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Well Why Not

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Well, Why Not? - Prolog

“Well, why not?” asked ‘Banger’ Bartlett. “No big deal. Just a few bucks. They have insurance.”

“I’m down on my luck, Banger, but I’m not going to steal anything. There is the soup kitchen and shelter. As soon as I can get back on my feet so I can work, things will be okay. And Banger, if I hear that place gets robbed, I’ll turn you in. I swear. You are better than that, man.”

“Yeah, well. I guess I’ll see you later.” Banger forced a laugh. He lifted his right hand, made the pistol motion. “Bang! See you later, alligator!”

Three days later Jerry Rastman was escorted to the morgue to identify Joshua ‘Banger’ Bartlett’s body. Dry eyed, stiff in his body brace, Jerry lowered his eyes to the face of his longtime friend. “It is him. Joshua Bartlett. Aka ‘Banger’.”

The officer asked Jerry, “He a gun nut or sump’in?”

“Trade mark,” Jerry replied. Jerry, as he’d seen Banger do countless times, raised his right hand in the shape of a pistol and softly said, “Bang. See you later, alligator.”

“Well,” the officer said, “He should have stayed with the finger gun. I know the owner of the place he tried to rob. Nate would never have shot him if he hadn’t had a gun. He’s faced down guys with knives a dozen times. Never had a gun pulled on him before, though. I know he’s is your friend, but he did a bad thing and paid the price.”

“Yeah. The price.” Jerry braced on the cane and turned around to leave the morgue. He was nearly bumped by a woman in a lab coat coming into the morgue, in advance of a sheet covered corpse on a gurney being pushed by an intern.

“Oh. I’m sorry!” said the woman. “I never expect to see anyone on their feet in here. Are you all right,” she asked, her right hand going to his left shoulder to steady him when he staggered slightly backward to avoid her.

“S’Okay,” Jerry said, wincing slightly at the pain in his back from the sudden movement.

“Are you sure? Why don’t you come to my office and take a rest. I can tell you are in quite a bit of pain.” She looked at the police officer. “He ID the body, Slattery?”

The officer nodded.

“We’ll, give Ralph a hand with this one. I want to get this guy off his feet for a few minutes.”

“Aw, Trish! You know I hate...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You owe me big time.” She turned away from the grimacing Slattery, looked at the grinning Ralph, and then took Jerry’s left elbow in her hand and guided him from the cold of the morgue to the warmth of the hallway.

“This really isn’t necessary,” Jerry said. He didn’t even try to pull away from her guiding hand, however, knowing full well that it would be agonizing to try.

“What happened? I have a feeling you shouldn’t even be out of bed, much less traipsing around.” Trish turned him slightly and into an office.

“Can you sit down by yourself?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but guided him gently into the chair in front of the desk.

“Miss, you really don’t have to...”

“Trish Mellow. Doctor Trish Mellow. And you are?”

Jerry found himself answering despite deciding to just get up and leave.

“Jerry Rastman. I was a friend of the guy that was killed in the robbery.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. But that is business over and done. What is wrong with you?”

“Broken back. Should be healed in a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah. Sure. What medications are you on for the pain?”

“Well, supposed to be on morphine, and something else, but my scrips ran out and I can’t afford the doctor appointment to get new ones. The med isn’t that expensive, but I just can’t get the scrip.”

“Well, tell me what happened.”

“I broke my back.”

“Yeah. Gathered that, slick. Now, if you want a pain scrip you’ll answer my questions.”

The thought of getting something for the pain he was in was worth almost anything. He took a slow breath, since he could not breathe deeply. “Was working the iron on a building down by the river. One of the guys nearly fell while he was tying off. He violated safety, but it was that kind of job situation. The bosses pushed all the time. Anyway he didn’t fall, but when he panicked and grabbed me for stability, he pushed me over the edge.”

Jerry took as deep of a breath as he could and let it out. “My upper harness failed, old piece of junk that it was, but the belt held and so did the lanyard. Brought me up short two feet off the ground, but without the upper body harness my back extended too far and snapped.

“I was very lucky that the break didn’t cut the spinal cord, but the paramedics did a good job stabilizing me and getting me to the hospital. There was enough insurance, barely, to cover the initial injury, but nothing for the longer term rehab.”

“How long have you been without pain medication. And been walking around in that mess?”

“Didn’t have any choice,” Jerry said defensively. “There just wasn’t money left for a hospital stay. They put me in this cast when I had to leave. I guess... three weeks ago.”

“Wow. Pain must be intense.” Trish opened a drawer of her desk, pulled out a purse, rummaged in it for a moment, and then set a prescription pad on the desk and began to write. “I’ll give you what the law allows. When you run out, come back and we’ll discuss the future.”

“I can’t take this! I can’t pay you. I can’t even get the med with the scrip now. It’s only four dollars, but until I can make some money, I can’t get it.” Jerry pushed the scrip back over the desk toward Trish.

“Stubborn, huh?”

“I don’t know. I guess. Maybe.”

“Yeah. Maybe. How are you eating and where are you sleeping?”

Jerry sighed again. “Soup kitchen and shelter.”

“Let me tell you how this is going to play out. I, a qualified doctor, with a large number of police and fire department friends, am going to fund the scrip, and enough extra for a week or so of good meals, and a place to stay that is not a homeless shelter.”

She picked her purse again. “Don’t think about leaving before I’m ready for you to leave. I’ll have you incarcerated as a vagrant. You won’t like that.”

Jerry believed her. He settled back in the chair from which he had been trying to get up. He watched Trish open the purse and take out a wallet. She removed two bills, hesitated, and then took out two more.

“Here is four hundred. Get a cheap, but decent room for a couple of weeks, and get the meds, and some decent food to eat. Come back in two weeks and we’ll see how you are and figure out a way for you to pay me back, because, I’m telling you true, this is a loan, and not a gift.”

“What if I just give this money away and disappear.”

Trish smiled, sweetly, and said, “You aren’t that stupid, and you know full and well I have the contacts to get you found. Now let me help you up and you can get out of this depressing place.”

Jerry let Trish helped him up and took the four one hundred dollar bills. He folded them and carefully placed them in his shirt pocket. Trish went back to sit behind her desk and Jerry started out of the office. “See you in two weeks,” she said.

Jerry waved his free hand, leaning heavily on his cane with his other one.

Well, Why Not? - Chapter 1

Jerry thought long and hard about his situation with Trish for the two weeks he was housed, fed, and medicated on her money. He was very tempted to remove the walking brace and show up at her office stating he was ready and willing to go to work, no matter what the job.

That thought didn't last long. She had too good of an eye and instincts that would have her seeing through his bravado immediately. So, even though he was feeling much better, he put on the back brace, made sure he had the receipts for everything, and left the small apartment.

Jerry didn't catch the flash of relief in Trish's eyes when he stopped and knocked on her open office door. "Have a seat; I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Jerry quietly watched Trish at her work. Twice she left to see to something after talking on the phone for a few seconds. During one of those times, Ralph stuck his head in the door and told him, "Dr. Mellow will be back shortly."

Actually dozing for a few minutes during Trish's absence, Jerry lifted his eyes when he heard her return. "Sorry. Had to take a couple of things I wasn't expecting. Though those things come up all the time."

Jerry was taking out the receipts and the money left from the four hundred. He handed the things to Trish before she sat down. "Money left. I'm impressed. How are you doing on the meds?"

Jerry saw the intensity in her eyes when she asked the question. He pulled the medication bottle from his pocket and leaned forward enough to place it on the desk.

Trish didn't reach for it, but gave it a good look. "About half gone. That's good. Haven't been double dipping, selling, or giving any away, I take it."

"No. Of course not," Jerry replied, his voice even.

"I expected no less. Now. How is your back. Ready for the brace to come off?"

Jerry so wanted to say yes. Trish could see it in him. But he finally shook his head. “Not yet. I still need it. Maybe another two weeks. I think it can come off about the same time the meds are gone. What do you want me to do in the meantime?”

“Same thing.” Trish took out her purse and again counted out money. “See me in two more weeks,” she said, handing the money to Jerry. She picked up the medication bottle and handed it to him. “And splurge a bit on the food. You look like you’ve lost a lot of weight. Get some real meat in you, at least more than you are getting.”

Jerry was on his feet, and put everything into his pockets. He started to leave, but hesitated. “Why are you doing this?” he asked, looking at her intently.

“Don’t really know,” Trish said with a slight shrug. “Just seemed like a good idea at the time. I still feel the same. But don’t know why.”

“Hm.” With that Jerry left.

He decided Dr. Trish Mellow knew her stuff. He was feeling remarkably better as the end of the second two weeks approached. He had enjoyed the extra three steaks he’d purchased and grilled on the community grill at the residential motel, after cleaning it thoroughly each time.

There were twelve of the small blue morphine pills in the bottle now, at the end of the two weeks. He had skipped a couple in the last week, and had not taken any at all the last three days.

He felt better than he had in months, even before the accident. Jerry had gained a couple of needed pounds, putting him just a few more pounds short of his ideal weight. That morning he had done a slow, and somewhat abbreviated, version of his old physical workout he had done religiously before the accident. There was a bit of pain, but nothing like he’d been having, and his back felt strong and flexible. But he put the

brace on and headed for the morgue, striding out faster and more smoothly than in weeks.

Jerry found himself actually looking forward to seeing Trish again, though this might be the last time. He'd pay her off just as quickly as he could, as soon as he had a job, which he should be able to get within a few days. There would be no need to see her once the money thing was taken care of.

He was smiling when he knocked on the again open office door. Trisha looked up and a small smile curved her lips, too. "Has it been two weeks?"

Jerry nodded. "Time flies, I suppose."

"It can, for a fact. You look much better. Chipper, even," Trish replied.

"I suppose I am. I took your suggestion and have been eating a bit better and resting well. I've been able to move around without the brace when in the apartment. Even did a light workout routine with only a bit of pain. No morphine for three days. Tapered off, skipping one and then two and finally just one for one day and none the last three."

Trish was nodding. "Right way to do it. A little fast, but no withdrawal symptoms?"

"No. Don't think I was on long enough. I have a pretty high tolerance, I think."

"Okay. Take off the brace and move around a little for me."

Jerry did as asked. Doing a few bends and even some squats. Trish could see the flicker of some pain, but it was nothing compared to what Jerry had been in the month before. Trish was nodding when Jerry finished the moves.

“Yes. I think you can quit using the brace all the time. But keep it and if you have any strains, even close, wear it until you’re back on top of it.”

Jerry nodded. “Yes, Doctor. Now. Thank you very much for all you’ve done. It’s time for payback. I think I can get a job middle of next week. There is a new project going up...”

Trish was shaking her head and Jerry’s words trailed away. “You aren’t in any shape to go back to iron work or any physical job. Not for some time. But I have a couple ideas. Been looking for someone with certain skills I can trust. I can trust you, can’t I Jerry?”

Jerry looked at Trish for a long time. “Yes. You can trust me.”

“That’s what I thought. Did a little checking up on you, those first two weeks. Been thinking about it these last two.”

Jerry frowned at that. “I’m not sure I like that.”

“I wouldn’t either, I suppose,” Trish said with a shrug of her shoulders. “Be that as it may, I did and I’m impressed with what I found out.”

“There is nothing special about me,” Jerry protested.

“Well, there are more people more ‘special’ than you if you want to put it that way, but you have some skills I want to take advantage of while I can.”

Jerry looked thoughtful. “What particular skills are you talking about? I was in service, as you know. I know how to kill people a lot of different ways. I hope you aren’t looking for a hired gun.”

“That’s rather blunt, don’t you think?” Trish asked evenly.

“I’m a good soldier. I’m not a murderer.”

Suddenly Trish smiled slightly. "Oh. I see. A manipulator, you are. And I'm not saying that as a necessarily a bad thing. Manipulation can be a handy tool. But being a manipulator myself, I'm not as subject to it as some. You're trying to get me to kick you out so you don't have to pay the debt." She saw Jerry turn red and start to protest. "Oh, I don't mean at all. You'd break your back again to pay me back the money. But I don't want the money. I have plenty of money at the moment. But I need some things done, strictly legal at the moment, and I don't want any of my current associates and acquaintances to know a single thing about it."

"Legal at the moment?" Jerry asked, his curiosity aroused.

"Yes. Ugly Old Dog. That is your screen name, isn't it, Jerry? On the prepper forums?"

Jerry didn't say anything for nearly a minute again. "Yes. I'm a prepper. And it isn't illegal now. I don't expect it to be... well... for a while, I suppose."

"From your posts, you seem to think it might be sooner than later."

"Perhaps. I don't see what this has to do with me paying you back eight hundred dollars."

"I work sixty to seventy hours a week more times than I can count, live a one and a half hour commute one way from here, and barely have time to eat, much less sleep enough to be good for me. And I've found myself worried, almost to the point of paranoia, about the way things are going in this country and around the world. It's not just natural disasters, though there are plenty enough of them to worry about.

"I'm a little more concerned about the human caused disasters than anything else. Financial collapse, war anywhere in the world and even here. I need a prepper consultant. And one has pretty much just fallen into my lap. Someone with no staff to know about any preps done. Someone I can trust to do what I want and not give it away."

“And you trust me to do that?” Jerry didn’t question the accuracy of her information. She’d pieced it together. No need to try and deny it. He was a prepper, and there was no denying that to Trish.

At least, he had been. He’d eaten through his food supplies, and slowly sold off everything else when he was invalided. But things were the same or worse now, than they were before the accident. He’d resolved to do what he could when he got a job, but that was looking further and further out. Unless he took on the job for Trish.

Trish had watched the play of emotions on Jerry’s face. His color returned to normal and he looked over to meet her eyes. “Yes. You can trust me. But do you really want to? A couple of months of preps and gear aren’t too expensive. But the deeper you get into it, the more you will spend as you see more things that need to be done. In other words, can you afford both me and the preps? I can certainly give you some pointers to get you started and then start paying you back when...”

“The last isn’t an option. I have information... from a couple of sources that I have, that bad things are going to start happening within two years. Things the American People won’t like. Things that will create massive shortages. Things that will decimate the infrastructure.”

“Things?” Jerry asked. “Kinda slim reasons to prep.”

“Not to me. I know these people from my college days. They went one route, and I went another. But they keep me informed. Been after me for years to prepare for things in general. Now they are adamant. They can’t be thought giving out the information, and them helping me get ready would compromise their security.”

“You are serious!” Jerry said. He’d developed his own sort of radar and had similar feelings that things were on the cusp of happening. He didn’t bother asking her who her sources were. She’d not tell him, he was sure.

Trish nodded, her eyes on Jerry's. "I have three people I want to bring in on this. People that will be of great help if I can convince them of the seriousness of the situation and get them into the prepping too. I've read that it is better to have a group than go it alone."

"That is true in many cases, though not all. A bad MAG is much, much worse than no MAG at all."

"MAG?"

"That is a Mutual Aid Group. People willing to help one another when the situation calls for it. Can be as close of a group as family, or more diverse, with the group coming together only when they are needed by one of the others in the group."

"This would be the second. I don't have any family. And no close friends except for these three people."

"And them? Do they have family and friends that would become part of the MAG whether or not the rest wanted them in?"

Trish looked thoughtful. "I hadn't really given that much thought. One is a family guy. I guess I just assumed he'd be in it with his wife and little girl. Madge... She is from a big family, but they threw her out when she got pregnant in high school. She hasn't talked to any of them in several years."

"So she has a child. How old. And the father?"

"She lost the baby. The boyfriend, when he found out she was pregnant, beat her up bad enough to lose the baby. And he's doing forty to life for murder of an appellate judge. I don't know the details. She can be pretty standoffish, especially with men."

“Joanie, on the other hand... She’s pretty social. Not a party girl, but she likes to have a good time. No kids or steady boyfriend. But she’s always been there for me, just like the others.”

“I see,” Jerry said. “And how much in the way of resources are we talking about, total for prepping, plus my wages?”

“We all do okay. I’m probably the most well off, followed by Madge and then Tarley. He’s the guy. I don’t really know any personal details for their finances. Just that they all complain about the same things I do when we get together.

“Prepping doesn’t have to be hugely expensive, but it does have costs. Monetarily as well as psychological and lifestyle choices. You’d want to make very clear to them that this would become a lifestyle as much as anything. Doesn’t have to affect everything, but will affect many choices they’ll be making in the future.”

Trish looked thoughtful. “I think I can talk them into it. So, will you do it?”

Jerry took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “Yes. I’ll do it.”

“You never mentioned the salary you wanted or expected,” Trish said then.

“Just figured a couple of months of work and we’d be even. I’m easily worth four hundred dollars a month.”

“But that won’t give you living expenses,” Trish promptly said.

“True,” Jerry admitted. “I just... If you continue to pay my expenses... say... four hundred dollars a month and I work for six months?”

“I think that is reasonable. Probably a little light on your end. But we can work out any little details at the end of the six months. That okay?” Trish asked Jerry, wishing she wasn’t quite so hopeful for a yes answer.

Jerry only thought for a few seconds. Yes. That will work. Now, first things first. Where are you planning to set up?”

“Set up? You mean live? Right where we do, I guess.”

“Ah.” Jerry sighed.

“Not a good answer?” Trish asked, seeing his impression.

“Well... A home base of some sort is usually agreed upon for a group. Either one of the members’ homes or some remote location where everyone meets when things start to go bad.”

“Well, the remote is out,” Trish said. “There is no ‘remote’ in New York City. I don’t think the others would want to leave the city, anyway.”

“The city isn’t the best place to ride out some things. Hurricane, tsunami, nuke war. Many of the physical disasters call for evacuation.”

“Oh. I thought you meant we’d have to move,” Trish said.

“To be honest, given the money, I would be out of here like a shot.” Jerry shook his head. “Despite all the good things about this city, I don’t think it will fare well in a major disaster.”

Rather defensively, Trish replied, “I don’t know. The city has pulled together pretty well, I think. Look at 9/11. I take it you aren’t a native.”

Jerry shook his head. “Missouri. The boot heel. Came up a few years ago for a contract job. Did okay on the job and just kept working until the accident. I was on track to move back home with a nice piece of cash to get a small farm and be a gentleman farmer until the collapse.”

“Collapse?”

“The thing I believe is most likely to happen. That or a nuclear attack. The Russians and Chinese... Well. Just because. This will give me a chance to heal up so I can get a real job and get enough money together so I can get out of here.”

Trish looked more than a little disappointed. Though it didn't show for long. “I see. Well, I hope you can get what you want from this arrangement.”

Jerry gave a slight shrug. “If not, I'll just have to find another way.”

“Look. I have to get back to work,” Trish said. She dug out her wallet and handed Jerry four more one hundred dollar bills. “I'd rather pay at the first of the month. You're working month, I mean. I doubt you have much left from the last installment.”

Jerry didn't answer, but took the money slowly, reluctantly. Trish was right. He only had a few dollars left.

“Here is my home address,” Trish said, writing it down on the back of her business card. Come by this evening and we'll discuss getting things started.”

“Are you sure...”

Trish was paged and she quickly said, “I'm sure. I have to go.”

Jerry stepped aside and let Trish precede him from the office. He made his way out of the building, his mind in a whirl. In his hurry to get things done and out of the way, he hadn't given much thought to what he'd need to get Trish and the others set up. The four hundred dollars was going to have to stretch a long way.

He began walking to a place he'd seen advertised on a billboard recently. It was an outfit that took older computers, refurbished them, and resold them for a small profit. All he needed was something that included WiFi capability so he could get on the internet at the residential motel. Even as decrepit it was, it did have WiFi included in the weekly rate.

Jerry finally had to stop and rest, and then take a bus the rest of the way to the computer place. His back just wasn't up to that much walking. When he arrived it didn't take him long to find a computer that would do. Nothing like the one he'd owned before the accident, it did have everything he had to have. He'd like to get a printer, but for the next best thing, he got an extra used thumb drive he could print to and then give to Trish to print out, or do it at an office and print shop.

When he was back to the apartment building he paid for another month's stay. He thought about taking one of the morphine pills when he got back to his room, as his back was really bothering him, but decided a hot soaking bath and then a nap would be better. He might just need those pills sometime in the future.

He wound up sleeping longer than he intend and woke up hungry. There were enough things left in the apartment to put together a quick meal. He was going to have to really stretch things during the month.

One of the few things he'd managed to hold onto during his recovery was a set of three thumb drives filled with his emergency preparation files. With his fingers mentally crossed, he fired up the computer and once it was ready he checked each of the thumb drives to make sure nothing was corrupted. They were all fine and the data was intact.

Jerry worked on the computer until it was time to head for Trish's place. He shut down the computer and put it in the cheap nylon case that had come with it. He checked the time and the address and sighed. If he was going to be on time he wouldn't be able to take the bus. He'd have to spend the money on a cab.

But he was on time, early, actually, and had to wait for a few minutes for Trish to show up. She looked a little frazzled. "Sorry if I'm late. There was a gang fight and I had six bodies to log in."

Trish handed Jerry her computer case as she dug into her purse to get her keys out. A few minutes later they were inside. "Have a seat," Trish told Jerry. "I'll be out in a few minutes." She disappeared into a bedroom and closed the door.

Jerry looked around and sat down. The small living room was decorated conservatively. Jerry took out his computer and began to pull up files he would want to refer to for this first consultation meeting.

He looked up when he heard the bedroom door open and close a few minutes later. Trish had changed out of her office attire and wore a pair of faded jeans and an NYU tee shirt.

"Much better," she said. She saw the computer on Jerry's lap and added, "I was going to offer you my old laptop. For some reason I didn't think you would have one."

"Well, actually, I picked it up after I left the morgue. I managed to save all my data when I had to sell the one I had."

"Out of that living expense money?"

Jerry nodded.

"Well, I think it best if we set up an expense account for you. There is no reason for you to pay out of pocket for things that pertain to the preparations we'll be making."

"I don't think..."

“Just bring the receipt next time and I’ll reimburse you.” Trish wasn’t going to let Jerry talk her out of it and it was pretty obvious to Jerry.

“I’ll keep the expenses down to the bare minimum.”

“Well, I don’t want you shorting on things. I want this done right. Not on the cheap.”

Jerry frowned. “I wasn’t implying...”

“I’m sorry,” Trish said. “It’s been a trying day. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Oh. I see. No harm, no foul.”

Trish smiled in return. “Thank you. I get rather... less nice... when I’m not feeling well. I missed lunch and my blood sugar is low.”

“We can put this off,” Jerry said. “You need to eat something.”

“Yes. I do. There is a place down around the corner. Would you mind doing some of the discussion over a pizza and pitcher of beer?”

“Sure,” Jerry replied. “I haven’t had pizza or beer in a very long time. And don’t worry. I’ll pay my half.”

“I wasn’t...” Trish started to tell Jerry she wasn’t worried about the price of half a pizza, but cut herself off. It was important to Jerry that he pay his way. “Okay. Dutch it is. Let’s go before I pass out.”

Jerry set the computer aside and waited as Trish found her purse and slung the long strap over her head to hang down one side. “I guess I’m ready.”

Jerry held the door open for her and then stepped back so she could relock it. It was a pleasant evening and Jerry was feeling fairly well as

they walked down the busy sidewalk. Trish noticed and commented. "You seem to be moving quite a bit better now."

"I walked quite a bit and was really feeling it when I got home. A hot bath and long nap in lieu of the morphine."

"That's good," Trish said. "Morphine is great for what it does, but it is a double edged sword. I'm glad you didn't get hooked. It happens way too often."

"I read up on it. That is the conclusion I came to, as well."

"Well, here we are," Trish said after they turned the corner. She held back slightly to allow Jerry to open the door for her. It was busy, but they were able to get a table without too much of a wait.

They ordered a loaded medium and pitcher of draft. Jerry poured them each a glass and he took a sip. "Ah, that tastes good. I don't drink much, but a beer and pizza just kind of go together."

"Yep. I got hooked in college. There was a small mom and pop Italian place that made the best pizza. And they got their beer from a local micro-brewery. Not too expensive, especially since they would cut you off if they thought you were drinking too much."

"Sounds like a nice place."

Trish sighed. "It was. Not there anymore. The husband died and the wife just sold off the place and went to a managed care facility. She didn't last long. They'd been together for sixty years."

"Ah. Too bad. But that is how it works sometimes. Two become one and one can't live without the other."

"Exactly," Trish said. "Very insightful."

“I read a lot,” Jerry replied, slightly embarrassed.

“I used to,” Trish said and sighed. “Now it is about all medical and morgue related. I haven’t been to a movie in months.”

“Can’t remember the last time I went,” Jerry said, looking thoughtful. “Not a big movie fan anyway. Mostly the action adventure stuff and some science fiction. Not the thrillers. Monsters. I’m an old B-movie monster movie fan.”

Trish smiled. “I kinda like the romantic comedies. Typical, I suppose.”

There pizza arrived and the two dug in. Both were obviously hungry and it didn’t take long to finish the pizza and beer. “Not quite enough,” Trish said as Jerry counted out his portion of the check. “How about some ice cream before we go back?”

“Is it close?” Jerry asked.

Trish grinned. “Everything here is close. Just another block down.”

Jerry smiled back. “Then ice cream it is. On me.”

Starting to protest, the way she had earlier, Trish kept silent. It was obviously what he wanted to do.

Trish noticed the way Jerry walked, keeping himself between the street and her, his head moving slowly, but on a constant scan all around them.

“You don’t expect trouble here, do you?” she asked when they turned the corner and approached the ice cream shop.

“There could be trouble any time,” Jerry replied, taking moment to look at her. “Oh. You mean right now. No. Why?”

“You just seem to be on alert or something.”

Jerry shrugged. "Habit. I've been in some bad neighborhoods and you had to watch all the time in those places." He opened the door to the ice cream shop and let Trish precede him inside, though he'd taken a quick scan around the place as he was opening the door.

The place was crowded, but they finally made it to the order counter and placed orders for large ice cream cones. Trish chose some type of tropical melody that Jerry had never heard of before. He took plain vanilla for himself.

They walked back to Trish's silently, working on the ice cream before it could melt in the oppressive heat. Jerry held Trish's cone while she got the locks opened on her front door.

"The rain on the way should cool things off this evening, I hope. The air conditioning in the apartment building went down yesterday. Could be another day before it is fixed. I'm lucky to have an apartment facing the east. Don't get that sun during the later hours of the afternoon. Not too good for winter, though. Probably be a bit cold. I have no idea how well the heat works in that old place."

Jerry finished his cone as Trish said, "Perhaps you'll be able to get something better before winter."

He smiled. "I doubt it. But it is a nice thought. Now, I suppose we should get started on the plans."

"Let me wash my hands and I'll be right with you. You can set up your computer on the table over there."

Apparently Trish didn't use the dining table for dining very often. It was cluttered with medical journals and books, with a clear circle around the open laptop and the all in one printer, scanner, and fax. Jerry followed the power cord from her system to the wall and found a power conditioning load strip. He plugged in his power cord and then set up his

computer so as to be sitting not quite 90⁰ from her so they could see each other's computer screen when needed.

Jerry had his computer up and running when Trish returned and sat down before hers. "Where do we start?"

"At the beginning," Jerry said with a smile. "Priorities. There are quite a few categories, with all of them fairly important, but some rather more so than others."

"What is first, then?"

"I group things together for priorities. The first one is water, food, fire, sanitation, and LBE or load bearing equipment. A BOB. Bug out bag.

"All are about equal in need for things that might keep you at home, with the LBE giving you the option of taking the other items and evacuating if the need does arrive."

"So water is first. How much?"

"As much as you can get and still have room and money for the other things. Since you live in a house with a partial basement, you have some possibilities. I'd say several fifteen gallon water drums and a syphon pump, along with a few cases of bottled water. And some repurposed two liter or gallon jugs from pop, or tea, or juice that can be cleaned and filled with treated tap water for giveaways."

"The drums sound heavy," Trish said.

"They will be," Jerry replied. "But a lot lighter than fifty-five or thirty gallon drums that some recommend, and more cost effective than the smaller drums and containers. The drums are for here. You aren't likely to be moving them once filled and treated. Just rotate the water once a year and you should be good. The bottles will be for evacuation if you need to."

Trish nodded. She was typing as the two talked, taking notes on what Jerry was telling her. "And food is next?"

"Parallel. For the meantime, regular grocery store food that you buy and eat, that is shelf stable can be double bought for a while to build up a stock. You also need some no-cook or add-hot-water-only foods in case you need to evac. Plenty of meat and comfort foods."

"Comfort food?"

"Things that you relish eating. Like the ice cream, though that isn't one you'll stock. Candy if you like it, canned or dried fruits. Even the makings for a favorite meal."

Trish nodded and kept typing.

"Now, fire. Several ways to start one, means to keep it contained. Fire for heat, hot water, and cooking. We'll go over the starters and keepers later. Just be aware you are going to need alternate means to have it and use it."

"You didn't mention my fireplace," Trish said.

"It isn't functional, is it?"

"Oh. Well, I don't use it... I guess they did say not to. Something about the chimney not being right anymore."

"Then I wouldn't consider it, much less use it. Too dangerous. Okay, sanitation. You need to keep clean, and you need to go to the bathroom. I'd get a chemical toilet, toilet chemical, plenty of toilet paper, some toilet paper alternatives, a shovel to bury the waste from the chemical toilet, and the means to clean up regularly. Baby wipes or regular bath wipes. Bags to keep the waste together. And if you do the toilet paper

alternatives, you will need dedicated washing materials to get them clean and sanitized.”

“Alternate toilet paper?”

Jerry nodded. “I use the red cotton shop rags that have been washed a few times to make them soft and absorbent. Use, drop in a foot powered stainless steel waste can. A large stainless steel stock pot and some Fels-Naptha laundry soap to wash them in, a hand plunger washer, another stainless steel stock pot to boil and rinse them in and treat with bleach. Or they can be hung out to dry in the sun that will also sanitize them.”

“Just doesn’t sound very... nice.”

“Simple body function. Toilet paper could easily run out in a long term disaster. Having an alternative to leaves and such is much better, in my opinion.”

Trish nodded. “I can see that. Yes. Okay. That leaves... LBE?”

“Yes. You’ll need a bag of some type to keep things in and together. A back pack works well for those things you would need to take with you in an evacuation scenario. The other things can go into totes for storage.

“Some of the bottles of water, the no-cook or hot water only foods, camper’s toilet paper, fire making tools, change of underwear at least, some hand sanitizer. And as you progress we’ll add a few more things to make it a full-fledged BOB, suitable for seventy-two hours or more.”

Jerry paused and let Trish catch up to him in her typing.

“That’s the first group, then?” Trish asked.

Jerry nodded. Now, you’ll want to continue to add things to that first priority group, while you work on the second group. The two first groups could probably be combined, but then you have the same

problem of trying to get everything at once, which is difficult and expensive.

“The first group is basic needs for a situation where you can stay at home and have what you need to sustain you for a short period, or get to a public shelter with enough things to do the same thing.

“This second group consists of important things to have, but might not be needed at a short stay at home disaster. You will need some communications. A NOAA weather alert radio at the very least. And this could be at the top of the first priority items in certain areas. Tornado alley, the hurricane coasts. Blizzard areas, etc. But there are other receivers that are good to have. A public service band scanner to listen to police and fire activities so you can avoid those areas and perhaps get an early head's up on a beginning disaster.

“Your group will need two way communications, probably Family Radio Service, FRS; GMRS which needs an inexpensive license; MURS, which would be my recommended units, unless you decide to get Amateur Radio licenses.”

Trish interrupted Jerry. “Is that the same as Ham? I think Tarlley knows a Ham.”

“That is good,” Jerry said, nodding. “Should cover needed longer range communications. In the BOBs and such a whistle and signal mirror will help you get found if lost or separated.

“You will also always need to have season specific clothing ready to go as a matter of course. As for other shelter, a good set of camping equipment will cover that and is dual use. It is good for when the house might not be viable to live in, but you can still stay on site to protect it.

“Lighting and electricity. Lanterns of different sorts and candles at home. Wind up or battery when on the move. Extra fuel and/or batteries as needed, and wicks or mantles if using liquid fuel lanterns.

“Next is protection and physical security. This is another group of items that could easily be in the first group, depending on where you live and work. Bad neighborhoods, high crime areas, late night activities. Several reasons to have self-protection higher on the list. But for ordinary situations, they can be added during this phase.

“Besides firearms there are other lethal ways to protect yourself and the group, and less than lethal items to try and control situations where deadly force isn't called for.

“Sharps and edged tools will be needed for a multitude of tasks. Regular kitchen knives will work just fine while in residence. Field knives and tools are a better choice when out and about. And axes and saws will save much labor in building or repairing shelters.

“As with the first priority items, keep building and adding to the second priority items while going for third priority things. These are items that will make life easier. Regular household bedding can be used if staying at home. Sleeping bags, pads, and space blankets are needed for each BOB. You might already have them as part of the camping gear to be used at home, but if you don't it is a good time to get them.

“You will need an extensive first-aid kit, with plenty of trauma items. Smaller kits can go in BOBs but still need to have trauma treatment. The only reason that this isn't a first priority item is that most people have a home first aid kit anyway for the small stuff. The injuries during a disaster are more likely to be numerous and much worse than the ordinary home scrapes and stings. Your kit can be much more comprehensive than most, given you are a doctor. The others probably need training, and supplies you can get for them they can't get on their own for use on them, by you, if the situation calls for it.

“Barring one of you having well equipped woodworking and metalworking shops, there will be a variety of tools needed. For extrication if you are confined, to get to others that are confined, and

basic hand tools to work on whatever might break down. Cordage can be made, but it is much better to have plenty on hand for many different applications.

“I mentioned fire, but that was for limited use. As you acquire and learn to use other things, the ability to maintain acceptable temperatures in living spaces during cold periods can be very important. Quality tent safe/indoor safe propane or kerosene heaters can suffice.

“While quite useful for cooking, gas and charcoal grills should only be used outside, for cooking. Though the stress is on no-cook or add hot water foods a hot meal and hot drink will be nice in the colder times.

“Now we come to transportation. A good vehicle is advisable for many evacuation and other scenarios, but they may become disabled or blocked by several means. Motorcycles, bicycles, animals, and on foot are the alternatives. Only because evacuation is down the list quite a ways on what needs to be done, the transportation is in the fourth priority group. It could easily be in the first group if living in a tsunami zone, an active volcano area, or where flooding can occur suddenly. And if there are children or pets involved, evac by foot is very problematical.

“Fourth priority items include things that not immediate needs or are expensive. Things to keep morale up provide welfare and recreation so people are not constantly under stress. Games, toys, books, paper and pencils. Something to keep the little ones quiet and busy, adults entertained or comforted, or just to break the monotony.

“You and the others will need to keep important documents safe and available at home and in the BOBs. IDs, insurance cards are important. So are things like birth certificates and financial records. I'll give you a comprehensive list later.

“A good library of educational and reference books, read, and then stored safely at home might be invaluable in the aftermath of a major disaster. Practice what is in the books as time and circumstances permit.

This can be expensive and cumbersome so is lower priority than it might be.

“Now finances. Precious metals. You will probably want them. They are pretty much just a wealth holding item to be used in the event that currency is no longer viable. But they aren't the only emergency finances that might be needed. A debit card and some cash should be kept in the BOBs to have money when evacuating.

“Another important set of items that might need to be higher than the fourth category for some people are HAZMAT and CBRNE protective gear.”

Trish looked at him quizzically. “That is hazardous materials and chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive protection gear,” Jerry told her.

Trish nodded and kept typing.

“Now if these are needed, they will be needed desperately, but are quite expensive. Your group will have to decide, with my help, of course, whether or not to make these a higher priority versus other needed items less expensive. They are really important in areas where nuclear power plants are, or high value terrorist targets that might have a dirty bomb used on.

“The last group is things that apply after the initial events, or require lots of special training. Wild food gathering is one of them. Fishing and hunting. Not too important one would think here in the city, but there could be a time when a pigeon breast would be a welcome meal.

“Barter items. No one can have everything they might possibly need. Having some barter goods to make trades early on in a long term disaster may get you things you don't have. PMs, I'm convinced will take over as money eventually, but initially people will want the basics. And it is a way of giving some aid to others by making available food for labor or

other goods. Have to be careful of things, though. Bartering can make you a target. I have a list of items and cautions I'll give you to look over.

“Alternative power from a generator, wind mill, or PV panels are options that could be very important if there are children in the house or medical equipment dependent persons but can usually wait until later due to cost if those needs aren't there. Plus they are hard to store fuel for.

“Many of the items you will get will need spares. Batteries, flints, bulbs, auto parts, fuels, all sorts of things. If it can be consumed, it needs some spares.

“And something that takes a great deal of training, but might be quite handy in the city is rappelling and climbing skills with the appropriate equipment. But training and practice is imperative, so it is down on the list a ways. If one does a lot of mountaineering or caving, it is a skill that is needed and would be higher in the priority list.

“Those are the basics. Once you have them, you start over, adding quantities and options in each of the categories. And then expand to other items needed for specific circumstances.

There will be things you think of that I haven't since they don't apply to me or I haven't encountered in my life.”

Jerry watched as Trish continued to type for some time without looking up at him. Finally she moved her hands from the keyboard and worked one against the other. “Haven't done this much typing in a long time.”

Looking chagrined, Jerry said, “I'm sorry. I should have just given you the lists and text and gone over it with you.”

“Well... that would have been nice, I suppose. But I can guarantee you I wouldn't have remembered as much as I do putting it in the computer myself. By the way. Did you know you talk about this like you were giving a lecture in a school.”

Jerry colored and didn't know what to say. Quickly Trish put her right hand on Jerry's. "I didn't mean that in a negative way. It's just you pack a lot of information into very few words."

"Oh. I see. I guess I do go into teaching mode when I have someone willing to listen. Though the ranks are growing, preppers are still a tiny minority and there aren't too many people willing to listen to advice. In trying to get the message out, I try to package it as tightly and compact as I can while still getting the information over."

"Well, I can tell you that a lot of this is already sinking in. I'm getting ideas already. And I already realize there is so much more to know."

Jerry agreed. "Yes. But I think that is enough for now. I want to get home before the storm hits full on. And you'll need to think over some of what is on this thumb drive. It covers what I was telling you, and gives a list of specific items and locations where they can be found."

"Oh. And I need to know if I'll be training the others or just you and then you train them."

"Definitely you training them and me. I'll try for a get together for Saturday. Is that okay?"

"Sure," Jerry said. "My days are pretty much open. Now I'd better get moving." He stood and began to unhook the computer. There was a flash of lightning and the crash of thunder.

"Okay," Trish said. "You aren't going out into that."

"I'll get a bus. I won't be out in it for long."

"No. Get a cab. And get a receipt. I'll reimburse you Saturday."

“But...” Jerry just couldn’t seem to win an argument. Trish was already calling a cab company.

When she put down the telephone she went over to the desk where she’d placed her purse. “I picked up a prepaid cell phone for you. Call me Friday night and give me the directions to your apartment and I’ll pick you up. I’m going to try to get everyone to go to Tarley’s for the day. He has a small place that might work as the meeting center you mentioned. I’d like you to see it and give your opinion.”

Jerry hesitated but finally nodded and took the phone. “Okay. Just add it to the tab.”

Trish was going to try and explain that she considered it an expense, but kept silent. Jerry looked depressed as it was. He obviously hated to be taking things from anyone. So she said, “Okay.”

There was a honk and Jerry headed for the front door of the house and out into the falling rain.

Jerry worked the next two days, getting current prices and availabilities of a multitude of items. He spent several hours in various major food stores and little mom and pop stores getting prices of common grocery store foods.

He was up early Saturday, ready to go as he and Trish had arranged by phone the evening before. Making sure he had the money he had left, and the laptop and extra thumb drive, Jerry was ready when Trish pulled into the apartment building parking lot.

Jerry looked the vehicle over as he approached. The beautiful British Racing Green Jaguar looked ready to pounce. Jerry walked over and put his computer bag behind the passenger front seat, sat down, and buckled in.

“Nice car,” Jerry said.

Trish looked over and smiled. It was a genuine complement and not the put down she sometimes got for driving such an expensive and luxurious car.

“Yeah. I like it.”

Jerry's glance had taken in the tight blue jeans and form fitting blue cotton shirt. Trish's hair was loose and flowing rather than in the bun he'd seen her in before.

“I'm glad you were up to getting this early of a start,” Trish said as she maneuvered up off the city streets and onto a thoroughfare. She handled the responsive car well. She did push the speed limit a bit, Jerry saw. They were only passed a few times and passed hundreds on the way to the Tarlley's.

“Is Tarlley a first name or last?” Jerry asked.

“First. His last name is hard to pronounce. And long. He hails from a long line of Spanish royalty, according to his family tree. I think he plays it up some, but he is a good guy. Though he can get a bit jealous. His wife is a real Spanish beauty. She's perfectly happy and in love with Tarlley, but when he sees someone try to hit on her, he goes into that Royal Protector mode. Makes it very clear that Carmalita is his wife.

“I don't know what he is going to be like when their daughter, now five, grows up. I wouldn't want to be a guy wanting to date her.”

“Well, there is no problem from me. I've pretty much sworn off women. No offense.”

“None taken.” But Trish looked over at Jerry for a moment before putting her eyes back on the road. “I take it you've had a bad experience...”

“Rather not talk about it. But yes. Very bad.” Jerry looked out the side window and went silent.

Trish decided she'd better do the same. Curious, but not too invasive. She could wait. Guys always wound up telling the sad tale.

Jerry sat up straighter and began to survey the area they were passing through. No longer structure on top of structure, this area was much less densely populated. There were even front and back yards that required mowing more than ten minutes. Even the occasional place with an acre or more of ground.

“Tarlley lives in that tan Mediterranean house over there,” Trish said, pointing to a rather low, sprawling house surrounded with manicured lawn. He thought he saw the signs of a fountain in the open atrium of the house.

“That looks like a beautiful place.”

“Oh, it is. You can't see the pool from the road, but there is a large in-ground pool with pool house and a huge outdoor kitchen for entertaining. Tarlley doesn't throw parties very often, but when he does, it's a humdinger.”

Jerry smiled. He continued to check over the surroundings as Trish maneuvered off the thoroughfare and down onto the city streets. A few minutes later and they were pulling up to the three double wide doors of the garage. There was a parking area that didn't block the garage, with two vehicles in it. Trish pulled in next to them.

“The Ford mini-van is Madge's, and the Chevy Sidekick is Joanie's,” Trish told Jerry as they got out of the Jaguar. Walking up to the gate in the atrium wall, Trish added, “Tarlley has four cars, a boat, and a motorhome. That six car garage is full, but with enough space for him to work on them himself. He has all the tools.”

“Trish! So good to see you again,” said the tall, bronzed skinned man that opened the gate. His hair was jet black and combed carefully back and the moderate length tied up in a ponytail.

He looked at Jerry and extended a hand. “You must be Jerry. Our expert. Welcome to my home. I am Tarley del Ontiveros de Zaragoza.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jerry responded, with a very slight, but perceptible bow that was more of a slight nod. The heel click was muffled with the hiking boots he had on, but Tarley saw it and smiled.

“Come in, come in! Out of this heat!” Tarley held the gate open and Jerry waited for Trish to go through before he did. The tall walls that formed the atrium with the ell shaped house were covered with glazed tile. And with the set of fountains in the center of the atrium, it was fully twenty degrees cooler inside than outside the walls.

But they passed the fountains and entered the house proper. The three women shared cheek kisses and hellos as Tarley and Jerry stood silently by. Trish finally turned around and introduced Jerry to the two women. Madge nodded amicably, but Joanie gave him a good once over. Until Trish nudged her.

“Hi,” Joanie replied then, taking Jerry’s proffered hand. “You’re looking pretty good for a guy with a broken back.”

Jerry had to smile at her youthful enthusiasm. “Well on the mend. I’ll be back to my old self in a few weeks.”

Joanie didn’t say anything else, but Madge finally spoke. “Are you sure we need all this... survivalist... prepper... nonsense?”

Trish started to protest, but Jerry spoke first. “Not at all. I don’t do the ‘survivalist’ thing. I’m a prepper and that is what I’m here to teach. To those that want to learn. Participation is strictly voluntary as far as I am concerned.”

His voice had been light and level, and all eyes turned to Madge.

“Well... Okay... I guess... Trish really seems to think we need to do this, so I’m game. Up to a point.”

“And I,” Tarley said, ushering everyone into the spacious living room. “Have become more than a little concerned with the way things are going here in this nation and abroad. I count myself lucky that I decided on this house design when Carmalita and I decided to build. We’ve not had a single problem with robberies or invasions, and they are becoming almost commonplace in this area. We are fairly secure here.”

Jerry was nodding. “It is a good design for a house for a prepper. Does it have a basement?”

“Small. Just under the main part of the house for mechanicals and some storage. There is no outside entry.”

Jerry nodded again. “I see you have a pool.”

Tarley smiled and went to the sheer curtains covering one of the windows, to give full view of the large patio and pool. Three more tall walls enclosed the area and there were a couple more fountains running to keep things cool. The outdoor kitchen and seating area were roofed with canvas awnings.

“It is a beautiful place,” Jerry said.

“Not so nearly as beautiful as my wife.” She lived up to the statement when she entered the room. “Carmalita, Mr. Jerry Rastman. Jerry, my wife, Carmalita. Again Jerry did that not quite bow and heel click. He didn’t offer a hand. Carmalita did her own very slight curtsy in acknowledgment.

“Little Anacelia is at a friend’s house for the day. We thought it best so we could concentrate on the lessons Mr. Rastman has for us. Can I get anyone anything before we start?”

There were head shakes all around, so everyone found a seat and the others looked at Jerry. He didn’t squirm, but it was close.

Jerry took a deep breath, let it out, and began to go over the things he’d told Trish, with a bit more detail. And the group had many questions that Trish hadn’t thought to ask the first time, but was glad the others did.

The group broke up for a bathroom break and the light lunch Carmalita had ready for them, waiting in the refrigerator. They ate out on the patio, and were quite comfortable with the fountains and the shade they were under.

All eyes were on Jerry when he got up after eating, and began to look over the house and walls in detail. When he turned around a few minutes later and saw all the eyes on him he reddened slightly. “Just checking a few things... for security aspects.”

“And your observations? Is this a good place for everyone to meet in the event of a disaster, as Trish has suggested?” Tarley was obviously eager for the answer he expected from Jerry.

“It does have merit for everything except violence,” Jerry said, joining them at the table again.

Tarley looked a bit shocked, but it was Joanie that spoke up. “But with these walls! And the whole house! It is stucco! Bullet proof, right?”

Jerry was shaking his head. “No. I’m afraid not. I thought at first the walls were solid concrete block with stucco over them. But they aren’t. They are simply wooden framed walls with a good coating of stucco. Excellent for privacy and to contain the atmosphere comfortable in extremes of heat, and certainly beautiful, but far from bullet proof.”

“I see,” Tarley said. “I gave no thought to bullets when I had the house built. Not so good, huh?”

“Pretty good against fire. And pretty good concealment, so they can’t see what they are shooting at, but can still shoot through randomly.”

“Do you really think we’ll have to deal with that?” Madge asked, looking uncomfortable.

“It is all scenario specific,” Jerry explained. “Might never come under fire, or it could be daily occurrence for a while.”

Madge was shaking her head. “I don’t like the idea of guns.”

“It is everyone’s personal choice,” Jerry said, “as far as I am concerned. It will be up to the group to decide if any weapons are needed or wanted and who has them and doesn’t. I can give advice on what to get for various situations, but the actual selection, if any, will be up to you all.”

“Can we not discuss guns any more now?” Madge pleaded. “I don’t think I want to be part of a military group.”

Jerry looked over at Trish and she shrugged slightly and then said, “We can discuss that among ourselves some other time.

“No atomic bomb stuff, either,” Madge added a bit forcefully, having had the weapons discussion tabled.”

Again Jerry looked at Trish and she shrugged again.

“As you wish,” Jerry replied. All the early stages aren’t too specific to any disaster. “They are the basic needs that apply to everyone. And with that said, the homes will need to have similar set ups. Only when really needed for a wider spread situation would everyone need to meet here. Or some other designated place if this one isn’t suitable.”

“There is so much to take in,” Joanie said with a sigh. “How much money are we talking about?”

“From about one and a half times your current food budget up to as much as you have you want to spend. All of this preliminary stuff is fairly reasonable. The exceptions that I mentioned earlier call for a savings plan if they aren’t immediately affordable. And the needs here for...”

Tarley smiled. “Just call me Tarley like everyone else. I find no insult.”

Jerry smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Tarley. The needs and possibilities here are different from those for Trish, and I assume you and Madge,” Jerry said.

Jerry continued, “I don’t really know what kind of dwelling the two of you live in,” meaning Madge and Joanie.

“Apartment,” Joanie said. “Fifth floor of seven. In building three of nine.”

“So it is an apartment complex then, not just a lone apartment building? A pool or other services?”

“Two pools, one of which is a kiddie pool. Workout gym, an open kind of park area. Pretty small, though. Good for a family or two to picnic. Has two charcoal burners. That’s about it.”

“Has possibilities,” Jerry said. “Mixed commercial and residential or residential zone only?”

“Mixed,” replied Joanie.

Jerry looked over at Madge.

“I have a small house on a small lot in a small gated community. No basement. It is strictly a residential area. It is quiet. I’m not sure I really need to do anything.”

“I see,” Jerry said. “What about hurricanes? Tornadoes? Floods? Blizzards? And any number of other things that could happen?”

Madge frowned. “Well, I suppose. But in the city like I am, there won’t be any tornadoes or hurricanes. They can’t happen in a city the size of New York.”

“Well...” Trish was saying, looking at Jerry.

“That is a widely held belief. I don’t follow it. Tornadoes and hurricanes can happen in and to large cities, New York City included. History has shown...”

“Those were all a long time ago, weren’t they? The ones you were going to explain. Things are different now.”

“It is really a moot point,” Jerry said. “Getting ready for the things you think could happen go a long way to preparing you for things you don’t expect. I believe that just getting the things I listed earlier will do for most of the things you will want to prepare for.”

“Oh,” Madge said, somewhat mollified. “That doesn’t sound so bad, then. I thought you were talking about underground doomsday bunkers and things like I’ve seen on TV.”

Jerry smiled slightly. “Those shows have been a double edged sword. The doomsday angle gets people to watch that might not watch a program about Prepping 101 that doesn’t have massive quantities of food and plenty of guns, and a deep bunker. But they give a misleading impression of what is really needed to be prepared for most things. Preparing for a true doomsday event will be costly, time consuming, and

might never be needed in our lifetimes. Hopefully people will figure that out as they watch those shows.”

“So we don’t need a bunker or anything to survive?” Madge asked next.

“Didn’t say that,” Jerry quickly responded. “You will need one to survive some scenarios. But those are much less likely to occur than situations where you just need to stay home, live on your preps for a few days or weeks, and then get back to normal.”

“Okay. I guess I’m in, then,” Madge said, relaxing significantly.

Trish and the others congratulated her and then looked at Jerry to continue. Before he could, Carmalita suggested they go back inside.

For the next three hours Jerry shared his thoughts and opinions on preparing for the basic human needs that would apply to almost all disasters. Tarlley was gracious enough to print off copies of the information and supply lists that Jerry had set up and transferred to the extra thumb drive.

Madge was the first to leave, citing an early evening appointment, and then Joanie, after giving Jerry and Tarlley effusive thanks for their help left. Trish talked a few minutes to Carmalita, thanking her for the lunch, while Tarlley showed Jerry the basement.

“This has potential for a medium length stay shelter for up to ten people or so, if modified, equipped, and supplied.”

“Ten people... I don’t know, Jerry. Our little group, and including you, of course, would be about all I would want to take in. I know my neighbors and all, and like them well enough, but there just aren’t that many people I would want to have in my house in a crisis.”

“I certainly understand that, Tarley. And don’t figure on me. I probably won’t be around long after the group gets things together and I feel you all are ready for come what may.”

“Oh. I thought you’d be part of the group?”

“I appreciate that,” Jerry said as they approached the front door of the house where Trish and Carmalita were waiting. “But I wouldn’t feel right to take a place that could be used by someone the group feels should be here. I have my own plans, plus I am being paid for the training. I really appreciate the offer, but don’t count on me being here in a crisis. I won’t sign off on the training until I’m sure you can all take care of yourselves and each other, though.”

“Very good, then,” Tarley said, shaking Jerry’s hand at the door.

Jerry gave Carmalita another rather formal nod as a good-bye and he and Trish went out to her car. Jerry looked around at the sky. “Joanie was right. It will storm again tonight.” That had been her reason for leaving when she did.

Both were silent as Trish got the Jag headed back into the heart of the city. But then she looked over at Jerry for a moment. “I think it went fairly well, don’t you? I didn’t expect Madge to be so...”

“Reluctant? That’s okay. Some people just have a hard time with the idea of people practicing violence on other people. And don’t have the background to understand some weather and other natural events. It isn’t a problem. I can’t, and won’t even try, to make anyone believe what I say and suggest. It is up to the individual to make those decisions based on the information I can give them. Information without undue attempts to make them believe something they simply don’t believe.”

“That’s good. I was just hoping for more cohesion in the group. I’ve felt very close to those in this group for a long time.”

“You can never tell about people until some situations develop. You only know for sure when they are tested and the results analyzed.”

“You mean there will be tests on what...”

Jerry laughed. “No. I’m not going to be giving quizzes and tests on the information I’m giving you. I’m talking about some of you facing one of the things we’ve only touched on. Something in real life. Even a power failure due to this storm, for instance.”

“How do you know there is going to be a power outage?”

“I don’t. It was just an example.” Jerry squirmed a bit in the seat.

“Back bothering you?” Trish asked.

“Yes. A little. That’s the longest I’ve gone without a fairly long break. But it was worth it. I think everyone, even Madge, was getting something from the presentation. There will be differences in the degree of acceptance everyone will have about some of the things I’ll be bringing up next.”

“Next week, then?” Trish asked. “At my place, I suppose. I don’t want Tarley to carry the whole load of hosting these meetings. And are you sure you wanted to give everyone your cell number? This group can be pretty inquisitive.”

“That’s good. And I really don’t mind. Even with going over the things I did, there will be questions that they didn’t think of at the time. Giving them specific information and advice on individual purchases is just part of the service I’m providing.”

“Ok then.” It was getting dark and traffic was heavy as the storm blew in. Trish left Jerry to his thoughts, and he did the same for her. When they reached Jerry’s apartment building it had started to drizzle rain.

“Thank you for all of this,” Trish said as Jerry prepared to leave the Jag.

“Quite all right. I feel like I’m getting off easy. Emergency Preparedness is a lifestyle and hobby with me, and I like clueing people in when I can. See you next Saturday.”

“Okay. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.” Jerry grabbed the computer case and hurried to the lobby of the building when lightning flashed and thunder roared as the rain began to come down in sheets.

Well, Why Not? - Chapter 2

During the next week, Jerry continued to put together the additional training materials he would need to get Trish's group up to speed prep wise. It wasn't very physical, but Jerry set up a physical therapy program for himself to bring his back into good shape.

As his back gained strength, he increased the number and difficulty of the various exercises he was doing, up to the point of pain. One thing Jerry learned was he wasn't in shape to go back to any physical job, and even a desk job would be hard on his back if he had to work an eight hour day.

Jerry walked up to Trish's front door and knocked. He wasn't surprised to see Joanie open the door. He'd seen her jeep parked down the street a ways. Madge was there, as testified by her minivan parked near Joanie's Jeep. Tarley was there, too, with Carmalita, but he had no idea which of the many vehicles on the street might be his.

Greetings were extended and accepted and Jerry got right down to the lessons for the day when everyone, even Madge, indicated they were more than ready. But before the lessons began, each of the others reeled off a list of things they'd purchased or otherwise acquired during the previous week. Madge and Trish both had written lists, while Joanie and Tarley just gave the list off the cuff.

"Good, so far," Jerry said. "Everyone did pretty good on the first priority items and I see some second priority, too. And it looks like there were some bargains, too."

Joanie laughed. She was the only one that had done a spreadsheet with the items' information, cost, acquisition date and projected rotation date.

"Basically, everyone just needs to keep up the acquisition plan, and start some training. How much first-aid does everyone have, aside from Trish?"

Everyone had taken advanced first aid course within a reasonable time, and Madge said, "I'm thinking about taking a first-responder course."

"That would be great," Jerry said. "The more medical knowledge in the group, the better off everyone is."

"When do you start?" Carmalita asked, obviously surprising Tarlley. "I think I would like to do that, as well. I worry sometimes about Anacelia hurting herself playing or in an accident and there not being anyone that could help."

"I did not know you had such a concern," Tarlley said. He looked from his wife over to Madge. "Perhaps I should do this course, too."

"Yeah. Count me in. I've already seen one accident that I couldn't help with because I didn't know what to do. I dread the thought of having to help someone, but I hated it that I couldn't that one time."

"That is very good, then," Jerry said, pleased with the universal support of the idea. "With Trish being a full doctor and the rest of you trained as First Responders, a very comprehensive first-aid kit is called for. Particularly heavy on trauma items. If finances allow it, an Only-aid kit would be good, but that is a large investment and really needs a home base to have one set up for maximum usage."

"You do not think our place is adequate?" Tarlley asked.

"It would certainly do in a pinch, but it might have to be abandoned and an Only-aid kit is something you can't carry on your back. It is, in effect, a small home clinic covering many aspects of medical and dental care. It is more of an item for a well-stocked group retreat well away from the major danger areas in a given large area."

"Let's wait on that," Madge said. "I really do not like the idea of leaving the city in a disaster. Especially if we get the medical training. Not only

do I not think it necessary, I think I would want to stay and help. New York City takes care of its own.”

Jerry was nodding, surprising everyone in the group, especially Madge. “Very good point. For most of the disasters, small to medium, that you will likely be exposed to. I was talking the big money disasters I mentioned before that would call for more training and financial investment. Unless there is knowledge of something impending that would require it, getting ready for the smaller stuff first makes sense.

“Priorities change for people in near constant risk of a disaster based on season or simply location. Those with members of a household that have medical issues call for much more medical knowledge and equipment, including a generator system to keep the power on to medical appliances.

“People subject to hurricanes, and especially tornados, need a weather radio right off the bat rather than as a second priority item. Ditto HAZMAT and CBNRE gear if near a nuclear power plant for instance. A good vehicle suitable for evacuation is also called for near a nuke power plant. They are also needed for the low probability, but very high danger of living near an active volcano.

“Those are all low on our lists at the moment, but should be taken into consideration when making the larger or more expensive preps.”

“I get expensive, but why larger?” Trish asked.

“Large means hard to transport easily and quickly. Having everything in one location when they can be split up in various locations for safety can be chancy. Yes, a truck load of food. But not in a lone storage building. Needs to be split up and that means one has to consider the local hazards that could require evacuation on a moments’ notice. Sometimes you might have a few hours or even days. Other things could be minutes to a couple of days. And I don’t think any of you intend to get a semi-truck and trailer to keep stocked and ready to go.”

Joanie grinned. "Might surprise you, but I can drive a semi. My uncle taught me when I was eighteen and looking for a career. Trucking was his."

"Well, we will definitely be getting that warning radio next," Carmalita injected. "And the First Responder training. What else should we be looking for, longer term." She looked over at Tarlley and smiled. "Tarlley provides quite well for our family, but I would like to budget the expensive things."

Sitting beside her, Tarlley rubbed Carmalita's back with one hand. "You give me great credit for what is so easy."

"But true. Jerry?" Carmalita prompted.

"Besides the generator for the homes that can effectively use one there are Precious metals if you decide to acquire them. Ammunition if you intend to get weapons, the retreat property if so desired, a comprehensive communications system, a group BOV if you decide you want to pool some resources to have available somewhere that one of you can get it and go to one of a set of group meeting and staging areas you will probably want to set up."

"Do we really have to spend that much? I don't know what some of it will cost, but it all sounds expensive." It was Madge again, questioning the money.

"Come on Madge," Joanie chided slightly. "Get with the program."

"Only what you want," Jerry quickly reiterated. "I'm just giving some possibilities and options. It is up to the individuals and group as a whole what they want to do."

There was definitely tension in the air. Tarlley broke it effectively when he asked Jerry, "The communications system. That intrigues me. CBs, I think they are called?"

Jerry smiled. "CB has a place in the total system, but there are other radios and bands that really need to be addressed. And a couple of them require licenses. And for Amateur Radio there are a couple of simple tests to get a license to cover a wide spectrum of bands for just about every type of communication one would want. It takes some study, not that much, and you can do practice tests on-line. With that license and the proper radio and antenna, one can talk down the street or around the world at given times on given bands."

"That sounds interesting. Can you get me started on that Amateur thing?" Tarlley asked. "And what about Ham radio. I know one guy that says he is a Ham and talks like that."

Jerry smiled. "Ham is a colloquialism for Amateur Radio."

"Ah! I see! My mistake. Yes. From what my guy says, it is really something useful to know. Like the First Responder training."

"If it is that important, I wish to train, as well," Carmalita said. "We will do it together. It will be easier, like the medical training."

Tarlley looked a bit uncertain for a moment, but smiled and nodded. "Yes. We learn together."

"I think I'd like to do that, too," Joanie chimed in. "My uncle used CB, but he always said he wanted a Ham license."

"The more the merrier," Carmalita said. "That is good, too."

Jerry, Carmalita, Tarlley, and Joanie looked at Madge and Trish.

“Trish was shaking her head. “I don’t think I’ll have the time. Maybe I can pick up some things from the three of you when you’ve completed the training.”

The others nodded, and then Madge spoke. “We can’t all learn everything, though it would be nice, I suppose. But I don’t think the radio thing is for me. I just need to know enough to use one in an emergency. And why can’t we just use our cellphones? The city has an excellent grid.”

“While the phones might still be all right even with an EMP attack, the cell phone infrastructure can easily go down for a variety of reasons for an undetermined amount of time. Some have battery backups, but they would still only last a few hours to a couple of days for the most part. They just can’t be counted on.

“While the other radio services are at risk, they can be set up to minimize that, and backups obtained for key items that we have direct control over, instead of counting on others. There are other alternatives, even for medium range communications. Short range is easy, and long range is going to pretty much be Amateur HF frequencies. But a group like this could probably get a license for a Business Band Frequency in the Low-VHF band.”

At the blank looks on their faces, Jerry quickly added. “Something to be discussed later. We need to work on the basics first, as always.”

The others looked relieved. And it was time for a bathroom break and lunch. Trish, unlike Carmalita, had called a nearby deli and arranged for lunch. The delivery girl was right on time. Jerry took the containers while Trish paid the girl. Joanie helped him set things out on the now cleared dining room table.

After the noon meal, the discussion turned to brand names versus less well known and generic items. Jerry summed it up by saying, “I buy the best value I can find for an item that meets or exceeds my needs. But the

item must always meet those needs. I won't buy something that is 'almost as good but is a lot cheaper' just because of the price. No point in buying something and then adding another piece of gear or replacing the cheap one that didn't do the job expected of it."

"But it would be so much cheaper to buy some of the things from Wal-Mart or something," Madge said.

"You can find bargains, yes. But are they bargains if they don't do the job quickly and easily? Or if they break on the third use and have to be replaced? Or can't be replaced and the job must be done without that particular item? Personally, I don't think so," Jerry replied.

"What about army surplus?" Tarley asked. "You mentioned LBE, load bearing equipment. If it works for the army, why wouldn't it work for us? Not just LBE, but a lot of the other things that could be used."

"Much of it will work. But it is designed for an army that has supply lines to replace worn or damaged items. Many of the items, while not throwaways per se, aren't expected to last a whole lifetime. Many things are of an acceptable quality and design, but might not be the best solution to a civilian's needs. Making do isn't a necessarily good thing, though it can come in handy in some situations.

"Take for instance my packs. They are, or were, all Kifaru brand and will be replaced with Kifaru. Because they might just be the very last pack I can get like that if the balloon was to go up the day after I get them. I can't count on a supply sergeant having another pack for me if mine bites the dust for some reason. I can afford to pay significantly more per item than the military can, because they are buying items by the hundreds of thousands and even a dollar more per item for them is millions of dollars out of the budget.

"And while they do have some equipment that I would like to have, it simply isn't available in new condition, and is often higher in price than

new or equal quality commercial simply because it is surplus and some people think that surplus is better, no matter what.

“One of the best examples, though the decision hasn’t been made about them, is using military or military cloned firearms, in particular the M-16 and M4 5.56 rifles and carbines. At the time they were adopted, we were fighting a war in terrain that precluded shots beyond three hundred yards most of the time. So a three hundred yard cartridge was selected in a platform that was to be lighter to carry and feed.

“But the military didn’t get away from the heavier caliber weapons. Those soldiers using the M-16 and now the M-4 were backed up with much more powerful weapons that could shoot harder and farther than the general issue weapon.

“When it comes to preppers, depending on the lighter caliber weapons, without the support of the heavier weapons puts one at much higher risk than needed. There is a need for short range firearms in prepper defense armories, but in general, the more people that have the heavier calibers, the more likely they are to persevere, especially against those that are into the issue weapons clones, due to the range and penetration of the heavier caliber versus the range and penetration of the 5.56. What the 5.56 can do, the .308 can do for the most part, plus the .308 can do much that the 5.56 can’t do.

“The same applies to the 7.62x39 in SKSs and AK-47 clones, and 5.45x39 in the AK-74 clones. Okay for an army. Not the best first choice for preppers, in my opinion.

“For field use, for those that can’t use the heavier caliber rifles well, something in 5.56 makes sense. But for unskilled shooters whose only weapons use will be short range defense, there is another weapon and caliber that does as good or better job than the M-4 clones in my opinion. That discussion can come later, if weapons choices need to be made.

“Now, where were we before I got on the soapbox.”

The other's laughed, even Madge, and Trish said, “Wal-Mart and such. Cheaper alternatives.”

“Oh, yes. Well, I'll just reiterate what I said before. “Go for the best quality you can that meets the needs of the item in question. Consider the fact that it might have to last you the rest of your life, in difficult circumstances, if you wind up needing it.”

From there, they went over Jerry's lists of preferred vendors and specialty items that they'd not covered with the basic Prep 101 items. By the time they were ready to break up and head their separate ways, the shopping lists were completed and each person had the responsibility of getting one or more of the items, making purchases for the group for a given item to get a discount where possible. Everything was to be shipped to Tarley and Carmalita's since Carmalita would be home to sign for it, and they had the space to store the items until the rest could pick up their items the next weekend.

But, fate being a fickle fellow, there was not a single item delivered by Tuesday. And Tuesday was the day that things happened that would have put the ordered items to good use. The only real 'break' was that the group was together to celebrate Anacelia's sixth birthday. Unfortunately, not at the family's home. They were out to Anacelia's favorite pizza place, usually only visited when the family was doing some shopping closer to the city center.

It had taken an incredible amount of persuasion on Carmalita and Tarley's part to get Jerry to join them. He'd been asked to put together a small kit for Anacelia since she wanted to be a part of what she'd been missing, when the grownups had their meetings.

So Jerry was there long enough to hand over the brightly wrapped gift to Carmalita. And just long enough to get caught in the middle of a terrorist

attack. He was about to leave the restaurant, but still had his back to the entrance when a loud boom sounded and the glass in the front of the shop blew inward.

Jerry's back was peppered, as was Carmalita's, with shards of glass, though his body had shielded her from the worst of the explosion. He was thrown into her, but managed to grab her shoulders and catch his balance before knocking her down.

There were screams from all over the restaurant, as well as outside. "Anacelia!" screamed Carmalita. She dropped the package and worked her way toward the booth where the others were, still calling for her daughter.

Jerry took the moment to grab the package, almost being trampled by the other patrons' mad dash to get out side. He bulled his way toward the booth and found everyone crouched down, partly under the table of the booth. Tarlley had Carmalita wrapped up in his arms, and Carmalita had Anacelia likewise.

Everyone looked scared. Jerry was about to speak when the lights went out. Anacelia and Madge both screamed. The others were close, but managed to not scream, but they all did exclaim.

"Everyone stay calm," Jerry said. He handed Anacelia's gift to Trish in the dim light coming through the shattered windows. "Open that up and get the things out of it."

"My present!" Anacelia cried. "That's my present!"

"I know, Little Miss," Jerry said. "But your present, if you will allow us to use it, could be a very big help right now. It is very important."

Anacelia bit her lip for a moment and then softly asked, "Can I open it first and give the things to you?"

“Of course,” Trish said, handing Anacelia the gift after getting a nod from Jerry.

“I’m going to go check and see what is happening. I advise you to stay right here until I get back. This could be anything. An accident, even.”

“But...” Madge said.

“He’s right,” Joanie said. “He knows what he is doing. Let him do what he thinks would be best.

Madge, trying to get out from under the table eased back. “Okay. I guess.” She looked at Jerry. “You’d better not make this worse.”

Jerry ignored the silly comment while the others just stared at Madge. “What?” She asked. “He’d just better not.”

Sensing there was nothing they could say to convince her otherwise the others turned to watch Anacelia open the package. The first item out of the large box, after the wrapping paper was removed with the help of her mother, was a wind up flashlight. “Wow!” Anacelia said. But she quickly handed it to Trish.

It was getting very dark so Trish wound up the flashlight and turned it on. The beam lighted the pale faces of the group, but there was not another soul in sight in the pizza shop.

“Everyone left,” Madge said. Maybe we should go, too.”

“No,” Tarley said. “Jerry said stay here. That’s what we are going to do. What else is in the package, Honey?”

Another “Oh, wow!” was followed with not one, but two one-half liter bottles of water. She handed them off and dug into the box again. “This says I have to give it to you, Daddy, before I open it.”

Anacelia handed her father the smallish box. He opened it and saw the Swiss Army Knife. "Honey, I think Jerry wanted you and me to learn how to use this together. It is a little too much for you by yourself. Okay? When we get out of here, I promise you can use it, with me helping."

"Okay, Daddy. I guess that is okay. You said Jerry was pretty smart." She next out of the box was a whistle, followed by a small signal mirror. Anacelia handed each item to one of the others in rotation. Except for the next time. It was a bicycle helmet. Carmalita immediately helped Anacelia put it on.

"Here is another one that says Daddy or Mommy should help me with. It she gave to her mother.

"A Bic lighter. Honey, just like your father, I'll help you with this later. Okay?"

"Okay, Mommy." Anacelia was back in the box already. "What's this?" she asked, holding up the P-100 dust mask still in its original packaging.

"That's a mask so you can breathe when there is a lot of dust in the air. I don't think you need it right now," said her father.

So Anacelia handed it off. Next out was a pair of swimming goggles. "Are we going swimming, Daddy?"

"Not right now, Honey. I think those are like the mask. In case of blowing smoke or dust."

"Okay. A packet of tissues. For runny noses, Mommy?"

"That's right."

"What are these?" Anacelia asked, removing two small rectangular plastic packages.

Trish leaned forward and said, "One of those is a space blanket, and the other one is a poncho."

Anacelia's eyes got huge in the light. "I can sleep in space?"

"No, Anacelia," Joanie said with a laugh. "The space blanket is just something to keep you extra warm in cold weather. And the poncho is keep off the rain."

"Oh. Okay. Can I have these now?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at her mother, as she held up two boxes of juice, a packet of trail mix, a packet of jerky, and a small bag of hard candies.

"I think these should wait. They are all part of an emergency kit. You might need them later," Tarley said. Little did he know how prophetic that statement was.

"Wow!" came again when Anacelia picked up a cell phone with a note attached. "What is pre... prepaid?"

"That means it is already paid for so it can be used without having any money," Carmalita told her daughter. "I'll hold on to that for you."

"Okay, Mommy." A rubber change purse was in Anacelia's hand. "But I have money, Mommy." She held up the coin purse to her mother.

"So you do. And a note, it seems," Carmalita said. "A ten, a five, five ones, and some coins, plus a note to taxi drivers to get her home and they will receive a reward."

A zip-lock bag with a pair of warm gloves and a knit cap came next. It had a note on it, too. "Add underwear," Anacelia said and handed off the bag to Trish.

“What’s this?” Anacelia held up a small bottle of gel and a round plastic case with some white paper in it.

“That is toilet paper and Purell hand sanitizer. To clean your hands when there isn’t any soap and water.

“That’s smart,” Anacelia stated and reached into the box again. “Wow! My own first aid kit! I know you said we were getting a really big one! I have one of my own, now. But it is a little one.”

“That’s good,” Tarley said. “Just what you need for scrapes and bumps.”

“Yeah. I get bumps a lot,” replied Anacelia. She looked at Trish, Joanie, and Madge. “I fall off the swing sometimes.”

The others smiled at the matter of fact statement.

The rest of the items didn’t really interest Anacelia at the moment. ID cards, city map with home and relatives’ addresses marked. A list of safe houses and number for a taxi company.

Finally a small back pack came out of the box and Anacelia said, “That’s all. Wow! I like this present.”

Tarley helped Anacelia put on the back pack at her urging. Most of the things went back into it, except for the flashlight and whistle. “Put this around your neck, Ana,” Carmalita said, handing her the whistle and lanyard. If you get lost, you blow that every so often until someone finds you. Okay?’

“Okay, Mommy.”

Suddenly, from the darkness outside Jerry’s strained voice came to them. “Carmalita, could you take Anacelia somewhere in the back for a few

minutes. And Tarley, I could use a hand. And whoever has the flashlight, keep it pointed the other direction.

Trish and Carmalita both hurried to do as Jerry asked, and Tarley hurried forward to join Jerry. Tarley gasped when he saw Jerry half supporting, half carrying a New York City police officer.

Tarley took the officer's other side and they carried him to a table near the booth the three women were at. "Trish. Could you see what you can do? I'm going to find the place's first aid kit."

It took only a few moments with the flashlight for Trish to determine that the officer was a candidate for the morgue and not a doctor. The man lifted an arm and his hand gripped Trish's sleeve weakly. "Get out while you can. Get out. They are killing everyone." The man's hand slipped and Trish felt for a pulse. There was none. The police officer was dead.

Jerry came hurrying back, but slowed, and his shoulders slumped. "Too late?"

"Way too late," Trish said. She made sure the dead officer's eyelids were down and then turned to Jerry. "It would have taken a trauma team to save him, and perhaps not then. What is going on? Did you find out?"

"Did he say anything before he passed?" Jerry asked.

It was Tarley that replied. "Just to get out. And that 'they' are killing everyone. Who is they? And what are we getting out of?"

"I was hoping he could explain further. But when I found him, he was already almost out of it. But here goes:

"Some defense agency got word that there was going to be an attack on New York City this evening. But they didn't know what or exactly where. Officer Creyton there got instructions to start clearing the streets

and to move everyone toward their closest perimeter of the City. And not to use the subways. They were being shut down. This was not long before I got here.

“Creyton had just started working the area to our west, getting people moving when the explosions were set off. He told me there was a whole ring of devices... dirty bombs... set off, and we’re in the middle of it.”

“Dirty bombs! That’s radiation! I saw it on TV!” Madge was close to hysterical.

“They are dirty bombs, but their range is limited. In a large circle around the financial district.”

“But we’re not that close to the financial district!” Joanie said.

“Yeah. But we’re still inside the circle. And according to Creyton, there are either terrorists, or foreign troops inside the ring, too, and they are just killing everyone they run across.”

“But why?” Madge asked. “Why would they do this? And who is it?”

Jerry was shaking his head. “Creyton didn’t know. Only to get people away from the financial district. And to expect running into armed perpetrators. Which he did. He said he’d just turned a corner several streets away and half a dozen uniformed men opened fire on him. He went down and was apparently unconscious because they didn’t finish the job, but kept going the way they were heading.

“He was up, trying to use the radio when I found him. The radio wasn’t working. Or, at least, no one was answering. He told me what I’ve told you, as I helped him back here. I ran across several bodies a couple of streets over.”

“So we’re trapped here because of you!” Madge cried. “We could have gotten away if you hadn’t told us to stay.

“Some of those bodies came from here. Recognized one woman that was wearing a tiger print dress, and saw the uniforms of a couple of the servers here.”

“I saw that woman in the print dress,” Tarley said. “And she is dead now?”

“Very,” Jerry replied. “It looked like they just cut them down as they were running away.”

“But we might have made it!”

“Yes. Might,” Jerry said. “But I wasn’t going to risk any of you without knowing what was going on. We’re alive and we’re together and have at least an idea of what is going on. Why, now. I don’t know why. But there is a reason. So we need to get out of here and head for the nearest gap between two of the dirty bombs.”

“No. We’re safe here. You said so yourself,” Madge insisted.

“We were for a while. The perps are headed in this direction apparently. I don’t know why they want everyone dead, but they don’t seem to be taking any prisoners. Creyton said he heard mostly foreign languages being spoken by the group that got him. At least two different languages, neither being Spanish or English, but he didn’t know what.”

“So we need to gather up some supplies and get ready to go. Water, mostly. And a large knife or two from the kitchen.”

“Why the knives?” Madge asked.

“So far I haven’t seen any signs of the perps messing with the women, but it is a high probability. I thought you all would feel better with at least something in hand to protect yourselves with.”

“Oh.” Madge paled significantly.

Jerry was stripping the equipment off the dead officer and strapped the belt around his own waist, adjusting things to ride on his slimmer body.

“Come on,” Tarley said to Joanie, Madge, and Trish. We’ll get to the kitchen and get Carmalita and Anacelia.” He looked at Jerry. “You’ll be where Anacelia won’t have to see the officer?”

Jerry nodded. “Go around the other side of the register. I’ll be just out front keeping a watch. And once you get close, douse the light and let your eyes adjust to the darkness. There is a moon out and we’ll be able to see well enough to move slowly.”

Heading back to the front of the restaurant, the others headed for the kitchen, getting Carmalita, who was frantic with worry, and Anacelia. Trish took Anacelia by the hand and let Tarley quietly explain to Carmalita what was going on as they trailed along to the kitchen.

Trish wound up the fading flashlight and the group moved through the kitchen. Joanie turned off several of the stove burners, which were still burning. Apparently the natural gas was still on. It was a tossup which of the women had the largest knife. Tarley had taken a large cleaver, and made sure Carmalita had two big knives, one in her hand and one in her voluminous purse.

Anacelia was wide-eyed at their preparations. “Do I get a knife?” she finally asked.

“No, Sweetheart,” Tarley said, squatting down to talk face to face with her. “They are too big and you’re too little. This is a very serious situation and Mommy and Daddy need you to come along quietly and quickly. Okay?”

“Okay,” Anacelia said, her eyes on the floor.

“We ready?” Trish asked.

When everyone nodded Trish turned off the flashlight. Madge gasped, and Anacelia squealed just a little bit. But the light hadn't been that bright, and their eyes soon adjusted enough for Tarlley to lead them out of the kitchen. There was more light in the rest of the restaurant, from the moon, and they had no trouble getting to the front door.

“Okay,” Jerry said softly.

Before he could continue a dismayed Anacelia whispered to him, “They won't give me a knife. They all have knives. You gave me a knife. Would you tell my Daddy to give it back to me?”

“Little Miss, you don't need a knife. I have a special job for you though, that is very important.” Jerry went to one knee.

Anacelia's eyes widened in the soft moonlight and Tarlley and Carmalita looked a bit worried.

“We adults have to be on the lookout for some bad guys and other things so we don't trip and fall. What I need you to do is hold onto your mother's hand, nice and tight, and follow along quietly. But every little bit I want you to look behind us, because we'll be looking forward. If you see any lights or any person, you tug on your mother's hand and whisper to her what you have seen.”

Anacelia's head quickly turned and looked behind them. She looked back at Jerry and whispered, “Okay. Is it really important?”

“It is very important,” Jerry replied. “You have to watch out for us the way we watch out for you and each other.”

Anacelia nodded firmly. “I will watch my very best.”

“Excellent,” Jerry said then and stood up. “Whispers only and a couple of hand signals,” he told the adults. Anacelia was already watching their back trail. “A closed fist means stop immediately and wait for another instruction. A wave of a hand forward means come forward. That should be enough for this little jaunt. Ready?”

There were nods all around and Jerry turned and started off slowly down the sidewalk. It wasn't long before they found a car in the middle of the street, empty, but with the doors open. “Wait!” Madge said.

Jerry stopped and went into a crouch. He turned around to see what had caused Madge to stop and speak.

“We can take that car! Get out of here real fast!” She was breathing hard, nearly hyperventilating.

“No,” Jerry said. “We can't do that.”

“Well, why not?” Madge asked, her voice rising slightly.

“Nothing is running,” Jerry said, his head on a swivel, keeping an eye on everything. “I think there was some kind of EMP device used, too. Power and everything else electric or electronic has quit working.”

“But...”

“Madge,” Jerry said softly. “I'll get you out of this if it is humanly possible. But you need to follow my instructions. I know what I'm doing.”

“I don't like it,” Madge said, but followed it quickly with, “Well then, let's go. We need to get out of this place.”

Jerry lined the group out again, staying close to the buildings lining the street. It was some time before they saw a body. When they did, Jerry

lifted a hand and made a fist. Everyone stopped and huddled against the side of a building.

“Okay. The perps have been through here. Could be anywhere. We have to take it very quietly and slowly. We’ll find a place to hole up so I can check things out again.”

“What is wrong with that lady?” Anacelia suddenly said, pointing to the body in the street.

“Oh, Sweetheart!” Carmalita said, drawing her daughter close to her. “That is a dead person. Killed by the bad guys. That is why we have to be so quiet and careful.”

“Oh,” Anacelia said. “I don’t like dead people.”

Jerry didn’t wait any more. Anacelia was doing just fine. He stopped at every corner to take a look around it before leading the group further. But when he came to a much taller building than the others in the area he stopped and carefully checked for signs of the perps. Seeing nothing he ushered the others inside and took the flashlight from Trish. With one hand shielding the beam, he looked around the lobby of the building. Moving forward again, slowly, he opened the occasional door until he found a room he liked. A women’s bath room.

“Okay,” he said. “Looks safe enough. I want everyone to take a break. Go to the bathroom, get a drink of water. I’m going topside to look around. Try to find the best path out of this circle.”

“Can I go?” Anacelia asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. I need you to sit by the door, open just a crack, and watch for me to come back. If you see anything or anyone else, let the door close quietly and tell your Father.”

The “Okay” came quickly and quietly. “I’m the lookout again, aren’t I?”

“That’s right,” Jerry said. Then he was gone. Anacelia went to the bathroom while the others waited, and then the others went, one at a time, using the flashlight to see by.

“How can he see in this dark?” Joanie asked Trish.

“I don’t know. He said once he had good night vision. And once when he took his wallet out he also took out a little bitty flashlight. I guess he keeps it on him all the time.”

That was, indeed, what Jerry was using to climb the stairs to the top floor of the five story building. He only turned on the light every so often, to check on where the next landing was, climbing in total darkness the rest of the time.

Jerry was a bit winded, and his back was bothering him by the time he made it to the fifth floor. It took him a few minutes to find the roof access. But when he did, he climbed out and took a turn around the roof in the bright moonlight.

Though he couldn’t hear the shots, he saw the telltale muzzle flashes of small arms weapon fire. He also could see the four of the spots devastated by the dirty bombs. Then he squinted and watched for a long time as a string of vehicles, their lights on, traveled in the otherwise dark center of the area.

“They can’t possibly be...” he muttered to himself. But after another look around, Jerry set the line of travel he wanted to take in his mind and headed back down stairs. He barely caught the movement of the bathroom door closing that last inch.

He stopped and called out, “It is Jerry. Everything is okay.”

The door opened and Jerry hurried inside. Trish turned the flashlight back on as everyone looked at him. “Okay. Got the lay of the land. There

is a pretty straight shot out of this ring of fire, starting about three more blocks over the way we've been going."

"Any clue as to what is going on?" Tarlley asked.

"Well, I have a crazy idea, probably quite wrong. But other than it, I haven't a clue."

There was silence for a few moments as everyone looked at Jerry expectantly.

It was Trish that asked, "Well? What is your crazy idea?"

"Any of you ever seen that film... Hm. Can't remember the title of it. But it was the third in the series, I think. Starred... Can't remember his name... Oh. The guy on "Blue Moon" detective show."

"Bruce Willis?" Joanie asked.

"That's it!" Jerry said.

"Are you talking about the "Die Hard" movies?" Madge asked. "What could they possibly have to do with this?"

Jerry looked thoughtful. "The third one, I think. Where the bad guys were going after the gold in the vaults under the financial district buildings?"

"I remember that," Tarlley said. "Very farfetched if you ask me."

"Yeah. That is what I thought too. But think about it. Some terror group, put together by a sovereign nation, commits an act of terror to isolate the place that probably has more gold than Fort Knox. Other countries' gold. They would be able to fund just about anything with the billions in gold that are in those vaults. And believe you me, they would have the means to get into the vaults quick. It wouldn't take hours for each one. But

there are a lot of them, so they do need a considerable amount of time. What better way to get it than a ring of radiation filled with fleeing people and terrorists on the rampage.”

“That is ridiculous!” Madge said. She looked at the others. “I told you he was a crazy guy. We’re not in some movie!”

“No. We’re not,” Jerry said. “It is real life, and if we want to hang onto ours, we need to be on the way again.”

“I’m sleepy,” Anacelia said.

“Here,” Tarlley said, handing his cleaver to Carmalita. He picked up Anacelia and got her comfortable in his arms, her head on his shoulder. “We’re ready.”

Jerry nodded and led the way out of the bathroom. It was a few minutes more before they ran across more bodies. On the street that Jerry had intended to go up to get through the ring. He saw a flash of light ahead and guided the rest into the building they were next to. It was another restaurant. It looked untouched and unoccupied so Jerry led them on into the kitchen.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’m going to keep an eye on that light I saw.”

“You be careful,” Madge said, surprising everyone until she added, “Or you’ll bring them right down on us.”

Jerry didn’t respond but headed back outside the kitchen and then into the street. He found a spot behind an abandoned car, one with several bullet holes in it and three dead people. It was some time before the light shined again. And by its light Jerry saw five uniformed men. And they weren’t searching for survivors to help them.

He jerked a bit when there was a burst of automatic gunfire, a faint scream, and another burst. “Jeez!” Jerry muttered. “Out and out murder.”

Watching a bit more, Jerry verified they were entering buildings to check for people. There were actually two groups he finally decided. Both consisted of three men each and they were leap frogging one another, searching the buildings.

Jerry finally decided they weren't necessarily looking for people. The street they were on contained quite a few businesses. As they got closer Jerry could see they were all carrying large shoulder bags. "Dang! They are just looting and killing everyone they see." Jerry's hand went to the holstered handgun on the dead police officer's duty belt.

The gun was a Glock 19. 9mmP, 15 round magazines. He'd checked the gun when he'd removed it from the officer. The chamber was empty but the magazine was full and there were two additional magazines in a double pouch.

He knew he was a good shot, but he had always used a .45 ACP. Plus he'd never shot the gun, so accuracy was a concern. That meant no long range sniping. He would have to get close and ambush the group with no mercy. He had a few minutes before they got to the restaurant so he hurried inside and explained what was happening and what he planned to do about it.

"I want you all to get ready to make a run for the next street up while I take on the soldiers."

"Isn't there something we... I... can do to help?" Tarlley asked.

"Yes," Trish said. "Throw things. A diversion. Anything?"

"No. I want everyone helping everyone else concentrate on getting to the other side of where the soldiers will be when I open up on them. It should catch them completely by surprise, this being New York City with its gun laws. They won't be expecting anything but a cop, and I won't be operating like the police do.

“Now, make sure everything is secure, and the light is turned off. Come out to the entrance and wait for my signal or you see me go down. If that happens... Well, if you can, grab one of the guns, mine or theirs, and just keep shooting until you get out of range.”

“But...”

“No buts. This is the way it has to go down or we all die.”

“We just hide,” Madge said. She was deathly pale, and shaking. “We can just hide. They won’t see us. Just hide.”

Jerry hesitated, but looked at the others. “Do what you have to. If she stays behind, she will probably get killed.”

Trish nodded.

“Don’t wait too long to get to the entrance. Those two groups were moving pretty fast.” With that, Jerry spun around and hurried back outside, pausing to get a fix on the approaching soldiers. “Dang,” he muttered. They’d moved closer than he thought they would. He took a few deep breaths, drew the Glock and worked the slide quietly to chamber a round. He took one of the spare magazines and held it upright between two fingers of his left hand.

His left then wrapped around the right, gripping the Glock firmly. A few more deep breaths, and then Jerry, at the far edge of the car, stood up and started running toward the soldiers, pausing a fraction of a second to fire two rounds at a time.

It caught the men totally by surprise. Three were down before the rest reacted. Still moving forward rapidly, pausing, firing, and then moving again, he yelled behind him, “Move! Go! Go! Go!”

He caught a glimpse from the corners of his eyes as Trish and the others rushed out of the restaurant and started up the sidewalk. Tarley and

Carmalita each had one of Anacelia's hands and were more carrying her than helping her walk. Her feet only hit the ground about every third step.

Madge was screaming something unintelligible. Joanie and Trish were running, but staying with the other four instead of out distancing them, just the way Jerry knew they could.

The fraction of a second of looking at the group was enough to let one of the soldiers bring his gun up and around. He wasn't pointing it at Jerry, but the group. Jerry slid to a stop and dumped the last five rounds in the magazine into the man.

He dropped the first magazine and slammed home the one held between the fingers of his left hand. Jerry felt the burn of a bullet going through his left thigh. He almost went down, but managed to take two more steps, and fired another double tap at the soldier closest to the group.

The leg gave out, but Jerry managed to control the fall, going into a one knee on the ground stance and sighted carefully on the last soldier standing. It took all his strength and fortitude to get back on his feet and start shuffling up the street, keeping an eye on the downed soldiers.

He saw one, obviously wounded, but still able to try for the rifle he'd dropped when shot. Jerry double tapped him and kept watching the others. He looked up and saw Trish hesitate and start to come back toward him. Jerry motioned her forward and yelled, "Keep going! Keep going!"

Jerry was certain that Trish did so reluctantly, but Madge seemed to be having trouble staying on her feet and she joined Joanie in helping Madge keep moving. He made it two more blocks, falling further behind before blood loss and pain from the wound in his thigh took him down. He wasn't going anywhere else on his own and he knew it.

He crawled over to the sidewalk where a minivan had run up on the sidewalk and into the building. Jerry squirmed around until he was partly under the minivan and as protected as he could get.

Keeping the Glock ready, he pulled the second spare magazine and put it on the sidewalk in front of him. Just before he passed out he saw and heard several helicopters, flying just above the buildings, go by. They were definitely US. "Here comes the cavalry." Then he was unconscious.

Well, Why Not? - Chapter 3

That is where the military assault team found Jerry, twenty minutes later. A call went out for a medic, who called for an emergency evac.

When he opened his eyes Jerry saw the canvas overhead and decided it probably wasn't heaven or hell. "More like a MASH unit," he muttered. He took a quick mental check of his body. Everything seemed to be in place, but with a restriction on his left thigh. "The one I took the bullet in." Another mutter.

A uniformed nurse was suddenly looking down at him. "I see you are awake. How's the pain?"

"Not much pain," Jerry said, analyzing the ache in his thigh where the restriction was. He wiggled his toes. So far, so good. "Nope. Not much pain. Can you tell me what happened. After I passed out, anyway?"

"No idea. They just brought you in with a gunshot wound to the thigh. Nicked a minor artery. Fortunately you were brought in before you bled to death, but it was close."

"I meant the others? Any word on the group I was with?"

"Sorry," the nurse said. "We've been handling casualties from all over. Don't know any details of where you were when you got shot, or anyone you were with."

"Oh. Okay. Hopefully they made it to safety."

There was the sound of a man clearing his throat and the nurse looked around. "I think the detective wants to talk to you," the nurse said and hurried away.

“Jerry Rastman?” asked a man in a suit and tie. He was holding up a badge case and Jerry squinted at the name but couldn’t make it out. Just the fact that it was a NYPD Lieutenant of Detectives.

“Yes...”

“Mind telling me what you were doing with a uniformed police officer’s gun and equipment? A dead uniformed police officer. One...”

“One James Creyton,” Jerry said.

“Yes. You kill him?”

“No, sir, Lieutenant. The bad guys shot him while he was trying to get people to evacuate. I got him to the doctor that is part of the group I was with. There was nothing she could do, she said.”

“Why did you take his gun and gear?”

“Didn’t want it to fall into the wrong hands, plus I perceived there was a need to be armed with what was going on.”

“What was going on?”

“I don’t know for sure. Officer Creyton said, before he died, that he’d been ordered to evacuate his area and then told the doctor to get out and get out fast. That was when I was looking for a first aid kit in the restaurant.”

“So that made you think you might be in danger of your life?”

“Someone shot the officer and was apparently still about, so yes. I didn’t realize the scope of the event until later.”

“Oh, really? And what scope is that?”

“I don’t know for sure. Just speculation on my part. I was hoping you might be able to tell me what went down. And where the rest of my group is.”

“Don’t know anything about a group except what you’ve told me. Doesn’t look good for you right at the moment.”

“I didn’t kill him! I suspect you’ll find, if you don’t know already, that he was shot with an AK-47. That is what the others I saw were carrying. And I’m pretty sure you didn’t find an AK anywhere around where you found him in that restaurant.”

“Perhaps this so called group you keep mentioning can verify your story. Who are they?”

Jerry took a deep breath and released it. “They won’t be able to help. I was out scouting when I found Officer Creyton. He was already mortally wounded when I got him back to the restaurant.”

“Still, I’d like the name of those in that group.”

Jerry hesitated, but none of them had done anything, so he reeled off their names and Tarley and Carmalita’s address, and then Trish’s address. “I don’t know where the other two ladies live.”

“Just what sort of group was this?”

“I was teaching them how to prepare for disasters.”

“Survivalists, you mean. People out to bring down the government.”

“No!” Jerry said adamantly. “Preppers. People just wanting to learn how to get by during natural disasters and such. Something like what has just happened, too. Only they just had a few hours of discussion and haven’t received any of the supplies ordered. Not that they would have done much in this situation, it being in New York City.”

“I take it by that you mean no illegal guns.”

“No guns, period, seems like.”

“So you wanted a gun for your own protection and took it after you killed Officer Creyton.”

“I think perhaps I should get a lawyer before I answer any more questions.”

“Why would you need a lawyer if you are innocent?”

“You keep implying that I killed the officer and I didn’t. I used his equipment to protect myself and the group from whoever those terrorists were.”

“Tell me what you know about terrorists. How do you think it played down? Don’t need a lawyer for that, do you?”

Jerry hesitated, but with the spirit that most innocent people have to cooperate, decided to tell the detective what his thoughts were.

“A series of dirty bombs, around the financial district. Do as much damage as possible and keep people out of the dangerous area based on the radiation. Then bring in some equipment, open up the banks and other financial establishments’ vaults in the area to clean out the bullion known to be stored there.

“Give the US another black eye, terrorism, and get enough untraceable financing to carry on with more terrorist acts. All they have to do is melt down the gold, pour it into new bars, and go from there. Billions of dollars. Makes bin Laden’s finances look feeble.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about this. Perhaps I’d better bring DHS in on this.”

Jerry shook his head. "I did not kill the officer, and I had nothing to do with the attack. It was just an educated guess, based on some of the things I saw, and what officer Creyton told me. It is just a theory. You haven't said if I was correct or not."

"Not my place to say. Now, let's go over things again..."

"Sorry, detective. Not without a lawyer this time."

"Think that will help?"

"It sure can't hurt. You're ready to try, convict, and execute me for something I didn't do."

"You'll be hearing from me," the detective said, closing the notebook he'd been using to write down whatever it was he was writing down. "The staff here has orders to not let you leave without my okay. We'll get to the bottom of this, and if you are involved, you'll pay the price of killing one of my compatriots."

Jerry just looked at him until the detective left. When Jerry moved his leg he groaned. Now his back and leg were both hurting. He waited for a nurse to approach. She was checking each patient's IV bags, if they had one.

"Any chance of seeing a doctor to sign me out?"

"See a doctor, perhaps. Sign you out, no. It'll be at least one more day before you can get around with that leg, even with a walker. A wheelchair, perhaps, if you can arrange for one."

"How about something for the pain?"

"I'll get the head nurse over to evaluate you."

It wasn't the head nurse that came over, it was a doctor. She was wearing captains bars. "So. Pain meds wearing off?"

Jerry nodded. "Not just the leg. I had serious back trouble recently, and everything that has happened has aggravated that."

"I see. You are in pain now?"

"Yes."

"Level, zero being no pain and ten the most intense pain you can imagine?"

"Only about 5, I guess, but it is constant in the back and throbbing in the leg."

"I'll have the nurse increase the drip slightly."

"Thank you. Can you tell me what happened? The detective that was here thinks I murdered a police officer."

"Don't know anything about that. You were brought in here by lead elements of a response force for terrorists on the ground. The bullet nicked a small artery and took a chip out of the left femur. You just need time to heal, with no use to speak of with the leg. Where you take that time is up to others. I'll care for you here. But there are many wounded, from the explosions, radioactive elements, and gunshots. As many or more dead than just injured. I'd say you were a lucky one. I have to see other patients."

Jerry sighed and nodded. Seemed like everyone considered him bad news. Thankfully another nurse did come by, adjusted the drip for the pain medication, and noted it on his chart at the foot of his bed. She never said a word.

Rather than worry about things he was unable to do anything about at the moment, he let the pain medication relax him into sleep.

He had no idea how long he'd slept, though it was again dark. He also didn't know what woke him up. "Must be feeding time," he decided when he saw the other patients in the ward having a meal. But that was before he knew someone was behind his head, doing something to the bed and IV support.

"I'll have this loose in a minute, Mr. Rastman. Get you out of here and into a civilian hospital. You're being transferred."

Jerry started to ask about the detective's orders to keep him where he was, but didn't mention it, just in case there was a screw-up and he was going to be able to get out of the place, in mostly one piece.

But there was the detective standing at the doorway in the air supported tent. He was frowning, but let the nurse push Jerry through the door without a word. A civilian ambulance was waiting, and the two attendants took over, moving him from the military gurney to the one the ambulance carried. Jerry barely grunted. The IV was transferred, the driver of the ambulance got in front, and the other climbed in back and closed the rear door.

"How you feeling, dude? Pain okay? Breathing okay?"

"Yep. Pain has faded since they upped the meds. I don't know what they are giving me."

"I do," said the attendant. "We'll have you to the hospital in a while. The closest ones are taking the worst cases and the ambulatory and semi-ambulatory are being farmed out to hospitals further away from the attack site."

"Does anyone know what happened? I saw some terrorist..."

“Yeah. Bunch of them. They got stopped in their tracks just before they got away with all that gold. Media, through the military, was showing some of it on the air. Pallet after pallet after pallet of bright, shiny, gold.”

Jerry saw the wistful look on the attendant's face. “Gold fever. Probably going on all over the place,” he thought to himself. His stomach was growling and he was anxious to find out what had happened with the others. He thought they'd made it past the terrorist okay and it was a straight shot then to the police and military cordon lines.

The motion of the ambulance, having to go slowly due to the heavy traffic, put Jerry back to sleep with the help of the last of the IV bag of pain killer. He woke again when the ambulance stopped.

Groggy now, coming down off the pain mediation, Jerry looked around. He was hustled inside, into an elevator, and then down a hall to a room. The hospital nurses helped the ambulance crew transfer him to another gurney, settled him in, unhooked the IV, but left the access in the back of his hand, and then left.

He really didn't want to be a bother, but he needed to go to the bathroom and get something to eat and something to drink. He finally pressed the call button. A nurse came in almost immediately. “What do you need, Mr. Rastman?”

“Bathroom, water, and food in that order.”

“It is past meal time, but I'll see what I can do. The ParaMedics said you missed it but you looked out of it. Wasn't sure you were up to eating. How's the pain?”

“Not too bad. I think I can get by with something besides whatever I was being given before.”

“Good sign. Okay. I’ll see about the food and water and send in a male orderly to help you to the bathroom.” Jerry nodded and eased back. He didn’t want the pain to start up again.

Jerry was back in the bed when the nurse came in with a tray, which had a pitcher of water, cup, and plate of food.

“That was fast,” Jerry commented.

“Yeah. Patient down the hall didn’t want it. Don’t worry, it was never opened.”

“I wouldn’t care,” Jerry said, taking the cup of water the nurse poured. He drank it down in one long swallow.

“You carry on by yourself now?”

“Yes, I can. Thank you. Oh. I hate to be a bother,” Jerry said, looking up at the exposed cables and mount for a TV screen. “No TV?”

“I’m sorry. It went out this morning. Maintenance hasn’t had a chance to bring another in. Everyone is quite busy with the attack and all.”

“That’s okay. I’ll find out what happened eventually.”

The nurse looked at him curiously, but he was already digging into the mashed potatoes and gravy beside the meatloaf.

When he finished the food, and half the pitcher of water, Jerry pushed the tray back, laid back, exhausted now, but only in a slight amount of pain. A level he’d dealt with before by just ignoring it. Jerry was asleep. Just before a nearly frantic Trish opened the door of his room. She stopped, looked at Jerry in the bed, and slowly backed out.

But the next morning, Jerry was awake, eating breakfast, feeling better than he had in some time when a knock came on the room door and Trish followed the sound into the room.

“You’re all right! The others? Everyone made it, didn’t they?”

Trish could see the apprehension in Jerry’s eyes. He felt totally responsible for the group, though he was just as much a victim as the rest. Even more so, having taken on six heavily armed terrorist with only a handgun.

“They’re fine,” Trish said, moving over to the chair beside the bed. “They are waiting for me to see how you are before the nurse will let them in. What about you? I can’t believe how you have been treated. That Lieutenant of Detectives was just infuriating. We all tried to tell him you brought that poor officer to me to help him, but he just wouldn’t believe us. I finally threw my weight around, with my position in the morgue. We’ve all been trying to get in to find you. We were so worried.”

Jerry saw the tears and wondered why they were there. Then Trish sort of explained. “I was so worried. I got you into this and...”

“No, no, no, no,” Jerry said. “It was a matter of being in the right place at the right time. I’m glad I was there. I can’t imagine what would have happened if I hadn’t been able to help. No offense, Trish, but that would have been a lot worse if I hadn’t been there. You and Joanie, might have made it out if you’d gone on your own, but you would have stayed with the others, and they, honestly, didn’t have a clue.”

Trish dried her eyes and sighed. “Yes. I know. They know. And they are determined to learn everything they can to you so they will be in a position to handle something like this if... when... it happens again.”

“Hopefully you’ll never have to face something like this again in the future, alone or with a group.”

“But it made me realize that I was just playing at becoming prepared, before. Hurricanes, and tsunamis, and tornados, and earthquakes... Those disasters pale compared to some other things.”

“Very true. But learning to prepare for them, like you are doing, will go a long way to getting you prepared for some, hopefully no nukes or terrorists, things that might happen the way things are going on around the world.”

Trish was nodding. “We were talking about that earlier. And speaking of the others, I should go get them. I know you are getting out this afternoon, but we all wanted to see you. Is it okay to bring them up?”

“Sure,” Jerry said. “But... Just tell them there is no need to fuss over me.”

Jerry finished up his breakfast and rolled the tray away and then adjusted the sheets and blanket, tucking the pillows behind his back. A tingle of pain, but nothing like before. He would be able to get around fine, at least he would if his leg didn't hamper him too much.

The door flew open a few seconds later and Anacelia ran in. Jerry noticed that she was wearing her back pack. “Wow, Mr. Rastman. Were you really shot?”

“Sure was. I recommend you avoid it.” The adults smiled when Anacelia giggled. “I certainly will. I have my BOB. We ate the food, but Daddy bought some more and some more water. Do you need some?” Anacelia sounded hopeful.

“No, Little Miss. I just had breakfast. But thank you very much. The present is from your mother and father. I just helped them pick things up.”

"I know. But I still think it came from you. They don't even have BOBs yet. They wouldn't know what to put in one."

"Careful Ana," Carmalita said when Anacelia bumped against the bed. "Come back over here with us and let the others see how Jerry is doing."

Joanie immediately gave Jerry a tight hug, as best she could, making sure not to twist his body. "Thank you," she said and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "And as soon as you are ready, I am ready to make a BOB. And I want to learn to shoot, too."

Joanie stepped back and Madge stepped forward. But she didn't try to hug Jerry or give him a kiss on the cheek. She simply said, "I'm sorry. And thank you."

Then it was Carmalita. She stepped forward and took Jerry's free hand. "You are a remarkable man, Jerry. Thank you so much for what you have done for us." She squeezed his hand and he squeezed gently back. She then slipped her hand free and stepped back.

"You saved my family, sure enough," Tarley said. This time it as a firm hand grip and two quick shakes. "I'll forever be in your debt. Whatever you need, anything, and just say to Tarley, 'I need this,' and it will be yours."

"Thank you, Tarley. I was only doing what anyone with my background would have done," Jerry said. "You don't owe me anything. I was glad to do it."

"I understand your reluctance. But the offer stands," Tarley added, smiling. "Now, as soon as you are able, I would like to pick up where we left off in the training. And I would very much like to learn how to protect my family from such a thing happening again. I was not thinking I would want a gun, but seeing the devastation and killing that went on when innocents are unarmed, and the criminal is armed, I wish to learn the use and care of firearms."

“You can count me in on that,” Carmalita said, slipping her arm through her husbands.

“Me, too!” Anacelia said firmly.

Tarley frowned, but Jerry winked at him. Tarley nodded and smiled.

Suddenly Joanie, looking thoughtful, asked Jerry, “If you were going to move... You know... Get out of the city, where would you go?”

“You thinking about relocating?” Madge asked. “Surely something like this can’t happen again.”

“True,” Trish said. “But with the way things are going, and some things that Jerry has told us, and I’ve been watching the news with a careful eye, I’m considering it, too.”

Madge shook her head, looked over at Jerry again, and said, “Again. I’m sorry. And thank you. But you people are not thinking rationally. New York City is the greatest city in the world. They simply won’t let this happen again.”

“But what about...”

Madge waved a hand in the air indicating she didn’t want to hear it, turned on one heel and walked out of the room.

“Wow!” Joanie said softly.

Trish, a touch of anger in her voice, told Jerry, “I’m sorry about Madge. I had no idea she was so...”

“It’s okay,” Jerry said, cutting Trish off. “Everyone is entitled to an opinion, and Madge made hers clear. That is simply all it is. I just hope my presence doesn’t ruin you friendship with her.”

“I don’t know.” Trish looked doubtful. “She made it pretty clear that she included all of us in the ‘not thinking rationally’ group. She may want to distance herself from us. Or so my psychology training tells me. Too many bad memories now, when we’re together.”

“It is a shame,” Jerry said.

“Her choice,” added Joanie. “If she wants to continue her friendship now, with my new awareness of preparedness, fine. If she doesn’t, that is fine too.”

“I hate to leave,” Tarley said then. “But we must. I must get back to my work, and Anacelia to school. And my beautiful wife is going to begin practicing putting up foods with dehydrator and pressure canner. We need to pick up the equipment we ordered in a little while. Thank you again, amigo. And remember my promise.”

“Thank you, Tarley. And I won’t forget.”

“I have to boogie, too,” Joanie added. “Work awaits me, too. Had to threaten to quit if they didn’t give me time to come down here once Trish found you. I’ll see you at our next training session.”

“Okay. I understand.” With that Joanie left, leaving only Trish.

“I hate to leave, too, Jerry. But like the others, I have to get back to my work. We’re over run at the morgue, as you can imagine. But I’ll be checking on you occasionally. If that is all right.”

“More than all right. I always look forward to seeing you.”

“Really? Enough to see me outside of the training?”

“Very much so. When I get back on my feet.”

Trish was grinning. “In that case, get well soon.”

Jerry was smiling as broadly when Trish left the room. He settled back in the bed, a bit tired from the visit, but as happy as he'd been in a very long time.

Well, Why Not? - Epilog

It was only two more days before Jerry left the hospital, leaning heavily on a cane after the nurse took him outside in a wheelchair after check out. Trish was waiting for him in the Jag. There was no stopping her, Jerry decided, when she made sure he was at the apartment, that there was food in the cabinet, and that Jerry had what he needed for the interim.

A day later Tarley called. "Jerry can you make it down to my business office? I have something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Sure. When?"

"My door is always open to you. Just whenever you can."

"Okay. Tomorrow? About ten?"

Tarley said, "Yes," and hung up.

"Wonder what that is about?" Jerry asked himself, but put it out of his mind. He went back to working on the computer, preparing for the next meeting of the group.

When Jerry arrived at Tarley's office he was immediately shown in. Still using the cane, but with less dependence on it, Jerry walked over to Tarley's huge desk. Tarley came out from behind it and the two men shook hands. "Have a seat, my friend. I have a proposition."

"Proposition?" Jerry asked, taking a seat in one of the visitor chairs in front of the desk.

"I'm intending to begin an enhanced safety program for my company employees. I'd like you to head the department."

“Really?”

“Really. I lost an employee in that terror attack. I heard people talking in the office about what they would have done if they’d been caught in it the way we were and my employee was. They didn’t really have a clue. I want to give them the opportunity to learn the best ways to handle that situation, but more importantly, your average, every day set of minor to major disasters. Trust me. You’ll be well compensated.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say yes, and I’ll get things set up. I’ll do it anyway, even if you decline the job offer, but will just have to find someone else to be the lead on it.”

“Well, I’ll agree, on one condition?”

Tarley nodded.

“It will be a temporary position, until everyone has been trained initially and we find someone to take over the position. I don’t plan on staying in New York City.”

Tarley was smiling. “Won’t be a problem. I plan on moving my headquarters elsewhere, and open up some new territory. You help me decide on the location that will provide me business, in an area that has the maximum advantages for prepping. You’d come along, I hope, and continue as head of the new program.”

Jerry’s eyes widened. “I’ll have to think on it... But, you know, I do have some ideas. I need to talk to Trish...”

“Becoming an item?”

With a smile Jerry replied. “Not yet. But possibly... hopefully, yes.”

“And how does she feel about moving?”

“We haven’t discussed it yet. Haven’t discussed anything, really. But she did say that day in the hospital room that she was thinking about it.”

“Good enough. When do you think you can start working? It’ll take me a week to get things set up in the corporate structure. This is going to be an across the board program. I want to change and add to the corporation by-laws to include prep related circumstances. You’ll be in on the actual set up of the department.”

“I should be ready to go by then. And I have a copy of an old government publication CPG 2-5 about preparedness for businesses. I’ll bring it over Saturday for the training session. It has example by-law wording that might give you a step up on the process.”

“See. I knew you’d be perfect job for you. See you Saturday, then.”

Both men rose and shook hands. Jerry was smiling when he left.

“Well, why not?” he thought.

End *****

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