me professionally and emotionally."

Cammy cautiously brought up the subject that evening when she and Trina went to the house. Justin was just getting ready to take the semi load up, but stopped when he saw Cammy wave at him to come over.

With the others on the radio, Cammy explained to everyone the situation with Michelle and the pharmacist.

"What did you think of him when he was at the clinic?" Justin asked.

"I didn't think he would make it, to be honest. Withheld some of the treatments we are short on. But he made it on his own."

"That's a good sign," Dirk said through the radio.

"I think you and Dorinda should talk to him and decide, Justin. I'm okay with it, if he's okay with you."

“Same here,” Dirk said.

Justin looked around at Margo and Trina. They both nodded.

“Okay. We’ll let you know.” Justin looked over at Cammy. “I guess we decide tomorrow.”

“Thanks, guys. Means a lot to me,” Cammy said. “All the help I can get is going to be good. Especially pharmaceutical help. Things are going to be touchy the next several months as those that survived radiation sickness start having to do more out in the open. They’ll be subject to every little bug going around.

“Michelle is good, but so much of health is what you put in your body. Food is most important, and people will be stretching menus as far as they will go. Supplementing food with natural remedies or body balancers will be a great help.”

Justin wasn’t the only one that thought it might be a moot decision. Algernon Tuac looked like the walking dead. He leaned heavily on a cane, and was pale as a ghost. But his eyes were clear and he spoke with clear, even tones. What convinced everyone was the garden cart that he’d pulled from where he was hiding out to the clinic. It was filled with all sorts of concoctions and remedies, along with many potted plants. “I have many more hidden away here and there,” he told the group.

Justin and Dorinda stepped away from the others. “I’m okay with it,” Justin said.

“Yes. Me, too. I just hope he lives to pass on the information.”

With a doctor, pharmacist/herbalist, and nurse in residence now, things seemed to get better all around. The fear that there would be no summer and therefore no fall harvest was quickly gone when the weather broke and the temperatures began to rise every day.

Justin’s next order of business was to find three large greenhouses and get them moved and installed at the retreat. The house was locked up again, and a set of radio frequencies left posted at the clinic so anyone needing medical care could get in touch with the retreat.

Everyone pitched in on getting the greenhouses set up, except for Margery. She had immediately taken Al under her protective wing and was making sure he took care of himself when Michelle was working with the others. He, in return, began teaching her what he knew. His large library, which they’d brought from where he’d hidden it in the back yard of his house, was a great help.

Every few days Veronica would up and disappear in the GMC and be gone for a few days, always returning with a pickup bed load of something. She’d moved a small tandem wheel, fifth wheel trailer to the retreat, and then asked Justin to move a large storage container for her from the railroad yard to the retreat. He set it behind her trailer. Veronica only transferred items from the High Rider to the container at night, by herself.

But the others continued to go on retreat sponsored salvage operations, managing to fill all their fuel tanks and stockpile seven double trailers of diesel, two of gasoline, and five single trailers of propane, plus five ten-wheel delivery trucks.

They found some food, but much of the canned goods were ruined by the hard freezes during the winter. With their stocks, and the anticipation of fresh foods from the farm, they traded away much of the food they did find for items they wanted or needed.

Justin, Dirk, Trina, Veronica, and Margo began spending quite a bit of time at the farm they had contracted with to supply fresh foods to the retreat. It was hard work, but they were learning things they needed to know to have their own farm.

Justin and Margo began searching for and salvaging or buying the farm equipment they would need the next year to start their own farming operation. With the future in mind, they located product silos they wanted to move, but couldn't do it with the personnel in the MAG. Long discussions were held about bringing in outsiders temporarily or permanently to help. But the idea was tabled until after the Lodge and barns were built that fall.

With the weather such that a great deal of physical work was being done by everyone that could, Michelle, Cammy, and Al reopened the clinic to take care of the various injuries that occurred when people pushed themselves too hard physically.

Al had a section of one of the greenhouses at the retreat for his herbals and was able to make many of the needed supplements and curatives that Michelle needed to give to those that simple physical treatment couldn't help.

Though they were still being careful when returning to the retreat, word finally got around that the retreat existed and was doing well for itself. In July a family of five showed up, triggering the alarms on the track leading into the retreat.

They were met by Dorinda, Veronica, and Dirk while still on the track. Dorinda hailed them from inside the tree line bordering the now hard packed dirt road. "Stop where you are," she called out. "We're armed and are prepared to use them to protect ourselves and what is ours. What do you want?"

It was the woman that spoke. "My husband is ill and the children are hungry. We're looking to work for some food. I and my eldest boy here, John, can do just about anything." She pointed to the large green heavy duty garden wagon that the two younger children were pulling. "We have a tent and things. We just need a spot to set up and we'll work just as long and as hard as we have to in order to get some food."

"You armed?" Dorinda asked.

The man opened the coat he was wearing despite the heat. He had a revolver of some type behind his belt. The three MAG members could see how thin he was. The belt was cinched up in

the last hole, and was still loose. He suddenly coughed, and Dorinda, Veronica, and Dirk all lifted weapons, thinking it might be a trick.

But it wasn't. The man was just ill. "Why haven't you been to the clinic on this edge of the city?" Dorinda asked then.

"We have," the woman said. "We have medicine. But we need food desperately. They gave us a little, but it all went to the children."

Dorinda looked at Dirk and Veronica. "Up to you," Dirk said. Veronica nodded.

"Okay. Since you already know the way, come on up. Make a move that even looks like you're going for that gun until we disarm you, and you are a dead man," Dorinda told the man.

As Dorinda, Veronica, and Dirk stepped out into the road, the man gingerly lifted his coat again to let Dirk take the revolver. Dirk checked it. It was a six shot .38 Special. Only three chambers were loaded.

Dirk stuck the gun behind his belt and then reached for the tow bar of the wagon. The two children thankfully released it and the group headed up to the retreat. Veronica went into the shelter to tell Margery what was going on and to radio Justin and the others about the situation.

Dirk and Dorinda helped the woman, Julieann, and John set up the family's tent and other camping gear. The two younger children, Amy, eleven, and Mark, twelve, sat down on the ground with their father.

Dorinda pointed out the bathroom that had been set up above ground so those working around the retreat didn't have to go into the shelter to go to the bathroom. Dirk disappeared for a few minutes after the tent was up and returned with a bundle in his arms.

"My spare tent," he said. "Thought you could use some more room and privacy."

"Thank you," Julieann said, tears in her eyes. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Just do as you said. Work hard and we'll get... What's your husband's name?"

"Gavin," Julieann said.

"We'll get Gavin well and..."

All eyes turned to the man. Amy was shaking him. "Daddy? Daddy!" Amy's actions caused Gavin to fall over to his side.

Dorinda quickly knelt, saying, "Take the children somewhere." Veronica hurriedly gathered the children around her and took them over to the bathroom to show them its facilities.

"I'm sorry," Dorinda said after a few moments.

Julieann collapsed beside her husband, sobbing quietly.

It was a somber time for two days. Michelle was brought up to the retreat to verify Gavin's death. Dirk used the backhoe to dig a grave in one of the small open areas in the forest. Gavin Sutton was laid to rest in the clothes he'd worn to the retreat.

Justin expedited the work to get a cabin shelter completed so the Suttons could move in and get out of the tents. Unsure at first, Amy and Mark were quickly adopted into the MAG as their own. They turned out to be a big help for Margery, for after a couple of weeks getting to know the two youngsters, she was sure enough of them that she let them babysit little Aaron while she got some fresh air and started helping in the greenhouses.

Greenhouse work was the primary role for Julieann and John, though John was soon helping Margo and Justin with the farm equipment. At sixteen he was a quiet, shy young man, and had been raised to be a worker. Justin often had to slow him down so as not to overdo it in the one-hundred degree plus temperatures of late July.

Veronica was off on one of her now infrequent ventures when Cammy radioed the retreat that there was trouble at the clinic. Justin, Dirk, and Dorinda went down, in a hurry, wondering why Cammy wouldn't say what the trouble was.

Justin and Dorinda both approached on foot from where they'd stashed the Suburban, with Dirk watching it. When Dorinda and Justin arrived at the front of the clinic, one from each side, it was obvious what the trouble was. A group of about ten men and four women were milling around outside the clinic. All looked haggard and drawn. And hot. So did Veronica. She was wearing a tee shirt, shorts, and her athletic shoes.

Veronica's hands were tied behind her and three men stood with drawn guns, all pointed at her. Upon a closer look, Justin could see bruises forming on her face, arms, and legs. She'd been beaten.

"What do you want?" Justin called out, standing beside the corner of the building.

"We want what you got! You want this woman alive, you pay up, and pay up well. She's been slinking around, salvaging for months. And so have the rest of you. Taking things we should all have a share in. We've seen you going up to that place in the mountains. We want it. You can live on the edge down here for all we care, but you aren't going to be lording it over us high and mighty."

The man stepped forward and threw a vicious punch into Veronica's stomach. It was a mistake. Not only did it determine what happened next, it allowed it. Veronica went down to the ground with a groan.

"You shouldn't have done that," Justin yelled. He stepped back to the edge of the building, raised his M1A and started firing before any of the group could react. Following his

lead, Dorinda, on the other side of the building, did the same. Shots rang out from inside the clinic a fraction of a second later.

Those in the front of the group went down, dead, but there were fourteen all together and some of them started getting off shots. One of them was aimed at the fallen Veronica, but that woman went down. Justin thought it must have been Dirk, but kept his attention on the group, now trying to break and run.

But they ran into a wall of rapid fire from their right rear quadrant. In seconds it was over. Cammy and Michelle ran out to check on Veronica. At least one round had found her. The mid thigh area of her right leg was bloody and squirting bright red arterial blood.

A man rose from behind the cover he'd taken and held his rifle above his head in both hands. "Hey! Is she all right? Can I approach?"

Justin held his rifle steady on the man as Dorinda, Cammy, and Michelle got Veronica up and into the clinic.

"I'm Jared Jenkins. How bad is she hurt?"

"Okay. Jared Jenkins. We know your name now. What are you doing here? And ease that gun down and set it aside. Carefully." Justin wasn't taking any chances. Though Jenkins had been the straw that broke the camel's back in the fight, he was an unknown. Justin divided his attention between Jenkins and the bodies on the ground.

Justin radioed Dirk to bring the Suburban in and to be ready for anything.

Jared was setting the rifle down when he suddenly pitched forward. Justin came very close to shooting him, but held his fire when Jenkins landed hard on his face and didn't move. When Dirk arrived a minute or so later, Justin said, "Check the bodies out there. Tie up any that might be living."

Justin went to Jared Jenkins and knelt down. That's when he saw the blood on Jenkins' left temple. There wasn't much, but there was some oozing from a terrible looking groove cut into the temple by a bullet.

Dirk came over, saying, "No survivors. They were riddled with bullets. What happened?"

"In a minute. Help me get Jenkins here inside. He's taken one to the head."

"He one of the shooters?" Suddenly Dirk reached down and pulled a pistol from its holster when he saw it.

"Yeah. But on our side," Justin said.

Despite that, Dirk slipped the pistol into his belt before helping Justin get Jenkins up and moving. He wasn't dead yet, since he was able to walk with the two men's help, but he was definitely out of it.

Between them and Al, they got Jenkins laid out on one of the exam beds in a clinic room. "Better go gather up things and keep an eye out in case there are some others involved," Justin told Dirk.

Dirk hurried off, and Justin, now with Dorinda's help, began to clean the wound on Jenkins head. He moaned and groaned, but didn't regain consciousness. Justin and Dorinda decided to leave the wound open until Michelle could look at it. Al had disappeared during their work.

"How's Veronica?" Justin finally asked, fearing the worst. He'd seen the arterial blood spurting.

"Bad," Dorinda said. "They wouldn't let me stay. They took her right into the room we have set up for surgery."

It was some time before Cammy and Michelle came out of the surgery room.

"How is she?" both Dorinda and Justin asked.

"Good," Michelle said, stripping of the surgical gloves she was wearing. "The bullet broke the thigh bone above the knee. We got the bullet out. It was close, but we managed to get the bleeder tied off and leg splinted. She's lost blood, but we have what we need to counter that, thanks to you and your doctor friend," Michelle told Justin. "I wish I'd thought to stockpile medications and such with a few of my patients for events like this."

"Yes. She was good. And a good friend," Justin said softly, thinking of Dr. Alicia Albright. He'd once thought about courting her, but she'd been too involved in her work to consider it. Having checked during one of the early trips he knew she'd died of radiation poisoning, helping people instead of taking shelter herself.

Justin quick brought himself out of his reverie and told Michelle, "Got you another one. The guy that was helping us. Jared Jenkins. Bullet gash on his right temple. We cleaned it some but you need to look at it."

Michelle nodded and she and Cammy went into the room where Jenkins lay. Before the door closed, those outside heard Jenkins ask, "How is the woman?"

"Wonder what the story is there," Dorinda said.

"I'm sure we'll find out later," Justin replied. "Let's go help Dirk with the bodies."

Dorinda sighed, but followed Justin outside. They were too late to help. A much rejuvenated Al had helped Dirk with searching the bodies, stripping them of useable items, including weapons and ammunition, and laying them out neatly for pick up and burial.

Dirk and Justin then went searching for vehicles. They found a scared fourteen year old boy standing guard with a Ruger 10/22 carbine. "Easy, son," Justin said when they saw him and how young he was. "You don't want to get killed over a bunch of broken down vehicles."

"Where's..." the boy started to ask, but suddenly just dropped the gun and began to run in the opposite direction.

"You want me to chase him down?" Dirk asked.

"No," Justin said sadly. "Hopefully he'll come to his senses and ask for some help from someone that won't chase him away or just shoot him."

Justin looked over at Dirk and then chuckled dryly. "You were going to chase him down, huh?"

"Well, maybe not. It was just a thought," Dirk said, smiling. He looked at the three vehicles the boy had been guarding. Two pickup trucks and an old van. Almost all the tires were bare rubber, and when Dirk tried to start each one, it was with some difficulty that he got any of them to turn over. One the battery just didn't seem to have enough juice. One the starter whined but didn't engage. The van started relatively easily, but sounded terrible and smoked like a chimney.

"I guess we add them to our trading stock. Maybe a mechanic will get one and get it running better."

"Yeah. Don't want to depend on any one of them for retreat use."

The sound of a semi-truck horn made them both jump and turn around. It was the first in a line of semis hauling the lodge and barn components for the retreat. Two motor homes and two school buses were also in the convoy. The motor homes and buses each had a trailer attached. One an open trailer, one a box trailer, and the other two fuel tank trailers.

Justin walked over, recognizing Pap McKenzie, the senior brother of the log building construction family. "We got here safe and sound. Where to, now?"

"We've had a spot of trouble. Give me a few minutes and we'll take you up."

"Sounds good. Want to stretch our legs, anyway. How safe is it. We need to gear up?"

"Not a bad idea. We just had a shooting. I think it's over, but we don't take chances."

Pap nodded and got on the CB in the truck. Justin and Dirk hurried back to the clinic. Justin explained to the others that the builders had arrived.

Michelle told him, “Veronica and Jenkins are going to need some close care. I hate to move them, but I think things would be better if we got them to the shelter. Cammy and I can split the work here and there.”

Justin and Dorinda nodded. “I’ll get the ambulance ready,” Justin said.

One of the never used items they’d found and got running was an ambulance. Another just in case item. But since it was available and hadn’t taken much to get ready, they’d done so. Justin fired it up and moved it to the doors of the clinic. It was the matter of only a few minutes to get Veronica on her gurney inside. Jared would ride in front with Dirk while Michelle rode with Veronica.

Though everyone had questions about Jared and Veronica, they didn’t bother either one with them for a few days. Until Jared could open his eyes without causing terrible headaches, and Veronica was able to sit up for longer than a few minutes. But finally the story emerged.

“I’d been seeing her,” Jared said, taking a look over at Veronica. They were both sitting in the main room of the shelter, with most of the others gathered around, doing various tasks.

“She was always salvaging things when I saw her. I kept trying to make contact, but at the very least sign she wasn’t totally alone she would disappear on me.”

“So there was someone watching me,” Veronica said, staring at Jared. “I never saw or heard anything I could pin down, but I was sure someone was there, part of the time.”

“She never left a track I could follow to find out where she was staying. I was afraid to just come out and call to her. I’d seen her move. She’s fast. If I wasn’t very careful, she’d wind up shooting me before I had a chance to talk to her. And I really wanted to talk to her.”

Jared’s eyes lingered on Veronica for a moment and she blushed. But her voice was sarcastic when she said, “Sure. Talk. I’m sure that’s all you wanted.”

“I’m not like that,” Jared said earnestly. “For a lone woman to be out, doing what you were doing, you had to be something special. I didn’t want anything to happen to you, so, since I couldn’t get your attention without getting shot, I just sort of started watching for you and keeping an eye on your back.”

“So you’ve been protecting me? For how long?”

“About three months,” Jared said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything when that group grabbed you. I’d been out looking for you again, this time to warn you about that group that moved into the area. But before I could figure out a way to contact you and convince you I wasn’t a threat, they had you. There were just too many for me to take on by myself, without getting you killed in the process.”

“Sure lent a hand when the fight started, though,” Dorinda said.

It was Jared's turn to blush. "After seeing them beat her, with her hands tied, and then that slime hit her again... I just sort of lost it. That group needed killing. For a variety of reasons. I'm just sorry the boy had to be involved in it."

"The boy?" Justin asked. "About fourteen or so?"

"Yeah. He kept trying to help Veronica, but he'd just get cuffed for it."

"He didn't die in the attack," Justin said. "He was with the vehicles. He took off when we came up on him, looking for the vehicles. You think he's worth saving?"

Jared nodded.

Veronica said, "He really did try to help me. I bear no grudge against Clint. He was the only spot of light I had at the end of a very long tunnel. I thought I was a goner."

"We'll see what we can do," Dorinda said, after glancing over at Justin.

It was obvious both Jared and Veronica were tired. They were taken back to the rooms they were using, and everyone went back to work. In Justin's case, he went up and checked on the status of the lodge. He was amazed at how quickly it was going up.

Having had the foundation completed at the time the shelter was built had helped, but Pap McKenzie and his family crews really knew what they were doing. They would easily meet the August deadline for the Lodge and the barns.

Things were going well. It worried Justin. But he said nothing to the others about his worry. He did spend a lot of time on the radio, talking to others around the country and around the world.

Pap McKenzie took his final payment and he and his family headed for home. Though the summer had been hot, temperatures were already moderating at the end of August. Much time was spent at the farm, getting ready for the harvest and the subsequent preparation of the food for storage for the winter.

Jared integrated into the group. After he was well enough, Justin took him to his place to bring back everything to the retreat that he wanted to bring. He wasn't in the same shape as Justin or Dorinda, but he did have significant preps still in hiding. Once he was settled into the Lodge, he began to help around the retreat, taking over much of the equipment work needed to finish installing the cabin shelters, tunnels, and fencing, leaving Justin free to oversee everything, and continue helping at the farm.

Though salvage trips continued, they were now mostly for specific items that the retreat needed to increase its capacity. And to look for Clint. It was late October when they found him. He'd come to the clinic, looking for help. He was weak and malnourished, and simply didn't know what else to do.

When it was obvious that it was the same boy, Veronica, now on crutches, rode down with Justin to talk to him. Rather reluctantly, Clint agreed to come to the Lodge and take up residence if he would help out where possible.

With the Lodge, barns, sixteen cabin shelters, fences, and the tunnels finished, Thanksgiving that year was a real one. Everyone at the retreat or now associated with it, had a great deal to be thankful for. Food was put by for at least another year without touching anyone's long term storage goods.

The various fields on the retreat property were prepared for planting the next spring. Feed was ready for the farm animals the retreat would get from the farm the next spring after birthing and weaning.

A full set of wind turbines, solar panels, and batteries were now in place and provided more than enough power for the retreat, even without the addition of three more generators with associated repair and replacement parts that Justin has seen to. He weathered a few jokes about the completion of the defenses now that there was nothing to fear. He managed to keep his fears to himself.

The snow started, and continued intermittently through Christmas. A blizzard started on January First, but everyone was in residence at the Lodge, the clinic having been shut down the week before, and Justin's house closed up for the winter, too.

Just In Case - Epilog

After three years of nothing untoward happening, Justin began to wonder a little himself why he insisted they maintain the degree of readiness they were. With the surpluses of food from the retreat, the original farm, and two other farms that managed to recover, people were repopulating the areas of the city that the retreat helped maintain. There was even enough excess to export some to surrounding areas for badly needed items. Sugar and salt being only two of the most important.

A school opened, as did three churches and two bars. Many cottage industries were springing up to fulfill the needs once met by major companies. There were several marriages, including Michelle to Al, and Veronica to Jared. Margo, Trina, and Cammy all found suitable husbands from the new crop of people coming in. Babies were born, people died, and life in general went on. Hard, but livable.

Only Dorinda and Justin remained single. People wondered why they didn't just get married. They were essentially Master and Mistress of the lodge, retreat, and surrounding area.

The fourth year started out the same, but Justin's worry factor never lessened. It was a good thing, for on February 14 of that year there came a tremendous shaking of the ground and a sound so loud it went beyond hearing into feeling. A week later Justin was able to confirm that the Yellowstone Caldera had erupted. The ash that was coating everything on and around the retreat was volcanic. But Justin Case, no middle initial, was ready, as were his friends and neighbors because of his attitude of being prepared, just in case.

End *****

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