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You Just Never Know

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You Just Never Know - Chapter 1

March 12, 2002

Freddy “Digger” Jones worked the backhoe controls of the Bobcat A300 with care. For someone with a nickname like Digger, he wasn’t a very skilled heavy equipment operator, but he could make the rental machine do what he wanted if he went slow and was careful. At the moment he was digging footings for his new above ground fallout shelter. The shelter was based on the old Civil Defense Above Ground Double Wall Fallout Shelter found in Civil Defense Publication MP-15.

The first design change was rather than dig the floor down several inches, Digger had hired a contractor to come to the property and do some ground contouring. The center of the lot, where the shelter was to be located, was three feet higher than the rest of the lot, and the shelter floor would be at that level.

Instead of twenty inches of fill between the pair of reinforced, grout filled, block walls that enclosed the shelter space, he would have three feet of fill, plus six inches of foam insulation on the inside of the outside block wall. Likewise, instead of a six inch slab roof covered with twenty inches of earth, Digger had modified the plan further to include a twelve inch concrete roof covered with three feet of earth. The earth would be topped with six inches of foam insulation, a bed of sand, and paving stones laid down.

The shelter was going to be much larger than the original plan, with a veritable forest of columns inside to support the roof. The columns would break up the floor space somewhat, but Digger figured it was worth the trade off to get the extra protection factor and some significant blast protection.

Again, unlike the original shelter design, the roof of the shelter was surrounded by a five foot high wall built the same way as the walls of

the shelter. Prefabricated steel trusses supported by steel posts on the upper deck walls would support a steel panel hipped roof.

Besides the ground level steel doored right angle entry hallway, Digger's plans included both access to the roof, and an escape tunnel that went to the edge of his property. The tunnel would be simple thirty inch masonry pipe going to a concrete box with a metal hatch set just below the ground level. The hatch could be pushed up through the three inches of earth covering with a hydraulic jack kept in the box for that purpose.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 2

September 10, 2003

Digger watched the building inspector drive away. "Finally!" Digger said. Then said it again. "Finally." It had taken a year and a half to get the shelter completed. Part of the length of time was the fact that he had to work on it when he wasn't on his job as Brakeman on the local Winnemucca to Elko, Elko to Winnemucca industrial switch train. However, much of that time had been waiting time for the building inspector to make up his mind on whether the "barn" Digger was building was, first, legal, and second, up to code. It took him two months to decide which code to go by.

The inspector never made Digger change anything, but everything was questioned intensely, and it often took Mr. Jasper a week to get back to Digger with the okay to go ahead with the next phase of building.

Digger was still amazed that the man had never really questioned Digger's calling the structure a barn. Even most of the contractors he had to get to sign off on the building elements before the inspector would check them had few comments about the building.

While he didn't swear everyone to silence, he made a good effort to get the experts from some distance away to check his work, or do the work he couldn't do. The fewer locals that knew about the shelter, the better.

Once it was completed, unless you had a good eye, you wouldn't really notice how thick the walls and roof were, since the interior was as big as it was. The interior was twenty-four feet by thirty-six feet with a ten foot ceiling. Even with the posts, the room looked big, diminishing what visible elements there were to the thick walls.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 3

September 11, 2006

It had been five years since he'd lost his sister and both parents when the Twin Towers collapsed. His parents had finally been able to take a trip to New York to see Digger's older sister. They were in Katie's office when the terror attack took place. They didn't make it out in time.

Digger laid the wreaths on the graves and stepped back. He said a silent prayer for them and then turned away, heading for his truck in the parking lot of the cemetery. Digger checked the spider net holding the tarp in place over the supplies in the back of his 1999 GMC Sonoma High Rider. It was still secure after the three hour trip back from Reno.

He had his hand on the key to start the truck, but folded his hands on the top of the steering wheel and put his forehead on them. It was all he could do to hold back the tears. After a few moments he raised his head, wiped his eyes, and started the truck. It was another half an hour to his home. He was well off the beaten path and took the twin track trail to his property in four-wheel drive, even in good weather. It was mandatory in bad weather.

When he got home, the weather looked threatening so he went ahead and unloaded, carrying everything into the shelter. He'd sort it and put it on the shelves and in the cabinets later. He was tired from the trip and having worked the evening before.

Digger was a member of several preparedness forum sites and one of the other members of one of them had set up two group buys of long term storage foods from Emergency Essentials and Walton Feed. Digger had gone to Reno to pick up his share of the buy. It had been sheer good luck that both orders had come in within a day of each other, and he'd needed only one trip to get everything.

He'd made a side trip to the gun store he frequented in Reno and picked up two more cases of 7.62 x 51 NATO military surplus ammunition that he'd ordered some time ago. Case lots of surplus military ammunition seemed to be getting hard to find. He might have to stop his quarterly purchases and get it whenever it was available. He was only part way to his intended stockpile of ten thousand rounds of the 7.62 x 51 NATO defensive ammunition. He had plenty of .308 hunting and specialty ammunition.

So far shotgun shells and handgun ammunition was still quite available. He'd start buying monthly to stock up on them until he had all he wanted. Digger had put in large orders for both when he was at the gun shop.

With the Sonoma and construction costs of the shelter paid off, and all the overtime he'd been getting the last two years his stocking up plans were progressing nicely. Digger lived a simple lifestyle of work, eat, sleep. And get on the forums. When he was home he had thirteen of them open on the computer, checking each one in turn every so often. Besides the preparedness information and discussion, quite a few people posted news items. With them, and checking the news services on the Internet, he kept informed of world events.

He also had an Oregon Scientific All Hazards Alert radio for local weather and disaster news. Some of his world information came from a Yaesu VR-500 broadband portable receiver, but he didn't listen to it all that much. He had it to use when he wanted to check on things he learned from other sources.

He still had the travel trailer in which he lived while constructing the shelter for appearance's sake, but was actually living in the shelter. He'd included antenna connections for communication equipment, protected against EMP, so he could still have sources of news, hopefully, if the worst happened.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 4

February 4, 2007

September 11, 2001 had started Digger on the path to preparedness. The news stories he saw on the forums kept him on the path. Joint Chinese/Russian cooperative war games. North Korea and nukes. Iran and nukes. India and Pakistan and nukes and long memories. Katrina. The Indonesian tsunami. If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Global warming. Or a new Ice Age. Or both. The scientists couldn't reach a consensus.

At the moment, preparations weren't on his mind. The Super Bowl was being played at Miami Gardens, Florida. Digger didn't follow football much. He didn't even know who was playing this year, but he always watched, primarily for the commercials.

They were as notable this year as previously, Digger decided as the half-time show wound down. He went to the fridge and got a second beer. He limited his alcohol intake, but it just seemed right each year to have a

couple of beers during the Super Bowl.

He'd taken his first sip of the second beer as the teams lined up for the second half kick-off. The bottle was on its way to his lips for a second sip when his hand quit moving. A man was running onto the field from the sidelines. He was holding something in his upraised right hand and he was screaming something.

Police were rushing out to get him off the field. Finally one of the sideline microphones picked up what he was yelling. "Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!" over and over. Just before three police officers reached him the screen went white, and then black. "What the heck?" Digger said aloud, setting the beer aside. A moment later a notice appeared on the screen. Technical Difficulties.

Just moments later the network news room set came on screen. The newscaster was just sitting down. The man's face was white with shock. "It appears that a nuclear weapon has been detonated at the Super Bowl. We will have more information as it comes in."

Digger switched to FOX News Network. The newscasters were saying the same thing. Over and over, in different ways. The one thing that Digger got out of it was that, so far, the incident was the only one that had occurred.

"Well, there was no EMP, so maybe they're right," Digger thought. He watched the news continuously, switching from one news station to another when one would start just repeating itself. There were some views, obviously from a great distance, that showed the small mushroom cloud created by the detonation.

It was total confusion. People were being warned to seek shelter immediately, in case there was another attack. Other broadcasters were taking a wait and see attitude. There was no word from any government official, though many were caught on the way to their offices and

questions called out to them. None responded.

Shortly after nine PM, every news station he checked was broadcasting a text message on a red background. The communications services had been taken over by the federal government, under Presidential Order. Further news about the situation would be released at a later date.

Digger checked the Yaesu VR-500. Lots of chatter about the event, but no real news. Shaking his head, Digger set his alarm and went to bed. He needed to be at the railroad yard at five-thirty the next morning. “If we run,” Digger thought to himself.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 5

February 5, 2007

There was still a news blackout about the attack the next morning when Digger got up. The weather had turned nasty during the night, though Digger would not have known until he stepped outside, except he had a Davis Weather Station that he used to keep track of the weather, in conjunction with the Weather Channel on his satellite TV system. He bundled up in Carhartt Arctic bibs and parka with hood. On his feet he wore LaCrosse insulated pacs. His hands were protected with Galetton Palomino Tempest insulated waterproof gloves.

Despite the cold, the Sonoma fired right up, due in part to the block and coolant heaters plugged into an outside receptacle.

Dispatch kept the train crew informed of the news, which wasn't much. Completing the run in Elko, Digger went to the room he kept rented for the turn around and went to bed early, after a hearty supper. The work had been draining in the foul weather. As had the tension everyone was feeling about the attack.

The rest of the work week was the same. The weather stayed bad, and there was no attack related news broadcast or printed. Digger was glad to be home when he got there the evening of the eighth. A supper of Mountain House beef stew and he went to bed.

Wondering what the news wasn't telling, Digger inventoried his equipment and supplies the next day. It made him feel better during his time off.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 6

February 12, 2007

Things were different the following Monday morning. It was all over the news. There had been additional attacks, at near the same time as the nuke at the Super Bowl. There was one chemical attack, in downtown St. Louis, Missouri. The other attacks were biological in nature, with several herds of dairy cattle in Wisconsin sprayed with what appeared to be Anthrax spores. The authorities were still trying to confirm that for sure.

The St. Louis attack snarled traffic on the Mississippi River bridges in town. They were just now being cleared. There would be no milk or cheese from Wisconsin for some time to come.

And the reason behind the attacks became clear. A video tape of Osama bin Laden was finally shown. The gist of it was that the United States would pull completely out of the Mid-East by April 5 or there would be further attacks. According to the translation the devices, supplies, and people were already in place to carry out the attacks.

The country went crazy with the announcement. People that had never thought about preparing were trying to buy shelters, equipment, and

supplies. Or leaving the country. Passport offices were swamped. Store shelves emptied overnight. Delivery trucks were stopped and looted. Gun stores began a record business until the government ordered them closed and sales of firearms suspended.

On the third day after the announcement, out of curiosity, Digger phoned several of the suppliers he used for preparations. All had recorded messages that they were out of stock.

Millions began leaving the larger cities almost immediately, seeing them as potential targets. Local authorities in rural areas began setting up corridors to allow people to pass through, but not stay in their area. Some simply blocked roads and turned those fleeing back.

Digger decided the crackdown, when it came, wasn't as bad as some had predicted prior to the events now occurring, but it was bad enough. Nationwide Martial Law. Travel restrictions. Many attempts at confiscating guns, though locally, not at the national level. Most jurisdictions quit trying when too many officers were shot while trying to disarm people, having obtained local firearms dealers' Form 4473's.

As time passed, world tensions began to heighten, with the United States warning other nations not to try to take advantage of the situation. The US made no move to pull out of the Mid-East. Instead, intense efforts were made to locate anyone that might provide information on the whereabouts of any of the terrorists and their weapons.

The restrictions about profiling went by the wayside. If you looked, sounded, or smelled like either an Arab or a Muslim, you were questioned, not always gently. Local battles began to be fought between law enforcement and Arab and Muslim communities. Overseas, the Arab and Muslim worlds began to call for jihad in the US. Rather than retaliation attacks for the round up and questioning of Arabs and Muslims, sections of the infrastructure were attacked. It was small scale at first, but as the Arabs and Muslims began to be taken to holding

camps set up all over the US, the attacks became more bold and destructive.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 7

March 5, 2007

March 5 was the day that Iran attacked Israel and US forces in Iraq with nuclear cruise missiles. Israel retaliated against all of its enemies in the region. The UN called for peace. That stopped when the buildings were targeted by a Russian nuclear missile. They were going to side with Iran. The balloons went up all over the world. Everyone with a grudge against anyone else began to attack. Those that only had rocks and sticks used rocks and sticks to attack tribal rivals. Those with nuclear weapons used them on national rivals. Sides were chosen up, and then re-chosen. Global nuclear war, feared for decades, was a reality.

In an ironic twist of fate, only hours before Tehran initiated the nuclear devastation that followed, US soldiers in Afghanistan located Osama bin Laden at his cave complex and destroyed it with three non-nuclear ‘bunker busters’. What he had created on September 11, 2001, finally come back to haunt him.

China sided with Russia and Iran. For a time. And then they attacked both, avoiding the oil fields in each country. Russia didn’t even have to retarget any missiles. They had fully intended to attack China when the US was out of the picture. The hastily organized Chinese forces for invasion of Taiwan, Japan, and Iran were destroyed in their staging areas, which happened to be planned targets for the Russians.

Either Russia, or China, or both, had detonated EMP enhanced devices over the US. Each had used EMP devices on the other.

When the travel restrictions had been put into effect, after the terrorist attack, with the only allowable travel was in cases of medical need. Digger was out of a job for the foreseeable future. Train traffic, except for military traffic was also halted. Some places the restrictions were slackened a little by the local military commander to allow people to go to grocery stores to try to get what little food was left.

It was the same in Winnemucca. Digger couldn't bring himself to buy any of the available food, with the well stocked pantry he had, but he had gone into town to see what he might learn about local conditions. He didn't take a weapon. Getting caught with one earned you a ticket straight to a detention camp. He wasn't hearing much about them. That they existed, and little else. Digger didn't plan on letting himself get placed in one.

He was questioned about his trip to town at the edge of Winnemucca. He told them he heated with kerosene, which was true, in a sense. He had a couple of kerosene heaters for back up. Seeing the five gallon can of fuel he kept in the back of the truck they confiscated it and then let him go to the one of the hardware stores to see if there was any kerosene left. To make it look good, Digger bought the last five-gallon jug they had. He wasn't able to get any news at the hardware store. With the military patrolling the city, Digger decided it was better to just get home and listen to the radio and TV to try to find out what was going on in the world. The military was just as keyed up as everyone else and would arrest you for the least infraction of the rules.

Digger almost thought the hardware store owner wasn't going to accept the wad of cash he was demanding for the kerosene. Gouging was supposed to be against Martial Law, but it wasn't stopping the hardware store owner. He did take the money and Digger carried it out to the truck. Another man followed Digger out to the truck. He seemed about to say something, but shook his head and went back into the store.

The truck had barely turned over when it just died. All the lights on the

dashboard also went out. He noticed the man come back outside. Digger tried the ignition again. Not even a click. Digger was lucky he was getting out of the truck at that moment. A brilliant light brightened the sky towards Reno. Digger was turned away from it.

“There is no target that close!” Digger said aloud. “Must be one off course.” Whatever the reason, Winnemucca was within ten to twenty miles of a nuclear explosion. People could make all the fun they wanted of him, but Digger remembered seeing the parodies of the ‘50’s Civil Defense slogan of duck and cover. It suddenly seemed like a reasonable idea.

Digger dove out of the truck and rolled over against the high curb of the street, feet toward the blast. His hands and arms covered his head. The man stared at him, but for only a few seconds. The blast wave hit, throwing the man down the sidewalk at least twenty feet.

The ground shook. Feeling the wave pass over him, Digger held his position. The return wave would be almost immediate. It was. Digger scrambled up and hurried over to the fallen man.

“You okay?” he asked, helping the man to his feet.

“I think I broke my left arm.” The man was holding it close to his side, the pain obvious on his face. He had been looking at Digger and the flash hadn’t blinded him, but he did have a moderate burn on the side of his face that had been turned toward the nuke.

“I’ll take you over to the Army. They’ll help you get your arm fixed and into shelter. I need to get home. Fallout,” Digger said.

The man’s look changed. It still showed pain, but a look of cunning crossed it. “I know you. You been buying stuff here for years. You’re one of them. A survivalist. You have a shelter, don’t you?” He had grabbed Digger’s arm. Suddenly he released it, and with his left arm still tight against his side, the man reached into his back pocket with his right

hand and pulled out a Beretta Cheetah .380 pocket pistol. He stuck the end of the barrel against Digger's side and hissed. "You're taking me to your place. Where is it?"

Digger knew the man had just made a wild guess, but Digger's reaction told the man it was true. "You'll never make it in time," Digger protested. "You will have to shelter here somewhere."

"No. You're taking me with you, even if you have to carry me. I'll kill you if you don't. Now let's get started. The man nudged Digger with the barrel end of the gun again.

There were dozens of people out in the street now, most just staring off toward the now visible mushroom cloud. The cloud was to the west of them, and despite the gentle westerly breeze, Digger knew he could make it home in time, before the fallout got there. But not with the crazy man holding a gun in his back.

"Put your hands down," the man hissed. "You're drawing stares." They were approaching two of the soldiers enforcing Martial Law. They were looking as unsure as Digger felt. They would stare at the mushroom cloud and then back to Digger. He wasn't holding his arms up, but they were out to his sides.

Another jab and another hiss. "Put your hands down by your sides!"

One of the soldiers lifted his M4 carbine up slightly. "What's going on?"

"We're in the middle of a nuclear war, you idiot!" yelled the man. He was losing it.

"We'd better search them," said the second soldier. He slung his M4 and stepped toward Digger and the man. "Put your hands up while I search you."

Whatever else he was, the man was a crack shot. He lifted the gun above Digger's shoulder and shot the soldier that still had his M4 in his hands. The bullet struck him squarely between the eyes. The man turned the gun on the other soldier as the first one fell. Another shot and the second soldier fell. The second shot wasn't quite as accurate as the first, hitting the second soldier at the corner of his mouth. But it, too, was effective. Both soldiers were dead.

People started moving toward them, to see what was going on. The man waved the gun and fired two rounds into the air. The small crowd began to disperse. "Don't get any ideas," the man said as Digger tensed. "I've got four more magazines in my pocket. Get going." He jabbed Digger in the back again. Digger was getting really tired of those jabs.

"Let's check the Hum-Vee. It's diesel. It might run. I might actually get you to the shelter if it does."

"Back away," the man said. "I'll start it. You aren't going to start it and put it in gear to get away from me." It strained the man, Digger could tell. But the man got inside the vehicle enough to try the ignition. He cursed. "No key! Search those two."

It was a big chance, but Digger waited until the man started to back out of the vehicle. Digger hit the man's broken left arm as hard as he could. It caused the man to drop the Beretta on the seat of the Humvee and grab the arm with his right hand. Digger pushed the man away from the vehicle and then dove for the Beretta.

The man fell beside one of the dead soldiers and screamed when his arm hit the pavement. When he saw Digger pick up the Beretta, the man scrambled for the soldier's M4. Digger hesitated, but the man had the carbine and was raising it up with his good right hand. Digger pulled the trigger of the Beretta and the man slumped back, but he was still trying to lift the M4. Digger shot him again. The second shot killed the man.

Again Digger hesitated. Should he see if the Humvee would start, and if it did, take it, along with the soldier's weaponry? He didn't hesitate long. He frisked the man and found the four extra magazines for the Beretta. Digger dropped them in his pocket, turned, and started off at a lope toward his home. The risk of getting caught with a military vehicle and weapons was too great. They'd probably just shoot him without any questions if he was stopped.

When he reached the edge of town he slowed and walked up to the guard post. "There's trouble in town. One of your roving patrols was attacked," he said before they could ask him anything.

"Where are you going?" the corporal asked.

"Home," replied Digger. "I think I have time to get there and rig a shelter before the fallout gets here. What are you guys going to do?"

"Don't you worry about that. Just get going. You don't have much time," the corporal said. Dismissing Digger with the wave of his hand, the corporal turned to the PFC manning the post with him. The PFC was white as a sheet. "You stay here. Let people leave if they want, but hold anyone that tries to come in. We're going to need all the supplies that are left for those already here in town. I'm going to check on that attack the guy told us about."

Digger didn't hear the last part of the statement. He was already up to a jog again. He was in good shape and confident of reaching home before the fallout reached him. He wondered why he had given the impression to the soldiers that he would have to construct a shelter when he got there. Not that he would have to tell them about the shelter he had, but why lie about it. He shrugged mentally and adjusted his pace slightly to be sure he didn't run out of steam before he got home. He'd jog a while and then walk for a while. But he would make it.

He began to think as he ran automatically. Maybe he should have tried

to get a few people to go with him. He had shelter space for at least twenty. His pace slowed as he wrestled with the possibilities. Digger finally decided that there would not have been any way to gather up just twenty people and get them to the shelter before the fallout arrived.

Then he ran up to a small group of people walking toward Winnemucca. He tried to stop them and talk to them, but they just shied away and continued walking. Digger shook his head and began to jog again. At least he had tried. It eased his conscience somewhat.

Digger was approaching the point where he would leave the interstate to take off cross country to reach his home. It would be a much shorter run if he did so, rather than follow the road. But as he did he saw a bus top a rise in the road a quarter mile away. He stopped and stared.

The bus was moving, but it was going at barely a walking pace. Black smoke poured from the exhaust. Digger hurried toward the bus. He stepped aboard when the bus stopped and the driver opened the door. There were calls of protest from a couple of the passengers.

“Keep going!”

“We have to get to Winnemucca!”

The driver told Digger, “Take a seat. I’m going as fast as I can. There is something wrong with the engine.”

“It’s a diesel, but must have some electronic controls. The EMP must have taken out the computer or computers,” Digger said. He made a snap decision, mostly driven by his conscience. “Turn around. I’ll take you to my place. I have a shelter that will take everyone.” There were less than twenty people on the bus. Digger didn’t bother to count.

“I don’t know,” the driver said, hesitatingly. “I think I should go on to Winnemucca. There’ll be someone in charge there.”

“Come on!” called one of the same people that had called out before.
“Get this thing moving! We have to try to beat the fallout!”

Another man, sitting just behind the driver, dressed in black from head to toe, calmly asked, “Can we make it if we walk?”

Digger looked at him and nodded. “It’ll be close. The wind is picking up from the west.”

“I’m with you,” the man said, standing up. “Driver, get my bag out of the compartment.”

“I’ll go, too.” This came from another man near the rear of the bus. Several more began to stand and move forward.

Digger thought the driver would refuse, but he got out of his seat and went outside. Those that wanted to go with Digger followed him out of the bus and gathered by the side. Digger looked at those left on the bus. “Anyone else?”

“No. Get their crap and get out of here.”

“We have to get to Winnemucca.”

This came from the same two men that had objected before.

Digger and the driver were still pulling bags from the storage compartment when the bus began to move. The driver ran to the door and began to bang on it as he trotted along side. Digger too ran alongside, grabbing the last two bags as people pointed them out.

The driver finally quit trying to stop the bus and stood on the road as the bus gained speed. “They’ll never make it if they don’t baby it,” he said. “I could barely keep it going.” He turned around and looked at Digger.

“I sure hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I’m sure he does or he wouldn’t be trying to help.” The well dressed woman was holding a baby up against her shoulder. Matter-of-factly she added, “I’ll need some help with my things.”

The others hesitated, but Digger picked up one of the red suitcases she indicated and the man that had first spoken up to go with Digger slung the shoulder strap of his big bag over his shoulder and picked up the other.

“We need to hurry,” Digger said, crossing the east bound lanes of the interstate and approaching the fence that bordered the right-of-way. It took several minutes to get everyone across the fence with their luggage.

Digger set a pace that the slowest of the group could maintain, fretting that it wouldn’t be fast enough. But since they were with him now, he wasn’t going to leave anyone behind.

“We’re getting close,” Digger told the group when they cut the two wheel track that was the last part of the road to his property.

Digger’s RadDetect™ PRD 1250 keychain radiation alarm started sounding off and a coarse grit began to fall from the sky as they walked up to the shelter. Modesty went by the wayside as Digger had everyone strip in the entry hall of the shelter. He did as well, brushed his hair out and went inside to get some blankets until those that had a change of clothes with them could change, and he got out something for the others to wear.

When everyone was settled for the moment, Digger took the time to look at the CD V-717 remote reading survey meter. The detector was just outside the main entrance of the shelter. The reading was already almost 50 and visibly climbing.

Two hours later the reading pegged at 500, the upper limit of the CD V-717.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 8

March 6, 2007

When Digger awoke the next morning the first thing he did was check the CD V-717. It was down to 200. He logged the time and number in the log beside the CD V-717. He'd take a reading every hour until he had enough to plot the peak.

Digger went about fixing breakfast, using the fresh items from the fridge. The woman with the baby was feeding him or her... He didn't know which, yet. She was sitting at the table in the kitchen area of the shelter, a blanket covering the baby as it fed from her left breast.

Digger was still chopping onions when she finished with the baby and put him down to sleep on a nearby blanket. She came over to help Digger. "I guess I should introduce myself," she said. "We never had a chance for introductions yesterday. I'm Mandy Johanson and that's Stephanie." She nodded toward the sleeping baby.

Digger shook her hand when she held it out. "I don't know how to thank you for coming to our rescue. I'm not sure the bus would have even made it to Winnemucca, and if it did, whether or not we could have found shelter. How long do you think it will be before we can get out? I was going to visit my Mother in Reno. I want to check on her as soon as possible."

"I'm Digger Jones. I'm not sure how long we'll have to stay in the shelter. Won't until I get a few more hourly radiation numbers. Once I can get a time line and these accurate radiation measurements, I can

calculate the peak rate and then the time when we can start going out of the shelter.

The others began to stir and Digger turned the cooking over to a couple of them. He went to the communications desk and began to scan for information. He didn't find anyone broadcasting. Next he tried the remote control camera mounted on the roof above the shelter. Nothing. The EMP had zapped it. He did have an alternative outside viewing system, however, primitive as it was.

The shelter was equipped with a small viewing port on each side. They were kept plugged with pure lead plugs to maintain the protection factor of the shelter. He went to each and took a quick look. Each look would add a bit of radiation to his total dose but Digger thought it worth it.

He was incredulous when he looked out the one in the front wall. Two men were walking toward the shelter. Hurriedly Digger put the plug back into place and went to the entrance hall.

"What's going on?" asked the first man that had supported Digger. "I'm Chester Pendelton, by the way."

"Two people approaching," replied Digger as he shook Chester's hand.

Chester's look hardened. "You're not letting them in, are you?"

"I don't know until I find out what is going on. I can't imagine how they found this place." Digger put on a Tyvek hooded and footed coverall, Nitrile gloves and rubber boots. He fitted a MSA Millennium respirator to his face.

He started to go to the arms locker to get out a hand gun, but changed his mind when he glanced around the room. Instead of getting one of his own firearms, Digger unzipped the coverall, reached inside into the pocket of his jeans, and brought out the Beretta and the four spare

magazines.

“Do you really think that is necessary to have in here?” Mandy asked, a look of dislike on her face.

“I don’t know,” Digger replied, but I have it and I’m going to keep it.” There was some murmuring from the rest of the group now as they gathered near the entrance. “Lock the door behind me. If I don’t say... ‘Open Sesame’, don’t let me back in. It’ll mean they’ve tried something and are dangerous.”

There was another view port in the door. It was thick leaded glass like the others, but there was no lead plug. The glass was as thick as the door itself. He’d checked the area with a CDV-715 the evening before. There was a cone of radiation extending out and up from the view port. It wasn’t a danger unless someone stood right in front of the port.

Digger warned Chester about the port, looked out it and un-dogged the entry hatch. He stepped outside just as the two men approached. He heard the clang of the hatch being closed. Digger could barely believe it. It was the two men from the bus that had been so vocal about continuing without delay toward Winnemucca.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“We’ll tell you when we get inside. We have to get out of this fallout.” It was the more belligerent of the two. The fallout was still coming down, but it was much finer than the early stuff.

“You’ve been out here all yesterday and this morning?” Digger asked.

Both nodded. Digger knew they were walking dead. He was surprised they were still ambulatory.

“Okay. We’ll take you inside and decontaminate you,” Digger said. He

turned to the hatch, leaned forward slightly toward a small speaker/microphone grate. “Open Sesame.” Nothing.

He said it again, slightly louder. It should be working, the electronics were all well inside the shelter. EMP shouldn’t have affected the intercom. Digger rapped the door with his gloved knuckles and repeated the phrase.

After several moments, which seemed longer than they were to Digger, he heard the hatch un-dogged. The hatch didn’t open and he hadn’t told Chester to get back in the shelter without opening it. He must have figured it out on his own, for when Digger pulled on the hatch, it opened.

Digger guided the men inside. They staggered as they came in. Digger went around the corner of the entrance hall and opened the door into the shelter proper. “I need someone to help me with these two.”

Almost as one, those in the little group stepped back. Except for two. Chester and Mandy. “Mandy,” Digger said, “Get a couple of blankets. Chester stepped forward and went with Digger back into the entrance hall. Chester put on one of the Tyvek coveralls, and the dust mask that Digger handed him. They began to wash down the two men, clothes and all, and then had them undress. They were obviously growing weaker by the moment.

Their clothes went into the same lead lined bin the other contaminated clothes had, for decontamination later, when the radiation had faded. Chester and Digger took the blankets and wrapped the men in them. The two leaned tiredly against the wall with the blankets wrapped around them as Digger and Chester decontaminated their protective gear and took it off.

Only then did they help the men into the shelter. They put each of them in a bunk, of which the shelter had three sets of two each. “Water?”

asked the second man. Mandy hurried to get it. Only a few of group was gathered around as Digger went to one knee to talk to the two men. The others were staying as far away from them as they could get, fearful of catching radiation sickness from what the not so quiet discussions they were having indicated. Digger knew he was going to have to address that unneeded fear, but not at the moment.

“What happened?” Digger asked.

It was the again the most belligerent of the two that spoke. “**** bus quit two miles down the road. The others, a bunch of losers, decided to walk to Winnemucca, right into the face of the fallout. I’m a hell of a lot smarter than that. A vehicle is one thing. On foot is another. So we backtracked you to come here.

Mandy was trying to help the other man take a sip of water, but she went pale and stepped back. Digger saw her and turned to the lower bunk behind him. The eyes were open, but when he checked for a pulse there was none. Digger gently closed the man’s eyelids and drew the blanket up over his face.

What little strength the belligerent had left him when he saw Digger pull up the blanket. “I’m dead, too, ain’t I?” Digger didn’t have to answer. The man’s eyes closed and the blanket quit rising and falling.

“They didn’t have a chance,” Digger said. “There is no telling how large a dose they got over the last few hours.”

“If you knew they were doomed, why did you bring them in?” asked someone from across the room. “They were a couple of jerks. We never should have let them in here.”

“We should have voted on it,” said another. Digger still didn’t know most of the names.

“That’s enough of that,” Digger said. “Let’s get something straight. This isn’t a democracy. This is my shelter, my food and water. You want to stay you follow my rules.”

“That’s not fair. We should all have a say in this. We’re all in it together.”

Digger hardened his look. “So we are. But like Al Haig once said, ‘I am in control here.’

“He didn’t have the right to say it when he did. Neither do you.”

“You want to leave now?” Digger asked.

His voice much quieter now, the man replied, “No. But it is a good thing you have that gun or things would be different.”

“Well, I do have it and I plan to keep it.”

Surly now, the man said, “You have to sleep sometime.” Everyone took it as the threat it was.

“Ah,” Chester said, “But I don’t have to sleep at the same time he does.”

“You taking his side?”

“I’m taking my side,” replied Chester. “And that’s the side where the food, water, and protection is.”

“Okay. You all get together and set up a hot rack sleeping rotation. Last night was fine with blankets on the floor, but there is no need to be that uncomfortable.” Digger turned away. Someone in the group began explaining what hot racking was.

“Thanks,” Digger said softly to Chester. Chester just nodded and went to

join the discussion about the sleeping arrangements.

Digger went to one of the cabinets that lined much of the wall space, Mandy trailing along, holding Stephanie in her arms. Digger was amazed that the baby was doing so well. Digger opened one of the cabinets and took out two items that looked like folded tarps to Mandy.

“For the two that died?” she asked.

Digger nodded, and shook one of the items. It wasn’t a tarp. It was a disaster body bag. Mandy had dealt with them before. Digger asked Chester for his help. Between the two of them they got the bodies into the bags.

Digger wasn’t sure he would get the extra help, but he asked for volunteers to help carry them to the generator room. It was difficult to handle the limp bodies. Finally two other men came forward and the bodies were moved.

“You aren’t going to just leave them in the shelter, are you?” asked Elizabeth Fontaine. She was the one that was continuously questioning Digger’s decision. “You have to take them outside.”

“No,” Digger replied patiently. “No one is going to pick up any extra radiation taking them out. They are not radioactive. We washed it all off of them before they came in. When the radiation level gets to a safe level, we’ll take them out and bury them. But not now.”

Muttering, Elizabeth moved off. Digger didn’t know if they were friends from before, but Elizabeth already had a following in the shelter. He shook his head and walked to the communications desk. Mandy followed along and sat down in one of the chairs by the desk and Digger opened the faraday box attached to the wall over the desk and took out both the Oregon Scientific All Hazards Alert radio and the Yaesu VR-500 receiver.

Digger hooked the radios up to outside antennas and they listened for an hour. Nothing.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 9

March 8, 2007

Things had fallen into a regular routine by the third day in the shelter. Though he was unmarried and childless, Digger had made provisions in the shelter for children being present. There were plenty of games and small toys for the three children, aged 5 to 12. That didn't include the baby, of course. Mandy had her baby bag so had, initially, what supplies she needed. Digger gave her some of the cloth diapers he had stashed. There was a laundry pair in the shelter, so they could wash them.

They ran the appliances when the generator was running, doing two or three loads of clothing and a couple of sets of dishes in the dishwasher. The rest of the time the shelter ran on an inverter powered by batteries the generator charged when it ran.

There was power to keep the TV and DVD player running for entertainment all day long. Digger had long been a yard sale and swap meet aficionado. He had hundreds of used DVDs, and even more books. The American Safe Room ASR-100N-NBC switched from AC to its own battery when the generator wasn't running and kept the air clean and fresh.

Late that afternoon Digger fired up his lap top and consulted the radiation log. It didn't take long to calculate the approximate peak dose and from that, the time line of radioactive decay using the Seven-Ten rule. Tired Old Man, of Frugal's Forum fame, had developed an Excel spreadsheet that made the job easy. Thanks TOM. Digger hoped he had

survived the attack and was doing what he did in his stories at Frugal's Forums.

According to the spreadsheet the radiation had peaked shortly after Digger had gone to bed that night on the 5th. It was now 20 and would drop to under 10 in 2 more days, on March 10th. On April 12th it should be under 1.0. They could begin to make limited excursions then. It would not be until mid-October when the radiation dropped below 0.1 that they could essentially stop worrying about the radiation. That was, of course, if there wasn't another attack. That didn't seem likely.

Of course, he lived in the shelter anyway. It didn't make much difference to him, but Digger was sure that as soon as it was deemed 'Safe', even if that was a 'Relatively Safe', that most, if not all of the residents of the shelter would leave. Chances were that some semblance of the Federal, State, and Local governments would be active and giving advice, if nothing else, by then.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 10

March 10, 2007

Digger was somewhat off the mark. By March 10th there were already people wanting to go outside and go to Winnemucca.

"It's too big of a risk," Digger protested. "The radiation level is still just below 10. You'll pick up an unhealthy dose just walking to Winnemucca. And you'd have to find good shelter for the night. Just think how some of you have been. Others might not want more tenants either."

A couple of the people had the good grace to blush.

It only got worse when they finally began to receive information over

Digger's radios. A recovery action was ongoing, nationwide, but only in 'clean' areas. Areas still having radiation levels higher than 1.0 were being left to their own devices for the moment, except for medical emergencies. A helicopter would be sent to pick up anyone with a serious problem.

That only lasted a few days. The authorities got numerous calls where no one was really sick, and a group would mob the helicopter, hoping to get a ride out of the contaminated area.

"I'm tired of rice and beans and whole wheat bread! I hate whole wheat bread. Why can't we have more of the Mountain House Freeze dried food?" someone said.

"People are going into areas with a lot higher radiation levels than we have here," Elizabeth protested. "I still think we should all go to Winnemucca now. The Army was there. Surely they are still, and can be of help.

Quietly Mandy asked Elizabeth, "What help do we need? We have clean air, clean water, food to eat, and a secure place to sleep. What more could you ask for, in times like these?" Elizabeth just sniffed, lifted her nose into the air and walked off, her little group with her.

After the noon meal on the 12th Digger finally gave in. It wasn't like he had anyone locked in. Anyone that wanted to could leave at any time. But the group that wanted to go seemed to want his express permission. He gave it. And small bundles of food, and two one-liter bottles of water, for each person going. Of the fifteen that Digger had brought to his shelter, eight were going to go to Winnemucca.

"Just so you know, the radiation level is 6.4. You will need to find other shelter as soon as you can. And by the way, once you leave, you can't come back."

“That’s not fair!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “There is no more fallout! And besides, even if there was, we can decontaminate like we did the first time.”

“That may be true,” Digger replied, “But there are accumulations on the ground, and if the wind picks it up, you’ll be breathing it.”

“Don’t you have some dust masks we can use? And those special coveralls?”

“Sorry. I don’t give to lost causes. With the doses you are each going to get with the attitude you have, you’ll be dead in a year, coverall or not. Dust mask or not.”

“I don’t believe that,” Elizabeth said. “You just want us to stay here.”

“I do, but I sure don’t know why, anymore.”

“Exactly,” Mandy said. She was standing nearby, feeding the baby. “Why would he want you to stay?”

“He likes to order us around and wave that gun in our faces every chance he gets.”

Mandy turned red. “He’s never waved that gun around you or anyone else. That’s all in your own mind.”

“Don’t you tell me what’s on my mind!” retorted Elizabeth. She turned toward the door to the entrance hall. “If we’re going, let’s get going. I’m tired of this place.” Elizabeth strode away. The others followed, though somewhat more slowly.

The last person in the group, a young woman, whose name Digger still didn’t know, stopped at the inside door. She turned around and handed

Digger her food packet and water. "I want to stay. May I?"

Digger nodded, and she went to stand with the others that had been observing the exodus. Digger followed the group to the exterior hatch and clanged it closed when the last person had stepped through. He watched for a few moments, as most of the group turned their faces toward the shelter, their steps hesitating. But all turned back around and followed Elizabeth.

The only ones that stayed were the woman that had changed her mind, the two parents, their three children, Chester, and Mandy and the baby. The others went about the daily business of shelter living. Digger went to the communications desk. Mandy followed along, switching Stephanie to her other breast to continue her feeding.

"You do that so gracefully," Digger said, shaking his head.

"A mother learns. Do you really think the trip will kill the others?"

"Not directly, but they are almost assured of picking up a slowly diminishing amount of radiation even if they find good shelter for most of the time. Eight hours of exposure today at the rate we have here, will be a dose of 51. Granted it is diminishing each day, but if they are out and about much they will still be getting more than 25 a day for several more days. That's the limit for most people to be exposed to short term, and still maintain good health. And even at that there are often long term effects. The cancers and such. It is quite likely some of them will come down with serious radiation poisoning pretty soon."

Mandy sighed. "Well, they made their choice. You did everything you could to dissuade them.

"That's right, Digger," Chester said, coming up to the desk and taking a chair beside Mandy. "Don't beat yourself up about it."

Digger nodded and turned on the radios. Much more news was coming through now. Things were not good, anywhere in the world. With everyone shooting at just about everyone else, the devastation was extreme. The sky had not been clear since the attacks happened. There were already signs of an early and severe winter in the northern hemisphere and a much cooler than normal summer in the southern, which was in the middle of a bad winter that had nothing to do with the attack. It didn't appear that the situation would be nearly as catastrophic as the Nuclear Winter some had prophesized, but it would definitely be bad.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 11

October 12, 2007

October finally rolled around. The radiation fell below 1.0. Decontamination of the outside of the shelter and close surroundings began. A little was done each day, to keep exposure limited.

At that, most of the work fell to Teresa and Juan Hernandez, the married couple with children. They were of an age where the doses of radiation they were getting were not likely to cause them problems until they were quite old. That's not to say that Digger, Chester, and Brenda, the woman that had changed her mind about leaving, didn't work. They did take turns, but only one to the Hernandez' three. Mandy wasn't allowed out, primarily for her future health, but she watched the children while the others were out.

Benito, the Hernandez' oldest, wanted to help. It was explained to him the consequences. His mother and father insisted he stay inside with the other children. Mandy let him help her, though she really didn't need it. It gave Benito something to do, so he could feel useful.

September had brought snow. Not too unusual at the higher elevations, and not unheard of in the valleys, but disturbing none the less. October was shaping up to be worse.

And while it still wasn't a democracy, Digger called all the adults together to discuss going in to Winnemucca.

"Okay. The good news," Digger said. They were sitting around the kitchen work table. "I don't know if you saw it when you first got here, but there is a 1973 Suburban out back. It's pre-electronic ignition and I should be able to get it started. That's the good news."

Mandy smiled and asked, "Okay, I'll ask. What's the bad news?"

"I don't want to take it in on this first trip. I don't want to use it unless I know the powers that be aren't commandeering working vehicles." Mandy looked disappointed. She knew she wouldn't be going without transport of some kind.

"Can we just take it close and hide it, and then walk the rest of the way?" asked Juan.

"That's a possibility. Especially for the future. But right now I don't want to risk even that. There is no telling what kind of patrols are out there."

Teresa spoke in Spanish to Juan. Her English was essentially non-existent, though Juan and the children spoke both English and Spanish fluently. Teresa did seem to understand it well enough. She just couldn't, or wouldn't, speak it.

Juan said, "Teresa says there has been nothing on the news about this commandeering."

"I know," Digger replied. And it makes me hopeful. But I keep getting

the feeling the broadcasts aren't telling us everything. There is still Martial Law and various government agencies are calling the shots. There is no way of knowing what might happen. I just am not willing to risk our advantages here. I think two of us should walk in and scout out the situation. And then decide about how to make future trips."

"We have to go in eventually," Brenda said. "Your supplies won't last forever."

"I know," replied Digger. Even though he had begun to trust everyone, he wasn't ready to tell them about how extensive his supplies actually were.

"I think it should be me and you," Chester told Digger. "I've read quite a bit of PAW fiction. If things aren't good, the women could be in danger of being taken."

At a touch from Teresa, Juan spoke to her in Spanish, apparently translating what Chester had said. When he had finished she looked a little pale and clutched the beads hanging around her neck.

"I could go, as well," Juan said. Teresa was shaking her head.

"No. Chester is right. He and I are the two best choices. We'll go tomorrow if the weather holds."

You Just Never Know – Chapter 12

October 13, 2007

It was cold the following morning, and the ground was covered with patchy snow from a light snow flurry the night before. Chester was somewhat larger in size than Digger, but Digger had once been a bit on the plump side and had some winter clothing that fit Chester well

enough for them to head out without worrying about the cold.

Digger was carrying the Beretta. He hesitated about opening up the arms locker and giving Chester a handgun, but had decided against it. This was a scouting trip. They would avoid any confrontations if at all possible. The .380 was just some limited insurance. Digger didn't mind losing it if it was confiscated by the authorities.

They did take two of Digger's two-quart canteens with pouches and shoulder slings, not at all confident of finding water they could trust.

They paced themselves, and were making good progress along I-80 when they were startled by sounds coming from behind them. There was simply no place to hide. They stood and waited for what turned out to be a Nevada National Guard unit convoy headed to Winnemucca from a staging area at Battle Mountain.

Digger and Chester quickly decided they had made the right choice. Every manned weapon in the convoy was trained on the pair as the convoy leader, an armored Humvee with a ring mount .50 M2 BMG, came to a stop near them.

"Hands up!" rang out the command. "You run, you die."

Vehicle doors opened in the middle of the convoy and a Captain and two soldiers approached. "Pat them down," commanded the Captain. The other weapons were still trained on Chester and Digger as one of the soldiers held his M-16 at the ready while the other searched the pair.

"Just a pop gun, Captain" the soldier said, handing the Beretta and four magazines to the officer.

"State your names and your business." The Captain was hard eyed, but Digger didn't get the feeling he was a bad man.

“Digger Jones and this is Chester Pendelton. We’ve been sheltering up in the mountains and just now coming down to see what was left of civilization.”

The Captain nodded, and said, “Not as much as we’d hoped, but more than some predicted. I wouldn’t recommend going into Winnemucca right now. There aren’t any supplies to be had, according to our reports. A gang of opportunists has taken a section of the city over. They control all the routes in and out of the city.

“Give it a few days and come back then. We’ll have the problem resolved. You need supplies?”

Digger shook his head. “No. We’re okay for a few more days. Thanks, Captain. We probably would have walked right into trouble.”

The Captain handed Digger the Beretta and the magazines. His eyes harder than ever, the Captain said, “Be very careful how you use that. We are shooting looters and bandits on sight. Scavenging will be under military supervision to assure equitable distribution of useable items.”

Digger nodded. Without another word, Digger and Chester headed back the way they had come. After they had passed the string of vehicles that was now moving again, Chester said, “I think they’ll be able to take care of whatever is happening in Winnemucca. I noticed you didn’t really give the Captain any idea of your setup and the rest of the group.”

“I’ve no real reason to believe the National Guard would be a problem, but the subject didn’t really come up in detail. I’d still like to check things out myself before we disband.”

Chester nodded.

The others were outside, getting some air on the deck, when Chester and Digger came into sight. All hurried down to meet them when they got

closer.

“What happened?” asked Mandy. “You can’t have been there and back.”

Digger explained while Chester went inside and got out of the heavy clothing.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 13

October 27, 2007

They gave it two weeks. Again Digger and Chester headed out. There was no snow on the ground, but the weather remained blustery. They met no convoys on I-80 this time. When they got to the first exit for Winnemucca they saw that a large sign had been fastened to the exit sign.

“All visitors must report to the National Guard Office in the Red Lion Casino.”

It didn’t say what the penalty might be if one didn’t do so, but Digger wasn’t planning on finding out. They headed directly for the Red Lion, passing through one checkpoint. There was a quite a bit of activity going on, despite the weather. From the looks of it, a salvage operation was going on. There were mixed groups of civilian and National Guard troops doing the salvaging. It was all going into military vehicles. Digger wasn’t sure what that meant. Could just be that there weren’t any civilian vehicles suitable that were working.

Somewhat apprehensively, they went into the Red Lion, past a pair of soldiers on watch. They were directed to a registration desk. Each was given to a nurse to start the preliminaries of a physical. After the doctor signed a form they were handed off to an interviewer and taken to other

cubicles that had been set up in the dining area.

Digger relaxed as reasonable questions were asked. Then the interviewer got to the psychological questions of post-apocalyptic coping. She seemed a bit disappointed that Digger wasn't more traumatized. She signed the paper she'd been filling out and handed it to Digger. "Give this to the census taker. You're cleared for release."

Digger stood up. "What would have happened if I wasn't cleared?"

"You would have been held in a detention facility until a psych team could work with you until you could be released back into the general population."

With a curt nod, Digger left. Chester was already at the Census desk. They both took the papers that needed to be filled out and sat down in the waiting area. It only took a few minutes to complete the forms. The authorities were requesting current status and address. Another form was to record known births, deaths, and survivors.

When they handed in the forms the first one the clerk looked at was the one about survivors. "You need to encourage these people to come in for registration and to pick up an ID card. It will make it much easier to function during these troubled times." It was obviously a standard speech.

She added a few items to the form and sent them to the ID card maker. They walked out of the place with shiny new plastic photo ID's and instructions to check in at least once a month for radiation physicals.

"Let's go see if the Sonoma is still where I left it," Digger said.

"Actually," Chester said, "I have a couple of things I'd like to do. I'll meet you back here..." Chester looked at his watch. "Two o'clock?"

“Sure,” Digger replied, surprised at the request. “Do you need some help?”

Chester shook his head. “I want to check on the friend I was coming to visit.”

Digger waited for him to say more, but Chester didn’t. “Well... Okay, I guess. I’ll go check on the Sonoma and be back here by two.”

The Sonoma was just where Digger had left it, in front of the hardware store. The National Guard was moving abandoned vehicles, but hadn’t reached this section of town yet. If he was going to recover it, it would need to be soon. There was no sign of the body of the man Digger had shot, or the bodies of the two soldiers the man had killed. The soldiers’ Humvee was gone.

Digger tried the ignition, not expecting anything. He didn’t get anything. Besides the EMP, the battery was dead. He’d left the ignition key on at the moment of the EMP attack. The electrical items still working had drained it. Digger shook his head. It would have to wait until they could bring the Suburban down with a charged up battery and the computers for the Sonoma. And fuel. All the vehicles along the street had already been drained. At least they hadn’t holed the fuel tank. The kerosene was gone, too.

He’d already tried the Suburban. It had started and run fine. He treated all his gasoline with Pri-G. The Suburban was kept full with the treated fuel all the time, though he had seldom used it before the war.

Digger left a note laying on the dashboard saying he would be back for the vehicle. It was still well before two, so Digger wandered around town. The Albertson’s was being used as the controlled distribution point for food and other supplies. All transactions were monitored by a National Guard team. You could get an allotment of food, if you showed

your ID card.

For those that wanted more than the allotment, or items not included, things could be purchased. Items were priced in dollars, but most of those sales were made by bartering and trading.

Besides the official supplies, people were allowed to set up in the parking lot for person to person deals. The soldiers were keeping an eye on things, but from what Digger learned, didn't interfere unless there was an altercation. It didn't happen often. Those involved, right or wrong, went straight to the detention camp.

He went back to the Red Lion and waited for Chester. He learned a bit more about the situation talking to some of the off-duty soldiers. Digger kept glancing at his watch as two o'clock came and went. By three Digger decided Chester wasn't coming. Without a clue of where Chester had gone, Digger knew searching for him would be futile. He didn't wait any longer. It was going to be cold during the night. He didn't plan on spending the night out.

Digger made it home just at dark. He just shook his head when asked where Chester was. Teresa and Brenda had supper ready and Mandy was feeding the baby. The others ate silently as Digger filled them in on what he'd discovered.

"Martial Law is still in effect. The National Guard is running things. There's a detention camp outside of Winnemucca where everyone that is a problem, or has a problem, is sent. No one really wants to go there, but there are no real rumors that it is super bad or anything. It seems like they want to leave alone the people that are doing okay on their own, and keep the problems maintained. Subsistence food is available once you register, and more can be traded for or bought. Prices are ten times what they were before the war, but the trades I saw seemed reasonable.

"The National Guard has already cleaned up the dead bodies after a

house to house search in Winnemucca proper. They haven't tried in outlying areas. That's why they haven't been up here. I'm on the tax rolls, so they will probably show up here at some point in time to check on us.

"Reno got lucky. The authorities figure the warhead that hit near here was meant for there. But they did get a lot of fallout from California. Most of Winnemucca's support is coming from Elko and Battle Mountain. A lot of people are surprised that Elko didn't get hit, but it didn't. If it was targeted, the warhead didn't make it.

"The National Guard is looking for workers for the recovery. All they are paying is food and a dorm bed, but it's keeping people going. Oh. The food is on top of the regular ID allotment."

All were silent when Digger stopped talking. Brenda was looking at the table top. When she looked up she asked, "Were the brothels open?"

Everyone's eyes widened at Brenda's question except Teresa. She leaned over to Juan and Juan whispered in her ear. Teresa said something under her breath and tugged on Juan's arm. He was sitting between Brenda and Teresa.

"I was headed there for another six week rotation," Brenda said calmly, completely ignoring what was going on beside her. She turned her eyes toward Digger. "Do you know if any of them were open?"

Digger shook his head. "I don't know. But... Something that I heard make me think they are."

"You said they aren't commandeering operating vehicles. Do you think you could take me there?"

"You don't have to work there," Mandy said encouragingly. "Didn't you hear what Digger said? There is other work. You're strong and healthy.

You can do labor until you find a waitress job or something when things get better.”

“You don’t understand. I like doing what I do. It’s really good money. It’ll probably be even better now, with the soldiers in town.”

Over the next few days the Hernandez’ avoided Brenda like she had the plague. Mandy didn’t try to dissuade Brenda any more, but she didn’t ignore her the way Teresa was. Chester didn’t show up either.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 14

October 28, 2007

Digger had the Suburban started and warmed up the following morning. He was taking the rest of them in to register. He had the parts for the Sonoma in the Suburban. If he could get it running, Juan would drive it back.

Teresa refused to sit beside Brenda, or let Juan sit beside her, so Brenda rode up front with Digger. Mandy rode in the second seat with Teresa and Juan. The kids rode in the third seat. There was quite a bit of jostling on Digger’s two track road, but it smoothed out when they hit the interstate.

Digger drove to the Red Lion and said he’d go work on the Sonoma after he dropped them off. It took a couple of hours, but the new computers, battery, and fuel worked. The Sonoma started. He locked it up and drove the Suburban back to the Red Lion.

There was major commotion going on when he entered the building. The customary guards were not at the door. People were milling around near the back of the room. Digger saw Mandy standing to one side, holding Stephanie. He went over to her. “What’s going on? Where’s the

Hernandez’?” Then he saw that she was crying. “What’s the matter?”

“It’s the Hernandez’,” she managed to squeak out. “They’re illegals. They’re being sent back to Mexico immediately. They’re doing that to anyone that can’t prove US citizenship.”

“Oh,” Digger said softly. Brenda was a prostitute and the Hernandez’ were all illegals. Suddenly a path opened and Digger and Mandy saw Juan and Teresa in handcuffs. They were being led to the door. The children weren’t in cuffs, but they were being herded along behind their parents by two female National Guard soldiers.

Mandy turned to Digger and leaned against him, putting her head on his shoulder as she cried. It only lasted for a few moments, for there was another commotion at the door. This time someone was being led into the building in handcuffs. And, Digger noted, ankle restraints. It was Chester.

Mandy had stepped away from Digger and turned to see what the commotion was. Digger walked over, closer, but was stopped by an MP. “Hold it. No closer. He’s dangerous.”

“What’s going on? I know him. He just came to town yesterday. His name is Chester Pendleton.”

“No it isn’t. It’s Chuck Polls. Chester Pendleton is an alias he’s used before. His fingerprints matched when they were run yesterday and a pick-up order put out.”

“Well, what’s he done? He’s sheltered at my place during this whole thing. Nothing indicated he was a criminal of some kind.”

“The worst,” replied the MP. “A bank robber and a cop killer. He’s been on the run for a year. They almost had him in Chicago. They recovered most of the money a year ago. Apparently the friend he sent the rest to,

took off with it. That's why he was in town. Looking for her. Not that the money is much good for anything now. The law is going to be harsher than in the past. We know it is him. We know what he did. He's already admitted it was him. He'll be hanged when they get him to Carson City."

Chester... or rather Chuck, saw Digger and Mandy and the baby. He called out. "Sorry, Dude! I owe you for the shelter time." He was hustled past and that was the last Digger saw of him.

Digger turned to look at Mandy, shock apparent on his face. "I never guessed," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"None of us suspected," Mandy replied. "Don't blame yourself. He never tried to hurt us in any way. He was a big help, for the most part. I felt safe around you, him, and Juan."

Digger looked around again. "Where's Brenda?"

"Oh, she went through the process first. Prostitution is still legal apparently. As soon as she was cleared, she was offered a ride to the brothel. She was very open about her profession."

"I see. Well... I guess we can head back..." Mandy cut Digger off.

"Actually, I'm moving on to Reno to see about my mother. And they need nurses. I'm an RN. They have a relocation transport leaving in a few minutes. I want to thank you for all you've done. You literally saved mine and Stephanie's lives. Thank you." She leaned forward and gave Digger a kiss on his cheek.

"I only had a few things with me. And the important ones are here in the baby bag. Just do whatever you want with the other things."

"Okay," Digger said.

Mandy turned and walked toward a soldier holding up a clipboard and calling her name.

Digger stood there for several long minutes before he was jostled out of his reverie. He headed for the door and the Suburban. He'd just lost the only family he'd had since he was a child. It was difficult.

He drove back to the Sonoma, and went about hooking up the tow bar on the front of the Suburban to the Sonoma. It was a lonely trip back home. He put the steaks into the refrigerator that had been taken out of the freezer that morning for their intended supper when they got back.

Digger locked up and went to bed without eating anything.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 15

October 29, 2007

Digger was lethargic the next morning and only ate some granola nut cereal from the stores. After that, he cleaned up the place. There wasn't much to clean. He'd insisted everything be kept shipshape and the other's had been very cooperative. It made the stay in the shelter more tolerable when everything was kept picked up and clean.

He had gathered the bags of all the former residents of the shelter together, intending to put them in the Sonoma to take with him. He would give them to the Salvation Army. He'd seen a collection point when he'd been in town.

He decided to sort through them first and throw anything away that wasn't suitable for donation. They had been the only clothes those in the group had, so had been worn heavily. First he went through the

Hernandez' things. There wasn't that much. It was all clean and in good repair. Teresa had been a good seamstress and had helped keep everyone's clothing repaired. It could all go, including the plain suitcases.

Next was Brenda's moderate sized suitcase. He started to open it, but then thought, "She isn't gone. I can drop this off to her." He set it aside, too.

Then he opened Mandy's bag. Her clothes were in quite good shape, having been of very good quality to start with. They could all go to the Salvation Army, too.

He picked up Chester's nice leather suitcase. Digger couldn't think to call him Chuck. He'd never handled the case before. It was quite heavy. Opening it, Chester took out the few clothes that were in it. He checked the sizes. They were a bit big for him, but Digger decided to keep them. Like Mandy's things, Chester's were of very good quality. He set out the socks, sure that they would fit. Chester had mentioned once that they had the same size feet.

The rolled up grey boot socks felt funny. Digger unrolled them. There was a sizeable lump in one of the toes. "That's odd," Digger said to no one. He reached into the sock and pulled out what was in it. "Well I'll be go to hell!" It was a roll of hundred dollar bills. A hundred of them when he counted them. Ten thousand dollars. "Geez!"

He checked the other three pairs of socks. Each pair had the same number of bills. Quickly Digger searched the other clothing, that he'd already set aside. Every pocket had money. It was all hundreds. After he got through counting the tally came to 110,000 dollars. Even at the current inflated prices it was a substantial amount of money. "I guess they didn't find everything he stole."

Digger started to move the bag. He'd hang up the clothing in his closet

in a moment. He grunted when he tried to move the bag. It was still very heavy. He hefted the bag to judge the weight. "At least twenty more pounds."

Setting the bag down, Digger ran his hands along the inside bottom of the case. A fingernail hooked on something and he gave it a tug. Up popped the false bottom of the case. A pristine white tee shirt was hiding what the compartment held.

Digger reached for the tee shirt thinking it must be more of the stolen money. "But it wouldn't weigh that much, even if it was full." He removed the tee shirt and gasped. Gold gleamed. A lot of gold. Digger took one of the clear plastic coin tubes from the compartment. He counted the one ounce gold Eagles. There were twenty in the tube. There were ten tubes. Two hundred ounces of gold. No wonder the bag weighed so much.

Of course, the two handguns and accessories had added to the weight. He'd barely noticed them the first few seconds. He took out the first one. It was a beat up looking Para-Ordinance P-14 in .45 ACP. There were six loaded spare magazines for it in the case.

Setting the P-14 and magazines aside, Digger picked up the other. It was a five shot Ruger SP101 2¼ inch barrel spurless in .357 Magnum. There were three compact speed loaders for it and a box of ammunition.

Digger didn't know what Chester's plans had been, but he suspected that Chester was on his way out of the country and had converted some of the stolen cash to gold. Gold still talked in a lot of countries. And kept other things silent. Digger wondered how much he'd sent to his not so friendly girlfriend.

Going to the sink in the kitchen area, Digger opened the cabinet door and slipped his upper body inside. He removed the floor plate of the cabinet to reveal the top of a floor safe. He spun the dial back and forth

and opened it. The Eagles and 100,000 of the cash went inside on top of what was already there. He'd hesitated, but kept 10,000 of the cash out. He added the P-14 and magazines to the safe.

After closing the safe and hiding it again, Digger went back to the bag on the table. He wrapped up the 10,000 in the tee shirt, and started to put the packet back in the secret compartment. That's when he noticed there was something else in the compartment.

Digger looked closer. It was a small black velvet bag. He'd missed it initially. It blended in with the compartment. And he had to admit, he'd been a bit star struck with the gold. Digger took out the bag. It too was heavier than looks would indicate. Opening the drawstring top, he dumped the contents out into his hand. Again he gasped. Not because of the American Derringer Corporation .45 ACP derringer, but the six tiny zip lock bags that held a diamond each. The bags were marked with the particulars of the diamond each contained. They ranged from 1.00 carat to 1.08 carat. All were round brilliant cut and VVS-1 clarity. There were three that were F color, two G's, and one H.

After adding the diamonds and the derringer to the floor safe, Digger repacked the bag with Chester's clothes. He'd take that bag, and the other's bags to Winnemucca after a few days and set into motion a plan that had just come to him.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 16

November 18, 2007

Digger loaded the former resident's bags into the Sonoma. He'd been told that open carry of handguns was allowed. There was a serious problem with feral dogs, cats, and coyotes. Long guns would be held for retrieval when you left town. They couldn't be carried into town. Digger

strapped on a pistol belt with a holster and magazine pouches. He holstered a Glock 21 and four spare magazines before he went out to the truck.

Whistling all the while, Digger drove slowly to town. A moderate snow was falling, but it didn't deter Digger. His first stop was at the Salvation Army pickup point. He dropped off Mandy's and the Hernandez' things and then drove to the brothel block. It took him three tries to find the right brothel.

His eyes widened when the women came out of the back and lined up to be chosen. Brenda, professional name Godiva, she informed him, took his hand and led him to her room. The bouncer eyed the bag that Digger carried. "It's okay John. It's the bag I left when I was staying with him."

Brenda closed the door and leaned back against it. "You saved my life, Digger. Any time you want to visit, it's on the house."

Digger turned red. "No, no! I just wanted to bring your things to you."

Brenda grinned. "I knew that. I was just joshing you. Thanks for bringing my stuff. The other girls fitted me out, but I prefer my own stuff."

"Okay," Digger said. Brenda could see he was uncomfortable and quickly led him to the exit.

Digger was still sweating when he climbed back into the Sonoma. It had been hot in all three houses, and seeing all that near naked flesh hadn't helped. He crossed the tracks and drove down to the Red Lion. He was carrying Chester/Chuck's bag. "I need to see someone about Chuck..." He couldn't remember the last name for a moment. "Polls. Chuck Polls."

"See the MP over there," the guard said. "He'll help you."

Digger walked over and handed the bag to the MP Lieutenant. The Lieutenant took it automatically. "It's Chuck Polls bag. He left it behind when he came to town." And then Digger did something he'd only done once before. He outright lied. "I thought about going through it, but decided I should just turn it in. There might be some evidence in it."

"Good thinking. What's your name?"

"Fred Jones. They call me Digger."

The Lieutenant put the bag on his desk. "Let's just see what old Chucky left behind. Might even be his loot. Boy will you be sorry you brought it in. Course, it couldn't be much. He's been on the run for a while and they'd already recovered most of it and his girlfriend ran off with the rest." He laughed at his own little joke.

It took only a minute to take out the clothes. "Just his clothes. He don't need them where he's going. We'll donate them somewhere. Thanks for coming in, Mr. Jones."

"Is that all?" Digger asked. It hadn't occurred to him that they wouldn't find the secret compartment immediately. Of course, the bag didn't weigh as much as it had originally. "Something heavy seemed to be moving around when I carried it."

"Oh, really?" the Lieutenant asked. Like Digger had done, the Lieutenant ran his hands around the inside bottom of the case. "I'll be darned! There is a secret compartment here!"

Another moment and the Lieutenant was holding the SP101 and the ten thousand dollars. "I don't believe it! This is probably the murder weapon. It's a .357 and that's what he used when he killed the cop back in Chicago during one of the bank robberies."

Digger blanched. He hadn't thought about that.

The Lieutenant shook his head then. “And looks like a few grand. Not much when you consider how much he took.”

Digger nearly erred. He almost told the Lieutenant that it was 10,000 dollars. It would have been a dead giveaway.

“Uh. Yeah,” Digger said. “I don’t know much about the case. I didn’t even know it was him when he was staying at my place.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t kill you in your sleep. Thank you for being an honest citizen and bringing this in. The bank and most of Chicago is gone. No way to get this money back to those from whom it was stolen. Figure the Colonel will put it into discretionary funds. Thanks again.”

It was a dismissal. The Lieutenant put clothes back into the bag and set the gun and money on them. “I’ll go see the Colonel right now.” Digger just walked away.

You Just Never Know – Chapter 17

December 24, 2007

As time had passed after turning in Chester/Chuck’s bag, Digger had made discrete inquiries about who was making it okay in the aftermath of the war and subsequent severe weather. On Christmas Eve Digger drove a loaded down Suburban to Winnemucca and began distributing care packages he’d put together for people he had determined needed the most help to survive until spring. All paid for with Chester’s ill gotten gains, that Digger had inherited.

He had accumulated everything slowly and quietly, not wanting to arouse suspicions. He used the cash at first. By early December silver and gold coinage were becoming the norm as things became more scarce

and cash prices climbed, even with the government trying to control it.

Digger had enough 1/10 ounce gold coins and pre-1964 silver dimes and quarters of his own, so he didn't waste any of Chester's full ounce Eagles on lopsided transactions. He hadn't found a way to use the diamonds, but knew the time would come when he could. They too, like Chester's cash and gold, would be used to help the community. When it did run out, well, then people would just have to make it on their own. Hopefully it would give a boost to those with marginal chances of survival to do so.

Digger wouldn't use any of it for himself. He still had five years worth of stored food and stabilized fuel. In addition, one of the first infrastructures the government had revived, after fuel supplies, was railroad transportation. Railroad workers were now federalized, but the job was still a good one. And one Digger enjoyed. He didn't have to worry about income for himself. He was making more than enough to live on without getting into his supplies. He was actually adding to them slowly. Because you just never know.

End *****

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