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Rudy's Preparedness Shop

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Rudy's Preparedness Shop - Chapter 1

"I don't know, Rudy. What if someone finds out?" Jack Jamieson asked his friend Rudy Donatelli.

Rudy frowned in exasperation. "Jack, there is nothing to be ashamed of in getting prepared. It's a good idea to keep it quiet so everyone and their brother and sister don't show up on your door step." Rudy could tell that it had been the first situation and not the second that Jack was worried about. It had come up before.

"I know. You've said that before. It's just that I can't stand it when people make fun of me."

"I'm aware of that," Rudy replied rather dryly. "I'm getting enough business at the shop to stay in business, Jack. My customers don't seem to be made fun of too often."

"You just don't hear it," snorted Jack. "Lots of people make fun of you guys behind your backs."

"I see." Rudy had a feeling that Jack was probably joining in on that joking. If he hadn't known Jack since high school, and their once common interest in sports, Rudy doubted they would be friends, such as they were. Jack was now more of a nagging nuisance than he was a friend.

Jack had thought about being a sports trainer, a long time ago. He been one of the assistant team managers while they were in high school, and had taped up Rudy for many a game in those days. Rudy had hopes of turning pro in basketball. He was a bit light for pro football, though he was being recruited for football by a couple of colleges. As he was for both baseball and basketball. Rudy was an all around athlete.

With Rudy's drive and determination to go pro, he took care of his body

pretty well. And Jack actually had a pretty good touch when it came to sports medicine as it applied to a high school team manager. They worked together quite a bit and that turned into a casual friendship.

They went their separate ways after high school, with Rudy getting the scholarship to the college he wanted and Jack going into pre-med, even with his less than great grades. The coaches had given Jack a good recommendation for his work with the teams during high school.

Jack didn't last long in college, besides the fact that he was going to flunk out, he got caught selling steroids. He'd been recruited by an alumnus of the college to help specific athletes get a leg up on the competition. Jack never found more than menial jobs after that.

Rudy, on the other hand, did well for himself in college basketball. Picked in the third round draft to play on an expansion team with an excellent contract. It went very well until the night of their first season game. Halfway into the first quarter his team got a three on two fast break situation. Rudy was going in for the layup. The defender cut his legs out from under him as he was coming down after making the shot.

His momentum carried him into the camera operators and cheerleaders behind the basket and he came down awkwardly. Between a concussion, wrenched ankle, and dislocated knee with torn ligaments, his pro basketball career was over.

But Rudy had a good contract and got the agreed upon contract buy out due to injury that was part of that contract. His degree in world history got him a job at the state library as a research librarian. The job was all right, as was the pay, but he began to get restless after a year of the work.

He saw history repeating itself here and there, and the old saying 'Those that do not learn from history are bound to repeat it' came to him occasionally. While he'd had a good plan, and stayed with it, things had

not worked out for him nearly the way he planned.

Between his injuries and experience in sports, his broad knowledge of history, and a few forum sites he'd run across on the internet, Rudy decided to change careers.

The business courses he'd taken in college had given him a minor degree and he put the knowledge to good use. He did a business plan, made market surveys, found suppliers and probable customers. In other words, used his education to get ready to start a small business. It was almost too easy. Despite the indications that the business would be somewhat marginal, though self sustaining, the bank loan officer at his home town bank was more than willing to lend Rudy the money to start an Emergency Preparedness Supply Business. Even offered almost double the amount that Rudy had asked for in the loan proposal.

The woman was a huge sports fan. Julie Bollinger had played basketball herself in high school and college. She, on her own, and through the auspices of the bank, was a major contributor to the high school athletics programs, as well as public programs. After a pledge to support the same causes with a little money if he wanted, but more importantly, with his presence, she sent the loan application on with her highest recommendation.

Rudy was a little uncomfortable with the situation, but it had to go through at least another step, if not two, before he would get the loan. As long as he wasn't foolish, and the business did fail, as so many new small businesses did, he would be able to repay the loan from the money he had in savings from his pro contract.

Well, the rest of the bank loan officers seemed to think it was a fine idea. The day the loan was finalized, Rudy had a banner made up to hang on the Little League baseball diamond supporters' fence. He also made a nominal donation to the new auditorium fund for the high school. With those obligations out of the way, Rudy got down to business.

And it was work. He wanted a building on the edge of the small city where he lived, in the direction of the major city they were near, off, but not too far from the interstate highway exit. That provided good access to his shop from the surrounding area and those in the big city that were so inclined. His market research had shown him that there was some competition, but primarily in the low cost products.

His shop would carry a value line, but would also carry the best that was to be had. Rudy made a few changes in the building, with the extra money that was available, and a tiny thought that had been in the back of his mind came to the forefront.

Rudy's parents were retired and were looking for something to keep them busy. He made a deal with them. He'd finance the construction of a small mini-warehouse complex on their property, and help them run it, if he could have a few of the units for his own use, at a reduced rate. He used his own money for it and banked the balance of the loan.

Knowing the business would be a bit marginal at first, Rudy carefully selected the products he would carry. He also made some excellent deals with a few suppliers to have big ticket items on consignment so he didn't have to tie up his money on storm shelters and large generators and such.

The shelves and storage bins began to fill a little more completely as the first months of business were conducted. His Federal Firearms License finally came through and Rudy filled the shop's gun cases with select weapons and ammunition.

He even made a deal with a couple of shops in town to supply, at a discount, items he couldn't or didn't want to carry in the shop, but were part of his recommended preparedness stocking list. One was a liquor store. Another was a clothing store catering to workmen. Yet another was a major home building supply store that would honor his discount

plan. One small grocery store agreed to carry case lots of certain items for him. He set up custom arrangements for several other businesses in the area to provide specific services at reduced rates for his customers.

By the end of the second year in business Rudy was making a solid return on his investment. His shop was fully stocked. And the little secret behind his two day local delivery guarantee was working well. The storage units at his parents that he reserved for himself had been filled with stock for the shop by placing double orders for everything with which he stocked the shop, plus a few items.

Rudy had plenty of stock at the shop for regular business, but if there was a run, he had additional stock that no one but he and his parents knew about. Plus, purchasing many of the items in the lot sizes he was, Rudy obtained significant discounts. Special order items could still take a few days.

He had used the money saved to buy a 1984 Suburban, had it modified to his liking, and used it and a sixteen-foot tandem wheel box trailer or a sixteen-foot flat bed trailer to make pickup and deliveries as the situation required. He had a matching 1984 Chevy one-ton pick-up he also had modified. Both had been converted to non-electronic diesel engines. The pick-up was kept parked at the shop inside the outdoor walled area.

The Suburban and pick-up were his show rooms for many of the automotive related products he sold. He really only used the pick-up for deliveries too big for the inside of the Suburban, but too small to use the trailer, to keep it in good running shape.

Rudy stacked the last case of freeze-dried food in the display area after Jack handed it to him. "Whew," Jack said. "Glad that's done."

Rudy let it pass. It hadn't been that much work, but Jack always liked to make it seem like he'd done a day's work in fifteen minutes. He went over behind the counter containing the cash register and made a couple

of notes on the pad there.

Jack was ogling the firearms in the weapons rack behind the locked clear security doors. “You thought about the machineguns, Rudy? You said you would.”

“They’re not machineguns, Jack,” Rudy replied, correcting his friend for what must have been the thousandth time. “But no. I don’t want to get a Class Three license. The semi-auto weapons are fine for my customers. Anyone wanting full-auto, NFA any-other-weapon, or something classed as a destructive device, can go to Harry, in the city.

“Well. I think you should do it. Machineguns are cool.”

Rudy just shook his head. “Thanks for helping. Here. Why don’t you go get some lunch?” He took some money from his money clip and handed it to Jack. “There’s some extra in there for your lunch. Thanks for helping today.”

“Sure. No problem. Probably put my back out for a couple of days, but I know you needed the help. Thanks. See you.”

It was an expressive sigh that Rudy released. Having Jack around this much was a real pain. To put it bluntly, Jack was a pain. He could never hold a job for long. He knew the city and county aid system inside and out and played it like a master. Currently he was living with some bimbo who was paying the way for both of them, but Rudy knew it wouldn’t last long. Jack would get a roving eye and wind up getting tossed out on his ear.

At least Rudy had made it clear several years previously that he wouldn’t take Jack in, give him handouts, and for sure not bail him out of jail. If he needed money, Jack had to work for it. Rudy was very careful about what he let Jack do. Never any deliveries to his customers. Nothing to do with the warehouse on his parents’ property.

Definitely nothing to do with the weapons or precious metals. He also wouldn't let Jack actually hang out at the store. Sometimes Rudy would have to come up with an excuse to get Jack to leave, but for the most part Jack had learned the length of his welcome and didn't abuse it too often. He sure did push it sometimes, though.

Rudy turned back to the work he was doing. It was a new month and he always tried to put up new supplies for his monthly specials no more than a day or two into the month. He didn't get a lot of walk in business, but there was some. Most of his customers were from word-of-mouth advertising and calls from his Yellow Pages ads. Probably a third of his business was from ads in a few preparedness magazines, and his internet site.

He did get many compliments on the store. It wasn't a dark, crowded surplus type store. Rudy had designed the showroom area to be light and uncluttered, yet able to display plenty of different types of products. Half of the building was storage room for the various products he carried.

Inside a security wall connected to the building he showcased and stored those outdoor items he didn't want in the store itself. Selective as he was with what he carried, Rudy was able to keep the place bright, airy, and cheerful. It helped a great deal when dealing with some of the rather reluctant survivalists he had as customers at times.

Been a few major happenings in the last few months and business was up. He made a few more changes in the displays and then went into the back for his own lunch. As he ate, one ear tuned for the annunciator on the front door, he browsed the internet, checking several of the emergency preparedness forums of which he was a member. Things looked about normal.

As he got ready for the five-thirty Monday evening preparedness class for this month, Rudy wondered if he might be letting life just slide by

him. He was actually making a decent living now, adding to savings and retirement, but...

The annunciator bell rang and Rudy looked up. It was Mrs. Robinson for the class. She'd started coming in after the blizzard the winter before had snow-bound her for six days. She'd had plenty to eat, since she canned every season, but had to do without quite a few other things, including sanitation. Though she was eighty, Mrs. Robinson taught a couple of canning classes that Rudy sponsored before each canning season.

After exchanging greetings, Rudy finished his preliminary closing ritual as Mrs. Robinson browsed the shop. Rudy always gave a ten percent discount on anything purchased after one of the training sessions.

By the time the other half a dozen people of a group of about twenty or so that often showed up for the training had arrived, Rudy was ready to lock the door and get down to business. As he was latching the door he saw another car drive up and waited for the occupant to park and come to the door.

It was a young woman, nicely put together, Rudy noticed, wearing jeans, chambray shirt, and short jean jacket. She had good hiking boots on her feet. "I heard about your training. Is it all right for me to attend? I'm Lizzie Graham." She held out her right hand and Rudy took it automatically.

"Sure," he replied, stepping aside to let the woman enter. "It's open to anyone that wants to attend."

"What is the lesson tonight?" she asked as the two walked over to join the others around a table in an open area at the rear of the store.

"Actually," Rudy told her, "This is a follow-up session for last month's session on Home-Made Iron and Travel Rations. We had a discussion of possibilities and then everyone chose one to make and bring back

tonight for evaluation. You may not get much out of it... But I can give you the literature from last month and you can at least read up on the options we discussed.”

“That sounds okay,” replied Lizzie. Her attention turned to the group. “Hi. I’m Lizzie Graham.”

“We’re pretty informal around here,” Pete Haskins said. “First names only. Until we get to know you a bit better, if you don’t mind. You can call me Snake.”

Lizzie grinned as a couple of the other shushed Peter. “Okay, Snake.”

“Don’t mind him,” insisted Rebecca Haskel. “We do kind of guard our active presence in preparedness, but we don’t really have code names. Hi. I’m Rebecca.”

Lizzie nodded and looked at the next person at the table. “Ron.” It went the same around the table. Lizzie noted that despite the assurance that ‘Snake’ was being a bit gung-ho about it, that none of the others gave their last name.

Rudy brought another chair from the back and Lizzie and he sat down. A lively discussion ensued, about the relative merits of the several rations that had been brought up the previous month. Everyone liked the gorp, but acknowledged that it would probably have the shortest storage life, but could be important as a comfort food long term, and as quick energy on an immediate basis for general use.

Mrs. Robinson had made a batch of Alpine erbswurst (dried pea soup w/ beef tallow), Pete had made jerky, Rebecca pinole (ground smoked corn flour w/ spices), and Ron pemmican (meat, bone marrow and ground fruit). Other things for them to try were lentils, and fruit leather and dried fruit. Rudy’s contributions were samples of lifeboat rations and malted milk tablets.

The others encouraged Lizzie to sample the foods, to get an ‘unbiased’ opinion. It turned out pretty much the way Rudy thought it would. There were a couple of universal favorites, like the jerky and the gorp. But each had their own favorite of the others. Some decided they would prefer the commercial versions to the homemade. A couple, like Rudy himself did, decided to use several if not all of the concoctions in their planning.

The meeting broke up well before seven, after several exchanges of recipes. Rudy rang up the sales for those that bought things to take advantage of the meeting discount. He noticed Lizzie looking around as the last of the group finally said good night and left.

“Something you want to pick up? There is a ten percent training meeting discount.”

“Actually,” Lizzie replied, “I was hoping to ask you a few questions.”

“You’re not a reporter, are you? I don’t get along with reporters very well.”

“Oh. Due to the paranoia in the survivalist business?”

“No... Well, not completely. I had a couple of bad experiences during my short sports career. Besides, being paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened slightly at Rudy’s words. Then she saw him grin. “For whatever reasons, I really don’t want to do an interview right now. I do have other things to do. Come back during regular business hours and I’ll consider it.”

“That’s a no, then,” she said.

“No. That’s a maybe. I said I would consider it.”

“Well, it has been my experience that when one says that, they are just wanting the time to figure out the best way of saying no.”

Rudy was guiding her toward the front door of the shop. “I’m not,” he said. “Now if you don’t mind, I need to finish closing up shop.”

“Okay, okay. You don’t have to hustle me out, you know. I’m just a citizen before I’m a reporter.”

“Yeah. Right.” He handed her out the door.

“Well, can you at least tell me a good place to get something to eat around here? I’m new in town.”

“Try Brandy’s. Good diner style food. Two blocks east and a block north.”

“Thank you.”

Rudy closed and locked the door.

“You’re welcome,” he muttered under his breath. It took a few minutes to close down the store completely. Though the building was built rather like a bank vault with windows, which were an acrylic armor, like the gun case door, Rudy always went through the routine of putting the high value items away in the actual vault that was part of the shop.

But first he closed the armor shutters over the windows and door of the shop, and then the ones in the back. Next he went to the glass counter displays near the cash register. He pulled the counter tray with gold and silver coins and put it in its rack in the vault. He went back and pulled the trays containing hand guns and knives and put them in the vault. Then he released the locking pins holding the long gun display case

securely against the wall and pushed it into the vault. Adding the cash drawer from the cash register finished the job.

As he turned out the lights and let himself out the back door and triple locked it Rudy found himself wondering about Lizzie. But he didn't give it a whole lot of thought as he drove to his apartment. He was hungry and ready for supper. He watched a couple hours of news while reading the paper, and then went to bed.

Rudy frowned when he saw Lizzie talking to Jack near the rear entrance of the shop the next morning. Jack seemed all excited when Rudy walked over to them after parking the Suburban. "Hey! Lizzie here said you two met last night but you wouldn't tell her anything. But don't worry. I've been filling her in on the whole business. She's a reporter. Going to do a front page story on you! Can you believe it? Broken down jock makes good with survival guns! Cool, isn't it."

He looked over at Lizzie. "You got that right now, don't you? Jack Jamieson. That's with an I and an E.

"I've got it," Lizzie said, her eyes on Rudy's face. She saw him frown. As he unlocked the door she said, "You said to come back during regular business hours. I like to get an early start."

Lizzie started to follow Rudy into the store, but he held up his hand. "Around front. I don't want you in the back of the store."

"What are you hiding?" It popped out before Lizzie could stop herself. She knew it wouldn't help her cause. But it was the natural reaction. Rudy surprised her. He responded without getting angry.

"A mess. I was restocking yesterday and I haven't put everything away. I have just a small path through the stuff and it isn't quite kosher. I'm going to straighten up right away, but I don't want anyone in there to trip

over something.

“Oh. I see. Don’t worry. I’m not here to report on how neat you are or aren’t.”

“You probably should be. Businesses that don’t keep their places neat and clean usually don’t do too well.”

“Yes. Of course, but...” Rudy shut the door. Frowning herself now, Lizzie went around the building, wishing she could see over the fence on the side of the building.

Rudy had the front door open and said, “Come on in. You can try to convince me while I clean things up. I’ve got an hour before I open. Don’t hope for too much.”

Lizzie followed Rudy to the entrance to the storage area of the store. He didn’t try to block her view as he went in. “Stay here by the door,” he said as he began to break down some cardboard packing boxes.

Since he hadn’t said not to, Lizzie did a thorough scan of the room. In her opinion it didn’t seem all that cluttered. It was at least as neat as her new apartment that she was still moving in to. Her eyes came back to Rudy’s face when he spoke.

“You need to get your pad and pen?”

“No,” she replied, holding up and turning on a micro-cassette recorder. “I use this.”

“What happens if it quits or you run out of tape?”

“It’s never happened.”

“Well, I won’t talk to you if you just use that. There’s a pad and a pen

there by the cash register. Take notes. Or at least pretend to. I trust that more than a recorder.”

“What do you mean you trust the pad more than the recorder?” She couldn’t fathom his reasoning.

“Recording tape can be copied and rearranged very easily. Notes can’t be without completely rewriting them. If they are subpoenaed an expert could probably tell if they were original paper and all that. Lot harder with tape, though it can be done.”

“I wouldn’t do that!” Lizzie said rather hotly. When Rudy didn’t do anything except look at her, she said, more calmly. “If I was going to I could just write whatever I wanted instead of what you’re saying.”

“That’s a lot harder to do than say. You’re concentrating on what I’m say, trying to understand it, and get it all down at the same time. Only someone with a great deal of experience can do two mental things at the same time. I trust the pad.”

“Does this mean you are agreeing to the interview?”

“No. I want to see some of your stuff first. And then I’ll make a decision. I just wanted to see how you would operate and maybe get a few of the preliminaries out of the way. You’re welcome to ask me background now if you want, but not specifics of my store or business. And that’s if you use the pad and pen. You can use the recorder, too, but if it comes to legal recourse, I’ll ask for the paper notes to be brought into court.”

“Why are we talking court about this? I just want to ask a few questions,” protested Lizzie. She found herself pen in hand, pad ready, the recorder dangling on its strap from her wrist.

“Because emergency preparedness had been given a bad name by journalists and the mass media.”

“You mean survivalists and survivalism. The militias.”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Only a tiny handful of people into being prepared are in militias, or consider themselves survivalists. But the reporting on the subject has linked the various words with specific actions that in no way are typical.”

“Okay. Maybe we could talk about that.”

“Not until I agree to the full interview.”

“Oh. Okay. Then tell me about yourself. This’ll be off the record.”

“There you go. Off the record. Nothing can be off the record. Even if a specific quote or item isn’t used, the information for evermore influences the reporter. It leads to other things, sets a tone, influences the reporter in many ways. The only things off the record are the things I don’t say. Anything I say to you, you can use. In context.”

“I don’t use things out of context.” She wasn’t hot, but the words came out forcefully.

“Good. I’ll hold you to that. What do you want to know?”

“Just a little about yourself. For the record.”

By the time Rudy had told her what he wanted to of his history up to this point he’d finished in the store room. “That’s about it,” he said, dusting off his hands.

“I’ll say,” Lizzie said with a smile. “I know more about you than I do my own brother. Not much of which I can use.” Her eyes were taking in

the store room now, and she had to admit it was neater than when Rudy had started. Annoyingly neat, actually.

“So, if you want to get me some examples of your work, I’ll take a look at them and decide if I want to let you do an interview.”

“What? Just bring you some of my published articles? What if I stack the deck with only my very best work?”

“Should be easy to spot,” replied Rudy.

“Okay,” Lizzie said, at a loss on how to counter his implied accusation. “I just moved to the city. It’ll take me a day or two to have some things faxed from where I worked before.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got the time. Just whenever you can get them to me.”

After a moments hesitation Lizzie nodded and put the pen and pad on the counter by the cash register, tearing off the several pages of information she had put down. She also turned off the recorder. Rudy put the episode out of his mind when the door closed behind Lizzie when she left.

Rudy wasn’t expecting much business. There weren’t any hotspots of activity anywhere at the moment. At least the news channels weren’t featuring any, and nothing but routine stuff was showing on the forums and shortwave sites he monitored at the shop. So Rudy decided to work on a flyer for the next month’s specials.

It didn’t take long, using one of the templates he’d created in Publisher. He printed out a couple of examples to look at later to proof them. He made a couple of small sales after lunch, and then began to put together some Back-To-School BOB kits. Several of the parents had asked him to come up with something they could send with their children to have on hand at school, without going overboard.

He knew what he wanted in the kits so it didn't take long to make up a dozen of them. The fill-in-the-blank contact information sheets he prepared on the computer and printed out, adding one to a waterproof pocket on the small backpacks he was using. He added a laminating pouch to the pocket so the parents could include a picture of themselves for identification. That done, Rudy did the monthly start and run on the generators he had to keep them ready for immediate use.

Inventory kept him busy the rest of the day. Jack stopped by at quitting time, hoping for a dinner, but Rudy said he was just going home to have some soup. Jack went off to find someone else he might talk into buying him a fancy meal.

Lizzie was back the next morning. Rudy noted the attaché case. He parked and went to the back door. They didn't exchange a word, Lizzie following him silently through the storage area to the display area of the shop. She took the opportunity to look over the storage area as she passed through. It was obvious that was all it was. Storage area for replacement stock. Quite a bit of it, at that.

Rudy glanced at his watch as Lizzie took out a handful of faxes. He took them when she handed them to him. She began to wander around the store again as he settled in to read them in detail. It didn't take long. What she wrote was concise and informative, with a style that let one read quickly. Rudy gathered up the papers neatly and set them on the counter. Lizzie saw him and moved over to join him, but he began the store opening tasks.

"Well? What do you think?"

"You're pretty good. Only show a few biases."

Lizzie's hands went to her hips and her eyes flashed. "I am not biased! My work... All of it... is fair and balanced. I look at every side of an

issue.”

“Oh,” Rudy said as he pushed the gun display case into place, “I think the bias is unconscious. I don’t think you realize you put so much of your own opinion into your work. And your lack of knowledge of some subjects is understandable.”

She was red in the face now, glaring at Rudy. “By the time I’ve finished researching an article, I am very well informed on the specifics of the matter.”

“I noticed that, in some of the articles of which I have more knowledge of the subject. But others in which I’m fairly well schooled, you missed a few specific definitions. Now for me, language is an art. I try to be as accurate as possible at all times. Like everyone else, I suppose I fail at times, so I can’t hold that too much against you.”

“I tell you I am fair and balanced and accurate. My work has been commended.”

“By those in your industry.”

“Yes. They are the only ones that can judge.”

It was Rudy’s turn to have flashing eyes. “Now that is a major point of disagreement. Your readers and viewers are the ones whose judgment counts. Your co-workers agree with you because they have the same biases and points of view. Much of the populace accepts what they read, blindly, assuming that today’s various media is still infused with the ethics of the past.”

“Are you calling me unethical?” Lizzie was furious.

“Not by today’s standards, and that is the only way I can compare and be honest. I think the standards are different from what they were. As far as

accuracy that is what I seek over all else. And you're not bad. I see a lot worse just about every day in the media."

"Show me! Show me where I am not accurate!"

"The article about the plight in the plains about drinking water and private wells. You used the term deep wells and shallow wells incorrectly."

"How so? I talk to well owners all over that area. They told me the depth of their wells. Some were shallow and some were deep."

"That's true. But a shallow well is not a shallow well because it is not as deep as the norm in the area. A shallow well is a well where the drawdown of the water while pumping is at twenty-five feet or less. Doesn't matter how deep the well goes. A deep well is any well where the drawdown of the water when pumping is more than thirty feet. There's a little overlap in that twenty-five-foot to thirty-foot area."

"A hundred foot well with the water level at eighteen feet while pumping is a shallow well. A well sixty feet deep with a drawdown to thirty-five feet is a deep well. It is because of the type of pump that must be used."

"Oh. I didn't know that. I thought that a well not as deep as the norm was considered a shallow well."

"It is, by some, but not to a pump person. Anyone can be excused for the occasional small mistake. There are times when there must be huge amounts of information you have to absorb. It is the general lack of accuracy I don't like."

"There is often a lot to absorb. And I should have caught that." She glared at him again. "But I don't know how you can say I'm not accurate, in general. I cover every side of a story. Every point of view."

“Yes. I noticed that. But you gave them all equal weight. Something that eight thousand people believe in versus twenty-eight people should be explained as so. In several of the articles you did exactly what you said. You gave equal weight to each, no matter how many individuals were represented by that opinion. And in several, there was no understandable division made to the various sides.”

“I have to give every side their time. It’s only fair and balanced to do so.”

“It’s fair, I suppose. And the way you do it, things seemed balanced. But it isn’t accurate. I want accuracy. I want to know that eight thousand people agree and only twenty-eight disagree. I want to make my decisions based on that. Not that person A says this and person B says that. That makes the opinions carry the same weight. They shouldn’t. This is a republic, run on democratic principles. Numbers make a difference. The majority should rule. And in ruling, make sure the minority opinion is addressed, but twenty-eight should not be making the rules for eight thousand twenty-eight.”

“Okay. I can see some, and I repeat, some, merit to your point. But I still believe that fairness is important.”

“Being accurate is being fair. You do an artificial fairness that misleads readers and viewers. In my opinion. I think you often go in with your opinion already formed and seek the answers to confirm it.”

Lizzie let it drop. But she wouldn’t drop the accusation of bias. “You said I was biased. Even if you think I was wrong in how I did it, I showed every view on every subject. How can that be biased.”

“Mostly in your use of descriptive words. Accurate and un-biased is Mary did this and John did that. You, in a few cases put it like this: Mary did an admirable job doing this and John managed to do that.

Mary is admirable and John is barely competent. It should be up to the reader to decide who is what, based on accurate information, not bias like that.”

Lizzie didn't try to refute his statement. “So this means no interview, I take it.”

“Let me think about it some more. You're bound to need more background information. Give me another day to think about it. I'll let you know in the morning.”

It was a subdued Lizzie that met Rudy at the back door of the shop the next morning. She'd reread some of her work in light of Rudy's comments. She wasn't pleased with what she learned about her reporting. It was bothering her when she as much as barked, “Well? What's it going to be?”

Rudy smiled. “I'll tell you what I will do. You can hang around and see what people involved with emergency preparedness do at a shop like mine. It'll be up to them, of course, as to what you can use connecting with their names.”

Lizzie's eyes widened. That wasn't quite a yes, but it was sure more than maybe. She followed him into the storage room. “I'll take that. But you are the key to this. I really want to delve into your psyche on this.”

With a laugh, Rudy responded. “My psyche? Boy, are you going to be disappointed.” They were in the showroom now. Rudy turned around and asked. “You have your tape recorder?” Lizzie nodded.

“Turn it on for a moment, please.”

“I'll get my pad and pencil...”

Rudy cut her off. “No. This is just for you. I’d like you to answer a question for me, and then listen to your answer later.”

Lizzie hesitated, but finally turned on the recorder.

“Just tell me in your own words what you want this article to do.”

She knew what she wanted, but hesitated, many of Rudy’s words of the day before coming back to her. Finally she said, “I want to show people what places like this shop, and people into survivalism are capable of doing and how they interface with the community around them.” Lizzie cut her eyes up to Rudy, noticing, all of a sudden, how soft brown they were. “That’s it, I guess.”

Rudy nodded. “Thanks. Just play that back to yourself every once in a while as we go. Ask what you will and I’ll answer to the best of my ability. Uh... I do have a business to run. Try not to chase any of it off. There will be some customers that won’t want their presence known here, much less their name used.”

“I get releases for anyone I want to quote. What about what I said just now. What do you think?”

“That is for you to think about, not me.”

Exasperated, Lizzie said, “You must think something about it. It seems so important to you.”

Rudy put a tray of handguns in the display counter. After a few moments he replied to her question. “It just verified what I thought yesterday. But you’ll have to come to your own conclusions about that.”

“I am not like you say!” protested Lizzie. She thought about what she’d said on the tape and couldn’t see anything that would make him think like he did. Nor could she fathom why he was going to go through with

the interview believing what he did. She ran things through her mind several times, but just couldn't see his reasoning. Finally, she shook her head, and then took out the pad and pen to begin doing her job.

She'd had a whole list of question in mind when she started the project, but couldn't think of a single one at the moment. Lizzie decided to just follow Rudy around and see what he did all day.

By the end of the day Lizzie had a couple of pages of very boring notes. Even the quotes from Rudy were boring. Simple answers to what this was for or that was for. She was hoping he would go to the gun displays and do something with them, but she wasn't about to ask him to, considering his opinion of her.

She ran over to the Coffee Shop next door to him on the side away from the side alley to get a quick lunch when he ate his. The young woman behind the counter seem quite enamored of Rudy. Somewhat less so of Jack when she brought his name up in relation to Rudy.

The few customers that came in made what appeared to be routine purchases. Mostly widgets and whatnots. No guns or anything interesting.

The only thing she had of value, she decided was a long list of internet sites she wanted to check out. They were the ones that Rudy checked from time to time during the day. She left at closing time, feeling fidgety and let down, but not knowing why.

The next day started out the same. But she finally began to remember some of the questions she had not been able to recall the previous day. They got set aside again when the phone rang, and Rudy's end of the conversation sounded interesting. It was about guns.

“Rudy, can you tell me what that was about?” she asked when he’d hung up.

“Sure. Fellow is thinking about a different gun for protection if the balloon goes up. Oh. That’s my way of saying if there is a disaster of some kind. Some people use a vulgar phrase, but I don’t. Do use the initials T E O T W A W K I and the one I prefer, T E O C A W K I.”

“I know the vulgar saying. Jack used it. And I learned in my research about TEOTWAWKI. What is the other one? The one you prefer. It has to be something similar.”

“It is. The End Of Civilization As We Know It, versus the world. There are a great deal more things that can end civilization than can end the world.”

“Makes sense,” Lizzie replied “Now about that phone call?”

“Oh, yes. A regular client has been thinking about upgrading a primary defense weapon in case the balloon goes up. He currently has a thirty-thirty lever action. He and his wife have been discussing it for some time. She wants to keep the Winchester for herself and get Harvey something more effective in defensive circumstances.”

“A machinegun?”

Rudy laughed. “No. I don’t deal class three. They want to try a couple of different options. Hillary thinks an SKS, but Harvey, if they’re going to spend the money is inclined to go with something in .308 for increased range. I’ll take them out to the range this weekend and let them try a couple different weapons so they can pick one.”

“I see,” Lizzie said. Less interested in Hillary and Harvey, she asked about machine guns again. “You said you don’t deal class three. That is machine guns?”

Rudy nodded.

“Jack said you were thinking about selling machine guns.”

This time Rudy frowned. “Just so you will know, Jack doesn’t speak for me or the shop or any of my customers. We’ll each speak for ourselves. Jack has a thing for full auto, but I don’t want the hassle a class three license brings. Besides which, I only have one customer that might be able to have a class three weapon and be able to shoot it.”

“I see. I didn’t realize they were that hard to shoot. I saw a reporter shoot one on TV one time. Didn’t look that hard.”

“It isn’t that it is so hard, it’s just extremely expensive. You run through thousands of round of ammunition if you shoot much, even just to stay in practice. While there are a few tactical situations where a full auto weapon might be an advantage, there aren’t many.

“And,” Rudy continued, “An individual is not like an Army. An individual has a very limited supply train. You can’t just draw more ammunition from stores when you run out. It is even worse when you’re in a field rather than defending a fixed position. Few people can carry more than two- or three- hundred rounds. Perhaps four hundred if they leave everything else behind. But even firing five or six round bursts, you can only engage sixty or so targets until your ammunition runs out.

“Someone with a semi-auto carrying two-hundred rounds can engage two-hundred targets. That’s a big difference. When you consider how often you are going to miss in any combat situation with people shooting back at you, you need more controlled rounds down target rather than fewer bursts. Machine guns are different. They...”

Lizzie interrupted Rudy. “I thought you were talking about machine guns.”

“No. I’ve been talking about full-auto rifles, carbines, and submachine guns. Machine guns are different. They are belt fed and usually supported by one or two riflemen that carry additional ammunition for the gunner. They can lay down a field of fire that can keep an enemy from advancing, whether they kill or wound many in the process. Rifles and carbines are a one on one proposition.

“About the only time full-auto rifles and carbines are justified is in setting up or responding to an ambush. There you need all the firepower you can get. An automatic rifle at the squad level, can be an asset, but all the problems I’ve already noted apply. Most emergency preparedness people are essentially operating on a rifle team basis and can’t support full auto fire even for one automatic rifle.”

Lizzie was writing furiously. She said nothing as she caught up her notes, thankful she had the tape to back her up.”

“So survivalists don’t have many machine guns or... what was it?” She looked at her notes. “Full auto carbines and rifles and submachine guns...”

“There are elements, like some of the militias that follow military doctrine, and especially some of the hate groups and extremists groups out there that have been tagged with the title survivalist, that do have and operate full auto weapons, including machine guns. But it takes a well funded group to have enough ammunition to use them in any sort of protracted series of engagements.”

“This is confusing. I want to understand it better. Is there something...”

Rudy looked up when the shop door opened and rang the bell. “I can explain it a little better and print you out a chart to show the differences. But you have to remember, I am a classisist. I use the original terms and definitions. Some things have been blurred in modern society. Now, if

you will excuse me, I need to wait on my customer.”

Knowing she would get the information later, Lizzie quit thinking about the subject and followed along after Rudy.

Rudy saw her come up and said, “Kathy, this is Miss Graham. She’s a print reporter doing a story on preparedness. Do you mind if she watches and takes notes and ask questions? She won’t if you don’t want her to.”

“That’s fine. I’ve got nothing to hide. Except...” She gave Lizzie a hard look. “You aren’t going to broadcast what I got to everyone, are you? I don’t want everybody and their brother on my doorstep with their hand out if things get tough.”

“No, Ma’am. I’ll either use your name and a quote or two, or something about what you’re here to buy, but not both. Is that okay?”

“If Rudy thinks it is, then sure.”

“I think she’ll do just as she says,” Rudy said.

“Then fine.” Kathy turned to look at Rudy. “I need to pick two more of those month supplies of LTS food.”

Rudy quickly told Lizzie, “That’s long term storage.”

Lizzie nodded and Kathy continued. “I’m glad you talked me into the freeze-dried stuff. For some of the items, it’s a lot better than the dehydrated. And I want to add a custom case to that. The kids love the mac and cheese and a couple other things.

“I want a can of the mac and cheese, one of the brownie mix, granola cereal, a sliced strawberry, and two extra of sugar to go into long, long term storage.”

“Anything else, Kathy?”

“Yeah. Greg wants a couple more bricks of twenty-two’s and a battle pack of five, five, six. That should be it. But what you got on sale?”

Rudy smiled. Kathy was always looking for a bargain. “Over on the table where they always are. I’ll start loading things up for you while you take a look.”

Lizzie stayed with Kathy. “Kathy, I saw that you wanted two months supply. Is that how long you want to be prepared?”

“Two months? Lord, no. We’ve got a years supply, rotating it out now, but only like to do two months at a time because of the cash flow situation. And plus that extra. The kids love some of these items. I wonder sometimes why we don’t just use the LTS food all the time. The price difference is getting close to being able to do it. Oh. Along with fresh stuff from the garden, of course.”

“Un-huh. How much is a battle pack of... what was it? Five, five, six?”

“Don’t you know anything? Five point five six NATO. Two twenty three Remington. It’s for our AR-15’s.”

“I didn’t know. Thank you.”

“Well, the battle pack size varies, depending on who is moving surplus ammo. What Rudy has right now is a thousand rounds in stripper clips, in cloth bandoleers, in a heavy plastic pack.”

“I see. A thousand rounds. That seems like a lot.”

“Well, we shoot up about a hundred every couple of weeks at the range, keeping our eye in. This pack will only give us four thousand rounds. I

want to get that up to at least five thousand per gun and we have three of the AR's. Building up our .22 stock, too. The kids can go through a brick every time they go to the range. We have ten thousand rounds, but we're shooting for fifty thousand. Can't reload it, you know."

"That sounds like a great deal of ammo," Lizzie said, watching Kathy closely.

"Well, if it all goes you know where in a hand basket, there won't be anymore to get for a long time. If I don't have it when it starts, I won't be able to get it after. We could be in deep do-do if they ever turn out the prisoners up the interstate if things go bad."

"Oh, I can't see them doing that."

"Yeah. Sure. You just think that. And keep your legs crossed if they do. I think I'll take a couple of these squeeze lights. They're a lot better than the old Russian ones."

A little put off by Kathy's remark, Lizzie let the woman walk away, to the counter to pay for her purchases. She moved over and began studying the weapons in the gun cases. She recognized a few, having seen them on TV and in the movies. There didn't seem to be as many as she was expecting.

She commented on that when Rudy returned from loading Kathy's minivan. "I was in a gun store some time ago, doing an article where a gun was used in a crime. They had many more guns than you have here."

"I only carry quality items I think are useful to a prepper. There are other gun stores here in the city, and in the big city for me to justify anything more. I have arrangements with one here and one in the city to get discounts for my customers if they buy something in those stores that I don't have here."

“I see. I recognize the M-4. That’s the gun the Army and Marines use.”

“The M-4 is usually select fire. This is a commercial copy that is semi-auto only.”

“Oh. You were going to explain the different guns?”

“Let me print the table off so you can follow me.” It took only a few seconds for Rudy to print the table in question off on his printer. He handed it to Lizzie.

Name.....Cartridge.....Action.....Feed.....Barr
el.....Stock.....Mount.....Crew
Machine.....pistol.....selective.....medium
or....standard....detachable.....none.....individua l
pistol.....(full).....to large
box....pistol.....(& holster)

Submachine.....pistol.....full.....large
box....carbine.....folding (full).....sling.....individual
gun

assault.....intermediate.....selective.....large
box....carbine.....folding (full)....sling.....individual
rifle.....rifle.....(full).....
.....(& bipod)

battle rifle.....full power rifle...semi-auto....large
box....rifle.....full.....sling.....individual
.....(selective).....

(folding).....(& bipod)

automatic.....full power rifle...full.....large
 box....heavy.....full.....bipod &.....individual
 rifle.....(selective).....rifle.....
 .(fol ding).....sling.....(or 2)

light machine....full power rifle...full.....large box....QC
 heavy...full.....bipod.....crew
 gun.....(selective).....or
 belt.....rifle.....(& sling).....2 to 4

heavy machine...full power rifle...full.....belt.....QC
 heavy....none.....tripod.....crew
 gun.....or larger

“It doesn’t list standard pistols or revolvers. They come in single and double action, single load or magazine fed. Then we come to a weapon that has had military application. The machine pistol. It uses a pistol cartridge, of course, has selective fire or in some case full auto only. It uses a medium to large box magazine. The barrel is a standard pistol barrel for that model. It can have an attachable stock and comes with a holster. There is no mount for it and it is used by a single individual. And then we go down the line.

The items in parenthesis are alternatives seen sometimes now a-days. Again, these are primarily military terms. There are civilian versions of most of those and that’s where a lot of the confusion comes from. There is no real equivalent of the machine pistol other than just a semi-auto

pistol.

The submachine gun civilian equivalent is the semi-auto pistol caliber carbine.

Where the intermediate cartridge assault rifle is select fire, the civilian equivalent is just a semi-auto carbine. Mostly .223 or 7.62 x 39.

The battle rifle or main battle rifle, MBR, is pretty much the same civilian or military, except a few military versions do offer select fire. Primarily in the thirty-caliber, full power class of rifle cartridges. The much older version was the bolt action military rifle that was used for many years.

Automatic rifles don't have a true equivalent in the civilian market as it is, by terminology, fully automatic. The closest thing for civilians are some of the heavy barrel version of MBR's.

Light machine guns sometimes have a semi-automatic option and don't really have a civilian counterpart. Though, if you get the right license and pay the fees, you can own the fully automatic firearms.

Now the heavy machine guns were traditionally those that took the same cartridge as the MBR, but with the removable barrel, and in some cases water cooling, were able to fire nearly continuously. Now, there is a blurring of the lines when it comes to machine guns.

“With new technology and materials, the old heavy machine gun is now primarily a medium machine gun. Machine guns over thirty-caliber are heavy machineguns. The automatic rifle is has been replaced mostly with what is now termed the squad automatic weapon in an intermediate cartridge and the use of the more portable light machine gun in overlapping roles.

“Now there are a few semi-auto versions of the various auto rifles and

machineguns available to the public, but they are a real nitch market and have curiosity value, but little value in the field that isn't handled by a semi-auto MBR or heavy barreled variant.

“Submachine guns, full auto rifles and carbines, despite common usage, are not machine guns in technical terms. I like to keep things accurate. And all rifles and shotguns with pistol grips are not assault rifles.”

Lizzie took the statements as the pointed references that they were.

“I’m going to need to study this. It’s a lot of technical information for me to take in all at once.”

“Sure. Take all the time you need. And if you have any clarifying questions, feel free to ask.”

She took him at his word, asking the occasional question the rest of the afternoon. Rudy took down various weapons and showed Lizzie the specific features, or lack thereof, listed on the table he’d printed for her. As Lizzie worked on her notes, she looked over at Rudy and noticed him engrossed in the bank of televisions mounted where customers could see them, as well as anyone behind the register.

Lizzie walked over so she could see what had Rudy’s attention. “What’s going on?”

“Hurricane Katrina,” replied Rudy. He nodded toward the TV carrying Weather Channel coverage. The projected path included New Orleans. “It’s been a long time since New Orleans has had a hurricane come close, much less right through the city. This could be bad. Really bad. Much of New Orleans is below sea level. Parts of it have been sinking for years through subsidence due to the weight of construction and the nature of the ground there.”

Rudy picked up the phone and made a series of calls. “You just ordered

almost as much stuff as you already have on display. And the back of the store is full,” Lizzie said, her amazement obvious.

“Business always picks up after a major disaster. Regulars increase their stocks or get things they’ve been thinking about for a while, and a lot of newbies show up to start the process. And this is shaping up to be a really bad one. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere near New Orleans the next several days.”

“But what if nothing happens? What will you do with all that stock?”

“It can’t not happen. That’s a huge storm and powerful. Even if it starts to fade, it’s going to do major damage to the Gulf Coast somewhere around or at New Orleans. It’s a done deal. Storms like that don’t just suddenly stop and dissipate.

“As far as the stock, even if I don’t get a run, I’ll sell it eventually.”

“It’s your business, but that sure seems iffy. I don’t see how you stay in business anyway. You have so few customers.”

“I do okay. I’ll never get rich at it, but I make a living. And I provide a needed service to the community.”

The expression on Lizzie’s face indicated that she wasn’t so sure of that, but Rudy looked away when the bell over the door rang. “And so it begins,” he said, glancing at Lizzie quickly, to see her expression. There was another customer right behind the first one.

“Hi, Rudy,” called Tom Bradshaw, the first customer. “Been watching the news. Looks bad on the coast. Makes me think I need to stock back up. I’ve let things get a little behind.”

That was the start of it. Business for Rudy was triple the next couple of days. And then Katrina made land fall.

Rudy's Preparedness Shop – Chapter 2

Lizzie hung around in the back ground those two days, taking notes, doing a few interviews. But mostly just observing the people and trying to discern their motivation. Unlike her preconceived notions, she had yet to see a camouflaged militia type person come in. There were a remarkable number of women. Mostly from the rural area outside the cities.

Rudy made sure Lizzie was nowhere to be found when his restocking orders came in. He loaded everything into the box trailer and took it to the warehouse at his parents, reloaded the older items from the warehouse and went back to the shop to unload. It took a while. He'd put in big orders with several places. There were notes on a couple of the orders that indicated he had phoned in just in time to be able to get what he did, as the Gulf Coast was getting priority.

He had everything in place by midnight. Rudy went to his apartment and grabbed a bite to eat before turning in for the night. He was glad he got the rest when he could. The next few days were hectic.

The scenes of looting. The reports of the shootings and the rapes. Those, along with all the other reports coming out of New Orleans in the days following Katrina's landfall were the catalyst for land office business for him.

Lizzie had learned a few things during her days in the store and pitched in where she could to help, mostly behind the cash register. Jack was typically absent. Lizzie paid close attention when Rudy gave advice on the firearms. There were many requests for weapons as the news from New Orleans continued to come in, many of them listing shooting incidents, the looting, and the rapes and even murders in Super Dome.

And yes, there were a few camouflage clad figures in buying supplies, including guns, but from what she could tell, and from asking questions of those willing to talk to her, most of the customers were everyday folk, now fearful of something like Katrina happening to them. Not necessarily a hurricane, since the area wasn't prone to them, but other, local disaster possibilities that did happen here from time to time.

She kept seeing just plain, ordinary folk coming in. Rural, suburban, and city. All types were coming in. And again she noted the number of women. Many of those she spoke to were picking up things their husbands had asked them to come get because they couldn't, due to work or whatever. Many more single women worried about their future come a disaster the magnitude of Katrina.

Every one of the people that had been at the training session put in appearances. Rebecca came in, and with Rudy's approval, set up a collection can for donations to Katrina victims. More than one person bought an extra item or two and put it with the donation can. Rebecca got an empty box from the back room and began to collect the items people were donating.

As word got around, outside people, not customers, began dropping off money and goods. A few, since they were there stayed long enough to look around. A few made their first purchases. Some would become regular customers.

Lizzie noted that bottled water was a big item, as were water purification devices. And guns. Lots of guns. Pistols, revolvers, rifles, and shotguns. Rudy kept getting more from somewhere, Lizzie saw. When she asked about it he told her of his arrangements with local gun dealers. They were getting a run as well, but Rudy got first call on anything he wanted. People wanting something other than the small group of specific weapons he carried were sent to those same gun stores.

Another thing Lizzie learned was that many of the guns were used. New

versions were not available of particular items. She heard a great deal of negative comment about the recently sun-setted Assault Weapons Ban.

She was going through numerous tapes and filling up note pads with the information she was accumulating. Lizzie even went along on a sales delivery to a rather gregarious man who was installing a photo-voltaic solar power system. He was more than willing to talk about his preparations and showed Lizzie his basement shelter and the stocks of food, water, and other supplies he'd obtained from Rudy the past two years since he'd become interested in preparedness. He even used the term survivalists.

That term was taking on new meaning for Lizzie. She suddenly thought of the tape Rudy had asked her to make before letting her begin the interview. She played it back to herself, using an ear bud and frowned. She was going to have to think on it some more, but she suddenly wasn't pleased with what she had said at the time. She just wasn't sure why.

She put it out of her mind as they drove back to the shop. She went inside as Rudy parked the Suburban and flatbed trailer in the rear. She nodded to Crystal, who was Rudy's part time checkout clerk when he made daytime deliveries. Crystal was disadvantaged, requiring a walker to get around, but she was a whiz behind the counter and knowledgeable about the business. And she was available pretty much any time Rudy needed her.

"Well," Rudy said the following day, "I know you must have a ton of material and will need to write the article pretty soon. You said your deadline was just before Thanksgiving. Is there anything else you need to ask me."

"Not really," Lizzie said slowly. "I do have a ton of material. Almost literally." She smiled at him. "It's all those pads you made me use." She held out her hand. "I guess this is it. I'll send you a copy of the paper.

You said you don't take it."

Rudy shook his head. "Don't like their politics. But I would like to see the article. If that's all I have to read."

Lizzie laughed. "Okay. I'll send you a clipping."

Rudy shook her hand, and then she was gone. He found himself missing her a little as the days progressed. He finally found out why Jack hadn't been around. He'd been nailed for a bad check and spent a few days in jail before he worked a deal with the company to work it off and time served. Jack wasn't going to like cleaning the stretch of interstate the company was committed to keeping clean in one of those good neighbor arrangements.

As he watched the weather over the next week he began to get the feeling it would be a rough one this year. He checked his stock of kerosene heaters and generators. He would have plenty of heaters if he put in one more order for ten. He had eight generators in stock at the shop, in three different sizes. An additional eight were at the warehouse. One big ice storm, which was probable, could take all of them.

Rudy made up orders for several of his suppliers, pausing occasionally, thinking what he would tell Lizzie about the whys and wherefores of the operation if she were still here. It was a week before Thanksgiving when he found her waiting for him at the back door of the shop. He could tell something was wrong. Lizzie looked very subdued.

She waited until they were inside, out of the cold, before she told him. "They aren't going to publish it," she said. From being subdued, she was starting to get angry. "When I turned it in and they proofed it my editor said it needed some work. They did that twice. Finally I demanded to know what exactly was wrong with it. I just couldn't find anything to fix the third time and I'd had to really look the first two times and they were minor.

“My editor told me it was too positive! Too positive!” Lizzie was striding back and forth as she spoke. “They didn’t want something that would show survivalism in a good light. All it did was show things as they are. Here. See?” She took a sheath of papers from inside her coat and handed them to Rudy.

He read in silence and then handed them back to Lizzie. “Accurate,” he said. “Not biased or slanted. Showed the good with the bad. Just the way just about everything in the world is, some good, some bad, mostly in the middle.”

“Yes. They wanted me to rewrite it with just the bad, but there wasn’t anywhere close to enough to make an article, even if I would have. And then she said just write the rest of it with the worst possible connotation. I couldn’t believe it. They wanted me to intentionally slant the piece, just like you were talking about. Well, I’ll tell you what! I threw it on the desk and quit and walked out.”

Lizzie had stopped pacing and was standing in front of Rudy, her arms down at her sides, her eyes on his face. Rudy saw her eyes tear up and he suddenly found himself holding her in his arms as she began to cry. “What am I going to do? That was a good job... I thought.”

Rudy just held her for a few moments, and then eased her away from him as her crying subsided. “You’ll find something,” he said softly. “You’re now the kind of reporter than can get to the meat of an issue without coloring it. There are bound to be a few places out there that want that kind of reporting.”

Lizzie took Rudy’s handkerchief when he offered it and wiped her eyes. “I used to think so. I used to think that was what I did, until I met you. Now I don’t know.”

“Now that you are aware, you’ll do it the same way every time. Don’t

worry. You have good credentials. You'll get a job quickly. Lots of papers and magazines are looking for people. Not everyone can do what you do."

"Lord, I hope so. The pay was good, but not great and I haven't put anything really aside. I always thought I'd eventually have a good paying job when I got famous and could stash away plenty for retirement and still live pretty good." She started to cry again.

Rudy took her back into his arms until she had once again subsided. As he released her he said, "If it's any help, I've been thinking of getting someone to help in the shop. Business has stayed pretty good and Crystal hasn't been feeling well. I could use someone for at least a month or two. It would give you time to find something. Rents aren't too high around here. Your car is okay, I take it. You'd have plenty of time to look for another reporting job and still pay the bills."

She looked up at him rather forlornly. "You'd do that?"

Rudy nodded.

"But I don't know that much. Just the little I learned while I was doing the interviews."

"It's mostly cash register while I'm out on pickups and deliveries and when I have multiple customers. Business is pretty steady right now." The bell over the door rang. "Speaking of which."

"I'll clean myself up," Lizzie said, hurrying toward the bathroom in the back as Rudy turned toward the customer.

"Oh. It's you," Rudy said, seeing that the person entering was Jack. "What's up."

Jack looked around the room furtively. "No one around, Rudy?"

“Well, that reporter is in the back, in the restroom.”

“I’ll make this quick. Look, man. I’m doing you a big favor. I found someone with a pickup load of M-4’s they got out of an armory in Louisiana. Forty of them. Five hundred a piece. How many do you want?”

“Jack. How many times have I told you I don’t want to deal full auto? Especially stolen ones. Are you out of your mind? You can go to federal prison for this!”

“Come on, Rudy! You can sell them for at least a thousand each. Probably two grand. I only want ten percent. And that when you sell.”

Rudy shook his head. “Who’s got you into this? You’re way out of your league.”

“No way I’m letting you find the supplier. You’ll buy direct from him and cut me out.”

Passed annoyed now, getting angry, Rudy told Jack. “Get out of here. You’ve lost your mind. I want nothing to do with this.”

“You’ll be sorry, Rudy. Mark my words. I told this guy you knew how to play big time. Boomer’s not going to like you backing out.”

“I didn’t back out,” protested Rudy. “I was never involved.”

Jack stormed out of the store just as Lizzie came back into the showroom. “What’s that all about? I can’t believe you’d have an unhappy customer. You’re great with them.”

Rudy shook his head. “No. Just Jack. With some crazy scheme he wanted me to get involved with. I’m beginning to worry about his

mental state.”

“I found him to be a rather scurrilous little man. None of what he told me about you and the store was completely true. He fabricated at least a fourth of what he told me.”

“That’s Jack,” Rudy said. “We used to be sort of friends, but I don’t know any more. Okay. Where were we? A job for you. I’ll get the paperwork ready if you want to go find a place to stay. Unless you want to stay in the big city and drive here every day. I wouldn’t advise it.”

“No. I’ll find something around here. Thanks again, Rudy. You don’t have to do this for me.”

“I want to. You’re on dangerous ground now. Someone who looks for truth through the deceptions. They aren’t well liked in some circles.”

“I’m beginning to discover that.”

“Grab the paper and look at the listings. There should be plenty of good places. I’ll get your paperwork packet set up.”

They parted for the day, Lizzie stopping in later to tell Rudy that she had found a suitable apartment. Rudy closed the shop, and the two went through the paperwork to make her an official employee on the payroll, starting the following day, if she wanted.

“I don’t know how to thank you for what you’ve done for me,” Lizzie said after they had finished.

“It’s nothing. With business picking up the way it is and Rita heading for Texas, I was going to need to look for part time help, anyway. You should be able to find a reporting job by the time business slows back down.

Lizzie decided to go ahead and get moved before starting work at Rudy's. That took two days. By the time she was settled in with her few possessions, Rita was threatening the gulf coast of Texas and Louisiana. And business was still good.

It was easy to fall into the routine at Rudy's. Rudy didn't try to stock everything available. He was selective. And it didn't bother him to send people to other businesses, both those that had reciprocal arrangements with him and those that were totally independent, like the big buying club stores. As a matter of fact, he used them as suppliers for some of his products.

For instance, he stocked a couple of pallets of bottled drinking water, but often told people they could get it a few cents cheaper a case at the buyers' clubs. Those that preferred getting everything they could at one store bought from him. The rest went to the other places.

As a matter of fact, Rudy was a member of several buyers' clubs and bought many routine items from them, marking them up slightly to compete with retail outlets. But he carried quite a few things the buyers' clubs didn't, including the LTS food, weaponry, and precious metals. Lizzie was amazed at how well Rudy could stay stocked, with the way he was moving product.

He had good relationships with his regular suppliers, which he told Lizzie. Some things took longer, but he had reserves at his parents. Which he didn't tell her. They didn't have to turn a customer away for lack of product those hectic days, other than for a few items that were special order anyway, that Rudy didn't normally stock.

They did send people to other stores for quite a few things, but they were all accommodated by the stores that Rudy had arrangements with. When she had a moment, Lizzie went through the computer generated list of which stores had which items in the area. It amazed her that he had an

arrangement with a discount liquor store for people to buy Everclear 190 proof grain alcohol as cheaply as possible.

When Lizzie asked Rudy about it, Rudy told her, “It’s primarily for medicinal purposes. However, you mix it with a large variety of other substances, and it’s drinkable for most of those that just must have a drink. A little goes a long ways.”

It was a bit amazing the education she got, both from Rudy, and from some of his regular customers. When he was gone on pickups or deliveries, she often found herself being talked through a sale for some item that the person buying it was more than happy to explain why it was the best thing going and that they sure were glad that Rudy was stocking it.

Though it was busy occasionally, there were slack times. Most of Rudy’s customers were repeat customers and often enjoyed looking around the store while they waited if there was a customer ahead of them. Lizzie learned a great deal by talking to those customers, as well.

Rudy had started a campaign to educate her about everything in the store and she was a quick learner. There were quite a few customers she was able to help on her own. Every day she was there, Lizzie learned more about preparedness. Not the how, though she was learning that, but the why. There were as many reasons why as there were customers, it seemed. Only one or two, if that, since both could have been pulling her leg since she was new, had anything like nefarious reasons for get the items they did.

Rudy still only let her observe the weapons sales. She still had much to learn about the relative merits of different weapons, despite the fact that Rudy kept a limited variety, though several of each. And she couldn’t even begin to count the rounds of ammunition. There were pallets of it in the back.

She was grinning like nobody's business when Rudy showed her how to safely unload the trucks that delivered palletized loads using the Bobcat 5600T Toolcat utility vehicle with pallet forks. The Bobcat was one of the special purchase items. He had the one, and many of the tools it could use, as a demonstrator and rental unit. If one was purchased he took it out of stock at the dealership in the nearby big city.

Rudy took only a small percentage of the newly delivered goods to the warehouse at his parents. The stock at the warehouse was relatively fresh, and the warehouse was nearly full. He wouldn't need to make any changes there for a while. He really didn't want Lizzie to find out about the warehouse if he could manage to avoid it.

There were some tense times in the store, with people there to buy things stopping to watch the news broadcasts Rudy had up on the TV screen near the register. By the time Rita started to impact the coastline, it had dropped to a category three hurricane. The problems with the evacuation were a hot topic, with lines of cars slowed by choke points on the evacuation routes. It was taking hours just to go short distance on some of the roads out of Houston.

"What do you think will happen in Houston and Galveston? You think it will be like Katrina?" Lizzie asked during a lull between customers as she and Rudy watched the TV coverage.

"No. Not exactly. Demographics are different. Katrina just happened and people have what did happen in mind. Feds are sitting on dead ready, as are the locals. It's a smaller hurricane. I don't know what will happen, but I'm pretty sure it will be different than what happened with Katrina."

Lizzie nodded, and murmured a, "Mum," as she watched a man on the evacuation trail interview.

When the interview was over, Lizzie turned to Rudy and said, a rather

earnest look on her face, “When we get time, would you help me put together an evacuation kit? The only thing I have is a good flashlight, and I got that after I began this project.”

“Of course,” Rudy replied. “And you’ll even get it at an employee discount.”

Lizzie grinned at him and for the first time, Rudy noticed she had slight dimples when she smiled like that. “Have some ready to go kits, but we’ll customize one up for you.”

“Okay. Thanks.” The both turned back to watch more of the news before the next customer came in. They didn’t have time to watch. Three customers came in, one after the other. Rudy handed the first one off to Lizzie. He wanted a few things she knew how to deal with. Both the others were looking for weapons.

It took a while for Rudy to talk the one out of buying anything. He just didn’t seem to be a good candidate to own a gun. Rudy knew that the man would probably go to a gun shop and make a deal on one. There wasn’t anything he could do about it, but he wasn’t going to sell the man one.

The second knew approximately what he wanted, but wanted Rudy’s opinion. The man was happy when he left. He’d be picking up a new Springfield Armory M1A in a few days, as soon as the paperwork cleared. While he was there he decided to start a precious metals acquisition program and bought a roll of silver dimes.

“Wow!” Lizzie said, coming back to the cash register with her fifth customer since Rudy and started with the two interested in firearms. “Nice sale.”

Rudy grinned. “Yep. For a good guy. I like to see people planning ahead. He has a wife and three kids he has to take care of. His wife just

came on board, due to what's happened in New Orleans and what is going on in Texas. They're not too bad on food. She apparently loves to cook and keeps a large pantry.

"They live in the rural area east of town and are worried about riots and looting here and the big city getting out of hand and impacting them. They already get alcohol and drug parties out their way.

"Oh. I never think about things like that," Lizzie said slowly. "I've always lived in good neighborhoods."

"I know. So have I," Rudy replied. "But I still see the need for protection. Things can change in a heartbeat. And here in the shop I'm at risk, due to the value in the cash register, for one thing, the guns, and the silver and gold. Right after I opened up had a transient try to rob me."

"What!" Lizzie exclaimed.

"Didn't amount to much. Just a drunk on a bender needing more drinking money. Also wanted a gun to get even with a barmaid that cut him off one night. Thankfully he was lucid enough not to try anything stupid with the knife he had. I held him at gunpoint until the police arrived. They took him off. I testified for about ten minutes a couple months later and that was it."

"You held him at gunpoint?" Lizzie asked.

"Sure," replied Rudy, hiking the hem of the light jacket he always seemed to be wearing. "Para Ordinance P-14 .45 Colt ACP."

"You've been wearing that all the time I've been here? The interviews and all?"

Rudy nodded. He got a bit concerned at Lizzie's appearance. "You okay? You got all pale and look a little shaky."

“I just didn’t know... I’ve never been around guns very much.”

“Get a little time and we’ll go out to the range and get you familiar with some of our stock. You should feel more comfortable then.”

“I suppose so...” Lizzie didn’t look all that enthusiastic, but Rudy let it go and they turned back to watch the news. Pretty much speculation at the moment. Rita’s eye wouldn’t make landfall for several more hours.

As they began to close up the shop Lizzie watched Rudy closely. Only once did the light jacket he wore show anything of the pistol, carried as it was in an inside-the-pants holster at his hip. They had the routine down pat and soon parted for the evening.

The next morning it was a bit rainy and there were few customers. They watched the news about Rita. It had drifted more north and east than earlier expected and Galveston and Houston had missed the worst of it. Quite a few evacuees were caught out on the edges of it, having run out of gas or a place to go when traffic was so tangled up the previous day and night.

“Glad I stocked up on fuel containers when I did,” Rudy told Lizzie, both of them behind the counter. The words were barely out of his mouth when their first customer came in, asking for fuel storage cans.

They sold most of their stock and sent quite a few people to auto parts stores and the big chain stores to get cheaper cans than the quality metal cans Rudy sold.

“Is it always like this?” Lizzie asked. “I mean, whatever disaster happens to be on TV, what happens during it, people come in to prepare for?”

Rudy nodded. “Pretty much. I have many regular customers that are prepared for whatever situations they think important. Occasionally something they hadn’t thought of will bring them in for new items. Mostly they just replace consumables, and upgrade equipment. That’s about half my business.

The rest is the emergency buyer getting ready for something that just happened, like Katrina and Rita, or something coming up locally. Unlike most places, I have a half dozen gensets that I rent to people during power outages. I also sell gensets, and won’t take them back after they’ve been run. It’s amazing how many people buy them, run them for a few days and then return them, claiming they were never used, and try to get their money back.

“That’s not right,” protested Lizzie.

“Certain element of society tries, every time.”

Business was brisk that weekend. Monday started off quiet and Lizzie took off to go to a couple of interviews for jobs.

Rudy was whistling as he dusted shelves in the slow time, thinking about Lizzie. And her dimples. And some other parts of her body that might be nice to see. He hadn’t had a steady girlfriend in a long time and he was beginning to wonder if he’d ever find the right woman for the permanent relationship that he really wanted. Time would tell, he supposed.

Then Arthur Pantura came in. Arthur Pantura was wealthy, to say the least. He had a big estate outside of the city and was into preparedness in a big way. Not just preparations for a given event, but as a life style. He was a good customer.

“Hey, Rudy,” Arthur called as they both headed for the check out counter. “Were you able to find out anything for me?”

“I did, but are you sure you don’t want a solar power contractor to do all this for you? I sell some equipment, but what you have in mind is much larger than anything I’ve done.”

“Oh, I’ll have a contractor engineer and install everything, but after you told me what you found on the internet, I wanted you to have a piece of the action for looking out for me. So. Are they legit?”

“Sure seems so, Arthur. I called and got prices. He said he could deliver all one hundred in two months.”

“Good. That will give me two banks up, with a complete set ready for change out in thirty-five years or so, plus two spares, just in case.”

“That’s going to be some system you have there, Arthur.”

“Those submarine batteries you found are the key. And the 300 watt PV panels, too. The combination is too good to pass up. What about inverters and associated gear?”

Looks like Xantrex equipment will fill the bill. A pair of stacked 5500 watt units to get you 240 volts with 48 volt input to go with the 300 watt panels. They’ll charge the two battery banks of 24 2.2 volt submarine batteries and feed power to the house. Three units as replacements and spares. Should set you up pretty good. I have the figures in the office in back.”

“Okay, boy. You get everything ordered through you, and I’ll find a contractor to take it from there. This is just what I’ve been looking for. I may just have to consider moving into the new foreman’s house myself and give the big house to him. And don’t you forget. There’s a spot in the new shelter we’re putting in under the house for you if anything happens.”

“Thanks Arthur. I’ll keep that in mind.” Arthur slapped Rudy on the

back and left the store. Rudy shook his head. Arthur was an amazing individual. And he sure knew how to spend money. Those submarine batteries, in the quantity lot he was buying, were \$2,500.00 apiece. The RWE Schott 315 watt solar panels were \$1,330 apiece in 20 count lots. Pantura wanted 40 of them. Plus the five Xantrex inverters and associated equipment. He was going to get a handsome commission on the items.

Lizzie didn't look to happy when she returned to the store just before closing time. "Not go well?" Rudy asked.

Lizzie shook her head. "Not really what I was looking for, despite what the ads said. And they didn't want a former reporter working for them."

"Not necessarily ex," Rudy said. "You can always do freelance work. And you still might get a job in the communications industry. I think you should try for that spot at Channel 4 in the big city."

"I don't know if I'm qualified for that. Besides, it would be on camera some of the time, too."

"You can handle it. What do you say we go get something to eat after closing? I'm hungry and in the mood for a good steak."

"Okay," Lizzie replied. "I don't have anything in the apartment to fix tonight for myself anyway."

"We really need to remedy that situation. On a permanent basis. Can't have my store clerk not prepared. Not in this business."

Lizzie laughed, her mood becoming much lighter at Rudy's good cheer. She found herself having a good time that evening. It ended early, with Rudy the one citing needed sleep. When they went out to their respective vehicles, Lizzie stopped Rudy before he could get into the Suburban.

“Thanks for cheering me up this evening. I really needed it.”

“Not a problem,” replied Rudy. “Got to keep the help happy, even if it is temporary.” He grinned at her.

Lizzie grinned back, but as Rudy drove away and she got into her own car, a slight feeling of disappointment came over her, though she couldn’t understand why. Instead she thought back on the evening and smiled again. Rudy was good company.

The next morning Andy Carter was waiting for them when they arrived at the store. “Did you see that post from that guy in the path of the evacuees from Houston? The whole area where he lived was out of things for days. I think it’s time me and Sheila got a bit better prepared. You know Pop has been on us about it. But I didn’t think anything would happen around here. I never thought about things happening other places causing us trouble.”

Rudy just nodded during Andy’s breathless speech. “Well, Andy, we can sure help you out with whatever you want. But you know, for a couple of weeks... Even a couple of months its just as easy and probably cheaper to buy regular canned goods and other things from your regular stores.”

Lizzie was surprised that Rudy would turn away business. Andy seemed to be, too. “But Pop said you had everything I needed.”

“I can set you up, all right. But I know you can’t waste any money. Buying double at the grocery store when you go will get you where you need to be cheaper.”

“Oh. Sheila and I do need to watch our budget.”

“Now I do carry a few specific canned goods that I think are good to

stock. You're welcome to look over my selections and then shop wherever you want." Rudy turned to Lizzie. "Would you show Andy our canned food selection? And be sure and get him one of our starting out pamphlets."

"Will do, boss," Lizzie replied, giving Rudy a strange look.

Rudy went about opening the security shutters and took the rest of the steps to officially open the store. He smiled as he heard Andy mutter the occasional 'Wow!' as he looked, first at food, and then a general look around the rest of the store. He left with a wave to Rudy.

Lizzie came back up to the front. Rudy was checking for overnight activity on the website. "You as much as ran off business," she told Rudy. "He was ready to spend every penny he had in here"

"I know. But I don't do business that way. Take advantage of someone like Andy He can't afford to blow his money. Sheila is pregnant with their first child. He only lives a mile from his folks. They have enough stored to take care of Andy and Sheila. Tom just wants Andy to take a little more responsibility and make preparations of his own. That post about what happened on the travel routes and destinations of the Rita evacuees just scared him, with Sheila's pregnancy and all.

"He'll be back here for important purchases, grateful I didn't take him for every penny he had today. He'll be a good, loyal customer, who'll spread word of mouth advertising for me worth much more than what I could have made today."

"I think you're probably right," Lizzie said. "I had all these preconceived ideas about you and the shop and how you'd be doing business. I honestly thought I didn't, when I took the assignment of reporting on this place. But as I think back, I did."

"In the past," Rudy replied with a shrug. "Gotta get on with life."

Lizzie sighed. "I know. If I can have a few minutes, I think I'd like to contact Channel 4 and find out their application process."

Rudy worked quietly, putting together an order that had come in on the website the previous night. He only sold things he could send by Fed Ex or UPS, to keep it simple. Many of the large items that were bigger money were expensive to ship. Like he'd done with Andy, Rudy wouldn't sell something that a person could find cheaper, over all, locally, even though his price for the item was lower. Sometimes freight made the over all cost much higher.

They both finished about the same time and began the dusting routine that kept everything clean and shiny. When they were done with the most of the shelves, Rudy had Lizzie do the precious metals goods in the display counter by the cash register while he worked on the computer. It was the first time he'd let her do it. "You want me to do the guns?" she asked when she was done." He'd not let her touch them before.

"We can do it together," replied Rudy, pulling his key ring off his belt and opening the pistol and revolver case. "I have a rule," he said, "about checking a firearm each and every time you take possession of it. You make sure of what the loaded status is. Here in the shop they will always be unloaded, but you don't take that for granted. You check, even if you've just seen someone else check. If someone sees you doing it, they may get in the habit on their own."

Rudy began to show her how to check each of the handguns. She would do the same, wipe them down with a treated cloth and return them to the case, after dusting the area. He did the same with the long arms, and knives.

When they were done, Lizzie put the treated rag and duster away. "Even unloaded they give you a feeling of power, don't they?"

Rudy nodded. “Too much so for some people. They think owning a gun gives them the right to do anything they want because they think they can do it using that power. I try not to sell to anyone I think is like that. On the other hand, feeling that power when you have a gun, especially a loaded one, seems to change a person slightly. Knowing you can protect yourself makes you walk and talk a little more proudly and forcefully. It’s amazing how fewer incidents armed people have with trouble makers because of that attitude of the armed person. It just projects and people avoid confrontation.”

“I’m going to have to think about that,” Lizzie said. “I need to go to the bathroom and then I’ll check the mail for anything important.”

It was a moderately busy day. Apparently several people locally and in the big city had seen the post Andy alluded to, or one similar. Rudy had seen the one Andy had been talking about, and if you hadn’t thought of the situation before, it was a real eye opener.

Some people just got information, like Andy, and would start their preparations at conventional stores. Others took advantage of the store and bought their first things from Rudy, after a consultation, which he did for free for the first meeting.

“Wow. Busy day, after all,” Lizzie said at the end of the day.

“Yes. I do have them occasionally.”

And Rudy had slow days, too. It wasn’t any problem for Lizzie to continue her job search the following week. And when Channel 4 called her back and gave her a written offer, Rudy was sad to see her go, but cheered her on her way to bigger and better reporting opportunities.

Rudy thought about her occasionally the next few weeks as the hurricane season passed and what was shaping up to be a hard winter approached. A few days after the job interview and audition, he began seeing her

regularly on Channel 4 as a field reporter. She was doing some human interest stories, but also the occasional hard news piece.

Six weeks after Jack had tried to sell Rudy the hot M-4's, he showed up again, looking the worse for wear. Rudy cautiously greeted him. Jack perked up and seemed to be his old self, and the two fell back into the same routine of Jack lending a slight hand here and there, and Rudy giving him twice what the work was worth. Rudy, however, took note of the haunted look in Jack's eyes.

And then Lizzie began calling on a semi regular basis of approximately once a week. It had to do with a series of stories she was doing for the station. She hadn't brought it up herself, but when the idea of what could happen in different regions of the country came up, she jumped on the opportunity.

In a latter segment of the series there would be interviews with suppliers, hopefully, Rudy included, Lizzie said. The main reason she was calling was to keep Rudy apprized of some of the things she was finding out, and his take on them. He could usually add a tidbit or two, or point her in the right direction to look. He enjoyed the calls. Looked forward to them, even.

Her weekly reports became a favorite telecast for many of Rudy's customers. Despite the fact that several of the things she reported on were essentially impossible locally, a few people began to make preparations for them.

Some of the reports were enough to get new people to start prepping, and others to increase their level of preparation.

And then Rudy began to notice a trend in the reports, as they became about less well known possibilities, and possibilities of government actions that might be taken during some events. Since Rudy usually

taped the airing, and would watch it a couple or three times, his discovery of the appearance in the background of the same face in several of the person-on-the-street interviews, which were part of each segment, was not surprising. Chilling was what it was. Someone was watching Lizzie, if not actually stalking her.

When it finally hit Rudy, what had been nagging at him for a couple of weeks, he told Lizzie when she called him the next time.

“But Rudy,” she protested, “I watch those tapes a lot, in the editing process. I’m sure I would have seen something.”

“Even so, I’m sure of it. I want to go with you on the next trip. In the back ground, just in case. If you haven’t seen it, I doubt we could convince the police to take a hand in it.”

“I don’t know, Rudy. I can’t authorize the expense of a personal bodyguard.”

“Doggone it, Lizzie! I wasn’t asking for a job. I just want to hang around in the background and see if I see this guy doing the same thing. I went back and watched all the street interviews again. He wasn’t in the early one, and then I only saw him once or twice over a six week period. But he’s been in the last three.”

“Well, I can’t stop you, I guess. But what about the shop?”

“I’ll go on winter hours and let Crystal do what she can. I’m entitled to a week or so of vacation. What’s your next installment?”

“A big one. Nuclear Winter.”

Rudy frowned. “You haven’t done Nuclear War yet. And you know that it’s not likely that...”

“Hold on, Rudy. Hold on,” laughed Lizzie. “It’s a buzz word, yes. And I know you don’t like it, but the audience will respond to it. I plan to get the facts straight on it. But there probably will be a weather component of a nuclear attack, and there certainly is with things like volcanism.”

“I know. I’m sorry. You going to be mostly local or long distance travel?”

“There’s going to be some long distance travel. Oh, Rudy! You can’t afford to monitor me like a baby. I don’t want you to, anyway.”

“Well... I know. Isn’t some of this Doomsayer stuff getting to you? Does it justify a bodyguard to protect you from some of the protesters?”

Rudy could hear some of the concern in her voice when she responded. “They are beginning to scare me a little. I don’t know why they can’t understand that the things I’m reporting go on all the time, somewhere. I’m not predicting things. I’m certainly not causing things to happen. The station just reports on some of the worldwide events to prove up my warning that a person needs to be prepared.”

“I know that,” Rudy said. “But there are crazies out there. Do you think the station would buy you hiring a bodyguard out of your own pocket, and pick up the travel expenses? You generally fly charter because of all the equipment, don’t you?”

“That’s true. I might be able to convince them to do the travel accommodations. It’s not that much for what we do.”

“Okay. I’m going to make the arrangements and I’ll see you Monday at the station.”

Lizzie was able to obtain approval for Rudy to accompany the team on the upcoming trip. The piece had been picked up by a national network

and people were recognizing Lizzie when she showed up to do her work. Rudy stayed out of the way except when Lizzie was exposed to public view. Then he scanned the crowd from unobtrusive vantage points, looking for the face he'd seen on the tapes.

He got a bit more than he bargained for. Lizzie was conducting person-on-the-street interviews and an Anti-Doom group proceeded to gather and start yelling and cat-calling. Rudy became a bit concerned for Lizzie's physical safety, but she waved him back when he started forward. Lizzie directed the cameraman to cover the protestors. That was when Rudy spotted the man.

Rudy was able to make his way around and behind him, and worked his way up slowly and carefully. When he was just behind him, Rudy reached forward and tapped the man's shoulder. "I'd like to talk to you for a..."

His words were cut short when the man turned, shoved Rudy, and took off running, right through the protestors. When he became tangled with them the man opened his long coat, swung what Rudy recognized as an M-4, and fired a burst into the air. The protestors spread out in alarm, as did the rest of those gathered. Rudy hurried over and hustled Lizzie behind the TV truck. He caught a glimpse out of the corner of his eyes of a gray sedan pulling away in the direction in which the man had run. "You okay?" Rudy asked.

Lizzie was shaking. "Yes. Yes. I'm okay. I have to get back on the scene. This is important." Lizzie pulled away from him and headed back into the churning crowd, microphone in hand. Her video man followed, camera up and recording.

A bit anxiously, Rudy, followed as well, staying close to Lizzie, but out of the way of what she was doing. Again, out of the corner of his eyes, Rudy saw the same car that had pulled away return. He made a mental note to go over and talk to the occupants' first chance he had. One of the

assistants had called 911 and they showed up then, sirens screaming and lights flashing.

Rudy kept a low profile, and no mention was made as to his official duties. Just that he was part of Lizzie's crew. The officers took statements all around, and finally left, not at all happy with the situation of having a man armed with a full auto weapon in his possession. Rudy finally remembered the vehicle he'd seen and turned around to go over to it. As soon as he left the group, headed in the direction of the car, whoever was in it started the vehicle and drove it away. It looked to Rudy like there were two people in the car.

Lizzie finally had all she wanted and the crew packed up and they went back to the hotel. "Whew! What a day! Frankie got the guy on tape," she told Rudy as they rode the elevator up to the third floor of the hotel.

"Any idea whom it might have been? It was the guy that's been showing up at the tapings."

"No. I didn't recognize him and I got a good look at him today. He was staring right at me at one point, before he took off running."

"Yeah. About that. Try to think to get behind some cover, will you? You were actually holding the mike out like you were going to get a quote from the man. Think about your safety a little bit."

"Oh. I didn't even think, I suppose. What do you think he wanted?"

"I don't know. He didn't seem to be with the protestors. They all reacted the same as everyone else when the shots were fired. He could have taken you out, but didn't. I don't know."

Lizzie had paled when Rudy so matter-of-factly told her she could have been killed, but hadn't on the whim of some unknown man. Rudy quickly took her in his arms and held her as she shivered. She got her

composure back quickly, wiping tears from her eyes with both hands before she spoke.

“I’m glad you decided to come with me. I don’t know what might have happened had you not been here.”

Rudy sat quietly by while Lizzie went over the material they taped today, picking and choosing the best to go into the report. She’d refine it more when they got back to the station the next day.

When they did arrive, Lizzie’s boss was waiting for her with two uniformed men. “Lizzie,” she said, “I know you had someone with you on this trip, but the station wants to provide bodyguards for you until we find out who that man was, and what he wanted.”

Lizzie didn’t protest, to Abigail’s surprise. “Thank you, Abigail. I don’t think I could afford it any longer on my own.” She flashed a smile toward Rudy.

“Well, good, then,” Abigail replied, oblivious to the look that Lizzie had given Rudy. “One of these two men will be with you except when you are secure at home.”

Lizzie gave Rudy a little wave good-bye, and headed into the station offices with Abigail. It appeared that Rudy’s job was done for the moment. He knew he couldn’t afford to stay, and Lizzie wouldn’t let him, anyway, so he headed back to his store.

When Rudy arrived back at the store he noticed a car parked in the parking area of the store that looked very similar to the one he’d seen the day he’d tried to confront the stalker. As it turned out, it wasn’t a similar car, it was the same car. A car carrying two Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosive agents. Who wanted to take a look around the place, especially the vault.

They had a warrant, so there was little Rudy could do. They also had a warrant to search his apartment. He took them to it and let them look. He was sweating it a little by the end, expecting them to want to look at the storage units at his parents' place, but they didn't ask and he didn't offer.

"Agent, can you tell me what you are looking for?"

"National Guard M-4's stolen from an armory in New Orleans. You have a friend named Jack Jamieson." It was a statement, not a question.

"I use the term 'friend' reluctantly," Rudy responded slowly.

"We're looking for him. If he contacts you again, call one of us." The 'or else' was heavily implied.

Rudy took the business cards from the two and said he would. They let him go about his business with nothing further. All the way back to the store Rudy thought bad thoughts about how idiotic Jack had become. He was wanted, for questioning or to be arrested, by the BATFE over those silly automatic weapons he'd been trying to sell to Rudy.

Crystal had taken the entire scene calmly. Rudy asked her if she was okay as she made ready to leave, now that Rudy was back.

"Oh, I'm fine, Rudy. I knew you hadn't done anything illegal. By the way. You need to get ahold of Bobby Blanchard. He needs some stuff I couldn't handle. He'll tell you all about it when you talk to him."

For a moment, after Crystal had left, Rudy wondered if the call to Bobby had anything to do with Jack. He couldn't figure out how it could, but he was still wondering when he made the call. It turned out that Bobby was thinking about one of the Toolcats for normal use on the farm, and for just in case, like Rudy had once pointed out to him. Rudy smiled. "Sure thing, Bobby. Come on in when you get a chance and we'll put her through her paces for you, with some of the implements, and you can

decide what you want to do.”

Rudy puttered around the store, restocking items that Crystal had sold, that she had not been able to do, thinking more about Lizzie than Jack. She was doing a good job on her reports, and he’d learned a thing or two he hadn’t known before she reported it.

After he closed, Rudy went to the storage yard and looked over the implements he had for the Toolcat, deciding on which ones he wanted to demonstrate to Bobby. Decision made, he hooked up the equipment trailer to the U500 Unimog truck that also found its home in the storage yard of the shop. Rudy owned it for the same reason he had the Toolcat.

The U500 was a rental unit, having many attachments useful around the city and on the outlying farms. It was also his demonstrator unit. He had an arrangement with a Freightliner dealership to get a small commission on any of the trucks to which he contributed to the sale.

With the implements loaded onto the trailer by the Toolcat, Rudy loaded the Toolcat and chained everything down for the next day. He headed to his apartment, ready for some dinner and a little time to read some new product literature he’d received in the mail the past week.

Rudy’s Preparedness Shop – Chapter 3

It had been a week since Rudy had demonstrated the Toolcat for Bobby, out at his place, and wound up demonstrating the U500 for a contractor that was doing some work on Bobby’s farm. Lizzie’s next report would be on that night and he’d set his DVD recorder for the event, as he had done for all of them. He would be working late, getting a couple of large orders ready. One for shipment, and one for pick up the following day.

He paused in his work and watched the broadcast on the TV in the shop. Rudy watched appreciatively as Lizzie examined the possibilities of, and

probable results of, the New Madrid Fault letting go again as it had in 1811/1812.

Living as close to it as he did, Rudy had researched it thoroughly, and there was nothing new that Lizzie brought up, except for the fact that more earthquake specialists were taking an interest in the area and finally becoming aware of the effects a major quake in the region would create. "Let's just hope your mentioning it doesn't trigger it, like some of the other things you've done." Rudy grinned and went back to work.

More than one person figuratively held their breath for a few days after the broadcast, but the New Madrid Fault stayed quiet. When Lizzie called Rudy one of the things she talked to him about was the fact that nothing had happened and now maybe the quacks would leave her alone.

Rudy agreed, just relishing in talking to her. When he hung up he finally admitted to himself that he had some pretty strong feelings for Lizzie. He was going to need to decide what he would do about them. But not right now. Right now he needed to finish up business with one of his favorite customers. Carolyn Jackson.

Carolyn was an Herbalist and Mineralogist. She studied and used herbs and minerals in many ways. Her cooking herbs were widely known for their great flavor and freshness. She sold them in a small shop down the street a ways from Rudy's shop.

A soft spoken woman, Carolyn was in her forties. Most folks in the area considered her a bit eccentric, working with herbs and minerals for health purposes. That's where the eccentric part came in. She had lotions, potions, tonics, and extracts for just about any health reason you could name. Most were herbal. What set her apart from many herbalists was her use of minerals to make some of her curatives and preventatives.

Inside the large greenhouse that she used to grow her herbs and other plants, Carolyn had an impressive mineral garden, as well. It was quite

decorative, but the rocks in her garden could be used to maintain health. Of course she had an outdoor garden as well, along with a small orchard of useful trees. She'd had a pond dug on her property and kept it filled with water from a well. One side of the pond was shallow, creating a small wetland for the plants that only grew in such conditions.

As soft spoken as she was, and a good healer, she had a backbone of iron. A couple of attempts to get her shut down because of her mystical ways had been met with use of experienced attorneys that had blasted the opposition. Rumor had that she'd also put a hex on the people. Rudy didn't care, either way. She was a good woman, doing her own thing, and that included preparing for the worst.

Having experienced the negative effects of certain members of a population that found your daily life as objectionable, Carolyn was prepared to defend herself and her property. She'd decided to increase her stocks of ammunition significantly, and was here to pick up a battle pack of .223 ammunition. Rudy loaded it up for her and then they quietly discussed a few things over cups of herbal tea that Carolyn had made and brought in.

They talked for almost half an hour, and then Carolyn left, leaving Rudy to his work. It was a quiet day and later Rudy was doing some cleaning when heard the thunder in the distance. Rudy looked up, a bit startled. With the heavy construction of the place, hearing thunder, or anything else outside, was unusual, unless he had the external monitors turned on. He'd just dusted the monitors connected to the outside cameras and had not yet turned them on.

The weather report that morning had called for some heavy thunderstorms. Rudy decided they had arrived. The National Weather Service radio alert signal went off and Rudy quickly began securing the shop as the radio detailed the sighting of a tornado in the area.

With the place locked up, Rudy went next door to the Coffee shop and

helped Melanie get people settled as they streamed in when the local sirens went off. The Coffee Shop was built on the model of one in an old Civil Defense booklet showing shelter in public spaces. It was built down into the ground by half and then mounded over with earth, which was contained by retaining walls.

It was difficult to tell that the place was a shelter from its looks. It was just another building on the block. Rudy had gone into partnership with Melanie and Doug, stipulating that the shop had to be built as a shelter.

Thirty people showed up in just a few minutes and more kept coming. Rudy led the way to the connecting door for the entrance to the shelter space beneath his business. A person would have to search very carefully to find the locked entrance that went up to the back room of Rudy's shop, which also had a locked door.

Everyone thought that the extra shelter space was just an extension of the store room for the coffee shop. That's how Rudy talked it up in a joking way, that being in the business he was in, and not having a shelter in the apartment building where he lived, he wanted one where he worked. No one suspected the secret passage existed. He always went outside and to the coffee shop's front door if he wanted access.

It was good that people sheltered from the storm, for there was a tornado. It came slightly inside the city limits before it dissipated. There wasn't much damage, and no injuries, but Rudy got a few inquiries about tornado shelters for homes. He was sure that out of the ten or twelve people that asked him about them, probably one would buy a home shelter pretty soon.

It was another good test of the shelter. The location was known by many people now, Many had seen the stacked boxes of equipment and supplies in the section under Rudy's store. They were aware of the heavy doors, and the locks they contained.

The shelter would easily hold a hundred people for the minutes or hour or so of a tornado. But it was limited to twelve families of four, or the equivalent in the case of a WMD attack. Those families that had bought space in the shelter made no bones about sealing it up when the time came. Those that had not bought in would be out of luck for anything other than the shelter space in the coffee shop itself. Rudy was sure there would be fighting over it if TEOTWAWKI came.

He was the one that drew up the rules and regulations and list of supplies that had to be provided to qualify for acceptance in the shelter. Rudy was pretty sure that some of the city's powers-that-be would most likely commandeer the shelter for use by people that 'needed' to survive whatever the event might be. Half the city hall wound up in the shelter the last two times there had been tests of the Emergency Response System. None of them had bought into the shelter.

Not at all sure exactly what he would do if the situation came up, Rudy helped Melanie and Doug clean up things before he went back to his store, the same conflicting emotions he got every time the shelter was used, swirling in his mind. He put the thoughts behind him when he opened the front door of the store, where a line of people waited in the now gentle rain.

Rudy sold a few things that day, as he always did after a local incident, or a major disaster was covered on the news. He was pretty sure a slight upswing in business was due to Lizzie's series of reports.

He found himself thinking of Lizzie as he closed up the store. "You have to decide if you're going to decide to pursue the relationship," he told himself in the quiet of the back room of the store as he put the drawer from the cash register away in the safe room.

Rudy thought more about her, but nothing was decided in his mind by the time he made it to his apartment and began supper. His mind drifted on to other things, including Jack, just before he went to bed.

The next morning he recognized Jack as soon as he saw the figure huddled outside the store when he turned from the street onto the alley and around behind the shop. Jack hurried up to the back door and slipped inside without a word as soon as Rudy got the door unlocked.

“Okay, Jack,” Rudy said, following Jack inside. Rudy decided that Rudy did look different in the clothes he was wearing, the hat and sunglasses, despite the gloomy rain that had hung around after the big storm the day before. He just knew Jack well enough to read the body language. And Jack was saying much, without opening his mouth. His whole presence said ‘Trouble,’ with a capital T.

“What’s going on? You’re in trouble.” Rudy’s tone was firm.

“I known, dude,” Jack replied, slipping the hat and sunglasses off. He tossed them to the desk in Rudy’s small office. “You’ve got to help me. I need some money to get out of here. Mexico, maybe.”

Rudy was shaking his head. “No. You need to turn yourself in and get this mess straightened out.”

“I can’t do that. I can get away from these guys. The feds are a push over. I’m more worried about Boomer. He didn’t like it when the deal went south.”

“The feds will protect you.”

Jack snorted. “Yeah, sure! They’d just as soon see me killed. They want me bad. I think I’m on the Most Wanted List. Probably.”

Rudy shook his head. “The feds stopped by here. They told me to call them when you contacted me. I’m going to. You can get through this, Jack. You’re a better man than this. You haven’t gone too far. Maybe a

couple more years in prison and you'll be back out and working something out. Take some classes while you're in. Make something of yourself. Turn this around."

With a groan, Jack collapsed into the chair in front of the desk. "You don't understand, Rudy. The feds will probably use me as bait, or something. To get Boomer."

"They'll protect you. Look. I'll stand up for you. Help you out. But you have to turn yourself in. You can't go on hiding like you've been doing. Look at you. You're a nervous wreck."

Jack's eyes were haunted. "I don't know, man!" Forcefully he added, "I'm not scared, you know. I could take those guys out. Just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"You don't want more trouble than you already have," responded Rudy. He took out his wallet and removed the card the BATFE agent had left. "This is going to be the best thing, Jack. Think about it. You know it."

Jack just sat there as Rudy made the call. Afterwards, Jack took the cup of coffee Rudy handed to him after Rudy had made a pot. They spoke little as they waited, the only comments traded were about the weather the last few days.

A half hour had passed when Rudy noticed Jack's eyes start to dart around. Suddenly Jack was up, putting on his hat and sunglasses. He threw the tepid coffee in Rudy's face and bolted for the door of the office, and then the back door of the shop.

By the time Rudy recovered from the shock and followed, it was too late. Jack was out the door and probably gone, Rudy decided. He checked anyway. And found Jack face down on the wet asphalt, one of the agents kneeling on Jack's back, fastening handcuffs around Jack's wrists.

Rudy watched the second agent run around the side of the building to assist. They started to lead Jack away and one of the agents said they'd be back for a statement. Jack started to struggle again and the agents had to subdue him. Jack had enough strength left to scream back at Rudy, "I'll get you for this, Donatelli! I'll get you for this!"

Numb in spirit, Rudy went about opening the store. He answered the agents' questions when they came back an hour later, still feeling at a loss. The arrest had happened early enough that there had been no other witnesses, so Rudy didn't have to deal with that situation. He was glad. The rest of the day was a blur. He wasn't concerned about Jack's threat. It had just been his fear talking. "That's all," Rudy said, finally shaking out of the mood he was in when a new customer came in and said, "I'm new to this survival thing. What do I need?"

They talked for a long time, with Rudy showing the man most of the store. The man left with loads of literature and a price list. He'd be back after he studied the facts that Rudy had given him.

Rudy cheered when Lizzie called him that night, but was left with an unsettled feeling when all she wanted to talk about was how the job was going. The series of reports was coming to an end.

She wouldn't really need to use Rudy as an expert on the preparedness business. The station had made arrangements with several of the biggest names in preparedness supplies to do the final segment on actual preparedness actions, equipment, and supplies. Rudy spent a restless night, dozens of things occupying his mind.

He picked up the phone several times to call Lizzie, but only once did he actually dial her number. She was too busy to talk to him. After wishing her well, Rudy hung up the phone. A minute or two of reflection, and Rudy decided Lizzie was behind him. She was happy doing her job and didn't need him. It had only been an infatuation, anyway. So Rudy told

himself and went back to work.

The next day Rudy put in an order triple the norm for 'female' items. One third, the normal amount he stocked, would go to the store. Almost two-thirds would go to the warehouse operation at his parents' to build up the supply there. A small portion would go into his personal stocks. Not for Lizzie. But for just in case.

Rudy watched the final episode of Lizzie's program and had to admit she brought it off very well. The guests she had, representatives of several major emergency supply houses, gave a good account of starting small and gradually increasing stocks as time and money permitted. Rudy found his own business increasing for several weeks after the show, despite not being named specifically.

But then things began to slow down, even with his regular customers. What seemed to be the beginnings of recession turned more hopeful. Things stabilized, with a very slight growth trend. The news was quick to point it out, though it was only a fraction of a percent. Lizzie's disaster preparedness programs were soon forgotten. She was on to 'booming' businesses now.

The price of gold and silver plummeted back to early 2000 levels. Well below \$300.00 an ounce for gold. Silver took the same dive to 2000 levels. It sank to \$5.00 and continued to slump. People that had bought silver and gold from Rudy, brought it back, hoping he would buy it before it fell any lower.

Normally he would check the spot price on-line and quote slightly below that. He didn't want to take advantage of anyone. But when someone would come in and offer the precious metal to him for a set price, often well below spot, he took it and paid them off. If they were happy, he was happy.

About his dealings in gold and silver. He saw the handwriting on the

wall. This was an adjustment period. That was all. Key things had happened all at once and things looked good. Short term. Rudy was sure it wouldn't last. He told everyone that brought up the subject that it wouldn't last. Even some of his regular customers were letting their precious metals go, mostly to him as he paid close to spot most of the time. Many other dealers were playing on the downswing to undershoot their prices since it 'was falling and there's no telling when it will stop. I can't afford to risk it.'

Despite having to tighten his belt with the lessoned income, Rudy held onto every piece of gold and silver he got back in returns, and bought more as the market dropped. He increased his warehouse stocks of other goods for the shop, too. He kept only enough cash to live on. Rather meagerly at that.

With the prosperity came some good news for some, bad for gun owners. Three additional states wrote their own versions of the sun-setted federal Assault Weapons Ban after another school shooting took place. Again, as usual, the actual weapons used were of no real consideration in the anti-gun activities. Two single shot shotguns and a bow were used in the attacks. But the call was to ban 'Assault Weapons'.

They were tough laws, and though they would be negated by the federal courts as unconstitutional, that would take months. For the meantime, residents of three states began to divest themselves of the laws' definitions of assault weapons. With more states looking to ban and tax them, the prices dropped as people turned them in to avoid the avaricious taxes levied on anyone deciding to keep them.

Another large chunk of Rudy's income and of his savings went to buying up the banned and taxed weapons from other dealers. Between the bargains in guns and precious metals, Rudy's ten years salary equivalent emergency fund went down to five years equivalent. But it was still in liquid assets. So were his retirement accounts.

He knew he would be ahead long term, despite the short term cash flow situation. When the turnaround came eight months later, it came with a vengeance. The good times had not been as good as they'd seemed. And they sure didn't last as long as promised. Three major international companies filed for bankruptcy within two weeks of each other. Interest rates went up and the housing market essentially crashed.

People being people, rather than buying low and selling high, the way Rudy structured his finances, people were eager to, as they saw it, get off a sinking ship. The smart ones weren't. They were waiting for prices to essentially collapse first, and then they would buy properties discounted by huge amounts.

Rudy was one of those smart ones. He'd been drooling over a piece of property near his mother and father's place out of town for years. As at one time the property had served as a nature park, and zoo, the entire parcel was enclosed in a twelve foot high masonry fence. It was divided into sections by other, similar fences. The family that owned the property had closed the place down years ago, but had never put it up for sale, hoping someday to reopen it in its previous grandeur.

But these were now hard times and the remaining family didn't care that much about reopening, anyway. The land was listed and Rudy saw it. He'd gone to school with some of the family and guessed at their desperation. He might be able to afford the listed price, but it would take all his assets. With what he knew, he made a quick counter offer, barely a quarter of what they were asking.

They wouldn't take it, but they would discuss it. Rudy knew he had them when he offered a third of the asking price and offered a third of it in immediate cash. They accepted. Rudy cashed out his least favorable assets and acquired the property in the matter of a few days.

Satisfied, Rudy sat back and relaxed. Business was beginning to pick up

as the economy continued to get worse. His regular customers were back up to speed quickly. New customers were cutting corners where they could, but bought mostly long term food storage packages as the price of food continued to escalate, like everything else.

Rudy held close counsel and continued to replace each order he sold, rotating it out of the warehouse to the store, putting the new in the warehouse. He did the same with the precious metals, despite the fact that he'd increased his personal holdings several times over.

The US wasn't the only place feeling the effects of the financial disaster they were going through. It didn't take long before the recession was worldwide. And then it was a depression. Many countries had runaway inflations in the process. It was a near thing. The history books would look back on it and describe the efforts of the Federal Reserve and the administration of narrowly avoiding it. Technically Rudy supposed they did. But with what did happen allowed him to pay off the property with continually diminishing value cash, while his actual investments gained in real value, if not in monetary value.

So, when the day came that France declared itself bankrupt and forfeited on it's global debt, and China stepped in with a plan to essentially buy out the entire country, everyone around the world, except those that had started in poverty, and stayed in poverty, were in dire straits. Except for those that had prepared. Including Rudy.

A couple of people were in the store, mostly looking longingly at the goods, when Rudy heard the news about China's offer. He quickly turned the sound up and was watching intensely as the two customers noticed his actions and drifted over.

"What's going on?" one asked.

"Well, it looks like China is going to outright buy France."

“Can they do that?” the other one asked.

“They sure seem like they intend to. And France seems inclined to do so.” Rudy cut a quick glance at the two men. “If either of you want to buy something, you need to do it now. I’m planning on closing up in a few minutes.”

“Now? Because of this?” the man that had spoken first asked.

“Yes. I want to get some things taken care of before it gets any worse.”

The second man watched the exchange, his eyes going from one to the other and occasionally to the TV.

“What’s this going to do? We’re already in a depression. I kind of wish China would buy us out. Maybe I could afford to buy some of your crummy stuff.” With that the man left in a huff. The second man couldn’t tell why the first man was acting the way he was. Nor Rudy, himself. So he asked.

“I don’t know about the guy. Never seen him before. But I think this so-called deal means big trouble. Maybe even nuclear war.”

The man knew he had an incredulous look on his face. “What! Nuclear War! But why?”

“The European Union, fragile as it is with what’s going on, is not going to let France come under the power of Communist China. On the surface, it sounds like it would be good. If France recovers with the help of China, the French could start buying things and help lift the Union out of this depression.

“I don’t think it’s going to happen that way. I think China is just creating a market for themselves. They’ve been hurt by the depression around the world, but not as much. A much larger percentage of their population

was living a subsistence level existence before this happened, and many that were beginning to do well were able to go back to that subsistence level without much trouble.

“If China’s industrial and commercial segments can start selling to France, to turn those Euros that China is going to give to France, things will start to heal. For France and China. And France has plenty of nuclear weapons to add to China’s arsenal.

“The rest of the Union is not going to like being left out in the cold and kept under the gun. I think war is on the horizon.”

“That sounds...” The man was silent for a moment, and then continued. “I started to say it sounded ridiculous, but you may be right.” A determined look on his face, the man asked, “How much for food for a family of five for a year? I’m not getting caught flat footed again.”

Rudy told him, and the man winced, but said, “I’ll take it. My wife may kill me, but I’m not letting my kids go hungry if this turns into a shooting war.”

Rudy helped the man load the boxes into his small import pickup. Rudy threw in a few extra things, for the sake of the children, over the man’s protests. When the man saw the packet of designs for fallout shelters he blanched and didn’t protest any further. The man left after that. Rudy had never even asked him his name.

Rudy locked the doors to the shop and went into the back room. It took only a matter of moments to get his investment broker on the phone. “Sammi? Yes, it’s Rudy. Look, Sammi, did you hear the news about China and France? ... Good. I think major war is coming and I... Don’t start that Sammi. I told you there could be a time when I wanted physical possession of my investments.”

“Yes,” he continued, after Sammi’s quick protest. “I do expect you to

bring them out to me... The diamonds, at least. The metals you can ship. But before you do that, cash out ten percent and wire half of it to each of my two banks here. Do that today. I need to order some things.”

After politely listening to Sammi’s continued objections, Rudy finally said good-bye and hung up the phone. He turned to the computer and started putting together orders from his primary suppliers. He had the thought that it could very well be his last order to each of them.

That task done, Rudy went outside and readied the U500 for a short trip to the discount buyer’s club. He’d had a membership for a long time. It’s where he got a few of the things he sold in the store.

By the time he got everything he wanted the truck was full. He went to a rental warehouse place and rented a 12’ x 20’ storage unit. He’d bought everything by the pallet so had to unload each of the pallets and move the contents to one in the building. But the buyer’s club had given him an extra pallet, so he could do so without double handling everything. It was dark and well past closing time when he got back to the store so he could drop off the U500 and get the Suburban and go home.

The next day was something of a repeat of the previous day. Business was a little better and he decided not to close down. Instead he asked Crystal to work the shop for a few hours while he made another local supply run, to the second of the buyer’s club of which he was a member. The Unimog was again unloaded at the rental warehouse.

He checked the news reports when he got back to the store. The UN was in an uproar, with the European Union even more so. China and France were keeping pretty quiet about the process they were going through. The United States was strongly against the participation of China in French affairs. So were Great Britain and Germany. All were doing all they could in the EU Parliament and the United Nations to block the deal despite cries from most of the rest of the world that it would bring an end to the worldwide depression. The cries included those from many

people in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany.

The news wasn't reporting the behind the scenes activity of the American, British, and German governments. They were adamant that China would not get a foot hold in Europe, especially such a large one.

During the next two days, as the scene played out, Rudy made two more local trips with the U500 to the two buyer's clubs in the big city. And the three semi-trailer loads of goods from his suppliers showed up. He unloaded them at the warehouses on his parents' property, transferred the goods with the Unimog to two additional storage units at the rental warehouse.

Rudy's business began to pick up drastically as the rhetoric became more heated. More than just he was beginning to see the potential for a war. He put in large additional orders to his suppliers every day, based on his sales. He was selling everything he could get, but unlike the past, he quit taking things from the warehouse at his parents. The two-day delivery guarantee was no longer valid.

Everyone in the business seemed to be gearing up, however, and he was able to maintain, for most items, a three day delivery schedule. Rudy knew it wouldn't last. There was only so much stock available and the producers couldn't make it as fast as they were selling it. Ten days after the first announcement of the Chinese buyout of France, Rudy got notifications from most of his suppliers that he was to be limited to a percentage of what he'd been ordering.

Rudy decided to begin using the stock from the warehouse at his parents, but before he could the unthinkable became thinkable. The Chinese had begun to deploy military units toward France despite repeated warnings not to do so. The Chinese announced that any interference in their operations in France would be considered an act of war.

When surveillance showed the French beginning to prepare their nuclear

weapons Great Britain fired a pre-emptive nuclear strike against France's land based weapons. They also tried for France's nuclear armed submarines but were not as successful. The subs retaliated, the US hit the subs, and then China launched against Great Britain, Germany, several of the Russian republics, and the United States. It turned into a full scale exchange then, on December 29.

As things escalated, Rudy's business did, too. One of the items he'd never offered a short term delivery schedule for was packaged fallout shelters. They were always a minimum of a week away, and as much as two or three months. So he didn't sell any fallout shelters. However, he did give away dozens, upon dozens, of fallout shelter plans. By that time it was too late for most. There weren't enough digging machines to go around. Rudy rented the Toolcat with a backhoe attachment several times, but when he got it back from the last person he locked it down and refused to rent it out anymore for fear of it being damaged by an inexperienced operator. It didn't matter, anyway. No one else tried to rent it.

Rudy was surprised when Sammi showed up in his store that day. She'd made the delivery two days previously. "I thought you would have been long gone," he told her. She stayed by his side as he helped a customer.

"I figured the best place was with you. You seem to be right about all this. I was hoping for a spot in your shelter."

"Okay. I guess so. But I need to help as many people as I can. Go over and lend what help you can to Crystal." Sammi hurried off.

It was 3:13 that afternoon when the sirens sounded and the NOAA SAME weather radio announced an imminent nuclear attack and for everyone to take shelter. The EAS system on radio and TV was giving the same information. It grew deathly quiet, except for the insidious sound of the outdoor siren rising and falling. Then there was a near panic. People began to just grab things and run. The store was cleared

out of people in moments. Rudy called to Crystal, “Get over to the Coffee Shop and down into the shelter under us. Take Sammi with you. She’ll go on my list.”

Crystal nodded, and with all the speed she could, hobbled with her walker to the exit. Sammi, to her credit, stayed with her and helped as she could. Rudy, with methodical care, began to close up the store. There was no indication of a strike anywhere near so he knew he had plenty of time. The store fully secured, he went out the back door and locked it up, and then ran to the Coffee Shop entrance. The front door was packed, people fighting to get in. He looked over the crowd. He couldn’t see Sammi or Crystal. He hoped they were inside and safe.

When he heard the boom of a shotgun from the doorway he dived back out of the way. The crowd seemed to pause, but then after the next big boom of the 12 gauge it began to disperse.

When things cleared out, Rudy got up from behind the car he’d taken refuge behind in the street. “It’s me,” he called out to the Coffee Shop. “Rudy!” waving one hand carefully, keeping himself ready to dive back behind the protection of the engine block and wheels of the car.

“Come on in, Rudy!” It was Augustus, the Coffee Shop’s chief cook.

When Rudy got to the door he saw three bodies lying there. Rudy had to catch his breath when he saw that one of them was Bryan Richardson, Melanie and Doug’s seventeen year old son. Dr. Shauverson was working on him.

It took a moment for Rudy to figure out who the other two men were. They’re faces were both pretty much gone.

“I had to do it, Rudy!” Augustus said, laying the shotgun down on the nearest table. “He shot Bryan when Bryan tried to tell them we could only let in those that had bought into the shelter.”

The ‘he’ that had shot Bryan, Rudy suddenly recognized as the mayor. The Glock 17 9mm pistol was still in his hand. The other man was the vice mayor, one of the mayor’s best friends and cronies.

Rudy picked up the Glock and set it on the table with the shotgun. He glanced over to where Doug was trying to comfort his wife, in turn being comforted by several people standing nearby.

“Augustus. Augustus!” When he turned back toward Rudy, Rudy could see the ashen look on the black man’s face.

“I think he shot me, too,” he said quietly and collapsed.

Rudy quickly had people clear another area and they moved Augustus to it. Dr. Shauverson had done all he could for Bryan for the moment. He opened his bag again and began to work on Augustus.

Motioning to two of the men, both of subscriber families for the shelter, Rudy had them help him drag the bodies of the Mayor and Vice Mayor out to the edge of the street. The two men ran back inside while Rudy searched the bodies.

More than a little surprised, Rudy pulled four high-capacity, 19-round magazines for the Glock from the Mayor’s pockets.

He was even more surprised by what he found in the Vice-Mayor’s clothing. Randy Paterman also had what Rudy thought at first was another Glock 17, in a shoulder holster. When he looked a little closer he found out he was holding a Glock 18C machine pistol with compensator. Spread around in various pockets of his overcoat, suit coat, and pants, were two more 19-round magazines and six 33-round extended magazines for the 18C.

An ankle holster produced a compact Glock 26 and a spare magazine for

it. The weapons were surprise enough, but the multiple bottles of prescription narcotic topped it. “Vice Mayor is right. I guess the rumors were true,” Rudy muttered, continuing to check the multitude of pockets the expensive overcoat and suit contained. There was a stack of hundred dollar bills that would choke a horse. In addition to the cash were a dozen plastic coin tubes. Two contained pre-1965 silver dimes. Two held silver quarters, three gold one-tenth ounce gold Eagles, and five contained one-ounce gold Eagles.

Considering what he found on Randy, Rudy rechecked the Mayor. He was glad he did. He’d missed the two tubes of one-ounce gold Eagles.

Rudy moved back to Randy. It took considerable effort to roll Randy over, but Rudy did so, in order to get the fine wool overcoat off his body. It was too good to waste. Rudy considered it spoils of war. With what was happening every manufactured item available was going to need to be husbanded. He pulled the holsters off the Vice Mayor’s body. The mayor had apparently carried his Glock in his suit jacket pocket.

Stuffing the money from Randy in his jacket pocket and bundling everything else up in the overcoat, Rudy ran back to the Coffee Shop. He picked up the Mayor’s Glock and added it to the bundle. Rudy worked his way through the throng of people still abuzz about the shootings and found his locker in his designated space in the shelter under the shop and unlocked it. He threw the bundle inside and relocked the locker. He hurried back to the Coffee Shop.

Augustus wasn’t looking too good and Rudy asked the doctor how he was doing. “He should be okay. I’ve got two cycles of antibiotics. If we can keep an infection from setting in, he should heal just fine.”

“What about the boy?”

“It would take more than I have here. I can make him comfortable, but I can’t save him.”

Rudy sighed. “That boy was worth ten each of those two. They sure weren’t the people we thought they were.” Rudy didn’t explain further. Instead, he went to the Coffee Shop entrance, which was now being guarded by Rich Schoegn. Rich had the shotgun Augustus had put aside. There was a determined look in Rich’s eyes.

“I’m going to go check some things. I’ll be back in a while,” Rudy told him.

Rich looked startled. “But what about fallout?”

“Fallout? We don’t have any yet. There hasn’t been anything...” Before he could continue, brilliant white, so bright it hurt the eyes, even though it was only reflected around the geometrically shielded entry into the Coffee Shop. The lights in the shop went out and the emergency lights came on.

Rudy turned and yelled, “Everyone on the floor. Not touching. And don’t touch the walls!” Rudy was in the process of doing what he was saying. It was a ripple effect as those further back saw what the others were doing and had the instructions shouted to them.

Not everyone was fast enough, or understood what they should do. Those that didn’t, paid a price. The ground shock from the nuclear detonation shook the shelter. Those not sitting on the floor were thrown down forcefully. A few moments later the doctor began to check on those newly injured.

“That had to be the big city,” Rudy said, climbing to his feet. “Got a while before we get any fallout from it.” When the shelter vibrated slightly, Rudy crouched but didn’t go back down to the floor. “Blast wave,” he said to no one in particular. Another moment and he told Rich “We still have some time before the fallout starts. I’ll be back.”

Rudy ran out and stopped for a moment, awed by the deadly magnificence of the mushroom cloud just visible, still rolling over the big city. Coming out of his reverie, Rudy continued his journey. There were dozens of people out in the street. Some just staring at the mushroom cloud. Others weeping and crying. Many asking one another what to do.

Knowing most of them were doomed, Rudy continued to call out to them to get inside and shelter themselves the best they could. His right hand drifted to the Para Ordinance on his belt beneath the coat he wore when he saw a man smash a window in a jewelry store and begin to loot it. The man's body collapsed, caught on the broken glass about the same time Rudy heard the sound of a shot from within the jewelry store. He saw a fist fight break out between the occupants of two cars that had collided when the traffic signals failed and the vehicles lost power, probably from an EMP burst high over the nation.

There was just nothing he could do for all the people now lining the streets. Rudy continued to run down the street, dodging people in the way until he came to the pharmacy in the next block. He saw a man in a white lab coat standing and staring toward the city. He grabbed him and half dragged the man into the pharmacy. "We need to get some things secured before the looters start in," Rudy said.

He had to shake the man slightly to bring him out of the trance he was in. "Come on, man! We have to save as much as we can."

Pulling him along, Rudy made his way behind the counter of the pharmacy proper of the store. That seemed to bring the man to his senses. "Hey! You can't come back here!"

Harshly, Rudy said, "We've just begun a nuclear war, man! The rules have all changed." Rudy took out the wad of bills that he'd taken off Randy. He peeled off twenty of them.

“Here. Now help me load up as much broad spectrum stuff as you have.”

Seeing the money changed the man once again. A crafty look came onto his face. “Without prescriptions? It’d take a lot more than that.”

Rudy riffled the bills and separated half of them. He handed the stack to the pharmacist. “I want basic stuff. That can be used for a lot of different problems.” As the pharmacist began putting things into the largest carry bag that Rudy found, Rudy quickly scanned the shelves himself and began to load up narcotics.

It was several minutes before the pharmacist noticed what Rudy was doing. “Hey! I didn’t agree to that!”

“Yes you did, when you took the money.” Rudy took the full bag from the pharmacist’s hands and started toward the counter. “I suggest you hide everything you can before the looters get here. You’re going to be a major target when it really hits people what is going on. And you’re going to want some way to make a living. After.” With that Rudy headed back to the shelter at a run.

He heard intense gunfire right after he left the pharmacy. It was coming from the direction he was headed. When he got close to the Coffee Shop he slowed down and began to approach carefully. Rudy shifted the bags to one arm and pulled his pistol. He saw three more bodies sprawled out on the sidewalk and street.

“Hey! It’s me! Rudy!” he called out, again seeking cover behind an automobile.

“Come on in, Rudy,” called Rich. “But watch yourself. There could be more of them.”

Rudy took a quick look around, but didn’t see anyone. He ran the rest of the distance, juking and jiving, just in case. He entered the Coffee Shop

without incident.

“Here, Doc,” he said, setting the two pharmacy bags down by the doctor, who was now treating a wound on Howard Spangler’s wife, Sara.”

“What happened?” Rudy asked Rich.

“Spangler’s showed up. I think someone knew about us and waited till someone showed up. They tried to take them hostage to force their way in, I think. But Sara and Howard figured out what was going on right quick and put up a fight. They got two of them and I got the third one, finally. I couldn’t shoot at first for fear of hitting one of the Spangler’s. I don’t know if there were any more.”

“Keep an eye out. I’m going out to check,” Rudy said. He scanned the area in front of the main street entrance of the Coffee Shop for several minutes and then quickly moved out, in a crouch. He only recovered a couple of hunting rifles and one Taurus .38 Special revolver, and the men’s wallets.

When he got back inside he checked the wallets. He hadn’t recognized any of the faces and didn’t know any of the names.

“I’m going to get a rifle,” Rudy said.

Crystal, with Sammi helping, was getting things a bit more organized. It was really the Richardson’s job, but they were with their son. He’d been moved to one of the cots in the shelter space under Rudy’s shop.

Rudy went to the arms locker bolted to the wall by the entrance to the area under his shop and unlocked it. He’d suggested 7.62 x 51mm arms, but had been outvoted when it came to stocking the shelter with weapons. Rudy had supplied three Ruger Mini-14 rifles, with a complement of forty twenty round magazines. The group had not wanted to pay the price for better options. The shotguns they’d selected weren’t

bad, being Mossberg 500 series pumps.

Also against Rudy's judgment were the house handguns. There were only two. Both were Smith & Wesson Model 10 police turn-ins in .38 Special. The group didn't think handguns were necessary.

Rudy had always had a sneaking suspicion that the group figured they could get anything they wanted, in the aftermath of a disaster, from Rudy. The buy-in for the shelter had been ten-thousand dollars, paid over three years. Most of the participants did not want to put out that much for group owned items, after they'd supplied the requisite food stores and other items detailed in their buy-in literature.

Rudy took a Mini-14 and a shoulder bag of ten magazines out of the arms locker and relocked it.

He'd seen Jimbo Johnson watching the back door with his personal rifle, an FN-FAL. When Rudy got back to the front door he slipped a magazine into the carbine and racked the bolt to chamber a round. They were still short three families. Fortunately one showed up almost immediately.

The family looked to be in the last stages of exhaustion. The father managed to get out that they had been running, slowing down to a walk to rest, all the way from their home. They had started to load up the car to come, but when the EMP came they couldn't get it started. They started off carrying a few things, but had to drop them, just to make it. Rudy put them in the doctor's capable hands and went back on watch.

It was only a few minutes later when an old beater of a pickup truck avoided the bodies in the street and pulled into a parking slot as if nothing had happened. The EMP obviously hadn't affected it. Three people were climbing out of the cab. They headed for the Coffee Shop.

"Hold it right there!" Rudy called. "There's no room here!" Rudy saw

both of the other couples they were waiting for struggling toward them, now, too.

“Rudy! It’s me! Lizzie!” called one of the jeans clad figures from the truck. The other two appeared to be an old man and a young girl.

Rudy stepped out and took a closer look. It was hard to tell. The woman’s head and face were covered in blood. But he recognized her. It was Lizzie. He stepped up to her and put his arm around her back to support her. She was barely able to stand.

The other two couples were dragging wheeled bags behind them and Rudy held up Lizzie, the man, and the little girl while the others worked their way inside. Rudy looked up at the sky. The growing mushroom cap of the cloud would be over them soon.

Rich gave Rudy a hard look. “Look, Rudy... You know the rules. You reserved space for one more. Not four.”

Rudy looked at the girl and the man. “Yes. Yes I know. Take these two in and send Sammi out.” He handed Rich the Ruger, and then reached into his pocket. It was only a moment before Sammi came out, a look of fear on her face. Rudy handed the keys from his pocket to Sammi. “Come on. Let’s go. We can’t stay here. We’re going to my parents’ place.”

“But the fallout... The radiation...” Sammi protested.

“We’ll make it. The winds are still in our favor and we’ll be going away from the cloud of fallout. But we need to hurry.” Slipping his other arm under Lizzie’s legs he began a staggering run around the Preparedness Shop carrying her. He had Sammi open the doors of the Suburban and put Lizzie in the passenger side second seat.

“Climb in and do what you can for her. We need to be on the road.”

Sammi tossed Rudy the keys and climbed in the other side. Rudy got behind the wheel, and with a little prayer that the converted unit would start, turned the key.

The non-electronic diesel started right up. Rudy put the truck in gear and pulled into the alley and then out onto the street. There were fewer people out looking around. As he carefully maneuvered around the numerous stalled vehicles Rudy asked Sammi, “How is she? Can you tell?”

Sammi was checking on Lizzie. “She’s breathing. There’s a scrape on the side of her scalp and blood all over the place.”

“Okay. Reach over the seat back. There should be a blanket there. Wrap her up and keep her warm. She’s in shock and no telling what else.”

“Rudy,” Sammi asked softly, doing as Rudy had asked, “Are we really going to be okay? Look.”

Rudy could see it too. The first granules of the fallout were hitting the windshield. The Nuk-Alert on his key ring began to beep. Just once at a time on a regular basis. Occasionally it would beep twice, but not often.

“What is that?” Sammi asked.

“My Nuk-Alert. We’re getting fallout, but we’re staying just at the edge. Nothing to worry about until this thing really starts talking to us.”

Though there was only the occasional vehicle moving, it was difficult going until they got on the interstate. Vehicles were everywhere. Particularly at intersections. More than once Rudy put the Suburban down in granny low and pushed cars out of his way so he could continue.

He couldn’t figure out where all the people were until he looked further

a-field. Then he saw people heading in every direction. As long as it was away from their stalled vehicles. He did notice some people scrambling under an overpass, probably looking for protection from the fallout.

Anywhere there was an accumulation of people, Rudy swung wide around. He wasn't going to take the chance of being swarmed and stopped. Once he thought he heard a shot, but no bullet holes appeared anywhere.

The further out of town he got the better the travel. The cars were spaced out more and he could weave where he need too. Unlike the city area, most of the vehicles in this area had coasted to the shoulders of the road instead of stopping in the travel lanes.

They were running out of the fallout, and then dropping back under it occasionally as they continued. Finally Rudy put the blinker on and took an off-ramp. It seemed like they'd been traveling forever to Sammi.

The Nuk-Alert began to sound two chirps, then three nearly constantly as Rudy took surface roads back the way they'd come. But it was only the matter of a few minutes before they were pulling into a rental warehouse place. Rudy drove around the back and stopped the Suburban.

Sammi thought it was a little strange for Rudy to stand there and wave his arms, shouting, "Mom! Dad! It's me! Open Sesame! Open Sesame! Open up!" He turned back to the Suburban and gathered up Lizzie in his arms again. "Come on, Sammi. Follow me. He walked toward the slanted doors of a basement access. They flipped open just as the three arrived. An elderly man with a short double barrel shotgun stood on the steps ready to fire.

"I said 'Open Sesame,' Dad. That's the signal that everything is okay."

"Don't look okay to me. And the fallout has started. You better

decontaminate.” He looked at Sammi. “Shower’s this way. We got robes.”

Rudy’s father showed Sammi where she could take a shower to get any fallout off while Rudy laid Lizzie down on the sofa in the finished basement. He checked her over. Like Sammi, all he could find were the slotted wound on the side of her head and lots of blood.

When Sammi came back a few minutes later wrapped in a robe, Rudy said, “Help me get her undressed and I’ll take her into the shower. I don’t think you’re strong enough to do it.”

Mr. Donatelli gathered up the clothing, adding it to the washer where he’d put Sammi’s, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Still dressed, Rudy took Lizzie into the shower and washed her off, supporting her all the while. She halfway came to when he cleaned around the wound on her head, but fell back limp when Rudy shifted her to pick her back up.

Sammi wrapped a robe around Lizzie as Rudy held her. He laid her down on the sofa again and went back into the bathroom to undress and get his own shower. When he came out his father gathered up his clothes, put them in the washer and started it. He stood by a book case, watching expectantly as Rudy once again gathered up Lizzie in his arms.

Mr. Donatelli flipped some hidden switch and the bookcase swung aside, opening up a short hallway. Rudy carried Lizzie into the large, well lighted, shelter, Sammi following behind. Mr. Donatelli closed and locked the steel clad secret door and joined them in the shelter proper. Mrs. Donatelli was opening a blanket on the sofa for Rudy to put down Lizzie.

“Mom, could you take a look at her? I think she’s had a grazing shot to the head.”

“Of course, son. Now step back and let me see what’s wrong here.” The white haired, somewhat stoop-shouldered woman quietly began to examine Lizzie. To stay out of the way and keep busy, Rudy went over to the desk on the other side of the room. A quick check of the video monitor revealed an eerie gray world of fallout on the ground and still falling. The CD V-717 survey meter with its remote probe indicated a radiation reading of fifty roentgens. Rudy watched it for a long minute. It appeared to be rising, which wasn’t surprising.

Sammi came over and put her hand on Rudy’s shoulder. “Thanks, Rudy. I don’t know what I would have done if it hadn’t been for you. I was right about staying out here. I’d be dead for sure if I was back in New York.”

“Sure, Sammi. No problem. And you don’t know. You might be in even a better shelter back there. You know some important people.”

“I do, for a fact. But I can’t name a one that knows where a fallout shelter is, much less two. I always thought you were a little nutty, keeping your retirement in precious metals and diamonds, but what you have told me time and time again sunk in. At least a little bit.

“Just before all this happened I converted a fourth of my holdings into the same things. I know I’ll have to work, doing hard work, of which I haven’t a clue, for years to come, but I do have something with which to help pay my way. I brought mine with me, when I delivered yours.

“You can’t believe how scared I’ve been, carrying around silver and gold and diamonds on me.”

“You sly dog, you,” Rudy said with a smile. “You were listening to me part of the time.”

Sammi grinned at Rudy and let her hand slide down his arm. She took his hand in hers and squeezed it for a moment. “Yes. And thank you for

keeping talking all those times. Now, do you think you can find me something to wear?”

“Yeah. I’ve got some clothes down here. Something should fit. We’ll have your other clothes done in a bit, but you’ll need a change of clothes, anyway.” Rudy went to one of the doorways on one side of the large room. He disappeared for a moment, and then stuck his head back out. “You might as well come check yourself. I can’t tell what might fit and what wouldn’t. You can change in here, too.”

Rudy went back to hover over his mother as Sammi rummaged through the clothing. He couldn’t stand it any longer. “Mom. Is she going to be all right?”

“Yes, dear. I believe so. You are probably right. That looks like the glancing blow of a bullet. She is going to have a terrible headache when she wakes up, but she should be fine. Now let me clean it and bandage it while she is still out. Henry. My bag.”

Mr. Donatelli handed his wife the bag she’d carried for most of her adult life. A certified nurse practitioner she began carrying a ready bag early in her career and had never given it up the way most modern doctors had.

Rudy sighed in relief. He went back to the desk and checked the radiation meter again. Over sixty. The CD V-717 with the probe in the basement was showing less than one roentgen. He’d go switch the clothes from the washer to the drier in a little while. He’d have a quick look at the gensets while he was waiting for the washer to finish. Unless you listened closely you couldn’t tell that anything was running in the generator and battery room next to the shelter.

Though they would rely on the solar power system most of the time, his father had started one of the generators so they could run the washer and gas dryer. They had a paired set up of generators where one ran as

needed. The second would kick in if additional power was required and would act as back up to the first. They ran on propane. Mr. Donatelli had a pair of thousand gallon propane tanks, arranged by Rudy, each serviced by a separate fuel company, as neither would give him more than a single tank. It had taken heated arguments by Rudy to get the thousand gallon tanks from either one.

After Sammi had found something to wear and put it on, Rudy did the same and then went on his errands. Sammi looked alarmed when Rudy went into the basement, but Mr. Donatelli reassured her. By the time Rudy got back, the elder Donatellis' knew Sammi's life history, without Sammi knowing she'd been expertly questioned. Rosie had picked up a few tricks from her ex-police detective husband over the years. Besides, she had her own experience in getting medical information from patients. That was like pulling teeth, sometimes.

When Rudy came back inside the shelter, he took the reading off the dosimeter he'd worn while out. It barely registered any radiation from his time in the basement, but he logged it anyway.

He checked the outside camera again. Fallout still coming down and heavier, at that. The outside radiation was now over a hundred roentgens per hour. Rudy and the others sat around the small kitchen table in the dining area of the shelter and were playing cards when Lizzie groaned loudly from the sofa.

They all gathered round her as Lizzie regained conciseness, muttering and groaning all the while. Her hand went to her head, and her eyes finally opened. She tried to thrust back upon seeing all the faces peering down at her, but she couldn't. She did groan again at the effort it cost her.

"It's okay, Lizzie," Rudy said, taking her free hand in his, to his parent's delighted amusement. "You've been shot."

“I know that!” she said, in a rather aggravated voice. “Am I going to be okay?”

“My mother says yes, and she’s never wrong,” replied Rudy. “Can you tell us what happened?”

“Not now, my dear,” Rosie said, shouldering Rudy from his place. “There will be time for that later. Now I want to take your vitals again, and check a few more things I couldn’t while you were out.” She shot the others a look. “Give me some fighting room, if you please.”

The others went to find something else to do while Rosie worked her magic. To Rudy, anyway. Medicine had always seemed like magic to him. He had no natural affinity for the medical professions, despite his mother’s expertise.

A few minutes later Rosie called to Sammi. “Sweetie, would you bring over a cup of that chicken soup I’ve got warming on the stove? And then the rest of you can eat.”

Sammi did as requested, without question, and then she and the others sat down to the meal of chicken soup and coleslaw. Despite Lizzie’s weak protestations, Rosie began to feed her the soup.

Rudy called over, totally without sympathy... no one had ever shown him any sympathy when his mother doctored him... “Easier just to do it. You will in the end, anyway.”

Lizzie relaxed and accepted the ministrations. It was easier, and more convenient, and... Lizzie fell asleep. The comfort of the place, the warm soup, and in large part, to the sleeping pill Rosie had Lizzie take during the examination.

Rosie joined the others at the table and decided to let Rudy off the hook. She wouldn’t make him wait for the final diagnosis. “Her eyes and ears

are still okay. No sign of hemorrhage or concussion. The bullet must have just barely grazed her. She's a lucky girl. She should sleep through the night. I'll keep checking on her, though, just in case."

Again Rudy sighed a sigh of relief. He ate the rest of his soup with a little more gusto. After the light supper, Rudy checked everything again. Radiation was up to three hundred and fifty roentgens. It was three in the basement when he ran out and ran back in with the clothing from the dryer. Inside the shelter proper the CD V-715 wasn't registering. Everything was as good as could be, all things to consider.

Rudy went to the sleeping quarters designated as the men's and went to bed. He slept the sleep of the mentally exhausted.

Rudy's Preparedness Shop – Chapter 4

When Rudy wakened the next morning it was to the sight of Lizzie's bandaged head. She was sitting on the edge of the bunk bed, watching him. Softly she said, "Thank you," and leaned down and kissed him lightly on the lips. "I should have done that a long time ago," she said, straightening back up. One hand went to the bandage.

"Still hearing pounding steel?" Rudy asked, concerned more than delighted.

"Yes. A little. Your mother gave me something for it and it's not too bad, depending on how I move."

Rudy went to swing his legs off the cot, but stopped when Lizzie continued. "I know you're going to want to check on things first, but I really want to talk to you about the last few months. I've been such a fool."

"I doubt that," Rudy said, this time swing his legs off the cot and

pushing himself to an upright position. “You’re right though. I want to check on things.” With that he exited the bunk room and went straight to the desk. The logbook his father had started lay open. He checked the figures from the night. His dad probably took readings every time he got up during the night.

From the looks of it, the radiation had peaked right around midnight and was 1,213 roentgens an hour later. Rudy opened the laptop and started an Excel program he had devised to calculate probable radiation rates over time and to track exposures. He saw that his father had already entered the initial data into it.

The radiation he, Lizzie, and Sammi had received was negligible. But from now on, they would need to keep careful track of their exposures. The lower the better, but under 50 a month for sure.

The shelter proper had a protection factor of well over 10,000, so they weren’t getting any appreciable contamination while in it. The basement was showing a PF of 1,200, based on outside readings and readings inside the basement, so a few minutes now and again wouldn’t be dangerous, especially after a couple of days.

Sixteen days after the attack the outside radiation, if they received no more fallout, would be 1.213 roentgens per hour and they could begin to go outside for a few minutes at a time without danger.

As long as nothing required them to be out sooner or for longer periods, like fire. The rental warehouse units had exterior cameras mounted with split feed to the office and here in the shelter. Rudy had used thyristors on the wiring and the cameras had come through the EMP with only one loss, and it was a camera that covered only a small section of the warehouses.

The one camera that pointed somewhat toward the city was showing a large smoke cloud. Rudy could only hope it wasn’t burning near his

shop and the Coffee Shop. It would be days before they would be able to get to town and find out.

Since any moderate exposures would take years most likely to produce any major effects like cancer, Rudy had agreed to let his mother and father do most of the outdoor exploring initially. It had been grudging permission, much to his father's amusement.

The shelter was large, well equipped, and decorated to give a light, airy feel to it. There was little of the closed in feel. There were enough supplies for ten people for a year. Rudy had made sure of that. The propane would last that long as well, if they were a little conservative and didn't run the gensets an undue amount.

During breakfast they finally found out what happened to Lizzie.

"I'd been thinking about Rudy lately, with everything going on. I realized the mistake I'd made, giving up Rudy for someone that said they could help my career. I bought his presentation hook, line, and sinker. Not only did he not help my career, he was a jerk and a creep, deep down, under the façade." She glanced over at Rudy. "I'm sorry." She let it go at that and continued her story.

"With the way things were going, besides just seeing Rudy and explaining, I was getting scared. I wanted his advice on how to further prepare. I finally decided to come out yesterday. On the road my car just quit on me, like most of the others. I thought of EMP almost immediately. I grabbed the BOB and started toward Rudy's on foot.

"I didn't get very far before a couple of guys stopped me. One wanted me, and the other wanted whatever I was packing. But Salvatore stopped. That was him, his truck, and his daughter that dropped me off at the Coffee Shop."

Lizzie sighed. “He and his wife and daughter were on their way to visit their cousin somewhere out here in this area. But he saw what was happening. His truck was still running, despite the EMP. Cause it was old, I guess. I was fighting with one of the men and the other got my BOB pack free of my arms and was going through it when Salvatore stopped.

“Both him and his wife tried to help. They got the guy off me, and Salvatore’s wife and I were backing up when the other guy pulled a gun and started shooting at Salvatore. His wife saw that and for whatever reason, she started for the guy.

“He saw her and fired at her. He hit her somewhere and she started to fall, but the guy kept firing. One hit her in the head and the back of her head just...” Lizzie had to stop and compose herself.

“I’d come closer to try to help, though I don’t know what I could’ve done against the gun any more than Salvatore’s wife could have. I guess about that time Salvatore knocked the other guy out and charged the one with the gun. The guy tried to fire, but it must have been the last round that got Salvatore’s wife in the head and caught me on the side of the head.

“The one that Salvatore knocked out started to come to while Salvatore was lamenting the loss of his wife. The guy pulled a gun, but fortunately was as woozy as I was and kept missing. Salvatore grabbed me and hustled me into the truck and he took off as fast as he could. I directed him to the shop and the rest you know.”

“You’re lucky to be alive,” Rosie said.

“So is Salvatore. And probably the daughter,” Rudy said, angry at what had happened, not just to Lizzie, but to an ordinary, innocent family.

“So you gave up your two spaces in the shelter in town to give it to

Salvatore and his daughter,” Henry said. “And brought Sammi and Lizzie here.”

Rudy nodded. “I hope they’re all okay.”

“We’ll try later today and see if they answer a radio call. Atmosphere might still be too ionized for anything except line of sight comms.”

Henry had taken up amateur radio when he retired and learned everything he could about the communications field the last few years.

He’d kept his equipment in a large faraday box on the desk. The box was grounded, as were all the antennas when not in use. The antennas also had gas-gap protection on them. The power systems in the shelter were all protected with thyristors.

“I tried HF last night, but all I got was static,” he continued. “I’ll keep trying after my nap, after this fine breakfast.”

The other’s quickly added their compliments to Henry’s for Rosie’s breakfast. Rudy did the clean up, allowing the others to find something to occupy their time. They’d be doing a great deal of that for the two weeks or so.

But Rudy had included time-occupying items in the shelter’s supplies when he helped his father build, equip, and supply it. Not that it didn’t get boring. It did. Being able to get into the basement for a few minutes a day, when they finally could, helped.

The wide variety of foods that Rudy had stocked the shelter with helped, too. So did the roominess and the light colors used to finish the walls, ceiling, and floor. The New Year came and went while they were in the shelter. By mid-January they were using the basement regularly, for limited amounts of time. Rosie and Henry suited up in Tyvek coveralls, rubber boots and gloves, and respirators to check the property.

Henry carried his M-1 Garand, and Rosie a Ruger 10-22 for protection as they did their survey. Everything was okay. The rain had washed the fallout to the drains around the warehouse units, but there was still an accumulation on the grass around the house. It was too much work for the elder Donatellis, so decontamination would have to wait for a while longer. Rudy fretted the entire time his parents were outside, watching them on camera when they were within view of one.

They were only out for an hour and picked up less than 2 roentgens of radiation. But they wouldn't go out again for a while. When the radiation dropped to less than one roentgen per hour in late February, everyone went out wearing their protective gear for four hours and used everything available to decontaminate around the house and to decontaminate the vehicles. The water with the fallout particles was washed to a low spot on the property and would be buried later.

They had yet to see anyone around the place, but Henry had made contact with dozens of other amateur radio operators from all around the country and in a few other nations, as well. There were survivors. But no word from the city or the big city.

In mid-March, with the radiation under 0.5 roentgen per hour, they decided to risk a trip to the city. This would be a scouting trip. The only ones with any firearms experience were Rudy and his parents. But it was decided, after considerable debate, that both the elder Donatellis would stay home, with Sammi.

Lizzie's head was healed enough for her to go. She'd be armed with a pistol, but would be driving, leaving Rudy to handle anything that came up requiring force. He was going well armed. Besides the Para-Ordinance P-14 he normally carried, he'd have a Colt Officer's model in an ankle holster. Long guns would include an HK-91 he'd keep handy on a sling, and a Remington 11-87P loaded with 12-gauge 00 buckshot. The shotgun would be at hand in the truck, if needed.

Not knowing what they would find in the city, they suited up fully, with respirators. They had one of the extra CD V-715 with them to check for hot spots. Rudy filled the truck fuel tank from one of many barrels of PRI-D protected diesel in one of the warehouse storage rooms. It was 9:30 am when they pulled away from the house.

The weather was chilly, and more rain was threatening, as they traveled slowly. The route was essentially the same as when they'd come out two and a half months previously. Just no people. They did see a few signs around, primarily small columns of smoke. Rudy thought they were probably cooking and heating fires of survivors.

The signs of life dwindled away as they neared the city. At least until they got to the city proper. There were a few smoke columns there as well. And they saw signs of some cleanup work having been done on a couple of the roads. But much of the city was gone. They could see the blackened remains from a high spot on the way in.

Rudy breathed a sigh of relief. One of the few areas that seemed to be untouched was the area where his shop was. And the warehouse units where he'd stored the extra supplies.

They had seen only one other vehicle to this point in their journey. It had sped away from them quickly. Rudy decided to check on Carolyn before they went to the shop. It was out of the way, but it would be more so to check on her when leaving, than when coming. When they got to her place it was immediately clear that Carolyn was all right. She was out and about, tending to her garden. There were piles of dirt here and there. She must have done some decontamination, Rudy decided.

They only saw her for a moment. She had ducked back behind the concealment of the corner of her house. She reappeared when Rudy had Lizzie stop the truck and he stepped out and called to her. "It's Rudy Donatelli, Carolyn!"

She came out from behind the house, but she was carrying a shotgun.
“You peaceable, Rudy?”

“Of course,” Rudy said, keeping his hands away from the slung HK-91 and the holstered P-14. “I take it there has been someone that wasn’t.”

“That’s his grave right over there. And it’s a shallow one. Just didn’t want any dogs to dig it up. He was a mess from the radiation sickness before I shot him. Knew he was dying and wanted a little lovin’ before he passed on. He didn’t get any.”

Rudy nodded. “Carolyn, I think you met Lizzie Graham at the store once.”

Carolyn nodded. “Yes. Did, as a matter of fact. And watched the series she did on preparedness. That might have saved a few lives. You did a good thing. Surprised I didn’t see Rudy’s place highlighted when you did the supply episode.

Lizzie colored slightly, but simply said, “Thank you, Carolyn. I hope many people took the series to heart. Have you seen much other life than the one you had to shoot?”

“A few. There’s an enclave around your shop, Rudy. Doubt you have anything left.”

Rudy just nodded, but Lizzie gasped. “Friendlies?”

Carolyn nodded. “The bunch from your shelter, plus a few, for the most part. Got some bad ones running around loose, though. But they can tell you more about that at the Coffee Shop.”

“What was your fallout like here?”

“2,490 an hour after peak. I’m not staying out too much at a time.”

“Good thinking. We only had 1,213. We’ve checked a few times with the meter on the way in. The closer you get to the city the higher the radiation. Do you need anything, Carolyn?”

“Got what I need for the moment.” Rudy saw the look on her face change for a moment, but that moment was quickly gone. “Might be running a might thin come spring, before I can get any harvest from my garden. I’m not seeing much small game around. Heard a lot of small caliber shots right after. I think people went to hunting the local animal population when their food ran out.”

Again Rudy nodded. “I’ll check in from time to time. If you need something, I’ll try to help. But you’ll have to let me know.”

Carolyn waved as the two got back into the truck. “I plan on making it on my own,” Carolyn called as Lizzie headed back the way they’d come.

They didn’t see anyone else until they got close to the shop. Though the big fire that had destroyed much of the city had not progressed to these areas, there were signs of individual fires. And from the looks of the fronts of some of the buildings, there’d been more than one battle waged, too.

There was a barricade of pushed up cars at the cross street two blocks from the Coffee Shop and Rudy’s shop. A man armed with an AR-15 manned it. He had a FRS radio in one hand. When he saw Rudy’s truck approaching, he quickly said a few words into the radio, and then met the truck at the point the roadblock could be opened.

“Hi, Rudy. Miss. We’ve been worried about you. Looks like you weathered the storm okay.”

Rudy nodded. It took him a moment to place the man. It was George Bascomb, one of the families that had bought in on the shelter. “Okay to

go in and see how things are going?”

“Sure thing. Let me move the barrier.”

Rudy started to get out and help push the car out of the way that was blocking the hole through the roadblock, but George managed quite nicely on his own, the way the thing was set up.

“They know you’re coming,” George said as Lizzie drove the truck past.

When the approached the Coffee Shop and Preparedness Store, Rudy took a deep breath. The front security door of his place had been yanked loose and was gapping open to anyone that wanted to walk inside. There were pockmarks everywhere on the buildings. A pitched battle using small arms had been fought here.

There was a crowd of people standing around as Lizzie parked the Suburban. Doug Richardson was in the forefront. “Look... Rudy... About your place. You have to understand...” He was hopping along sideways trying to explain to Rudy as Rudy and Lizzie headed for the broken front door.

“We needed the stuff and you weren’t here. We figured you wouldn’t mind, considering. We really needed it.” Doug stopped at the door and let Rudy and Lizzie go inside on their own. Rudy checked everything out. It had been looted, not just needed items taken, once people could get in.

He had to smile a small smile of relief. He had taken the time to secure the important things in the vault. They’d certainly tried to get into it, but the vault door was still intact. That was good. The rear storeroom was just as looted as the showroom area. And what wasn’t taken was busted up.

Rudy felt a major attitude adjustment coming over him. With a rather

cold smile curling his lips he went back outside. The group had gathered again, waiting for him. They were collectively holding their breaths.

“What’s done is done. Can’t say as I’m happy about it, but I understand you felt you needed the equipment and supplies. So be it. Tell me. What about all the signs of gunplay I see. And how did you make out in the shelter?”

As collective as the breath holding was, so was the sigh of relief. Most of the group moved off to let the leadership that had developed during the shelter stay deal with the rest. Doug started the tale.

“We had three more attempts to get in the shelter right after you left, but we drove them off.”

Rudy noticed an obviously still ill Augustus standing off to the side, listening, as Doug continued. “We got everything locked down tight by the time the fallout actually got here. Got things lined out straight away. It got tiresome in the shelter but we managed.

“I guess we pushed to get out a little too early. Doc warned us, but... Well... Gee... Randy, they wanted to go. Who was I to stop them? The two weeks was up, so we let a couple of guys out. They went exploring. Stayed gone a couple of days.”

“Two days!” Rudy interjected. “But the radiation still had to be well over 2. Carolyn said it was a lot higher here than out at my folks.”

Stubbornly, Doug said, “They wanted to do it. Said radiation didn’t scare them. Did get pretty sick after they got back. But Doc said they’ll be okay. Just going to be totally useless for a couple years. Can’t afford more exposure.”

To Rudy, Doug sounded disgusted with the two men. Rudy suspected there was more to the story. “Where is Doc?” Rudy asked. “I haven’t

seen him in the group.”

“About that. We kind of had a riot when the Doc wouldn’t hand out antibiotics when the two came back into the shelter, bringing radiation sickness with them. The Doc told them that it wouldn’t help. But some wanted it any way. Doc sort of got arrested and banished about three weeks into the stay.”

Rudy paled at the thought. The radiation here, while not immediately lethal by any stretch, that long after the attack, was still dangerous if exposed constantly. “Do you know where he is?”

Doug actually laughed. “Holed up at the branch bank on 7th! Imagine that! Like, what’s he going to do with all that money? Money is a joke. I’ve tried to buy stuff, but nobody is selling for cash. They all want trades or silver or gold.”

“I’m not surprised. We don’t want to stay out in this too long. I’ll be back in a couple of days to get the few things I left in the vault.”

Lizzie finally said something. “Where is Salvatore and his daughter. I haven’t seen them. I never got a chance to really thank them for helping me that day.”

With a shake of his head, Doug said, “As soon as the radiation was under one he took off with her.” Doug frowned. Don’t know how that piece of junk of his would run. Nothing much else around here is.” He looked at Rudy’s truck and the truth hit him. “It is the older ones that run, isn’t it. Never should have let him take that truck once we saw it would run.”

Rudy put a hand on Lizzie’s arm to curb the protestation he was sure she was about to make.

“We’ll find one and get it going before the gas disappears.” Doug

slapped Rudy on the back and left with a smile on his face. Rudy wasn't going to make a big deal of them raiding his shop. That extra food sure had been good. Helped make up for the loss of his son that first day.

Softly, Rudy told Lizzie, "I want to check the storage yard. Come with me, but keep an eye on anyone coming up for me."

Lizzie nodded. They drove around to the back of the building. Before Rudy got the gate to the yard open, it hadn't been tampered with that he could see, Augustus came around the corner of the building, walking slowly, protecting his side where he'd been shot.

"Hey, Rudy," he said.

"Hey, Auggie. You didn't look like you were buying the company line back there," Rudy said, keeping his voice down.

"Oh, it was sort of the truth. Just not all of it, and with some spin on it. We did do pretty good for the most part in the shelter. Everyone is still sleeping in it. But those two guys that went out? Doug and a couple other the same as forced them to do it. To find out how safe it was going to be.

"And Doc? He tried hard to save Bryan. You know that. You were there. But Doug was bearing a grudge from the first. Doc had the most room since he was single and didn't bring anyone in with him. Doug was just like the handful of others that insisted on the antibiotics. If Doug and Carl and a couple of the other leaders had spoken up, everything would have been okay.

"They roughed Doc up some, but let him clean out his locker when they threw him out." Augustus looked around for a moment and then leaned close before he continued. "Doc asked me to hide his stash when it started looking like things were getting out of hand. He left a few things for them to find, but most of the stuff you brought back that day is in my

locker with my stuff. Nobody else knows.”

Rudy nodded. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah. But the Doc wanted me to take it pretty easy. In my weakened condition the radiation could be tough on me. But we all have to go out and try to find things with which we can get along.

“Doug didn’t mention it. I don’t know why. But there is a band of heavily armed looters going through and taking everything of use or value. We fought them off, but they might be back. Doug and Carl don’t think so. But from what a couple of the punks were yelling at us, they will be back.”

“Okay, Auggie. Thanks. I’ll be back in a couple of days. You want to go with me then?”

Augustus’ eyes lit up. “I sure do. This group is actually okay. It’s just a handful of them, but I don’t have much way to take care of myself at the moment. If you help me, I’ll sure pay you off good when I can. You know I’m a good worker.”

Rudy clapped the man on the back. “Sure do, Auggie. You can be sure I’ll help. You think Doc is okay?”

“Yeah. I think he’s just using the vault for shelter. That fast food place was right next to the bank. I think he might be living off the leavings there.”

“I’ll go find out. Thanks, Auggie.”

Augustus made his way back to the corner of the building and disappeared. “Keep an eye out for anyone else while I check in here.” Rudy opened the gate a touch and slipped inside while Lizzie kept watch. He was out in a few moments and relocked the gate. “Let’s go.”

Again Lizzie drove, with Rudy riding shotgun, even more vigilant than before, knowing there were some bad guys out there somewhere. And somewhat questionable good guys, too.

It looked like the bank had been looted, with windows busted and the ATM's ripped apart, but when they entered the bank it was obvious some semblance of order had been restored.

"Doc! It's Rudy. Doc! You in here?"

"Crimeny, Rudy! Announce it to the whole world!" Doctor Chauverson said, rising up from behind one of the counters near a stack of boxes nearly blocking the slightly open vault door. He was carrying a club made from a 2 x 4.

"Doc? You okay? You look like someone beat the crap out of you!"

"They did. Wanting drugs. Word got out from the compound that I had a stash. They wouldn't let me take anything from the shelter. It might be that it was a good thing. They believed me when I told them. If I'd had anything, I think they would have killed me out of sheer lust of killing from the high they would have been on. But they took it out on me, anyway, not having anything."

"Well, come on. We're going to take you back to my parents. Mom can look after you till you're better. Anything here you want to take?"

"Just the vault, if we could. Probably saved my life."

"I'm afraid that's out," Rudy replied, smiling. He helped the doctor maneuver himself out to the truck.

Rudy helped him into the front seat and told Lizzie. "I'm going to ride in back. I have better maneuvering back here if something happens. But the

first course of action is to gun it and get away. I'll be holding on until and unless I have to shoot."

They didn't need the precautions. No one attacked them on the way back to the Donatellis'.

Rudy decided to wait three days before they went back. The doctor was in shape to lend a hand in what they were going to do. Sammi was going along, too, to help. They would need the hands available to empty the vault in his shop.

When they'd returned to the shelter at Rosie and Henry's place, Rudy finally explained what he'd been checking in the side yard of the shop. He'd checked to see if the vehicles and equipment had been bothered. He did see signs where someone had jumped the fence and checked out the vehicles, but as far as he could tell, nothing had been done to them.

The parts they would need to run were in the vault with the other things Rudy was going to bring back. When things had started to get tense and Rudy thought a nuclear attack was likely, he taken the electronic components out of U500 and the Toolcat.

He had spares, in case of EMP, but hadn't wanted the vehicles to be able to run anyway. It wouldn't take long for Rudy to restore the Unimog, Bobcat, and pickup to running condition. They would load the Bobcat Toolcat on the trailer for the Unimog and load the things from the vault into the Suburban and the pickup.

Doc protested slightly about carrying a weapon, but on second thought, that one about having been thrown out of the shelter and then getting beat up, he changed his mind. He took the 11-87P and a military harness with shell pouches.

Part of the three days they'd spent at the Donatellis' was used for

weapons familiarization. Lizzie learned to shoot the Glock 21 that Rudy provided for both her and Sammi. Sammi learned, too. At least enough to be able to engage a close target. They were finally ready.

The trip to town was uneventful. Again he was in the back seat, with Doc. Sammi rode up front with Lizzie driving. Rudy directed Lizzie to drive by the storage warehouse. The gate had been pulled free of its guides, and a couple of storage rooms had been opened, but not broken into. They decided it was someone that owned the stuff that came to get it, but couldn't open the gate without electricity, since it was on a keypad opener.

When Lizzie drove through the place Rudy noted that the storage rooms he had rented were still undisturbed. They continued to the shop. The crowd of people paid them little attention. To them, everything useful had been taken, already. It was a little difficult to get the lock to work on the vault door, as it had been hammered some, but Rudy got it open after some trial and error.

The others gasped at the sight within. Rudy told them, "Get things arranged so we can make the fewest trips possible, with loads that each of you can carry. Get everything moved to the back door." He grabbed the box with the vehicle parts and headed outside.

They'd blocked up the door at the front entrance so no one could come in on them. Only Augustus came around to the rear of the building. Rudy had him act as look out for anyone wandering around. He let out a slight whistle when he saw the amount of goods they were moving.

Rudy had the trailer connected to the U500, with the Toolcat loaded, and the pickup started by the time they'd moved half the stuff. Rudy parked the vehicles close and they began to load.

"Augustus," Rudy asked after they loaded the last item, "Does anyone stay in the shelter under my shop during the day?"

“No. The two guys that are sick are in the Coffee Shop, but everyone wants out of the place during the day. A month of that was plenty. But people are still scared of the radiation so they sleep in it at night.”

“Okay.” Rudy motioned everyone to join him. “Get in the vehicles and get ready. I’m going to get my stuff from the shelter. I’ll be right back.”

When he went into the Preparedness Shop, the others glanced at one another and shrugged. He would have to take down the front door to go out that way to get to the Coffee Shop. They didn’t discuss it, just went to the vehicles. Augustus joined Lizzie in the Suburban, and Doc rode with Sammi in the pickup. Rudy would drive the U500 alone. They’d loaded another 11-87P for Augustus when they were getting things ready and he held it on his lap.

Rudy went to one of the storage shelves in the back of the shop and reached behind it. It released a latch and Rudy pivoted the shelving unit forward, exposing a set of narrow stairs leading downward.

Rudy went down the steps and looked out the small peephole into the shelter area under his shop. Seeing and hearing nothing he pivoted his locker away from the hole in the wall and stepped out. It was the work of only a moment to open the locker and take out the few things he’d been keeping in the locker, and the items from the mayor and vice-mayor.

He reset everything as he went back up to the back room of the shop and then reset that shelving unit. Out to the U500 he went. He tossed in the gear and climbed into the cab. They were off, with Rudy in the lead.

Again they made the journey with no problems. Rudy was not going to let his guard down, however. The tales of the rogue bunch had him worried. It was easy to get ambushed. He wasn’t sure who all might have seen them pull out with the equipment. No one seemed to have

followed them. He'd circled around twice and doubled back once to check. The others, though they had FRS radios, hadn't questioned him about it on the trip, trusting to his judgment.

They did, however, ask when they got to the house. He explained why he'd done what he did, and they all looked surprised and disappointed. "The shop was a target and I'm a target because I have stuff. Though there is no food in the vehicles, other people can't know that and might assume there is. We all need to be cautious until things line out and we can be sure little or no danger exists. That's why someone will always be watching the monitors, day and night."

They looked slightly alarmed and very disappointed they were going to need to do such things. They'd just been through a nuclear war, for heaven's sake. Why did they have to worry about looters now?

"It's human nature. There are good people and bad people. Some of both have undoubtedly survived."

Rudy wasn't too worried about the truck and utility vehicle equipment he'd left behind. There wasn't that much anyone could do to it, even if they were of a mind to get back at him for some reason.

And it wouldn't be long before he had everything back to his parents' place, anyway. He'd use the U500, with forks attached, and the trailer, to move everything in a few more days, as long as everything went okay. The next couple of days Rudy had other plans.

While the others finished decontaminating and preparing a garden spot, the task made much easier with the Toolcat, which Rudy had loaded up to bring out with the bucket installed, Rudy left in the Suburban to check on his recently acquired land. He'd paid it off with devalued dollars and wasn't sure how the owners would take to him taking it over. He was prepared to offer additional financing. If he could find anyone to pay. Rudy smiled as he pulled onto the property.

One of the brothers and one of the sisters had said they would be down to clean out any remaining items of interest to them from the old mansion. A pickup truck with a pop-up camper trailer was parked in the overgrown driveway. Rudy checked the both the truck and the trailer. Nobody around. There was the semblance of a trail through the overgrowth to the mansion of a house. He went up it, pulling the P-14 from its holster.

The stench told him what he would find when he opened the unlocked front door of the house. He went back to the truck and suited up, adding the Millennium Respirator last. There were four bodies on the sofas and chairs of the great room of the mansion, gathered around the fireplace. There were signs of a fire in the fireplace.

Rudy went through their clothing for ID's and found their ID's. It was the brother and sister and their two spouses. They'd been caught here during the attack. "Why didn't they get in the basement?" Rudy asked no one. "Probably no food, anyway, nor way to get it."

Well, that solved the buying out problem. The only two that had an interest in the place were dead. No other surviving relatives. The place was his.

Rudy checked the truck on the way out. It wouldn't start, but had plenty of gasoline in the tank. It wasn't that new. He might be able to get some ignition parts from an auto parts store and get it going again. Rudy shook his head and went about his business. He took off the environmental equipment and took a look around outside, finding the tracks and trails that still existed in the overgrown landscape.

It would do, Rudy decided. It would do.

He and the doc suited up the next day and buried the bodies with the help of the Toolcat.

It took five trips to get everything moved from the lot beside the shop in the city. And they took it to the estate rather than Rudy's parents'. He explained the plan he'd come up with to them.

"This is good ground," he explained. "Always been fertile. Just look around you. We've got enough firewood to burn for years. The house is old, but solid. We'll worry about what to do with it later. There's a place near the center of the estate that is behind four walls on three sides and three walls on this side. Protection.

"We can easily grow a huge garden in one of the walled courts, just like they used to do, except for foodstuffs rather than pretty stuff. The Toolcat will make that easy. There are bound to be people that survived with horses and goats and sheep and cows and pigs. If we have something to trade, we can make a good life for ourselves here."

"We'll be a target," Doc said. "Just like your place was before. Walls can be breached. Even four of them in a row."

"True," said Rudy. "But there will be people depending on what we can furnish. And there is plenty of room here. I was thinking of inviting in people we can trust to help work the place. And defend it."

"I'm in," Lizzie said quietly, moving to stand beside Rudy and take his hand in hers.

"Yeah. Me too." Sammi moved to stand with them.

Doc could only grin. What else was he going to do? "Me too," he said after another moment of deliberation. But he wasn't finished with his questions. "We'll be awful vulnerable taking our goods to the city to trade them."

“We don’t take them in.” Rudy was warming to his topic. He’d thought about this a great deal during the stay in the shelter. “We become the meeting place. People come to us for trades.” A bit sheepishly Rudy finally admitted to someone the potential of what he had. “I’ve got some other stuff stashed. We have what we need until the new old technology takes hold and enough production of enough things can take place to make the area pretty much self-sufficient.”

Sammi grinned and said, “I thought you were holding out on us when we drove around that mini-warehouse place. I’m surprised you don’t have stuff stashed at your parents” The look on his face confirmed it.

“Okay,” said Doc. Where do we start?”

“We survey the area. Find out who has what resources and what people need. I’ve got quite a bit of diesel and gas put by, but we’re going to need fuel quick. I know there were some small scale bio-diesel operations going on around there. Dad probably knows some of them. If we get fuel, we can make a much quicker go of it.”

“So let’s get started.”

Rudy’s Preparedness Shop – Chapter 5

They got started, all right. First they cleared the most protected spot on the walled estate. The clearing generated a large amount of firewood, which they split, sorted, and stacked out of the way. The Bobcat Toolcat was of great help in the clearing chores.

A huge garden plot was then cleared, generating more firewood. The Toolcat, with rototiller attached had the plot ready for seeding in a short time. Rudy opened up a couple of #10 cans of stored seed and they planted the garden as the planting times for the various foods came up. They did the same thing at the Donatelli place.

The seeds were all non-hybrids which Rudy had purchased and canned himself. The Donatellis had plenty of fresh potatoes at home, as Henry was a meat and potato guy, literally. They had white and red both. Several were cut and the eyes planted.

They were keeping in contact with a half a dozen groups of people that had set up basic enclaves. Mostly in their residential neighborhoods. There was the one group still centered around the Coffee Shop and Preparedness Shop shelters.

Henry stayed in contact with several survivors around the country and around the world. It seems that even areas that were not engaged with nuclear weapons, local battles using conventional weapons had started. Without global re-supply, the heavy weapons soon ran out of fuel and ammunition, leaving the combating forces to slug it out rifleman versus rifleman. Not a few battles were fought with farm tools in some of the poorer nations.

Henry was hearing some disturbing news about roving gangs pillaging communities trying to make a comeback. It seemed most of them were extortion gangs, threatening much, but unable to carry out their threats against any group that was organized and armed. However, there were reports of one group that was well armed and ruthless.

They didn't threaten or negotiate. They came in, usually under cover of darkness, at high speed, killing everything around them, and taking what they wanted when done. They left no witnesses.

Though the countryside seemed peaceful enough on the surface, Rudy, as well as the others, had a feeling that there would be bad times for sure, before there would be lasting peace in the area.

There were two ways to deal with the menace. Actively seek the bad guys out and deal with them away from the home grounds, or wait until they came calling and deal with them then. There were a few of the

survivors that, like Rudy, favored seeking out those dangerous to their continued survival, and eliminating them. The majority, however, since it hadn't happened to them yet, decided that it probably wouldn't, and he and the ones with guns could handle it when it did.

When he approached the enclave at the Coffee Shop Doug summed it up for him. "Yeah. We heard about your idea. You want a bunch of Rambo's to join you and go off on a killing spree. Well, I'm against it. We have food here and we set up some collection basins for water like you suggested. We're armed here and have the shelter. I'm not going to go risking my life for a bunch of losers out there that survived by happenstance, but can't take care of themselves."

Rudy had been going armed, and he finally got the doc to do so all the time. Augustus was slow to heal, but was able to drive and handle a gun. He fell in love with the Glock 18C and Rudy assigned it to him for their road trips. Rudy even had some LBE gear that would keep the 33-round magazines handy for him. It was going to be a while before he could handle a long gun.

Dr. Shauverson didn't like the recoil of the .308 weapons that Rudy had, so he elected to carry one of the eleven Steyr AUG's he had. He'd picked up most of them after the state assault weapons bans had become prevalent. Sammi and Lizzie both carried AUG's to keep as much interoperability as possible.

Rudy had twenty of the 100-round Beta C-Mag dual drum magazines for them. They kept one in the rifle when they were in a static situation, switching back to 30-round magazines when they were mobile. There was enough ammunition available for Rudy to give a comprehensive weapons course. He threw in a few tactical maneuvering exercises with the weapons training.

Without enough to be an effective assault force Rudy and his group continued their improvements to the estate to make it defensible and as

self sustaining as possible. And they did do their part to control the lawlessness that did exist locally. People were scavenging to find the food and supplies they needed. That included Rudy's group. There were a few that preferred to take it from those that rounded it up.

Just locals making do the way they had before the war. Abusing the system. Rudy, Lizzie, and Sammi were in one of the city's poorer sections, prior to the war, anyway, and were systematically going through the local stores, including an ethnic grocery store.

They'd dropped Doc off at the Coffee Shop to do what he could with the various illnesses and injuries that were cropping up after the war. Some due to the war. A lot of people had sheltered, but not adequately enough. Of the 20% or so of population that had survived the first days, weeks, and months after the war, many were dying with radiation poisoning.

Even more were dying of various ailments they'd had before the war. With no way to get their treatments and medications they were dying off, too. And there were the injuries that came up due to the hard and dangerous work people were doing to survive. Doc was having to use all his skills to try to keep people as healthy as possible.

But he was very stingy with his stock of medications. Only those with an excellent chance of full recovery got the benefit of the medicine. Fortunately no one really knew what he had, so there was little said when he said he couldn't help someone.

He was reluctant at first, but during that first summer Doc began to work closely with Carolyn, following her advice, and prescribing homeopathic, mineral, and herbal treatments for many of the ailments he was coming up against. The more successes he saw, the more he relied on her.

Augustus was acting as driver of the Suburban and look-out while Rudy, Sammi, and Lizzie did their scavenging. When he saw three men

approaching he notified the others on the FRS radios they all depended on. It was only moments and everyone was in a ready position.

Rudy came out and stood in the doorway of the shop, where he could duck back and be somewhat protected by the masonry construction. Before the men got close to the store, Rudy called out.

“What do you guys want?”

“Hey, man! We’re just picking up stuff like you. How about we share what you got, since we’re here, too. It’s only fair. We had to walk here and you got rides. Two of them. Maybe we should have one of them, too.”

The leader of the trio had spoken. The other two made a point of showing their weapons. “And if we say no?” Rudy asked.

“Then we take it, Man! We take it!” The three began to disperse, bringing their weapons up to fire. But they’d watched too many gangsta music videos. As they leaned forward, their pistols held sideways, ready to fire, two AUG’s, an HK-91, and a Glock machine pistol opened up on them from twenty yards away, from behind cover and concealment. The three were like bloody rag dolls when they hit the ground.

None of the three required a coup de grâce. After several long minutes of silent watching, Rudy suited up in an environmental suit and went to the bodies. He retrieved what was useful. Wasn’t much. The clothing was ruined with the numerous bullet holes all over their bodies.

One .32 ACP pistol was ruined from the gunfire. The other two were low cost, low quality, 9mm’s. Rudy collected them. There were only three spare magazines between the two with 9mm’s. The .32 carrier didn’t have a spare.

They quickly finished gathering what they wanted from the store, and

then after Lizzie and Sammi suited up, they wrapped the three bodies inside plastic sheeting kept for the use and loaded them on the truck.

There was a slit trench just off the estate that would be their final resting place, once they were covered over with earth. That was what they were doing with all the remains they ran across in their journeys. It was becoming routine.

There was already a problem with feral cats and dogs eating human flesh. Most of the other groups were stacking bodies out for the animals to consume rather than burn them or inter them in some way. The feral dogs were getting aggressive toward humans. It was only a matter of time before live humans became prey to the dog packs. There were a couple of reports of cats attacking children left unattended in and around houses.

Like everyone else, they were ranging further and further a-field on their searches. That included some of the burned out areas. Though the fires had been devastating, there were still some useful items available. Most of the other scavengers were taking only edibles. Rudy and his friends were taking everything useful and stockpiling it at the estate for future use.

On one of the trips near the burned areas, to see if there was anything left at a grocery distribution warehouse, Rudy realized that they were near where both the Mayor and Vice-Mayor had lived. He made a point to remember to check their places out, in light of what he'd found on them the day of the attack.

The warehouse had been picked over, but there was quite a bit of food and other consumables left. It took three trips to get everything back to the estate with the U500 with the stake bed for it, pulling a trailer they'd picked up at a dealership early in their quest.

When they were done they went to the Mayor's house first. It was a

modest two-story in a better part of the city. Fortunately the area had escaped the wide ranging fires. When Lizzie asked, “What are we looking for here?” Rudy shrugged.

He said, “I don’t know. But considering what I found on the two, and their being best buds and all, I want to see what we might find. Load up anything you see like we’ve been taking at other places.

Rudy let Doc, Lizzie, and Sammi check for the ordinary. He looked for that which might be hidden. Starting in the master suite he found the Mayor’s wife. She was lying on the bed, a bottle of pills on the nightstand beside it. They’d wrap her up before they left. Rudy took the bottle of pills and checked the bathroom. Lots more pills, mostly prescription, for both the Mayor and his wife.

Bagging those as well, Rudy went into the walk-in closet. He browsed through the clothing quickly and then began to investigate nooks and crannies of the storage areas. In the bottom of a storage box he found something. Home-made porn of the Mayor’s wife with other women.

Rudy put it back and moved on. He almost missed the built in safe. A clothing storage bag was hanging in front of it. Rudy had found a slip of paper in the Mayor’s wallet when he’d checked it. He’d brought it along just in case. A few twirls of the knob and he was in the safe. A low whistle escaped Rudy. There were piles of cash in the safe, along with some rather cheap looking jewelry, and personal papers. There was also a Colt .45 ACP and a spare magazine. Taking the .45 and magazine, Rudy closed and locked the safe with the other contents intact. Nothing useful. He was only taking things that had some utility or value in the current circumstances.

He made his way downstairs. He searched again and came up with more porn, some marijuana and another pistol. This one was a richly engraved Browning High Power. There were three spare magazines for it. “Man had a taste for good firearms, anyway,” Rudy mumbled to himself.

That was all he found in the finished portion of the basement. He checked the unfinished section, and then the garage, without finding anything else of use. He joined the others as they put the few items of food and other utilitarian items in the Unimog. "Let's see about the Vice-Mayor's now."

On a hunch, when they got there and Rudy used the keys he'd taken off Randy Paterman, He opened the door very carefully. Nothing happened so he stuck his head around the door and blanched. There was a sawed off and cut down shotgun rigged to go off.

Rudy motioned the others back, and after checking for tripwires, he carefully entered the foyer of the impressive looking house. He disabled the booby-trap. It was set up on an electronic detector, so, with the power off, it had not activated. "Man was serious about his privacy," Rudy told the others, stepping back outside

He handed the short double barreled whippet shotgun to Doc. "Give that to Augustus to keep up with and then you guys can check the houses on either side. "I don't want anyone else in here. He might have more booby traps, and they might not all be on electronic controls."

"Just leave it, Rudy," asked Lizzie. "What can be in there that's worth risking your life for?"

"Probably nothing," replied Rudy. "It's just my curiosity. I always thought Randy was a little off, but I voted for him and the Mayor. I want to see just how bad my judgment really was. It'll take me a little while, because I have to be careful, so you guys take your time."

As the others went to the other houses, Augustus keeping watch as always, Rudy began to search the house. There were more booby-traps, and he was right. Not all of them were electronically triggered. But they were all for exterior access points, so within view from inside the house.

All used similar whippet shotguns. 12 gauge, double barrels, cut off just past the hand guard, with the stock cut down to a smooth, rounded pistol grip. Each one had double triggers set to fire both barrels at once. It would have made a mess of the mid section of anyone triggering them.

Rudy found enough to make him slightly ill. Randy was into some very sick stuff. But he had been an illegal weapon aficionado. Besides the whippets, Randy rounded up a total of 23 firearms, most of which would have been illegal for anyone except a Class three dealer. There were no signs that Randy was such. There was a sizeable collection of edge weaponry, too. And accessories for the firearms.

The signs that were there indicated that Randy Paterman was a big time criminal. Probably with mob connections. A safe room in the basement held documentation that he was involved with extortion, prostitution, drugs, gang control activity, and obviously gun running. He also liked to live well and had given his survival a great deal of thought.

The only reason Rudy could think of that Randy had chosen to try to get into the Coffee Shop shelter was that he had not wanted to bring the wrong kind of attention to himself by building a nice fallout shelter. A quarter of the basement was a safe room. Rudy thought it would have been adequate for a shelter with a little more work. But for whatever reason, Randy had made the choice to go to the Coffee Shop with the Mayor and demand entrance, which act resulted in his death.

Rudy and his friends would reap the benefits of that decision. Though he had not bought anything from Rudy, Randy had bought the best in survival equipment and supplies. When Rudy was sure there were no more booby-traps inside the house, he went into the garage.

It too was rigged. This time not with a whippet. There were two M-4 carbines set in a crossfire pattern aimed at the center of the garage door. These two made six of the full auto carbines formerly in Randy's

possession. Rudy thought of Jack suddenly and wondered if he'd made it. Probably not, but it was possible, Rudy supposed, that the feds were still taking care of the federal prisoners in some way.

The M-4's had been Rudy's first priority upon entering the garage. His second was to search the garage as he'd searched the rest of the house. Nothing.

The only things useful were the weapons, the food, and the drugs. There had been a whole pharmacy in the basement. Most of it was probably for sale, but Rudy suspected Randy used, too, from the amount he'd taken to the shelter with him. Randy must have liked his alcohol, as well as the drugs. And bought by the case. And he liked the good stuff. There was bottle after bottle of premium liquor. By the case.

The stash of cash was valueless. Randy had known that gold and silver would be better after a nuclear war and had not taken any vast amount with him when he went to the Coffee Shop, the way the Mayor had. But Randy had apparently taken all the gold and silver he had at the time.

Rudy added the M-4's to the collection of weapons and then went out to join the others. They were finding more than they'd expected. Of course this was an upscale neighborhood. These people had been in the position to buy things. Unfortunately they didn't choose the right things to keep them alive in the event of a nuclear war.

They loaded up everything Rudy pointed out to them, showing their amazement at the haul. Rudy didn't mention a few of the things he'd found. No need for them to see such degradation.

Initially Rudy had stored the things they found in the few empty storage rooms at his parents rental warehouse. He couldn't bring himself to toss out what was in the other rooms. Someone might still show up or it, as unlikely as it was. Besides, with things the way they were, the risk of a raid was high.

To provide alternative storage Rudy decided to get some semi truck and trailer rigs. Rudy wasn't a great truck driver, but he could do it in a pinch. He hired an experience truck mechanic to help him get a couple of rigs in shape to run. Most of the EMP damaged trucks just needed the electronics replaced and they were good to go. The parts had survived the EMP since they had no long wires connected to them to act as receiver for the massive energy burst.

Part of the scavenging process was draining fuel from disabled vehicles. Since Rudy had one of the few operating vehicles, his group was getting the lion's share of everything. So it went with the trucks. Mostly they wanted empty trailers to store their current and future scavenged good in, but they found the occasional useable loaded truck as well. They all went to the second best secured spot on the estate. So did trailers loaded with what Rudy had been storing at the two sets of warehouses.

To give back his parents' house to them, the five of them moved into the mansion that controlled the entrance to the estate. After some significant clean-up and modification. The well was still fine, but they had to replace the pump. The original house had been built in 1831. It had been modernized a couple of times, but with an eye to maintaining the original flavor intact, even back then. With a pair of gensets from a rental place in the city hooked up they were good to go.

Rudy and the others had a long list of wants, to go with their census. Through the process they had also made contact with several farmers. Most had lost their production capability when the fuel ran out a few days after people came out of the shelter. A few could, and did, plant gardens.

The ones Rudy was primarily interested in were those that raised animals as part of their farming. Most particularly chickens, beef, milk cows, and swine. Many had lost most, if not all of their animals from the radiation. Many of the farmers lost their lives to it, too. But of those that

were left, a handful agreed to cooperate with Rudy and his group. Those that had viable farms despite the current conditions were told that their goods would have a market if they just kept going. And, if not, Rudy was prepared to buy them out with food or precious metals.

All the farm animals running around loose without current ownership were rounded up and distributed among the farms with facilities with which to take care of them.

There was one couple and one family of five that had animals, but couldn't care for them at their own places that moved to the estate. They would live in the mansion with Rudy and his friends as it had a total of eleven bedrooms. The animals were put within the section of the estate that had contained the animal habitats that were part of the small zoo the operation once boasted. The zoo was back, but it was of meat, eggs, milk, and honey on the hoof, so to speak. There were enough stud animals between all the farms to keep the gene pool diverse enough to avoid problems of inbreeding in the animals.

Rudy gathered his group of five people around the kitchen table in the mansion after a very nice Sunday dinner they had prepared after three long days of hard work in bad weather. It was only August and the air had a fall-like quality to it already.

"Now, Mom and Pop are pretty much out of this, due to their age. They should be safe at their place on their own, as long as we can go to their aid if someone attacks." Rudy said. "They've already said they'll lend a hand where they can, but at their ages, and with health limitations there is only so much they can do."

"One of the reasons I wanted to set up the estate is because it is more defensible than we were there, especially with the stuff spread out all over the place like it was. Someone would have eventually started checking the storage places for useable items just like they are homes and businesses.

“As scavenge sources dry up, people are going to start to get hungry. When they’re hungry they get mean, unless they are at the point of starvation and are too weak to be mean. We’re in good shape here, now that we have deals with farmers that can help with the gardening and tend the animals.

“We keep hearing of that band of outlaws raiding and taking over small operations for a few days until the resources are gone. We were a target before. We’re definitely a target now. If that gang, or any other, finds out about us here, even disregarding the storage stuff, they might well try to take us over for the winter.”

“We have to protect this place,” Doc said. “It’s going to be the only really stable source of food for a lot of people in the city.”

“He’s right,” chimed in Lizzie. “The area is going to have to have sustainable resources to keep us going.”

“Can we defend this place?” Sammi asked. “Mark might be able to help, but Paul wouldn’t be any help. He does okay with his farm tasks, but he not up to a firefight.” Sammi had lost some weight since the war, and become rather more outspoken about things. “I think I can help and be effective. Lizzie here, too. But is that enough to do it?”

“No,” Augustus said, before Rudy could answer. “We need a good dozen people or more to help defend the place against a concerted attack.”

“That’s right.” Rudy confirmed Augustus’ words. The more hands, the better. But we’d have to bring in some housing. And they’d need to be paid like we’re doing with Mark and Paul’s families.”

“They’re getting shares of production. Can’t we do the same with some hired guns?” Lizzie asked. “Though, to be honest, I don’t much like the

idea.”

“I don’t think just hired guns would work,” Rudy said. “Well, I guess it might work, but it’s a risk that they might just take over. I was thinking more in the line of people to help expand the operation and provide other services. And they’d be on shares, too.

“But I have a feeling this winter is going to be pretty bad. You’ve all seen how hazy the atmosphere is all the time.” There were nods and ‘yes’s to that.

Rudy continued. “I’m not sure how we could keep everyone in warm enough housing. There are several more buildings on the property. A couple could be converted to housing since they have wood stoves. But the rest...” His voice trailed off and he looked at the others.

Augustus looked thoughtful. “You know... If we could get another genset... And nobody had destroyed the propane place... maybe we could bring in a few trailers for the winter, until we can build something permanent next summer with wood stoves or fireplaces.”

“Wouldn’t even have to move a propane tank. Use a couple of the delivery trucks to run out of and just shuttle fuel that way.” Doc voiced his obvious approval.

Lizzie and Sammi were a little slower to come on board the idea.

“From what I’ve read about nuclear winter...” She saw Rudy frown. Lizzie smiled and continued, “They could be bad ones. It’s already way too cool for an August. The garden is only doing reasonably well. I don’t know if trailers would do all that well in a bad winter.”

“And what about a septic system?” Sammi asked.

“There are details to work out,” Rudy said. “Let’s think on this and see

if we can come up with a way to do it. Even then, we'd still have to convince several families to move and have family members risk their lives for this place, rather than their own place.”

It didn't take long for the perceived problems to be addressed and solved. With the 5600T Toolcat it was easy to dig a hole for a large septic tank and trenches for field tile for it. The truck a septic system company used to install septic tanks was old. Very old. They had problems starting it, but not because of EMP. But start it did, and they installed the septic system large enough for twenty fifth-wheel travel trailers.

The propane place had five delivery trucks that they were able to get running by replacing ignition parts. Rudy took one of his generators in to power the facility's pumps and they filled all of them and took them back to the estate. They were piped into the gas line system for the trailers so any truck could be taken in to town to refill when needed.

Instead of using one of the gensets that Rudy still had in stock, they got two from a rental equipment place and converted them to propane. They got two and a synchronizer so they could shut one down for service and still have power, much the way they'd done on the two for the mansion.

With a limited amount of bio-diesel available from the two farms that could produce it, the gensets at the mansion were converted to propane, too. They wanted to conserve liquid fuels for transportation. Depending on who else might scavenge it at the dealer, they had enough propane for a couple of years. Before someone else got it they intended to find two or three propane semi-trailers and get as much as they could.

The Bobcat trencher attachment made running a water line to the trailers an easy task. Rudy began moving trailers two weeks after their discussion. At first, getting people to move out to the estate, despite the problems cropping up in the city, was difficult. But Rudy was guaranteeing food and shelter for the entire winter in exchange for some

work around the estate, including its defense. As the weather worsened he got takers. Plenty of them.

Combat veterans got first choice, but anyone that agreed to fight for the place, and the farms the estate had agreements with, were brought out and settled in. With as many families coming out that were inclined the group eased the restriction about 'hired guns' and brought out eight single men that would share three of the trailers and do much of the routine patrol and watch work.

A few of the people had firearms, though not many were of a kind suitable for defensive work. Rudy's armory held what was needed, including ammunition and load bearing equipment. Every one of Rudy's combatants was suitably equipped for the task of defense.

They had no crew served or heavy weapons, except for a pair of Barrett Light 50 M82A1 .50 BMG rifles. They had the means to make Molotov cocktails, and the sprinkler system was hooked into the propane supply to be used as a simple Fuel/Air Explosive (FAE) weapon. The sprinkler system, though old, was well laid out, with many zones, so they could use the FAE system where they might need it.

Rudy's dad already had a radio that would work for communication between his place and the estate. Radios were obtained from abandoned electronics shops to equip all the farms and the estate to provide an early warning network, and alarm system.

Tensions eased somewhat when November rolled around and nothing had happened. The consensus was that word had got out about how well prepared they were and all the bandits were scared off.

Well, word had got out, about a large farm with plenty of food and fuel. The first attempt at getting a piece of that action by ne'er-do-wells was clumsy at its best. One of the roving patrols that went through the entire estate at irregular intervals caught the two men flat footed. Both were

armed, but neither got off a shot. The three man team disarmed them, cuffed them and brought them before Rudy and his team, which were the undisputed leaders of the small community.

“I’ve been dreading this,” Rudy said quietly as he, Doc, Augustus, Sammi, and Lizzie sat and just looked at the two men for a moment. Then Rudy asked, “What did you two intend to do?”

“Nothing,” answered the taller of the two men. His name was Warren.

“Just out for a stroll. Over a high fence.”

“Thought we might get a buck,” Jonesey, the short one said.

“That’s right. We was hunten’,” piped up Warren. “We’re hungry.”

“So what do you think we should do with you, considering this was private property and you were trespassing.”

“Ain’t no law any more. You can’t do nothing to us.” Jonesey was feeling feisty. He figured they’d just be shot. That’s what some of the enclaves were doing when they caught someone stealing.

“Oh, there is law,” Rudy said. “Same basic law we had. Just simpler.”

“What are you going to do with us, mister?” Warren was showing a little nervousness.

“I think what I’m going to do is make an example of you.” Both men blanched. “Not that,” Rudy was quick to explain. “Though I thought about it and that is what will happen if you’re found on this property again without an invitation.”

Rudy surprised everyone present when he said, “I’m personally going to give you a little tour of the place and then kick your hind ends off of it.”

Everyone looked surprised, but no one said anything. Rudy rose from the chair at the table he'd been sitting behind. "Bring them along."

It was a little tour, for sure. The two men saw the gardens and the farm animals. And lots and lots of people with guns. Then they went back to the gate at the entrance of the estate. "If you want something to eat come back with something useful to trade, even if it's just a couple hours of work for a bowl of bean soup and a piece of cornbread. Come back for anything else and you're dead. Un-cuff them and give them back their guns. If they as much as look back this way shoot until they're dead."

The others had trailed along on the tour and were standing a few feet away. They watched as the men were released, took up their guns and walked out of the gate. It was obvious at first that the urge to look back was nearly overwhelming. But they didn't. And they didn't walk very far, either. After half a dozen steps they took off running down the dirt road leading to the place.

Rudy waved the two guards back to their work.

When they were out of sight Augustus asked, "Why'd you just let them go?"

"I wasn't going to shoot down two unarmed captives," Rudy said. "Not for just being on the land."

Lizzie said, "But you know they were out to steal whatever they could. You saw them. They're probably starving."

"Not starving, but thin, yes," Rudy replied. "I'm hoping they'll go back to the city and spread the word. We've got a lot of things to do and not enough people to do them. They saw that we have food available. By the sweat of our brow. And they saw that we are an armed camp. That won't stop the gang or gangs, but it should go a long way to stopping the locals

from trying to sneak in and get anything, especially if they can get some food for just doing some work.

Rudy was right. It didn't stop the gangs, or the gang. A week later word came over the radio that there were three carloads of armed people entering the property at the main gate. As had been planned, the remote teams kept an eye out for invasion from the other areas of the estate, while the response team made its way to assist the gate guards.

The gang had tried to ram the gate to get through, but the winding entrance road the Unimog and Toolcat had made with berms had prevented it. Some of the gang was already on the property and a firefight broke out. Rudy's forces trained nearly every day and they knew what to do.

The invading force was gradually maneuvered into one small area of the estate with directed fire. The defenders then turned and ran leaving the grassy open area free for the invaders to cross. The gang did so, firing as they ran. One man smelled the rotten aroma of propane gas but it was too late. As he turned and began to run back the gas from the sprinkler heads shooting into the air a few inches mixed with enough air for it to detonate as one more person fired their rifle.

Rudy had them bury the scorched, limp-as-jelly bodies in yet another slit trench kept open for those that lost the battle with nature and other humans.

More snow came and covered the scorched grass for the winter. Rudy continued to use the Toolcat and Unimog to better their defenses. There were now walkways behind each of the walls in key sections, and sandbags were filled and laying on top of the walls in a crenellation pattern to allow easy rifle fire over the walls that were susceptible to attack.

The next attack came with another small gang. They'd obviously

scouted out the place without getting caught. They made it inside the second fence using ladders in remote areas. But a listening post heard the movement and a blocking force was dispatched. The blocking force engaged the gang with rifle fire while another, larger force, was moved to flank the gang. This time there were survivors, though wounded. Two of them.

They were shown the ever ready slit trench used to bury the dead and let go, their injuries untreated. One didn't even make it to the end of the bermed entrance road before he died. The second man was never seen or heard from again by anyone on the estate, but a legend grew that the estate was ready for any force that might attack them. They already had a grave dug for your body.

A few days later one of the farms radioed for help. They were under siege in the farm house and a few people were trying to catch the stock. The small fleet of vehicles that worked were all loaded with the Rapid Response Force and headed toward the farm. There was a good two feet of snow on the ground and only the presence of the Unimog with its front blade mounted allowed them to progress after they left the confines of the estate. Important parts of it were kept cleared of snow, but there was no road maintenance.

When they got close enough to hear the shots being fired the group slowed down and advanced. The small force dismounted and marched forward. Rudy was part of the sniper team on exterior deployments and he and the assistant gunner moved forward, following a scout. When in view of the situation, with a good vantage point on a slight rise overlooking the farm, Rudy set up the M-82A1 on its bipod, while the assistant gunner set up a spotting scope to direct Rudy's fire.

The scout kept going, radioing back the particulars of what was happening at the ranch. When everyone was situated for the attack, Rudy opened fire with the Barrett, taking out what appeared to be the leader of the bunch.

His spotter continued to pick targets for him as Rudy used the Swarovski optics to zero in on what the spotter was telling him. With the battle now on two fronts the gang tried to break away from the action, but with the snow as deep as it was, they were slowed. Rudy and the others picked off those trying to escape one by one.

There were a couple of holdouts in fairly defensible positions. Rudy was called up closer to deal with them from another vantage point. The powerful .50 BMG ammunition tore through concealment that the gang members had used as cover from the lighter arms of the rest of Rudy's team.

One gang member stood up with his hands up, but a shot from the farm house put him down. There were five seriously wounded gang members so Doc was called to check them. All would probably live if Doc expended the time and resources to try and save them.

The five were given the option to be executed or turned loose with only the clothes on their back. Two opted for execution, primarily because they were in great pain and when it was explained to them there would be no relief, they decided dying now was preferable to dying later and enduring the pain until then.

The three that opted to try to find help elsewhere were taken off the ranch property and turned loose. One was unable to walk. He pleaded with his fellow gang members to help him and take him with them. They ignored his pleas. He lay back in the snow and waited to die. It wasn't long in coming as night drew on and the cold got worse.

One was found a few weeks later, his body exposed from under the snow when high winds blew the snow away from the edge of the road in that area. The third man made it to the city, but what friends he had couldn't help him. He died some time later, his body thrown out during a blizzard. The feral dog packs made short work of the body.

Things calmed down after those two incidents. Word got around that Rudy would take care of his interests with little or no mercy. The locals quit trying.

Though Rudy's group had the most vehicles running, there were a few others that resourceful people got going. Fuel was obtained from the hundreds of stranded vehicles all over the area. The working vehicles were saved for the most important missions. They couldn't travel very often anyway, due to the snow. Only when the high winds cleared some areas would anyone venture out. They had to dig their way through tall drifts, even then.

People were coming out to the estate to trade for food, mostly exchanging their labor for a meal. A few were bringing objects that the estate had made known were wanted. The butchering had been done early in the previous fall, once temperatures above forty degrees were no longer expected, and the meat could be kept safely hanging, so those that got a meal got one with good protein. They left with a bag of beans and a bag of rice, and the information that there would be more the next summer. If things went well.

Christmas, such as it was that year, came and went. So did New Year's Day. The snow just kept piling up. No one was moving outside their own small compounds. Henry kept Rudy informed of what was going on in the world. There wasn't much different. Small enclaves of survivors making do with scavenging whatever they could find to live on.

People were dying all over. From the cold, from epidemics in the close confines that most people had to live in to continue to survive. Word of the vicious group had diminished. Speculation was that it had moved on, disintegrated, or died off when the weather got bad.

Rudy refused to let his guard down, or the guard at the estate. People went armed and there were sentries out at all times. There were several

colds and a few cases of the flu at the estate, but Doc was on the watch for illness and got the people isolated and treated with the medications Rudy had provided, and the various items Carolyn made in her shop for Doc.

Rudy's mother could still write prescriptions when she retired and had always kept Rudy well supplied with emergency quantities of everything the two could think of that would be needed by a group such as theirs.

Spring was nearing, though it was going to be a late one and a bad one, from all indications. Henry had been hearing off and on about perhaps the government trying to get started up again. There had been no word of any type of government operation since shortly after the start of the war. The rumors gave many of the people hope. Rudy chose to believe it when he saw it.

Besides the hope of the government coming to help them, there was also the hope a new spring always brings. Even a late one.

Rudy's Preparedness Shop – Chapter 6

Rudy's group dug themselves out of the accumulated snow and sent a team to the city to check on people. It was a sad trip. People had survived, but far from all. Of the twenty percent or so that had survived the war itself, perhaps forty percent had survived the winter. Many of those were in poor condition.

One of the farms was a total loss. The people had died, and the animals died for lack of care. Another farmer had lost his wife, daughter and one of his three sons to illness. He turned his animals over to the estate and Rudy agreed to feed and care for him and his remaining two sons until they could make arrangements to go south before the next winter.

Quite a few people were thinking the same thing. If they could manage

the spring, they would walk south, if need be, to get away from the chance of another terrible winter. Rudy couldn't blame then. The winter had been devastating. Rudy was seriously considering it, himself. He had Henry start trying to find a suitable situation where they could set up operations in an area that had not had such a severe winter.

He still had supplies enough to make the move and get them through another winter if it was just the group at the estate, even if all of them wanted to go. But first they'd have to meet a new threat. The reports of the gang had resurfaced and they were more ruthless than ever. Rudy contacted the small groups around them to keep an eye out and report any movements of groups.

Though the majority had voted against it the first time Rudy brought it up the previous fall, Rudy was now determined to meet the group away from the estate. Ambush them and be done with it.

The opportunity wasn't long in coming. The remnants of one enclave showed up at the Coffee Shop. They had a message for Rudy. Leave everything at the estate and take off for parts unknown, or suffer the fate of the rest of the places that the gang had hit. Apparently word had spread about the estate, and Rudy's part in its success.

It seemed a little strange to Rudy when he went in to meet the messenger. It was a young woman, still terrified at what had happened at their place. She and half a dozen others had been sent to the Coffee Shop with the explicit instructions to give Rudy the news or else they would be hunted down and killed like their families and friends had been.

Miriam was her name and she began shaking when she relayed the message. "He said to tell you he was coming and you wouldn't have a chance. He'd let you live if you ran and left your stuff. Otherwise he was going to kill you and some woman named Lizzie."

"What was his name? Did he say why he wants me dead?" Rudy asked.

She shook her head and shivered again. “No. And all I ever heard him called was ‘Boss’. I don’t know why he picked me and the others. Some of his men weren’t happy about it, either.”

“Well,” Rudy said thoughtfully, “That’s good to know. I don’t suppose he told you when he was coming this way.”

“No, but I overheard some of the men say that what we had at our camp would last them more than a week.”

“Could you tell how many men he had?”

“Over twenty, I think. Maybe fifty. I don’t think I saw all of them.”

“How were they armed?”

“They all had machine guns,” Miriam said, her eyes going round. “They just shot and shot and kept shooting until everyone but us were dead. And then they ate. The ones that guarded us were mad because they couldn’t... use us... and had to wait to even eat, before some more could watch us.”

Rudy questioned her for a while longer, and then the others, but no more useful information was forthcoming. He discounted the machinegun remark. The men could be, and probably were, armed with National Guard full auto M-16’s and M-4’s. That was bad enough, but it also sounded like they had ammunition to burn.

Rudy was silent as he rode back to the estate in the Suburban, with Lizzie quietly driving. The best Rudy could make of it was that someone that knew of him was simply out to take over the best operation in the area. “Well,” Rudy said to himself, “We’ll just see about that.”

When he was back on the estate he talked to the man that had become

the field commander of the small security force the estate had. He was ex-U.S. Army. Rudy liked him and trusted him. He laid out the situation for him and mentioned the intention to go after them, rather than wait for them to come to the estate.”

“We’d have more firepower if we waited,” Connelly O’Donald said. “But it isn’t a bad idea as long as we don’t get ourselves into an ambush. Their automatic weapons against our semi’s would be devastating.

“What if we could get them into an ambush with automatic weapons of our own?”

Connelly frowned. “That would be great. But where are we going to get them? You had plenty of good weapons to equip us with, but I figure if you had full auto you would have issued it.”

Rudy shook his head. “I’m not a big believer in full auto. I acquired some right after the war.” Rudy filled Connelly in on the weapons taken from the Vice-mayor’s place. Of the 25 weapons he’d found, there had been six M-4’s, two AUG’s converted to full auto, three MP-5s, and one MP-5SD, and six full auto HK G3’s. “And plenty of ammunition for all of them. Oh. The .223’s had 100-round dual drums, besides plenty of twenty and thirty round magazines.”

Connelly whistled. “That would be quite the ambush force if we could get them to fall into it.”

“We know where they are supposed to be now, and about how long they’ll be there. There aren’t that many good roads from there to here. I think we can do it. Get as many people together that are willing to go and we’ll leave day after tomorrow. I’ll break out the weapons tonight and we can have familiarization and practice tomorrow.”

With a nod and a half salute, Connelly moved off, excitement in his eyes. Rudy was less excited than worried. It was a big risk they were

taking. If it was false information that Miriam had been fed to lead them away from the estate, it was going to work. There'd be security at the estate, but not enough to withstand a real onslaught.

The day they were to leave broke clear and cold. Rudy watched the people going on the hunt with a weary eye. He hadn't slept much the night before. They'd been pretty lucky. Only a handful of people hurt in the various altercations so far. That could change quickly.

On foot, it was a long distance between enclaves now. With mechanical transport, it wasn't that far. Rudy took Connelly's advice on where to stop and set up the ambush if the gang was where Miriam said it was. Connelly would scout the area personally to see if the gang was still where they were supposed to be.

It was nearly dark when Connelly returned. "They are there, all right," he said. And up to no good. People are cleaning weapons and looking serious. It's a good thing we got here when we did. I think they are going to be on the move tomorrow."

Rudy nodded. "We may not need the provisions for three days. Just as good. I want this over with. Should we all stay awake or sleep in shifts?"

"Shifts. There was no sign they would pull out tonight. But we need to be positioned and ready early tomorrow, in case they make an early start."

Rudy made a quick coded radio call to the estate to explain what was going on and then turned in to take his own sleep early and take a watch later that night. Everyone had a good bedroll and there should be no problems during the night from the weather.

The other three-quarters of the force were up and joined those that had taken the early morning watch. Everyone was in positions pointed out to them the previous afternoon. Rudy, though not an experienced soldier,

could recognize the suitability of the site for an ambush. Connelly had them in the classic L shape, with Rudy on a high spot with the Barrett to disable the few vehicles the gang had. The first one at the head of the column when it reached the tangle of cars in the middle of the road, where they would have to ease down into the side ditches of the road to make it around them. The track was there from previous uses.

Rudy was positioned so he could also take out the last vehicle in the line about where it cleared an overpass. There was some room to maneuver vehicles, but not much. They were counting on the Barrett to stop or slow the vehicles. Everyone settled in for a wait.

It was a long one. Apparently the gang wasn't comprised of early risers. "Kinda like Jack," Rudy said to himself. He wondered again what might have happened to his old friend. He wondered some more about why he would think of Jack now. "The full-auto weapons." Again he spoke to himself. And then, for the final time, said to himself, "You have to quit talking to yourself."

It was almost ten when the lead vehicle came into sight down the interstate. Word was passed and everyone got ready.

The ambush went off just like the training session the day before. The lead and trailing vehicles were stopped in their tracks by Rudy and the Barrett. The rest of the team poured fire into all six vehicles. The gang didn't have a chance. They fired not one single round. After the firing died down, and a wait to see if anyone was going to try anything, one lone man started at the back of the convoy and checked each vehicle for survivors. Blood was leaking out of some of them due to bad door gaskets.

The man called up to Rudy and Connelly. "Got a live one here. I think it's the boss."

It took only a minute for Rudy to get down to the lead car. He stopped

suddenly when he saw who it was. “Jack!” he whispered, stepping forward. “Why, Jack? How?”

Jack’s head lolled on his shoulder as he tried to focus his eyes on Rudy. “You said...” He coughed and spit blood from his lips. “You said you didn’t do machine guns.” It was all he said. His head rolled forward and he died.

“Hey!” called one of the security force. “Every one of these guys had an M-4!”

Though he didn’t know how Jack had managed to leave the prison after the war, it was obvious that he knew where the guns in question had been hidden. And with them he had organized a gang to survive.

Absently, Rudy spoke as he stared at Jack’s lifeless form. “I guess he still hated me for turning him in for the robbery.”

What was useable was retrieved, including eighteen working M-4’s and twelve that had taken rounds that made them inoperable. They were still good for parts guns. There were several cases of ammunition. They didn’t recover much fuel. There wasn’t much to start with and the vehicles had been riddled with bullets, some of which found every gas tank.

“What do we do with them?” Connelly asked. “Leave them as a warning?”

Rudy shook his head. “No. No, we’ll bring the Toolcat back and bury them. The wild dogs are problem enough now. We’re going to have to organize an expedition to hunt them down before they kill anyone else.”

Rudy thought about Jack from time to time as spring fled and summer approached. What drives a man like Jack, he wondered. He always just shook his head and went on to other things. Things like preparing the

estate for a move down the Mississippi to greener pastures, lock, stock, and barrel. And just about everything else. Somewhere that the weather was reasonable. It took hard work, but the convoy moved out on July 4th of that year, celebrating the move to a new, better, world for them.

End *****

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