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Z-Factor

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Z-Factor

“Okay,” Bobbi said, rather reluctantly. “I admit it was kind of fun.”

“Kinda fun?” Bobbi’s friend Julia said and barked a laugh. “You were having the time of your life!”

“I was not!” exclaimed Bobbi. “Om... Om... Om...” Bobbi had her eyes closed and was meditating.

“Can’t meditate away the fact that you liked shooting my pistol,” Julia said softly.

The Oms stopped for a second and when Julia looked over Bobbi was frowning slightly.

“Zen does not lend itself to violence. Om... Om... Om...”

“Sure it does,” Julia said, rather seriously.

Surprised, Bobbi looked over at her long time friend. “How?”

“Meditating, clearing the mind, calming down... Most shooters do something. I saw you get ready before you shot. You might not have been Oming, but you were calming down, just like I showed you. Call it the Z-factor, if you don’t want to connect it too closely with Zen. Besides... You’re Christian. What’s with all the Zen stuff lately?”

“It is so calming, Julia! You should really try it! I’ve found that if I don’t delve too deeply into it, there is no conflict with my religion. I’m often just praying silently when I do the Om.”

“I’ve got my own methods to calm down, thank you. If the big Z works for you, I’ll not say anything else about it. Better not. You shot almost as well as I do and it was your first time. You sure you weren’t a soldier or something in a past life?”

“That’s silly. I don’t believe in reincarnation any more. When you die your soul either goes to heaven or the other place. I was just in a stage back then.”

“Un-huh. A stage. Like some of the other ones.”

Bobbi went into pout mode. “You always make fun of my hobbies! I know I sometimes go off the deep end, but... not so much lately.”

“I know, Sweetie! I’m not criticizing. Just funning you a little.”

“Oh. Well, okay.” There was silence for a few minutes as Julia maneuvered in heavy traffic. “And besides,” Bobbi said, as if there’d been no delay, “What about you and your... uh... Preps you call it?”

“My preps, are a way of life with me. One you’d be well to adopt. Bobbi, the world is a dangerous place, and...”

“Om... Om... Om...”

Julia fell silent and sighed. Sometime there seemed to be no hope for Bobbi. Off on some tangent she had a rather weak grip on reality sometimes. Her dabble into Zen was no competition for her religion, just something to play around with until the next fad or whatever came along.

It had been rather amazing that Bobbi had agreed to go to the range with Julia that day. First time ever, and Julia had been trying to get her to go, literally for years. Julia glanced over at Bobbi and began to wonder what was different about her friend now.

“Om... Om... Om...”

Julia really began to wonder when Bobbi agreed to go not only shooting with Julia the next week-end, but to a gun show first.

Keeping a sharp eye on her wide-eyed, rather bedazzled friend, Julia guided them over to one of the ammunition vendors. Julia bought a case of .45ACP FMJ to get her stocks back up to a more comfortable level after the recent shortage of ammunition.

Bobbi looked rather longingly over her shoulder when Julia headed out to put the ammunition into her Jeep. “Can we go back in?”

Julia was surprised. “Well... Sure... But I didn’t want to insult your Zen self.”

“Nah. That’s just the Z-factor. Like you said. I realized it this past week. Meditation is good, but it isn’t my religion. I use it now when I just need to get away from things for a couple of minutes. Can we go back?”

“Yep. You got your hand stamped didn’t you?”

Bobbi held up her arm proudly. There was the reentry stamp. “Okay,” Julia said, “Let’s go back.”

It was Julia that had to call it a day, after spending all morning and most of the afternoon wandering around the exhibits. Bobbi had a question about nearly everything. Julia was able to answer most, but when she wasn’t sure there was always a male standing nearby more than willing to provide the information. And take plenty of time doing it. More than once Julia had to nudge Bobbi to keep moving.

When Julia said she was ready to go get something to eat, Bobbi frowned. “I want to look at one of the guns again.”

Wearily Julia agreed. Bobbi made a beeline to one of the tables catering to women shooters. “Can I have that one?” Bobbi asked, pointing to a pink stocked 10-22 .22 rimfire rifle.

Julia thought she was going to faint. Bobbi was in the process of buying a gun. A twenty-two, but a real gun, never the less.

“Bobbi! Are you sure you want a gun of your own? Did you even bring any money?”

“Sure! See.” Bobbi carefully opened the bag she used as a purse. There was a wad of folded bills that would choke a horse, Julia thought.

Julia just stood and watched as Bobbi was led through the process of buying the rifle. She could even take immediate possession since they were in Nevada. She declined to get any accessories for it, except for ten spare Ruger 10-round magazines. Julia did talk her into getting a cleaning kit, eye and hearing protection, and they picked up two bricks of .22 LR ammunition on the way out.

“I can’t wait! Let’s go to the range right now!” Bobbi said excitedly when they were both in the Jeep.

“I have to eat something first,” Julia said. “I’m starving.”

“Oh. Yeah. So am I. Let’s get something fast.”

“You are not going off your health diet to go shooting. We can take the time to eat a real, healthy, meal.”

“I guess you’re right,” Bobbi said, slumping back in the Jeep’s front passenger seat. She only pouted a little.

The eagerness was back when they finished their late lunch and were on the way to the range. Julia explained all the safety aspects of shooting, Bobbi’s second lesson in a week. Julia was pleased that she took it all in raptly. The weekend before Bobbi had paid attention, but was more interested, at first, in just getting done what she had decided was going to be an ordeal.

Bobbi asked some questions, and then, with Julia convinced her friend could handle the rifle safely, showed her how to load it. Bobbi nodded and set the rifle down on the bench. She closed her eyes and the Oms were back. Half a dozen of them. When she saw Julia looking at her she shrugged and said, “The Z-factor. I’m ready now.”

Julia’s thumb was worn almost raw reloading the ten round magazines so Bobbi could just keep shooting. Bobbi went through the first brick of .22 shells and was ready for more, but Julia called a halt. It was beginning to get dark and her thumb ached. “You always want to have some ammunition available. Never shoot it all up, unless you’re defending your life.”

“That’s smart. Julia, you really know a lot of good stuff.”

“Yeah. Well, thank you. I think. Now let’s go home and get the rifle cleaned and put up before we get something to eat.”

“Can we celebrate? Me getting a gun?”

“Sure. The budget is fine. We can spare a little extra for a celebration.”

“Cool!” Bobbi replied and carefully carried the rifle back to the Jeep after putting it in the silicone sock Julia bought for her at the range shop. It, too, was pink.

Over the next several weeks, Julia observed subtle changes in Bobbi’s outlook. Bobbi had latched onto the ‘Z-factor’ much more tightly than usual for one of her tangential episodes. But it was almost entirely devoted to the shooting sports. Bobbi wanted to go every week-end now. And before each session, she did the Om thing for a couple of minutes to relax and center herself. Or so she said.

When Bobbi asked to shoot Julia's CCW carry gun, a Para Ordnance version of the venerable Colt 1911 semi-auto pistol, she did the same thing the first time. "I don't know," Bobbi said after putting three 12-round magazines through the gun. "I kind of like it. But it's pretty plain."

"Being plain doesn't make it inefficient or unable to do the job. Speaking of which, you really need to rethink your Z-factor warm up when you shoot a pistol. It's fine when you're target shooting, but not so good if there are bad guys shooting at you. You have to be quick and precise."

Bobbi, to Julia's surprise, nodded and said, "That makes sense. I'll remember that."

Julia found Bobbi on the computer a couple of times the next week looking at gun sites and even at least one preparedness site. Julia didn't say anything. If Bobbi was finally coming around on the subject of preps, then so much the better. With some people, Bobbi being a perfect example, you didn't push. You provided opportunity and responded to questions.

That was pretty much it until the next gun show came to the city. Julia was stunned when Bobbi handed her a computer generated ticket to the show and held up hers. "I thought we could go to the gun show tomorrow. I got tickets online so we wouldn't have to wait so long in line to get in."

"Well... Sure. Wasn't planning to this time, but okay. If you want to, we certainly will."

Bobbi made a rapid circuit of the show the next day, but came back to one table shortly afterwards. Julia just stayed with her and kept an eye on things. Bobbi was on a mission, and she sometimes wasn't very aware of what was around her.

The table where Bobbi stopped and look for some time carried a line of custom handgun grips, including those for 1911 design pistols.

“That one,” Bobbi said, pointing at a pair of grips under the glass top of the display case.

“This one?” asked the dealer pointing to one of the closely spaced grips.

“Nope. One to your left. Yes. That one. Can I see it up close?”

The dealer handed the two thin slabs of wood to Bobbi and waited expectantly.

“Uh... Bobbi... If you’re thinking about those as a gift for me...”

“No. Of course not. They’re for me. I’m going to get a pistol to fit them.”

“A pistol to fit the grip? Is she kidding?” the dealer asked Julia.

“No, she’s not kidding,” Julia told the dealer, but she leaned close and whispered to Bobbi, “Bobbi! Let’s discuss this! You don’t just buy grips and then go find a pistol to fit them.”

“Why not? I already know the pistol I want. Just like yours, only prettier. That table was really busy so I came over here, first.”

“You’ve got a 1911 picked out? Where?”

“Would you hold these for me?” Bobbi asked the dealer, handing the fancy grips back to him. She then led Julia on quite a chase through the three rooms of the gun show.

Julia happened to be looking at Bobbi when they came up to the table. Bobbi was enchanted. Julia looked down to where Bobbi was looking on the table. “Oh, Bobbi! That pistol goes for over three grand!”

“But isn’t it like yours, only with the silver plating and gold inlay?”

“Well... Yes... But...”

“And it’ll shoot okay? It’s not just for show?”

The dealer answered for Julia. “Yes indeed! Only had a few rounds put through it, but it is a shooter, for sure!”

“I want it.” Bobbi didn’t look at Julia as she handed the dealer her credit card and took the clipboard with the paperwork to be filled out. An old hand at it now, Bobbi made quick work as Julia tried to come up with some reason for Bobbi not to get the gun.

Bobbi certainly had the money, but in Julia’s eyes, the fancy gun was a waste of it. Better to get a cheaper model that was just as effective, such as hers, and get more supplies for it with the rest of the money.

But Bobbi was so set on the gun that Julia didn’t have the heart to try and talk her out of it. With Julia’s tacit, but unspoken agreement, Bobbi got on a roll. Pistol in a bag, she went back and got the grips she wanted, batted her eyes a couple of times and got the dealer to throw in silver plated screws and attach the grips to the pistol for free.

A direct route next to a table selling high grade magazines for the gun. Eight rounders, stainless steel, to go with the silver plated gun. Twenty of them. Then on to a custom leatherworker for a belt, holster, and magazine pouches, with fine tooling, of course.

The last stop before they left the show was at the ammunition dealer to get more .22 LR ammunition and two cases of .45ACP FMJ to use in the new Colt.

Bobbi was smiling, but silent, on the way to the range. “You really sure you want to shoot it?” Julia asked finally. “It’s really more of a collector item than a shooter.”

“You know I like pretty things. It’s even better when they are useful,” Bobbi replied.

Julia had to admit a couple of hours later that the fancy gun was indeed a shooter. A very good shooter. And with a little help from a couple of willing ‘experts’, Bobbi learned how to draw and fire the gun from the holster. Not super fast, but fast enough and very accurate. Julia was a bit jealous of how well Bobbi shot with so little practice.

Happy as a clam, Bobbi put everything away after cleaning the gun when they got home and changed clothes to go out for another celebratory dinner out.

Turning Bobbi into a fledgling prepper after that was relatively easy for Julia. Bobbi spent most of her spare time on the computer, catching up on information that was old hat to Julia. And questions... She asked hundreds of them. Most Julia could answer, but on occasion one that they both had to look up. Julia wasn’t much of one for the prep and PAW fiction on some of the forums, but Bobbi, seldom without a book handy, took to it like it was candy. She spent countless hours reading the fiction.

Then, when her current boyfriend asked Julia to go camping over the Labor Day weekend a couple weeks before the event, Bobbi cautiously asked to go along. Normally the two kept their romantic lives to themselves. But when Julia asked Mark if Bobbi could tag along he agreed. A bit too eagerly in Julia’s eyes.

But Bobbi didn’t have any camping gear. So Bobbi went into shopping mode, occasionally asking Julia for advice, but making most of the choices on her own. Most everything was purchased on-line, with delivery times well in time for the trip.

By the time the day they were to leave on the camping trip, Bobbi was as well equipped for a wilderness camping trip as Julia. Everything they would need for the three-day weekend, plus a week's extra consumables, just in case, was loaded into the back of Julia's Jeep. They would meet Mark at the entrance to the section of the National Forest where they would be camping.

Mark, as usual, Julia suddenly realized, was late. Julia and Bobbi waited in the Jeep for him to come over from his car. "I thought you were going to rent a pickup for this trip. That car will never make it. You know that," Julia told Mark.

"I know. I figured to ride in with you. I'll get my gear."

Julia got out of the Jeep and hurried over to Mark at his small car. Bobbi, sensing the tension in Julia, stayed where she was.

"Mark! This is all you brought? What about a tent? It's going to be cold. And I only see a couple of bottles of water. Where's your food and water and emergency supplies?"

"Oh, I figured you'd have all that. I brought my own sleeping bag. Figured on sharing your tent."

"Oh, you did, did you? Well, that's not going to happen now or ever. Just put that stuff back in your car and go home. We're done."

"Not so fast. Let's see what Bobbi has to say about this. She wanted to go. Maybe you should take my car and go home and Bobbi and I can go on this little jaunt together. I'm sure that's what she was wanting, anyway."

"You slug!" Julia said, her voice low and intense. "Bobbi wants nothing to do with you. She has a steady boyfriend. You've had a roving eye

ever since we started going out. Should have known that when your eye roved to me, it would at some point rove again. Good-bye!”

Julia turned and walked back to the Jeep. She didn't realize Mark was right behind her. “Bobbi!” Mark said over Julia's shoulder when she opened the door of the Jeep, “Tell Julia you just came along to be with me.”

“What? Are you insane? I don't even like you, Mark!”

Mark said a few choice words, mostly expletives and derogatory to women. Julia just shut the Jeep door and put the vehicle in gear. Mark was still yelling and shaking his fist at them when Julia made a turn in the road and they lost sight of him.

“Julia, I didn't...”

“You don't have to say it, Bobbi. I know you didn't do anything to encourage him. I've been seeing the signs lately that he's looking for more than I'm willing to give. Small loss.”

“I'm sorry, anyway. You want to go home and we can have a cry fest and get some ice cream to go along with it?”

Julia shook her head. “Not a chance. I'd rather do the camping. I don't think I'm going to be crying my eyes out for Mark. Now, look lively. Not only is it beautiful out here, it can be dangerous if the roads get washed out. We're heading into the primitive camping area of the National Forest. Not too many come in here this late. Good chance of an early snow.”

“That's why the extra supplies, right?”

“Partly. Also to have some if we run across someone who didn't plan adequately. I've had to hand out some food, and especially water, a couple of times before.”

Bobbi smiled. “Okay. You’re stronger than me. Oh! I see what you mean! I know you’re a good driver, but be careful.”

It was some time later when Julia stopped the Jeep and the two women got out. “You are so right, Julia! It is beautiful out here! You should have made me come with you before.”

“You weren’t ready,” Julia replied, stretching hugely. “Don’t know what’s come over you, but I think it’s been good for you.”

“Yeah. My eyes have really been opened lately. To many different things. A year ago I never would have even considered having a rifle, much less a handgun.”

The two began unloading the Jeep and setting up the camp, Bobbi following Julia’s lead. After several moments of silence, Bobbi was talking again. “You know... It’s because I’m scared.”

“Scared? Of what?” Julia asked. “We’re well equipped to handle any dangers out here. Even the occasional cougar or bear.”

“No. Not here. I love it here already. About things... the economy... the way the government is going. All the natural disasters that are happening. Avian Flu and Swine Flu. What’s going to happen if one of those mega disasters happens? What if I lose my job because of the economy?”

“Well, as for your job, it’s pretty secure. So is mine. But that’s why I’ve always kept extra food and other consumables. In case of a layoff, or we can’t get in because of the weather.”

“All I ever did, before now, was keep a blanket and a bottle of water in my car. It never really hit me until I started reading the forums all the things that could happen. I think I worry the most about something

happening to a child, and not being able to help because I don't have any supplies.

"I had no idea how expensive first-aid gear is. Got a real shock when I started putting together a first-aid and trauma kit. Even getting the supplies through the company at a discount, it's still expensive."

"I know. I don't have as much as I'd like, either. And it's tough to get some of the medications I'd like to have on hand, for a doctor to use, in the aftermath of a disaster."

"I hadn't thought of that," Bobbi mused. She pushed an aluminum tent pole through the sleeve of her tent. "My doctor and I have been friends for a long time. I think I might get her to prescribe some things. I'll ask at my next check-up."

"I tried with mine, but she was adamantly against any sort of prepping. Considers it hoarding and people that prep as trouble makers. Absolutely abhors guns."

"You need a new doctor. You should come see Angie."

"I may do that. Especially if you have good luck with her."

The tents were up and the two women separated to put their respective gear inside. The wind had risen and it was threatening to rain or snow. "Are you sure we can't have a real fire?" Bobbi asked.

"No. The risk is just too high. Let's get things finished and we can have a hot meal before the weather dumps on us."

Again following Julia's lead, Bobbi set up her stove and began heating water to reconstitute a Mountain House meal. Either set of gear would have been fine, but Bobbi wanted the hands on experience of doing everything herself.

With the meal finished, and large mugs of hot chocolate ready, Bobbi, and then Julia used the chemical toilet set up in a privacy enclosure. Both women had one of their own, but Bobbi had helped Julia with hers and considered it adequate training.

“See you in the morning, Bobbi,” Julia said. “If you get scared, or something happens, come wake me up. I usually sleep like a log during bad weather.”

“Okay, Julia. Thanks again for letting me come along. Good night.”

Bobbi had the time of her life those three days. Julia was a good teacher and Bobbi an avid pupil. By the time they returned to the city, Julia was confident that Bobbi could camp on her own, barring really serious weather or other problems.

During the ensuing months, Bobbi became as much of a prepper as Julia. She graduated to a .223 carbine, another Ruger. Though she kept her Ruger 10/22, she picked up a Ruger SR-556. It was identical to the one Julia had, so they could share accessories and magazines.

Unlike Julia, who had a quite serviceable set of ALICE LBE gear dating from the Vietnam War, Bobbi went with an FMCO vest setup for eight thirty-round magazines, with several additional pouches for other items, including a three-liter water bladder.

As they gathered Bobbi's equipment, getting her as ready as Julia, the two continued to watch the news with a jaundiced eye. And they made plans. Several different ones for different circumstances. One of which was a bug-out/evacuation plan.

Julia had a lot of faith in her Jeep, but it was a newer model, with sophisticated engine electronics. In the event of an EMP event it was likely to be disabled. And getting out of Reno might be a wise decision depending on what actually happened, if anything.

It was Bobbi that told Julia about the idea of using game carts as bug out equipment carriers to allow taking a great deal more equipment and supplies than could be carried on one's back. While most of Bobbi's recent purchases were from REI and Sportsman's Warehouse, in Reno, the two took a trip just outside of town to the Cabela's located near the California border.

Both got a bit sidetracked with the availability of so many things applicable to preparedness. But they finally worked their way to the selection of game carts the store carried. The clerk was a professional, and made no comment on the fact that they bought two of the Super Magnums with dual wheels, not for use as game carriers, but as evacuation aids. It seemed they were getting quite a few requests for them now. He wondered why, but didn't ask where they got the idea.

On the way home with the game carts, Julia made two stops. The first one was at Wal-Mart, a place both women loathed, but the only local place they were sure they could find a pair of snow sleds they could make into pulks to use with the game carts in deep snow. Since they were there, they also picked up several Rubbermaid Action Packer totes. With a set for each game cart and the lashing straps to hold them in place on the carts, Julia headed for the Jeep dealer.

Despite the Jeep being a four door, there wasn't space to carry one game cart, much less two, inside. The roof rack carried two spare tires and pioneer tools. And the carry rack above the rear mount spare tire already carried fuel cans. Even the front of the Jeep was out of the question. It too had a rack, this one with a fourth spare tire, winch, and additional tools.

So Julia chose a hitch mount fold down cargo carrier and had it installed. When they got home, they assembled the game carts, lashed the totes on, and set the assemblies on the platform. A couple of high fives later, satisfied that the set up would work, Julia and Bobbi carried the totes to the apartment to be packed up and stored, along with the folded up game carts.

The ability to evacuate gave both a sense of ease. For a while. Things just kept getting worse in the US and around the world. Gold was now over \$1,100 an ounce, the stock market knocking on 11,000, and prices were going up, with the government saying that inflation was down.

Swine flu, Avian flu, and the regular old seasonal flu were all taking a toll on the population. US troops were still dying in several places around the world, and the nuclear club was growing. The last item was particularly disturbing, as the newcomers to that club were not the most stable of regimes, or had US hating fanatics in charge.

The first real test of Bobbi's and Julia's preparations came over the Christmas Holiday. A huge storm system coming in from the Pacific, due west of Reno, was forecast to dump a tremendous amount of snow on the mountains to the west of Reno. Normally Reno got only a small taste of even large storms, but this was different. The forecast for Reno was for feet of snow, not the normal few inches, with temperatures well below freezing.

Bobbi and Julia talked it over. They both were off work for two weeks, and the propensity of the old heating system in the otherwise nice apartment building to cut out for hours at a time, convinced them both to take a vacation well to the east, before the storm hit.

They were methodical. Since they had plenty of time, they took the time to do a list as they got ready to leave. There was nothing they could do about the plumbing in the walls and under the floor, but RV anti-freeze was put in all the traps and the toilets after shutting off the water valves going to each fixture and draining everything they could.

Anything that might get damaged if the water pipes burst was placed on higher shelves, the counters, and tall furniture. The game carts were unfolded and secured in the open position, then loaded, after a bit of

reorganization of their contents. Those totes not going were closed and sealed with duct tape, just in case.

Even with the time taken to write down the list of actions taken, and the rearranging of things, the two were ready to go down to the Jeep in less than an hour and a half. In the future, with the practice of this evacuation, they would be able to do it in well under an hour. Less if the game carts were pre-loaded and ready, as would be the case in slowly developing crisis.

They saw the need for being early, rather than late, in making the decision to evacuate. The roads were already heavily travelled, almost exclusively east bound out of Reno. The westbound lanes were already backing up, with the Donner Pass already closed with three feet of snow on it and more coming down heavily.

The snow in the valley began just as Julia put the Jeep in gear and they headed for Interstate 80 eastbound. While waiting for an accident to be cleared ahead of them, Julia left the interstate, found a fuel station that was open and had fuel. She topped the Jeep's fuel tank off, though it was already over three-quarters full. Bobbi got some snacks and half a dozen large bottles of water for the trip. They had what they needed, but a bit more wouldn't hurt, she decided.

Leaving the fuel station and pulling into the parking lot at a neighboring fast food joint, Julia parked in a spot that would allow easy departure, in case the parking lot continued to fill with people leaving the interstate because of the delay.

Again, neither woman was particularly hungry, but ordered filling meals to see them through the projected travel time. Finally, from their table near a window, Julia saw the traffic on the interstate begin to move again. Both women made a last trip to the bathroom, and then went out to the Jeep.

“How’d you know you’d get blocked if we had parked closer?” Bobbi asked.

Julia grinned. “I do occasionally read the prep and PAW fiction, too,” she said. The snow was coming down more heavily now and Julia wasted no time getting back on I-80 and pointing the Jeep eastward.

It was a long, slow, and boring drive. At least for Bobbi. Until she fell asleep. Julia, on the other hand, kept both hands on the wheel and her eyes peeled for signs of trouble ahead. She was able to basically stay just ahead of the worst of the storm, needing the wipers only occasionally to clear a small accumulation of snow when she had to go slowly.

Their goal was to reach Winnemucca, Nevada, get a motel room, and wait out the storm. Taking their gear was just a drill. But they were not alone in leaving Reno to avoid the storm, plus most of the Nevada towns that had major casino operations had their Christmas operations geared up and the supply of motel and hotel rooms ran out before all those from Reno arrived, and then headed for Battle Mountain, and finally, Elko.

Bobbi and Julia had a quick discussion, and decided they would stay in Winnemucca. Though not intended for tent campers, the Winnemucca Events center had opened to take RVs and semi trucks. Rather reluctantly, they were allowed to find a safe corner and set up Julia’s tent. They would use only the single tent to conserve the energy from the Coleman Black Cat catalytic tent safe heater. Bobbi had an identical heater, which they brought inside, just in case.

Instead of setting up the privacy enclosure, the chemical toilet was placed in the rear vestibule of the tent. The chemical toilet and privacy shelter were part of their regular camping equipment that they had brought, but would abandon with the Jeep if they had to use the game carts.

As darkness fell and the snow continued to worsen, Bobbi and Julia took up residence in their temporary home. Though it got below zero, Bobbi

and Julia only used the heater enough to keep certain items from freezing up. The hot meals they made on Julia's backpacker stove, used on the bare ground of the front vestibule, kept them just as warm inside as the clothing and quality sleep systems did their exteriors.

Bobbi continued to keep a journal, and, more importantly, a running list of observations about their first evacuation. What went right and what wasn't quite right. Fortunately there weren't very many items on the second list.

Storms went through the region in waves. It was over a week before more than just a peek of the sun was visible. But the plows were running, and after ten days the main roads were clear. Julia and Bobbi packed up and headed for home.

There were several plumbing trucks parked in the apartment building parking garage, with men and women hustling about continuously. Bobbi and Julia had been wise to make the preparations for cold weather effects on the plumbing. Though their lines inside the apartment were all okay, the pipes had burst in several places when the heat failed during the worst of the storms and things froze up solid.

Talking to the apartment manager, Bobbi learned that there were several deaths in the area, including one in this building, all due to the cold and lack of heat. It would be another three days before the water was turned back on.

Having just gone through the event in a tent, enduring a few days in the apartment without water would be little problem. They still had plenty of water in storage in their climate controlled storage room. When Julia called to check on whether or not the storage units had lost power she found out they had not. Everything in the small storage room should be fine.

Julia and Bobbi exchanged the gist of the conversations and set about restoring things to normal, incorporating what they had learned during

the event. All the consumables they had used during the evacuation were replaced, and a few more added.

The rest of the world couldn't care less about the snow storm in Reno. That is, except for the terrorist group that had planned a Christmas Day detonation of a small nuclear device. Diverted on their way to Reno to place the device, the five men and two women chaffed at the delays. The detonation was to have been a warning for the American Fascist Pigs to remove themselves from the Middle East or suffer additional consequences.

The problem turned out to be that in the terrorist organization, the left hand did not always know what the right hand was doing. Another cell had been tasked with making the announcement. But unwilling to stay and martyr themselves, the two men set up an automatic system to release the information a few hours after the event.

About the only thing the announcement, minus the detonation, had accomplished was to put the authorities on alert. NEST was notified and began looking for the device. Julia and Bobbi, both back to work, noticed the unusual helicopter traffic. They even spotted one of the NEST trucks, though they had no idea it was what it was.

The terrorists were not idle. Well, except the two that had set up the automatic message system. They were both dead, bodies hacked to pieces for their failure to be martyred. The device team was holed up, discussing what to do. They'd been very careful not to contact the next cell with their dilemma, fearing exactly what had happened to the other men they knew nothing about.

On New Year's day it was decided to get as close to Donner pass as possible and then detonate the device, closing the pass and, hopefully, cause fallout to reach Reno. In the heavily shielded, otherwise innocuous mini-van, the five terrorists headed for the pass. They almost made it.

But the driver of the van, a bit less enthusiastic about martyrdom, began to cry, mumbling prayers and asking for divine intervention to avoid his sure death. Though the best driver of the five terrorists, and the most 'American' looking, trying to drive while crying and wiping your eyes of tears was not conducive of safe driving.

The driver swerved while wiping his eyes one last time and sideswiped the semi he was trying to pass. Rebounding, the mini-van hit the median and rolled over. Like the mini-van, the device was heavily shielded with lead. The device wasn't that securely tied down and came loose during the crash, crushing both of the women under the weight of the device and of slabs of the shielding on the walls of the van.

The third person in the rear of the van was merely trapped. The driver was dead, his chest crushed when the device slammed into the back of his seat, driving him onto the steering column. The only person not seriously injured was the final man, who had been riding in the passenger seat of the van. The only one buckled in, he rode out the rollover and the device bouncing around in the back of the van.

Vehicles were stopping when that fifth terrorist fired his AK-47 toward the road. A California Highway Patrolman was a few vehicles back and came out of his patrol car shooting. He killed the terrorist before the dazed man could hit anything with the wildly swinging AK. It took the Patrolman a few seconds to notice the chirping sound he was hearing, and then locate the source.

His face went white when he realized it was the NukAlert radiation detector on his key ring in the patrol car. Getting back into the car he radioed for help, using an open frequency, and then went over to the van, cautiously, the NukAlert now in his hand. The closer he got to the van the quicker the chirps came.

Feeling like it was his duty, he went all the way up to the van and looked in. Seeing the exposed lead he realized his fears were real and started to run back to his car. Before he could turn around, the final living terrorist,

trapped, but not helpless, shot the Patrolman with a burst from the AK-47 that was just within his reach.

The Patrolman fell backwards, dead before he hit the cold ground. Several people coming on a run to help suddenly turned around and went the other way as the terrorist sprayed and prayed, dumping the rest of the forty round magazine blindly through the exposed sheet metal of the van where the lead had come off.

Though the authorities would not have announced anything until after the NEST team arrived, if then, the fact that numerous people had heard the original transmission by the Patrolman, the decision became moot.

The rumors, which weren't rumors after all, spread quickly. Reno news station helicopters were on the way, as were dozens of official vehicles and aircraft. Julia was listening to background music when the announcer broke in and gave the report in a very shaky voice.

Rumor or not, Julia didn't wait. She was able to get Bobbi on her cell phone and they agreed to meet at home and get ready to evacuate. A few minutes later, when Bobbi tried to call Julia and tell her she was trapped in traffic the cell system was down from overload.

Bobbi didn't panic. She did take time to change from the low heel pumps to insulated boots. Then she grabbed her Bug-out bag, left the car and headed for home on foot.

Julia was nearly frantic when Bobbi didn't show up in reasonable time. With both their sets of gear loaded, Julia decided to give it just a few more minutes. She couldn't be still. Julia loaded every last bit of food in the apartment into the Jeep, grabbed some things from Bobbi's bedroom for her, and then headed out in the Jeep. When she came to the junction she hesitated, but then turned west. The traffic was heavily east and she was able to keep her speed up.

Bobbi saw Julia before Julia saw her. Jumping up and down, waving her arms, Bobbi finally got Julia's attention. Julia whipped the Jeep around and came to a stop. Bobbi jumped into the front passenger seat and Julia looked for a way to get on the west bound lanes.

When no opportunity presented itself, Julia said, "Hang on!" whipped the wheel around again and headed east in the west bound fast lane. There were a few close calls, lots of horns sounding, and more than one expletive shouted at her, but Julia held her course until she could get off.

She stopped the Jeep, put her head down on the steering wheel and drew and released several deep breaths. "Julia, you think we should clean out the storage room?" Bobbi asked. "It's just a couple of blocks away."

Julia looked up, saw where they were and agreed. "Big risk, but if this is the big one, it may be our only chance." Putting the Jeep in gear again, Julia made the two blocks, the Jeep tires squealing a bit on each turn.

The power was still on, so the two were able to enter the storage lot and Julia parked near the elevators to the second story of the facility. Bobbi and Julia both grabbed the available carts and headed to their storage room.

"Oh, no! My keys!" Julia exclaimed. "I can't find my keys!"

"I've got mine," Bobbi said and proceeded to open the door to the storage room. "Not everything will fit."

"Sure it will," Julia replied, calm again. "You just keep it coming." They each took a cart load down and Julia began placing select items in the rear of the Jeep, and others on the roof rack, rear spare tire rack, and on top of and around the game carts.

When Bobbi had the last load down and she and Julia finished hanging and strapping things into place, it was difficult to tell that the Jeep was a Jeep. It could be just about anything under the mass of material on it.

“Let’s get out of here,” Julia said. Bobbi ran to open the gate again and joined Julia in the Jeep. “I don’t think we’d better go back to the apartment for my things,” Bobbi said quietly.

“Not to worry, Bobbi,” Julia said. “I grabbed everything I thought you might want to have with you, plus your regular prep items.”

“Oh, thank you, Julia!” Bobbi said, glancing behind the seat. She couldn’t make out what Julia might have brought for her, but she trusted her friend and turned back forward to help watch the road.

There was still traffic westward, but it was light. Traffic eastbound was about like heavy morning and evening commuting traffic. Julia was more than a little tempted to use the westbound lanes again, but between being more than a bit dangerous, and if she got stopped there was no telling when she’d get loose.

So she stayed with the traffic. It did begin to thin out as they went through the canyons east of town. There were more than a few vehicles that looked much like the Jeep. Heavily loaded down, with things tied on all over the outside.

There were the normal number of breakdowns on the side of the road. Bobbi tried to call in the breakdowns, but the cell system was still down. By the time they were past Fernley traffic looked about normal for a weekday. Including westbound traffic. “You think they know?” Bobbi asked.

“I don’t think so. Or if they do, they think it’s a drill or a hoax,” Julia replied. “I don’t even know for sure, but I’m not taking any chances. Winnemucca, here we come.”

Things went well for some time. There was no more news on the radio. The authorities had acted quickly to get the coverage stopped, laying it

off to a hoax being played. Again Julia and Bobbi exchanged looks. It didn't take any words. They would continue east on I-80.

Almost to the Rye Patch Lake State Recreational Area exit, Julia felt the Jeep's engine stutter a bit, but it smoothed out after a few seconds.

"What's going on?" Bobbi asked. Several cars were coasting to the side of the road, their tail lights glaring in the near darkness. Several semi tractor trailer rigs were doing the same. But there were still some vehicles running. Mostly older models, but not exclusively.

"Hey! The train is stopping, too!" Bobbi said, pointing to a Union Pacific freight train some distance away. "We were just keeping up with it. Now we're going past it fast."

"EMP!" Julia muttered.

"But we're too far from a blast for EMP... If it was actually there at Donner," Bobbi replied. She'd read extensively about the effects of EMP. For ground bursts the effect radius was about that of the other major destructive effects.

"Got to be the tracks carried it... Bobbi, I think there really is... was a nuke. It went off and the tracks carried the EMP. Can't be very strong, since the Jeep is going, along with some other vehicles. Just the luck of the draw, I guess."

Bobbi was looking into the rearview mirror on her side of the Jeep. "I don't see any mushroom cloud," she said.

"Too far." Julia suddenly added, "Bobbi, we probably need to find a fallout shelter."

"I know. But distance helps. I think we should keep going, at least to Winnemucca. We might not even need it there. But there should be some places available. Uh... What about Brian?"

Julia lips were a thin line. “I don’t know, Bobbi,” She said slowly. “You know we don’t get along.”

“It’s nuclear war, Julia. Surely he’d take us in...”

“You, oh yeah. Me, not necessarily.”

“He’s your cousin.”

“And I’m the one that turned him in for embezzlement of our grandfather’s estate. He’d be living high on the hog if I’d kept my mouth shut.”

“Please, Julia? I’m scared.”

“I know. So am I,” Julia replied. “Okay. We’ll try. And if he does agree to take you in, but not me, I want you to take him up on it. He’ll hit on you, for sure, but you’re a big girl and can handle it.”

“I don’t want to stay there if he doesn’t let you. And I’m not a big girl without you backing me up.”

“We’ll just have to wait and see.”

It was another two hours to Winnemucca. Traffic was light by the time they arrived on the outskirts. The westbound lanes had police vehicles blocking them. There were some on the eastbound as well, but the lanes weren’t blocked. But there was a check point.

The police officer that walked up to the driver’s side door of the Jeep had an amused look on his face. “You hiding in there somewhere?” he asked Julia when she lowered the window.

“Yes. What’s going on?”

“I figured you knew, considering the look of your rig. A terrorist nuke, they think, went off at Donner. The Governor ordered traffic in this area to stop. People are being allowed into the nearest city, but that’s as far as they go for the moment. Only authorized personnel are being allowed to leave the cities. Things are crowded. Tell me you have a place to stay.”

“What about fallout?” Bobbi asked, leaning over so the officer could see her.

“They are saying that it shouldn’t reach here.”

“They?” Julia asked.

“The big boys with the Geiger counters.” The officer looked around, and then back at the two women. “However... If it was me, I’d be looking for something. The Mayor is opening up some city buildings to receive refugees... I bet you’re armed. They won’t let you in, and will probably seize your supplies and gear. Not that I ever mentioned that, you understand.”

“We do, Officer... Lewis.” Julia had to squint to read his name tag. “And thanks. We have one possibility. If it doesn’t work out, where would you suggest we go that we can go without giving up all our stuff. We’re self-sufficient for a couple of months.”

“A couple of wise young ladies after my own heart.” Officer Lewis looked around again, and then took a business card from the right hand pocket of his coat. “All else fails, try this place. Tell them ‘Cougar’ sent you. Don’t mention my name at all, okay?”

“Okay,” Julia said, taking the card. She handed it to Bobbi without reading it. “Thank you, Officer Lewis. Be careful, will you? Things might get bad.”

Julia felt herself blush slightly when Officer Lewis winked and said, “Sure will, Ma’am.” He touched the brim of his duty cap and waved them on through the check point.

“What do you think, Julia?” Bobbi asked, holding the card out for Julia to look at. Julia turned on the overhead light for a moment and read the card. The only thing on it was an address.

Julia turned the overhead light off and frowned. “Do you know where that is?”

Bobbi shook her head. “We need to get a map. And see if we can get some fuel, I expect.”

“Yes. Good point. There’s a station that looks like it is open.” Julia pulled in and stopped beside a pump. “Limit of ten gallons,” Julia told Bobbi.”

“I’ll get a map and pay for the fuel.”

“Okay.”

Julia waited until Bobbi signaled her from inside the C-Store before she started pumping the gasoline. The pump cut off at the ten-gallon mark and Julia hung up the nozzle. She rubbed her hands together. It was getting really cold. She should have put on her gloves.

Bobbi hurried back out after going to the restroom and stood by the Jeep until Julia had a turn inside. When Julia got back, she got behind the wheel again and Bobbi entered the other side.

“Well, here goes...” Julia said after she started the Jeep. The slight trouble on the road had her more than a little worried about the Jeep starting again. Running when the EMP happened, it had kept going. But once stopped, would it start again?

Julia breathed a sigh of relief. The Jeep started. But the issue of Brian was of the same import. Julia headed for his place on the outskirts of Winnemucca. Like Julia, Brian was a prepper. The only problem was he had embezzled money in order to build up his preps faster before Y2K. He'd let slip the fact and Julia heard him.

The rest of the family did nothing. But Julia let her conscience dictate what to do. She turned Brian in. He wiggled his way out of jail time, but lost a large portion of the preps. One thing he'd done before the embezzlement was build a large fallout shelter in his back yard.

It was almost midnight when Julia pulled into the drive at Brian's. The lights were on in the house. Julia honked and stepped out of the Jeep. Bobbi got out, too.

The front door opened. "Who is it and what do you want. I'm warning you. I have a gun and will use it."

"I didn't think he was supposed to have a gun," Bobbi whispered across the gear tied on the hood of the Jeep."

"He's not," Julia replied softly. Julia raised her voice. "It's Julia, Brian. With Bobbi Watson. We'd like to share the shelter. I take it you know what's going on."

"Of course I know what's going on. Take a hike."

Julia didn't fight the fact. "Take Bobbi in, if I leave?"

"No!" Bobbi hissed at her friend.

Suddenly Julia heard a soft "Om... Om... Om..." Then Bobbi started praying softly, under her breath.

"What will it take for me to get a place in the shelter, Brian?" Julia asked, looking back at her cousin.

“Ounce of gold, not a silver dime less.”

“Tell him ‘Okay’,” Bobbi said immediately.

“I don’t have an ounce of gold,” Julia told her friend. “Only a half. In tenth ounce Gold Eagles.”

“Don’t worry. I have it.” Bobbi looked at Brian and called out, “It’s a deal. You get your ounce of gold once we’re settled in the shelter.”

“No go,” Brian yelled. “Gold first, and then shelter.”

“Not going to happen,” Julia said. “Let’s go, Bobbi.”

“I’ll throw in another tenth, if you do it my way,” Bobbi said, standing her ground as Julia got inside the Jeep.

There was silence for several moments, but then Brian said, “Show me the gold.”

Bobbi reached into the Jeep and pulled her BOB out. It took her a moment to get the gold out, but she walked up to the porch of the house and Brian stepped forward. Bobbi opened her gloved hand. Three shiny pieces of gold were on the black leather of the palm of her glove. Two one-half ounce Gold Eagles and one one-tenth Gold Eagle.

Brian reached for it, but Bobbi pulled her hand back. “Un-uh. Shelter first.”

“You’re as mercenary as my cousin,” Brian muttered. “Okay. Have her pull around to the back. She knows where the shelter is.”

Bobbi hurried back to the Jeep. “Bobbi... I...”

“Don’t worry about it, Julia. Let’s just get in that shelter and get some sleep.”

“Okay.”

Brian was waiting for them, now wearing a heavy coat. He pointed to a spot and Julia parked. Taking just their BOBs, the two women went over to the door of the partially buried shelter. What wasn’t below ground level was mounded over with three feet of earth. The entrance was in a right angle.

“Just until the fallout, if there is any, and then out you go,” Brian said. “And if there isn’t any fallout in two days, you’re out then, anyway. Gimme the gold.”

“After we look around and see if we’re going to stay,” Bobbi said.

“Crimeny! Okay. Hurry it up. It’s getting cold and I’ve got someone waiting.”

“You aren’t staying in the shelter?” Julia asked, surprised.

“Naw. Suzie refuses and there isn’t much likelihood we’ll get any at all. You two are a couple of dopes. I’m getting an ounce and a tenth for nothing.”

Brian laughed and Bobbi smelled the alcohol on his breath. She looked around the place now that they were inside. Brian flipped a switch by feel and a set of LED lights came on, brightening the place considerably.

“Okay,” Bobbi said. “Here’s the gold. Now leave us alone.”

“You know,” Brian said, putting the coins in a pocket. The hand came out of the pocket with a small gun in it. “I could just kill you and take everything...” His words faded away when he was suddenly confronted

by a very business-like looking Para-Ordnance .45 ACP and a shiny, delicate looking Colt 1911 .45 ACP.

“Hey! Easy there! What are you doing with guns?” Brian asked.

“Keeping ourselves safe, Brian. Keep it in mind,” Julia said. “Now go leave us alone, if you aren’t going to be using the shelter.”

With a low growl, Brian put the handgun back in his coat pocket and stomped out of the shelter.

While one stood just at the outside entrance of the shelter, Bobbi and Julia took turns bringing in just a few more items from the Jeep. When it was Julia’s turn she flipped the two switches, one under the dash, and one under the right rear fender, which incapacitated the starting system of the Jeep, and then took her gear inside.

“Do you really think he would have done something?” Bobbi asked Julia as they began to set up for the rest of the night.

“You never really know about Brian. He’s a big coward, but he’s more than willing to take advantage of someone. In these circumstances, with the possibility of the disappearance of authority for a time, he just might step over the line.”

Bobbi shivered. “He gives me the creeps.”

“I know how you feel. Lock the entrance. One thing about Brian, he knows his construction. Could probably make a living designing and building fallout shelters.”

Bobbi threw the latches that secured the main entrance door. Julia paused and looked around. “Bobbi, look for anything that could be a secret door for an emergency exit.”

It took a while, but between them, they located two spots that were probably entrances to escape tunnels. Neither was opened, but both were booby-trapped to make plenty of noise if anyone tried to enter.

Finally the two women went to bed, their sleeping bags placed on the plain metal bunk bed frames. Both had their handguns placed for easy retrieval but difficult for anyone else to get hold of one of them.

Despite the late hour they went to bed, both were up early, wanting to find out more about what happened. Brian had equipped the shelter with several radios and a remote reading radiation meter. Both looked at the meter and breathed sighs of relief. There was no indication of any radiation.

It took a few minutes for Julia to figure out how to get one of the radios hooked up to the right antenna and power supply, but after that, they were receiving what news was available. Turned out not to be much. From what they could gather, there was a news blackout about the event. I-80 was closed from Winnemucca, Nevada to Truckee, California.

“What do you think, Bobbi?” Julia asked after returning the radio to its EMP safe condition. “We can’t go back to Reno yet. I’m assuming we can eventually. Check out that place the Officer told us about yesterday?”

Despite the situation, Bobbi’s eyes were sparkling when she said, “Check out the place, or Officer Lewis?”

“Oh, you! What’s it going to be?”

“Let’s go check it out. Seems safe enough. This place is okay as a shelter, but I’m still concerned about Brian.”

“Me, too. Okay. Let’s pack up completely and go see about that place.”

With the Jeep loaded again, Julia and Bobbi checked the map. The address on the card was, like Brian's place, on the outskirts of the city, but in the opposite direction. It was eerie when they drove through town on the way to what could only be a retreat some of the locals had put together. There was only light snow on the ground, but there were almost no vehicles on the street.

Many businesses were closed, and the ones that were open didn't seem to have much clientele. One police officer, parked in a parking lot near the center of town watched them drive by, but made no move to stop them.

Julia had to put the Jeep into four-wheel-drive to get up the final driveway to the place. It was a long, winding drive. There was a gate part way up and Julia stopped the Jeep. A few seconds after she stopped, a man suddenly appeared beside the Jeep, causing Julia to jump and her right hand go to the pistol tucked under her right thigh.

She lowered the window when the man indicated. "Cougar suggested we stop here," Julia quickly said. Bobbi handed the card to Julia and Julia handed it to the gate guard. Still without saying a word, the man handed the card back to Julia and walked over to the gate lock mechanism. A few seconds later Julia pulled through and the man relocked the gate.

Bobbi was watching in the rear view mirror on her side and saw the man disappear. There was a dugout of some kind well inside, and to one side, of the gate. The entrance was draped with white camouflage and when the man entered, Bobbi could no longer pick out the spot from the surrounding ground.

Another quarter mile on the uphill track and Julia pulled into a gravel parking lot nearly filled with vehicles. A long, low structure was built right against the mountain. Its roof was covered with solar PV panels. A freestanding antenna tower was located at one end of the structure. There were several large berms here and there. Julia, at a guess, thought one might be a set of fuel tanks.

Two men and a woman came toward the Jeep. One man carried a rifle, and the other a shotgun. All three had handguns holstered on their waists. Julia downed the driver's window again and waited tensely.

"So. You're the ones Cougar radioed us about. Welcome to the Trinity MAG. That's..."

"Mutual Aid Group," Julia said. "Offic... Cougar implied we could stay here for a while."

"Cougar is a good judge of character, and if he says for you to stay, you can stay. You'll pardon us if we double check with him first."

"Of course," Julia said. Her eyes cut from the man that had spoken, to the other man. His eyes were on Bobbi. When Julia glanced over at Bobbi, Bobbi was unabashedly staring right back at the guy.

The woman spoke again. "You seem well equipped. You armed?"

Julia nodded. "Pistols and carbines."

"Willing to use them?" asked the woman then.

"I think so. Won't know for sure until a situation comes up where we have to make the decision."

"Good answer. Okay. Go ahead and climb out. Keep your weapons holstered and don't make any moves that would indicate we're being set up."

Julia nodded and climbed down out of the Jeep, holstering the P-12 as she did. Bobbi was doing the same thing on the other side of the Jeep. She came around and stood by Julia. She couldn't seem to keep her eyes off the man that had remained silent. And the reverse was true, as well.

“I’m Margarite,” the woman said as she began to walk toward the building. “You a couple or just together? It doesn’t really matter, but we can accommodate you either way. Two beds or one. You will have to share a room.”

“We’re both hetero. Two beds,” Julia quickly said. She looked around. Bobbi had lagged a bit and was walking with the guy she’d been eying. He wasn’t silent any longer. Julia could see his lips moving. Whatever he was saying, Bobbi was entranced. Either in the words or just the man.

Margarite glanced back, too. “Yes. So I see. Very good. We’ll get you settled and then assign you some storage space for your gear. Assuming Cougar reconfirms your credentials. And that could be it.”

A young woman ran from the structure and up to Margarite. “Cougar says okay.”

“Thank you, Bridgette,” replied Margarite. Bridgette ran back inside and the small group followed.

“Wow!” Bobbi said, her attention going from the man to the interior of the building. It was obviously dug back into the mountain. The huge room they were in was deeper than the outside dimensions alone would allow. It looked inside rather like the outside suggested. Like a hunting lodge somewhere in the Yellowstone or Black Hills.

Julia had to agree with Bobbi’s ‘Wow’. She said her own soft “Wow” when Margarite led them through a door on the far wall of the room and they entered a corridor carved from the rock of the mountain. It was a short hallway and opened into a room as big, or bigger than the main room of the complex. It too was carved from the natural rock.

There was a set of doors around the perimeter of the area, on two levels. The upper level was accessed by a stout metal walkway with stairs to the floor every so often. “You’re second level, at the back. Number Two-

Twenty. “I don’t do stairs well, so I’ll leave Pete to get you settled. Pete, after they check it out, assign them a storage room in the other cavern.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Julia noted that Pete touched the brim of his hat in deference to Margarite when he spoke.

Bobbi followed Pete up, with Julia behind her. The other man had disappeared before they left the main building. Pete pointed at a door they passed after getting onto the walkway. “Women’s communal bathroom. Several stalls, showers, and sinks. Keep yourselves decent when going to and from.”

Julia’s and Bobbi’s room was some distance further. Pete stopped and opened the door marked two-twenty. “Take a look around and then come back out and I’ll help you move your stuff.”

“Thank you, Pete,” Bobbi said. Bobbi didn’t quite shove Julia into the room but it was close. She closed the door behind him. “What do you think of Pete? Sweet guy, huh?”

“Bobbi, I... We... just barely met him.”

“Yeah, but I can tell. He’s a keeper. He was telling me this is an old silver mine the MAG bought. Over fifty families are members, with accommodations for another twenty.”

“I rather gathered that. About the mine. But don’t you think you’re a little premature in your assessment of Pete? What about Cecil?”

“You know I haven’t been seeing Cecil for some time. Nope. I can tell. Pete is mine. You leave him alone.”

Julia shook her head and smiled. The smile broadened when she thought of Cougar, Officer Lewis. No. She had no interest in Pete.

The two did a slow turn. The room was spacious, but plain. Two twin beds with stands on either side and between them, a simple dresser, and two folding chairs were the furniture. One area was obviously meant as a closet, by the hanging bar that stretched from one side to the other, though it wasn't enclosed.

Above the door was a vent to the main compartment. A shiny insulated duct came from near it to the rear of the room. A very slight movement of air was discernable. Conduit ran around the walls and featured several electrical outlets that fed two bedside lamps and a torchiere lamp.

"Very functional," Julia told Pete when she and Bobbi went back outside. Pete was leaning on the railing of the suspended walkway. "Yeah. Those that bought in have the nicest rooms. Some of them with their own bathroom and an efficiency kitchen."

"Pete, could we make a pit stop before we go down to the Jeep?" Bobbi asked as they neared the door to the women's restroom.

"Sure. Take your time. I'll be right here."

Julia followed Bobbi into the restroom. Bobbi headed for a stall while Julia looked around. Much like a gym change room, she decided. Austere, but very functional. It would serve several women more than adequately. Julia decided to take the opportunity and went into another stall.

Bobbi and Pete were talking quietly when Julia came out of the restroom. "Okay," Julia said. "Ready."

Bobbi gave Julia a slightly annoyed look. She was getting to know a lot about Pete and everything she learned, she liked. There'd be another time, though and Bobbi smiled at her friend.

It took a couple of trips to carry the things they wanted in the room, and then several more through a separate entrance that led to another large

carved out area. Like the residential one, this one had rows of doors all around the area, except for no second level. The double doors opened into approximately ten by twelve foot storage rooms.

“Those that bought in at the highest level have larger storage rooms, but the rooms are all the same, except for size,” Pete explained as he carried one of the totes to the room. “Y’all are well organized. Lot of those that came in on this left behind a third of their stuff and brought things that they didn’t need.”

“Julia taught me all I know,” Bobbi told Pete. “She’s been a prepper for a long time. Me just a few months.”

“You sure picked it up quickly. And well,” Pete said.

Julia just carried things and let Bobbi do the talking. She kept wondering how Officer Lewis was doing out in the world. And when he might be at the retreat.

It wasn’t until after supper in the communal dining hall that Cougar made an appearance. He wasn’t in his Official uniform, but might as well have been. He, like most of the men and women in the retreat, were wearing similar clothes.

Bobbi, chatting with some of their tablemates found out the standard clothing was matching ‘tactical’ shirts and pants from Proper Uniform, in khaki. The ‘public safety lightweight eleven-pocket tactical pants’, and ‘public safety tactical long sleeve shirt.’

Julia decided that she and Bobbi didn’t look too out of place. They’d settled on Dickies work shirts in light blue, and work pants in dark blue to blend in when in an urban environment, which was where they expected to be most of the time.

The two were on their way to the communal kitchen after the meal to aid in the clean up and dish washing when Cougar entered the room. Julia’s

keen eye noticed how many women looked at him and sat or stood a little straighter when his eyes passed over them. But it was on Julia where his eyes stopped.

He walked over and asked, “How goes it? You settled in?”

“More or less,” Julia replied. “About to help pay our way in the kitchen.”

“I won’t keep you, then.”

Anxious to have at least a few more seconds with him, Julia asked, “How’s it going out in the world? Haven’t had any information since we came, and our radios don’t work inside the mine.”

“Tell you what,” Cougar said, “Meet me in the lodge by the fireplace later and I’ll fill you in.”

“Okay,” Julia replied, shivers going up and down her back.

“And you were ragging me about Pete,” Bobbi whispered to Julia as they made their way into the kitchen.

“Oh, hush! I’m just trying to find out what’s going on.”

“Yeah. And I’m eight feet tall. Uh-oh. Look at that pile of dishes.”

After freshening up after washing the pile of dishes, Julia headed to the lodge. Bobbi had disappeared before Julia was ready. Bobbi wasn’t on Julia’s mind when she entered the lodge. Cougar was.

But there was Bobbi, with Pete, talking to him near the fireplace. A small fire was burning, and quite a few people were taking advantage of the cozy atmosphere to gather and talk.

Cougar and Pete both stood up when Julia approached. Bobbi gave Julia a delighted grin that neither man saw.

“I hope Bobbi hasn’t been telling tales on me,” Julia said as she sat down.

“Oh, I don’t think they’re tales. Seems you have a lifelong friend and fan.”

“Really?” Julia said, looking at the smiling Bobbi. Her eyes cut back to Cougar. He was watching her intently. “So. What’s going on out in the world?”

“It’s bad,” Cougar replied quietly. Reno is saturated with radiation from the fallout. The main lobe of the fallout cloud traveled right over downtown. People are sheltering as they can, but there are already several deaths, with many more to come because of it. At least, that’s what I’m getting on the official net. You were smart to leave when you did.”

“We had a couple of places picked out,” Julia explained, “that would be decent fallout shelters, but I’m afraid other people would get the same idea, only wouldn’t have any supplies. Being here is a great gift you have given Bobbi and me.”

“I think you’ll pull you weight here,” Cougar said.

“I agree. They both jumped right in and helped with the dishes after dinner,” said Pete.

“I noticed that,” Cougar said, smiling. “Everyone has a job to do here. But it won’t always be washing dishes.”

“That’s good,” Bobbi said. “I don’t mind, but I’d prefer to be doing something more constructive.”

“You will be,” Pete said. “I’ll see if I can get you on my work crew. Lots of hard work, but we get things done.”

“That sounds great!” Bobbi exclaimed. “You teach me what I need to know?”

“Sure. It’d be a pleasure. If you want, I can go show you the gear we may be using if that fallout gets this far.”

“Okay,” Bobbi replied. She was right beside Pete, listening intently as they walked away.

“Your friend has made quite an impression on Pete,” Cougar said, looking back at Julia.

“The same can be said about Pete making an impression on Bobbi. I just hope neither one is going too far too fast.”

“Won’t happen with Pete. He’s an old fashioned guy.”

“Good. Then I have nothing to worry about. Bobbi is much the same way.”

“And you?” Cougar asked quietly.

Julia’s eyes searched Cougar’s face. She liked what she saw. “I’m the same. Has cost me more than one casual friend that wanted more than I’d give.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Cougar. “It must have been hard.”

“Not really,” Julia replied with a shrug. “I find doing the right thing is usually actually easier than taking the so called easy path.”

“Wise words. Look. I have to go. They have us on twelve hour shifts. I need to get some sleep before I go out again.”

“Okay. It’s been nice talking to you. And thanks again for letting us come here. We were prepared to camp out, but this is much better.”

“You’d camp out in this weather? It’s snowing again.”

“Sure. We’re equipped for it.”

“I’m impressed. I saw the game carts and thought you might be pretty self reliant. Being a winter camper tells me even more so that you are.”

“Why, thank you. I won’t keep you. Get plenty of sleep so you’ll be sharp in the morning. Don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I might not have a choice, but it’s nice to know someone cares.”

“Surely not just me,” Julia said, making it a question she really needed to know the answer to.

“Oh, not just you. I’m proud to say they’d miss me here, but having a person care is as important as having a group care.”

“Okay. You hurry on. I want to turn in early and get some sleep myself. Don’t know what the morrow will bring.”

They parted without touching hands, much less kissing, but the feelings were in both of them.

Bobbi and Julia turned in early. They would be up early the next morning for kitchen duty again. Three days passed much the same way. Julia was able to spend only a few minutes a day talking to Cougar. Bobbi, on the other hand, was now spending most of her time with Pete. He had quite a few responsibilities, and needed an assistant. Or so he said. But Bobbi was actually working every time Julia ran into her.

The Trinity MAG had an excellent communications system, monitored 24/7. Anything of importance was announced at meal times. People were dying in Reno every day from radiation poisoning and violence associated with finding and obtaining food.

Nothing was being shipped into the city. People were urged to come out so they could be treated for the radiation. Those that did were being shipped to FEMA camps around the west. For many it would be their last trip. Others finally began to recover.

Nevada National Guard units were making sweeps through the city, but only once for each unit. It limited their exposure to a minimum. The urge was to get through their assigned area as quickly as possible and get out, so many people were missed.

The impact the event had on the Trinity compound was that members of long standing were bringing in other relatives and friends. Julia and Bobbi could see the handwriting on the wall, primarily in Pete's face.

"Okay Bobbi. We aren't going to be thrown out. Let's pack up and leave on our own," Julia said one evening after seeing two members doubled up that had been using a room each.

"Maybe Pete could get us a stay of execution..." Bobbi asked hopefully.

The look on Julia's face caused Bobbi's words to fade away. "Not really fair, is it?" she asked. "The people here spent a lot of time and money getting this place ready. Not fair of us to take space that is earmarked for others."

"It'd be different if we had fallout here," Julia replied. "They would insist we stay, I'm sure, making whatever adjustments needed."

"Without that great need, the effort won't be made. And shouldn't, I guess. If I'd come on board with preps when I should have, we might have a place like this to go to."

“Water under the bridge. I’m not inclined to go back to Brian’s. From what Eddie has told me, there isn’t a place to stay in Winnemucca that isn’t already doubled up.”

“Camping it is, then,” Bobbi said, more cheerfully than Julia expected. “We’d better go let Margarite and Pete know. What about Officer Lewis?”

“Eddie will know soon enough. I think he might be inclined to make an issue of it.”

“You guys are getting close, huh?” Bobbi asked.

Julia frowned. “Not very quickly. He is working so hard he hardly has time to eat and sleep, much less spend time with me. But he’s dedicated. I won’t ask for more until this situation is over.”

Bobbi sighed. “Yeah. I’m spending time with Pete, and it’s nice, but he’s pretty much all business for fourteen, sixteen hours a day.”

Silently the two headed for the MAG office in the lodge building. Margarite accepted the announcement without comment. Pete objected, but Bobbi had a quiet word with him and he relented. He obviously didn’t like the idea, but Bobbi had convinced him.

“I tell you what. You don’t have to go far, in case this does escalate into more widespread events. There is a good place to camp two ridges over, behind us,” Margarite told the two.

“They can’t get their Jeep up there,” Pete said.

“That’s okay,” Julia quickly said. “We have our game carts. This will be their first real test. But we planned well and will be just fine.”

“That’s right,” Bobbi said. “We’re set for a couple of months. After that, we’ll need to look for additional food.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Pete said quickly. “You can have...”

“Pete!” Margarite said sharply.

“Uh... you can buy some food from us if you run out,” Pete continued, rather subdued.

“We have some gold set aside,” Bobbi said, also quietly.

Margarite smiled. “There you go. Won’t be a problem as long as this isn’t a permanent relocation. We can guarantee you a couple month’s additional food. For a fair price. When you need it.”

“Thank you, Margarite,” Julia replied. “That’s kind of you. But we’re hoping we can go home or relocate somewhere else by then. We heard the announcement that Reno won’t be reclaimed for at least a couple of months, to allow the radiation to fade to a safe level.”

Bobbi and Pete were looking at each other, rather alarmed, it seemed to Julia. Bobbi hadn’t said much after hearing that announcement. Julia had a few ideas where she might go and get a job fairly quickly. Bobbi wouldn’t have any problems, either, but she obviously wasn’t enthusiastic about the possibility. Because of Pete. Julia was making sure Eddie Lewis didn’t come into the factoring process. Not yet, anyway.

It didn’t take long for Julia and Bobbi to get the Jeep packed up again, just as it was upon their arrival. The new people coming into the MAG facility needed the storage space as much as they needed the living quarters.

There was a light snow coming down when Julia started the Jeep and headed for a faint trail that at one end of the parking lot. She put it in

four wheel drive and managed to make it to a spot where she could turn around and head the Jeep back down the trail, well past the first ridge behind the MAG property.

The game carts were ready and it took just a few minutes to secure the Jeep with a canvas cover. Carbines slung, the two women began pulling their respective cart up on what was now a foot trail. The light snow didn't call for removing the pulks from the loaded carts and putting the carts on them. The wheels of the game carts pushed through the snow without a problem, but it was a near thing.

An hour later the camp was set up, a small pit fire burning the plentiful sagebrush that covered the hills. Though not normally carried, for this stay the chemical toilet and enclosure had been added to the game carts' loads. Both tents were set up, but one was to store the gear unpacked from the game carts. The other the two would share, to save on the limited amount of propane they had with them for heating the tent a bit in the morning.

There wasn't much to do. The two shared every page of written material they had with them, including individual copies of "The SAS Survival Handbook" by John 'Lofty' Wiseman. They did have solar battery chargers and were able to keep batteries charged for their music players. Even the music got old after a while and Julia, with Bobbi's enthusiastic agreement, decided to go exploring the area on foot.

They weren't going to take their Ruger SR-556 carbines, but both reached for them after gearing up. They exchanged a look, shrugged, and slung the carbines. With daypacks on, just in case, the two headed up the mountain, simply enjoying the outdoors.

It was cold, but no more snow had fallen, and they were dressed adequately for the weather. It was a great break from lying around in the tent. Up on another ridge, they could see their camp, and a great deal more. They broke out a stove and heated up water to reconstitute their lunches, and to heat water for hot drinks.

It became a daily event for lunch. Even when a snow storm blew in, dropping six inches of snow in one night, they braved the blowing wind the next noon, just to see if they could, and had their regular lunch and hot drink up on the same ridge.

It was also the time when they checked various radio frequencies using a Yaesu VR-500 all band/all mode handheld receiver. It kept them informed of what was going on in the country and around the world.

Reno was still off limits. There were calls for retaliation for the nuclear attack. But the powers that be either still didn't know who had perpetrated the act, or weren't admitting to it. However, the US government was promising there would be a strong response when it was clear who had set off the weapon.

Around the rest of the world things weren't going well. Most of those nations with a grudge against the US were applauding the attack. Which didn't sit well with the US population. The UN had denounced the attack, but was not trying to do much to find the perpetrators. Even some of the UN representatives stated in round about ways that perhaps the attack was justified in some way.

But the attack near Reno wasn't the only event to take place. With Iran nearer every day to having nuclear weapons, Israel carried out an attack on Iran's known and suspected nuclear facilities, using joint exercises with the US and Turkey as a cover to get their aircraft as close as possible without a response.

Even when Iran did respond, after the Israeli aircraft crossed the Turkey/Iran border, they were unable to stop the attack. The UN was in an uproar the next day, and despite Saudi Arabian initial silence, the Arab and Muslim countries went to a war footing.

Things were looking tense in the Middle East. It didn't take much for the situation to escalate. China and then Russia geared up for war, stating

they needed to be ready if the US became involved in the pending war between Israel and the rest of the Middle East.

Things were still unresolved at the end of two months and people were beginning to be allowed back into Reno. Services were back on and businesses, at least some of them, were calling workers back to work. Bobbi and Julia talked it over and decided to go back, as well. Bobbi simply couldn't justify trying to stay in Winnemucca just on the off-chance that she and Pete would develop a deeper relationship.

But it was still a sad parting when Julia stopped the Jeep at the MAG lodge. Pete was there and the two disappeared for a little while. Bobbi had red eyes from crying when she rejoined Julia.

"He wants me to stay," Bobbi told Julia as they headed home. "But I just couldn't drop everything like that and try to start over in Winnemucca. He's committed to his life, and service to the MAG."

"I'm sorry, Bobbi," Julia said softly.

"What about you and Eddie?" Bobbi asked, ready to talk about anything rather than her own situation.

"Guess there isn't one. He wasn't at the Lodge, and didn't try to contact us up the mountain."

"At least Pete came to see how we were doing a couple of times," Bobbi replied tearing up again.

There was silence for a long while. Traffic was light and the roads had been cleared after the last storm, so the trip went quickly. It was a subdued pair that opened up their apartment and unloaded the Jeep. A quick supper and the two went to their respective bedrooms to go to bed, neither up to discussing the situations any more.

Both were able to get right back to work. One of the first things the two did after getting their first paycheck was to order replacements for the supplies they'd used during the crisis. Bobbi's car was recovered, washed, and became the two's primary vehicle for three weeks. Having been lucky with the weak EMP pulse from the railroad tracks, Julia opted to get a Cummins 4BT non-electronic diesel engine put in her Jeep.

Bobbi insisted on helping pay for the conversion, as she would be reaping the benefit of the reliability of the vehicle if anything else happened. Julia finally relented, and put the money she saved into more gold and silver coins, despite their still high prices.

A week after the work was done, Julia and Bobbi took it for a hard run out in the desert to check it out in rough country. Julia was pleased with the result, despite the slightly different handling characteristics.

Neither woman ever questioned their devotion to being prepared, even as things in the world seemed to be calming down. It was like a calm before a storm. And when that storm came it was a killer. An actual storm.

The snow load in the mountains to their west during the past winter was a record breaker. So was the early, very warm spring. The storm system was huge, bringing more moisture to the area than the mountains could keep on their west side. So the heavy, warm rains pounded the snow into raging avalanches here and there. More importantly, it turned the snow to water, that with the rain, created immediate flash floods in the Truckee drainage area. That meant a large portion of Reno was in danger of floods.

Julia and Bobbi decided to lend a hand with the preventative sandbagging that was taking place in the most likely to flood areas. Fortunately someone with foresight had purchased several Go-Baggers single person sand bag filling tools.

The tool had a large scoop-like front, that narrowed down to the perfect size to fit into a commercial sandbag. Slip the bag on, scrape the assembly up the sand pile, and voila, a filled sandbag. Slip the tool from the bag, tie the bag off, and it's ready to be placed.

It was still hard, back breaking work, but the two women felt a sense of accomplishment as the water rushed on by, inside the sandbagged areas, with half a bag height of room to spare. That's not to say there were no consequences from the high water. There were some places that flooded, and utility lines crossed the river in several places.

So the two arrived home, sweaty and dirty after the third day of bagging, congratulating themselves on a job well done, anxious to take a shower and go out for a good meal. Only the water was off. But, being the preppers they were, a couple of sighs, and opening of storage totes, and the two were able to heat water, put it into a MSR Dromedary Bag with shower conversion, and get warm showers, anyway.

Things seemed to settle down after that. Summer came and went, without any more trouble. The attack had not been forgotten, but it wasn't getting the air time it had initially. And the government wasn't saying much about it, either. So, with Thanksgiving coming up, Bobbi eagerly agreed to go to Winnemucca to have the Holiday with Pete. And Julia was invited.

Bobbi had been talking to and corresponding with Pete since she'd come back to Reno. The same couldn't be said for Julia and Eddie. Julia tried to convince Bobbi that it was better if she went alone. But Bobbi insisted. And finally got her way.

But Julia decided to make it a training trip for herself. She'd be out of the way and not feel like a three's a crowd person. So the Jeep was loaded down again for a full evacuation drill when Julia headed for Winnemucca, with Bobbi beside her in the Jeep.

The sun was shining brightly, with temperatures in the low fifties, but the wind was blowing to beat it. More than once Julia had to adjust quickly when passing a semi, or being passed by one, especially those pulling double and triple trailers. A gust of wind would catch the trailers and they would edge over into Julia's lane.

But Julia was a very good driver and the wind was just another minor problem. It did keep her mind off being in Winnemucca and possibly seeing Eddie Lewis. She wasn't sure she wanted to, or didn't want to.

Turned out she didn't have a choice. After following the directions Pete had given Bobbi, Julia pulled into the driveway of a large old house. When Julia followed Bobbi inside after Pete opened the door she did a double take. Eddie was there. He was in uniform. His eyes met hers, and Eddie nodded slightly. Julia did the same.

Eddie worked his way over. Julia tried to move away, but was caught amidst several people greeting Bobbi like she was one of the family. "I'd like to talk to you while you're here. I have some explaining to do."

"Not for my sake," Julia managed to say calmly.

"More for mine," Eddie replied. "Please?"

"Of course. Just catch me when you can. But be aware I'm going camping for a couple of days after Thursday."

"Understood," Eddie said and went out the front door.

With the situation resolved for the moment, Julia let herself be caught up in the holiday activities. Pete's family was a joy to be around, and seeing Bobbi fitting in with them brought both a slight pang of jealousy and then one of awareness that this could very well be Bobbi's new life. She was very serious about Pete, and he seemed to be about Bobbi.

Bobbi was in her element with the children of Pete's extended family. Julia was persuaded, fairly easily, to join in the fun. It wasn't until that night that her feelings for Eddie came out. She cried for ten minutes, for no good reason she told herself, before falling asleep in the motel bed. Bobbi, exhausted from the trip and the day's activities, had fallen asleep in the other bed as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Thanksgiving Day was fun, Julia had to admit. She was an only child and the family had never had the big, extended family affairs that Pete's family was obviously adept at having. Guest or not, Julia was assigned some chores to get ready for the early afternoon feast.

She was holding one of the babies, crooning softly to her, late in the afternoon. When she looked up she saw Eddie standing a few feet away, looking at her. "That's a good look for you," he said softly, not wanting to wake the baby now that it was asleep.

Bobbi saw the situation and hurried over to take the baby. "I'll put her down in the crib," Bobbie said and made herself and the baby scarce. "You have a few minutes to talk?" Eddie asked.

Julia wanted to say no, but found herself nodding. "Let's go outside," Eddie said, taking her hand to help her out of the low chair she was in. Julia didn't notice the room going quiet as she followed Eddie out the door.

Arms crossed over her chest, partly for warmth, partly for the protective feeling it created, Julia waited for Eddie to speak. He was leaning against one of the porch posts, looking out at the mountains.

"I'm married," Eddie finally said, turning to look at Julia.

Her heart fell. "Married?" she managed to say.

"Was married, I should say. She died a month ago. Rapid onset cancer."

“Oh, Eddie! I’m sorry!”

“Don’t be,” Eddie replied. He was looking at the mountains again. “But even for someone like her, that was a bad way to go.”

“Someone like her?” Julia asked.

“These last couple of years, she wasn’t the woman I thought I married. She started gambling, and drinking, and stepping out on me. Had I listened to my friends a few years ago, I wouldn’t have married her, but I was blinded by her beauty... But that beauty was a façade for a heartless, demanding, selfish soul.

“I’d finally come to the decision to divorce her, but she became ill, and... well... I couldn’t just abandon her like that...”

“Oh, Eddie!” Julia said softly, stepping up to him and putting a hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that.”

“It’s made me a stronger person. I had to tell you about things... why I didn’t try to pursue a real friendship with you when you were here before. It just wasn’t fair to you or to her. But I’m free of her now, and would very much like to get to know you better.”

Eddie looked around at Julia, waiting for an answer. Several things went through her head. One that he might just be lying. But the thought quickly passed and she nodded. “I’d like that very much.”

“Cougar! Get in here!” Pete yelled, holding the door open.

“What’s up?” Eddie asked quietly, his thoughts on Julia.

“Man! It’s Reno! They’ve been nuked!”

“What?” asked Julia. “Again?”

“This time right downtown. It’s gone!”

Everyone was crowded around the television, children were told to hush, and the room fell silent, except for the news reporter. She looked badly shaken. The rising tower of a mushroom cloud was in the background. It wasn’t a graphic. It was live and very real.

“We have very little information at the moment,” said the newscaster. “It has been confirmed that central Reno has been destroyed by a nuclear device. People are being urged to evacuate or seek shelter. When...”

The television screen went black for a moment, then white with static, and then finally another picture popped up. It was a different newscaster, a man this time. “We have lost contact with our field unit. To reiterate, our team was approaching Reno to do a special report on last year’s attack when they saw and heard the nuclear blast.”

The man fell silent, one hand going to his earpiece. The man’s face paled perceptively. “Ladies and Gentlemen, please stand by for further information. We have been ordered off the air.”

The screen went to the news network logo.

“Let’s go, everyone,” Eddie said, taking charge immediately. “We just do our evac drill, just like before. This may be an isolated event or part of something larger. We will not take chances. Get your gear and head for the Trinity Retreat. Pete, make the calls.”

Julia and Bobbi watched as the celebration turned into a high speed readiness action. Pete was on his cell phone, activating an automatic text messaging system. It was their first line communication system, until the system went down. Then they would switch to radios for as long as they worked, and finally, revert to preplanned actions if communication wasn’t possible.

“Julia, you and Bobbi know the way. Head on up while we get the rest of our people organized.”

“I’d rather stay and help,” Julia immediately said.

“Me, too,” Bobbi said.

Pete, cell phone to his ear, joined Eddie in saying, “We have our plans. You’d be helping us better by being out of the way.”

It stung a bit, but seeing the organized activity, both Bobbi and Julia realized that Pete and Eddie were right. They were just getting in the way. “Okay,” Julia said quickly. “We’re on our way.”

Two vehicles were pulling into the yard when Julia and Bobbi left. They recognized Margarite in one of the vehicles. She didn’t get out. A few minutes later the gray Suburban passed them, headed for Trinity, as well.

When Julia pulled up to the gate, it was quickly opened and she drove through. The Suburban they’d seen Margarite in was pulled up close to the Lodge building. Margarite waved Julia and Bobbi over. Both noted that Margarite was using a walker and looked very pale.

“I’m sorry. No room in the inn, I’m afraid. We already have more people on the way than we have spots for. They take precedence, I’m afraid. I hope you understand. You’re welcome to camp again... Better yet,” Margarite said after a moment’s thought, “There is likely to be fallout here this time.”

“We have a place...” Julia said quickly.

“Okay. But if you want, there is another old abandoned mine near where you were camping before. Didn’t mention it as a campsite as the shoring isn’t in very good shape. You’d have to be very careful. But there is a stope off the adit not too far inside. That stope would be good fallout protection. But I must reiterate, the mine itself is a danger.”

“Thank you, Margarite,” Julia said, after looking at Bobbi and seeing her nod. The two turned back to go to the Jeep, but Margarite stopped them.

She reached into the Suburban and pulled out a hand-held radio. “They’ll want to know how you are. Check in at six, morning and evening, as long as the radios work.”

“We have spare batteries,” Bobbi said.

“I thought you might. But I’m more concerned about a radio black out due to a HEMP if this escalates.”

“Oh,” Bobbi replied, taken a bit aback.

Margarite didn’t stop them when the two walked back to the Jeep and got in. She did mutter to herself, “Pete and Eddie are not going to be happy.”

Julia and Bobbi had no idea of the row that erupted when Pete and Eddie arrived at Trinity, expecting to see the two women there. But Margarite held sway. No outsiders while there were MAG members to be cared for. Both men vowed to check on the two women, as soon as they could.

Julia managed to get the Jeep up another canyon, on the way to the mine, rather than going to the camping spot and hoofing it from there. Still, with the old mine road washed out they still had to break out the game carts and continue the trip. The Jeep was left in the canyon, concealed well with its cover. Julia couldn’t feature anyone being up there, but she didn’t want to take chances.

It took an hour of hard work pulling the game carts up the side of the mountain, avoiding what had once been a road for the smoother surface of the raw ground. When they reached the mine both felt their hearts fall a bit.

Margarite obviously didn't know the mine entrance had recently been reworked. It took another hour of work with their Stanley 30" forcible entry bars and Cold Steel Rifleman's tomahawks to make an opening just large enough to get the game carts pushed through. Donning Petzl headlamps, the two gingerly began to explore the adit, the initial dig into the side of the mountain. The timbers looked rotten, but seemed to be holding up the roof of the adit satisfactorily.

The floor was littered with odds and ends they carefully moved out of the way. A stope led off to the right some ways into the adit. It looked to be lucky to be intact. But the timbers apparently had some more life in them.

The two went back to the entrance of the mine and, leaving the game carts where they were, carried the bare minimum to the stope and began to set up a camp in the cramped quarters. Neither one was quite comfortable inside the stope, and they went back to the mine entrance to watch the sunset.

At six, Julia used the radio to make contact with Trinity. Both were disappointed when they were told that their contact had been noted and the Trinity operator signed off.

"At least there aren't any bats," Bobbi said when they went back inside to the camp.

"There is that," Julia replied. She was more worried about something falling from the rocky ceiling. The tent fabric and aluminum support poles wouldn't do much to protect them if the roof decided to drop a boulder or two on them.

Up early the next morning, the two again radioed Trinity at the appointed time. And got the same response.

"I wonder if Margarite told them we were coming up here. What if Pete and Eddie think we're at Brian's?" Bobbi asked.

“Poor Brian is all I can say. I don’t think they even know about Brian.”

“Uh... Well... Actually, I mentioned it to Pete once.”

“Oh. Well, out of our hands. We’ll just stick here until we know it is safe to go out.”

Three more days passed before Julia and Bobbi got to speak to Eddie and Pete respectively. Both were apologetic about Margarite having sent them away.

“How full is the place?” Julia asked when Eddie didn’t immediately tell them to come down.

“We’re at twenty percent over capacity. Got people doubled and tripled up.”

“Then it is good that we aren’t there,” Julia said. Bobbi nodded her support.

“I’d still rather you be here. Some of these people... You have as much right here as they do.”

“Don’t worry about it, Eddie,” Julia said. “We’re doing okay. Not picking up anything much on the VR-500. Don’t know if it’s poor reception or people just aren’t talking.”

“There is a news blackout,” Eddie replied. “The Main Stream Media talking heads are just rehashing old info and speculating a lot. I don’t like the fact that many of the foreign Amateurs are silent, as are most of the World Wide shortwave stations. Even the internet doesn’t have much information. I think it is being censored.”

“Why would they do that?”

“To keep us from knowing what is going on and panicking, I assume. The general population, anyway.”

“Okay. Bobbi would like to talk to Pete if she could,” Julia said and handed the walky-talky to Bobbi.

Julia moved away to give Bobbi some privacy. Her thoughts turned to possibilities. What ifs. She shook her head a few minutes later. They were as prepared as they could be. Speculating wasn't helping anything.

Bobbi had tears in her eyes when she went over and handed Julia the radio. “I miss him so much,” Bobbi said. “He asked me to marry him just a few minutes before the announcement.”

“Oh, Bobbi! That is great! You two are good for each other.”

“Yeah. But what if...”

“No what ifs,” Julia said firmly. Things will work out fine. Let's go back inside. I think I'll turn in early.”

“Yeah. Me, too,” Bobbi replied.

The next morning, when the two went to the entrance of the mine for the morning radio contact they heard buzzing sounds. Both women had their handguns out, looking for a rattler. It was a couple of moments of fear before both realized that the sound wasn't a rattle snake, it was Julia's NukAlert keychain radiation monitor.

The two exchanged a look and hurried back from the entrance. Both looked at their watches. It was six. “You stay here. I'm going to make a quick call and see if they know what is happening.”

“No chance. I want to hear, too.”

“But Bobbi, there is no point...”

“You go, I go,” Bobbi replied firmly and started toward the entrance of the mine again, walky-talky in hand.

They spent less than two minutes just inside the entrance of the mine. Bobbi held the radio outside the opening they had made in the wooden barrier. They could see the light dusting of fallout coming down. Julia held her alarm tightly in her hand to dampen the sound so they could hear the radio.

“You two stay back in the mine for a few days,” came Eddie’s authoritative voice. No more communication until it is safe. If your alarm sounds when you get close to the mine entrance just go back where it is safe.”

“Is everyone okay there?” Julia asked when Bobbi pressed the push-to-talk switch.

“We’re fine. Now get back inside, will you?”

“Okay, okay,” Bobbi replied. The two hurried back to the camp. Julia’s alarm quit sounding.

“I wonder what is happening,” Bobbi said. “It can’t be delayed fallout from Reno. Can it?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve got a feeling we may be in the middle of a nuclear war.”

“Yeah. I think you may be right. I need to pray,” Bobbi said softly.

They were conserving battery power, so often sat in the darkness of the mine without benefit of lights. Julia heard Bobbi’s string of soft ‘Oms’ before silence fell again and both women began to pray for themselves, Trinity MAG, and the whole world.

After two weeks, Julia's NukAlert sounded only very occasionally when they ventured toward the mine entrance. They decided the radiation danger was now low enough to try the radio again. They waited until six in the evening and then called Trinity. There was a garbled response. Enough got through so both sides knew the other was okay, and that radio communication was still being affected by the radiation.

It was marginally better the next morning and Bobbi got to talk to Pete for a few minutes. Julia was only able to speak to Eddie for a few seconds. He was on his way out to carry out his police duties again.

"Oh, be careful, Eddie!" Julia cautioned him. "Things could be very bad."

"Don't worry. I will. I have a very good reason to keep living. Now."

When it began to snow, both women went back into the mine. "You think we could go out for an hour or two?" Bobbi asked Julia after they had breakfast. "I'm really getting cabin fever staying in here."

"Probably shouldn't... But the radiation is way down now. And I'd like to get out for a little while, too."

That settled, the two prepared for a jaunt through the lunch hour, much like they had done when camping out in the area before. It became their daily break, with it snowing or not snowing. The clean, crisp, cold air felt good as long as they didn't overdo it.

The radio communication was much better, and they were able to talk back and forth at the scheduled times. Which was very good, because communications became very important a month into their stay.

They were perched on an outcropping of rock, well above the level of the mine entrance, watching an eagle high in the sky. Julia took the

binoculars down from her face and handed them to Bobbi. But something caught her eye in the distance. “What’s that?” she asked and pointed.

Bobbi put the binoculars up to her eyes and looked in the direction Julia had indicated. “Holy Cow! It’s a group of people... Julia, they are heavily armed...”

Bobbi handed the binoculars back to Julia and Julia focused in on the group. Bobbi was right. Every one of the group had at least a long arm, and many had handguns of one sort or another on their hips.

“Get down!” Julia whispered urgently, sliding off the outcropping and crouching behind it. Bobbi was beside her instantly.

“What is it?” Bobbi asked.

“One of them has binoculars. I saw him just in time. He was turning to look up this way.” Both women jumped when the sound of a shot came. Julia eased to one side of the outcropping and took a quick look.

There was one person down on the ground. The others were moving away. “My Lord, Bobbi! They just shot one of their own!”

“Julia, I have the feeling that this isn’t a hunting party looking for antelope or deer,” Bobbi whispered.

Julia took another quick look. “They’re gone. I’m going to go check on the body. You cover me from here.”

“But...” Bobbi started to protest, but a quick look from Julia had her nodding. “Okay. But be careful.”

As a matter of course, both women always had both their pistols and their carbines at hand when they left the confines of the mine. And now,

Bobbi got a good rest position and aimed hers down past Julia, to where the other people had disappeared.

Julia had her carbine in her hands as she slowly approached the person on the snow. She could see red spots where blood had colored the snow. When she got close enough, Julia could tell it was a man. Fairly young. And still alive.

Moving forward at a faster pace, but still cautious, Julia eased up to the man. His eyes were closed and he was clutching his chest. His hands and coat were bloody. Julia nudged the man with her foot, keeping the carbine well out of his reach.

Only groans resulted from the nudge, so Julia squatted down. “I’ve got a first aid kit. How bad is it? Who shot you? And why?” Julia poured out the questions as she laid her carbine aside and reached for her first aid kit.

The man opened his eyes. Julia now knew what the look of death on a person’s face actually looked like. Her hands stilled as the man spoke. “I’m done for... That conniving no-good Brian... I should have known he would do this after I showed him how to get to Trinity from the back side.”

Julia blanched. “Trinity? Brian? Not Brian Castleton?”

“Yeah. Brian the creep Castleton. You know him? Your loss. He’s hard on women.”

“What is it about Trinity?” Julia asked.

“He wants their supplies. He ran out the time before and couldn’t replace them. His plan is to just go in shooting. Kill everyone that fights back.” The man groaned and settled back in the snow.

Julia motioned for Bobbi to come down to join her. It would take the both of them to get the man back to the mine, once they bandaged the wound. Bobbi could feel the air of urgency in Julia. She assumed it was for getting the man's bleeding stopped.

Only when Julia tried to move the man's hands away from the entry wound did she realize he had died in those few seconds it took for Bobbi to join them. "Too late," Julia said, standing. "Look, Bobbi... That group is a gang led by my cousin and..."

"Brian?" Bobbi asked.

"Yeah. Brian. And they mean to attack Trinity to get their supplies. Kill anyone that fights back."

"You know most of them will fight back! Even some of the kids!" Bobbi said.

"I know. I don't have any doubt who will win the fight, but all those that will die..."

"Okay. Julia, you're the planner. What do we do?"

"We get on the radio and warn the retreat, and then we follow the gang and do what we can from behind them."

Bobbi nodded. She held the radio out to Julia. It took several interminable seconds to raise the retreat. And many more before she convinced someone with the power to sound an alert. But finally Julia was satisfied that the retreat was going to be ready for the attack.

"Okay. Let's go," Julia said, adjusting her field gear with a slight hunching motion. Bobbi did the same and then the two were moving at a slow jog, following the tracks in the snow the gang was leaving behind.

When they saw the last man in the string, Julia and Bobbi slowed down, following quietly, with just the one man in sight. It was an hour before the group stopped, and Julia and Bobbi stopped in turn.

“Trinity is just over that ridge,” Julia whispered to Bobbi. “They must be planning to just go straight over the ridge, down onto the roof of the Lodge and start killing people.”

“Julia, we can’t let that happen. They took us in once. And though they didn’t this time, they did point out a safe place.”

“Exactly. I want the time to get to know Eddie,” Julia added. She pointed to a spot off to their left.

Bobbi hesitated. “I don’t know if I can, Julia...”

“Think of Pete. You’ll do what needs to be done.”

Julia heard Bobbi ‘Om’ a couple of times and then she began to ease over to the spot Julia had pointed out as Julia went the other direction. Bobbi waited a couple of minutes, but when Julia fired the first shot, the man in Bobbi’s sights went down without a sound when Bobbi fired her first shot.

The first couple of shots weren’t located and the group began firing toward the top of the ridge, thinking the attack was coming from that direction. But a couple more shots and Brian directed the men to fire back up the trail.

While no combat tactician, Bobbi and Julia had read enough to know that you didn’t just stay in one place and shoot if you weren’t behind good cover. The snow covered sage brush made pretty good concealment, but it wouldn’t stop a bullet.

Both women would fire a couple of rounds and then change position. Julia ached for her friend when Bobbi screamed and then fired off a

string of quick shots before her carbine went silent. Julia redoubled her attack, moving back in the direction of Bobbi.

Julia saw several of the men rise, at Brian's direction, and begin to charge toward Julia's and Bobbi's location.

Julia managed to take down two more, but the rest were almost on them when they began to fall with no effort on Julia's part. Members of the MAG had joined the battle from the retreat side.

Keeping her carbine handy, Julia let the MAG members tend to the rest of the gang and gently eased Bobbi over onto her back. She looked for a wound, but didn't see anything at first. But then she noticed some blood on the snow at Bobbi's right hip. Looking closer she learned that a bullet had hit the Colt 1911A1 and ricocheted into Bobbi's hip.

"Ow!" Bobbi suddenly said, coming to after having passed out. "That scumbag ruined my pistol!" she added before passing out again. Julia had her own pistol out suddenly when a shadow darkened the snow beside her.

"It's me, Pete, Julia. Oh, no! Bobbi!"

Two women ran up, both armed, but also both with med-packs on their backs. Eddie came over and took Pete by the arm as the two first responders began to check Bobbi out. Eddie's other arm went around Julia.

One of the first responders radioed for a stretcher and then stood up. "It's not too bad. The pistol took most of the impact. Who would have thought a show piece like that would be worth anything in a crisis." She shook her head and went to guide the stretcher bearers to Bobbi.

"Let's let them do their job and get to the Lodge. Margarite is frantic to know what is going on. I'm a little unclear on that, myself.

Julia let herself be led away. She averted her eyes from the sight of Brian with a dozen bullet holes seeping blood, his open eyes not seeing the snowflakes that began to fall.

It was an hour before Julia was allowed to see Bobbi again. Her time had been filled with describing to Margarite, Pete, Eddie, and a half dozen other of the leadership of the MAG on what happened, and their part in it.”

“You put your lives at risk, to save some of us, despite me sending you off to that mine. I am so sorry I put you in that position.” Margarite was apologetic.

“Don’t be,” Julia said. “Had things not occurred they way they did, there is no telling who might have died in the attack. Could have been me or Bobbi or Pete or... Eddie.” She looked up into his face. His eyes were on hers. “Well worth the risk,” she added and then looked back at Margarite.

“I see. Well, I believe you have more than met the buy in price to the MAG, even if it wasn’t monetary. Pete. Get them set up in two twenty again. Put my worthless son in one of the bunkrooms.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” Pete said delightedly. Julia wasn’t sure if Pete was happier to have Bobbi and Julia staying, or the opportunity to put Margarite’s son out.

One of the first responders came up and told Julia that she could see Bobbi in the small infirmary the retreat boasted. Pete was already there, holding Bobbi’s hand, when Eddie and Julia entered the room.

“Did you see what happened to my Colt?” Bobbi asked. “How am I going to replace it now, with everything going on?”

“You should worry more about your hip than the Colt,” Julia chided.

Pete smoothly cut in. "I know a couple of guys..."

"Yep. Pete knows a couple of guys. Who know other guys. You'll have that pistol replaced in no time, unless I miss my guess," Eddie said.

Bobbi seemed to cheer up considerably at that news. "I knew I loved him for a reason," she said, her eyes on Pete's.

Eddie nodded his head toward the door of the room and Julia followed his lead to give Bobbi and Pete some privacy. But Eddie had an ulterior motive in getting Julia out in the hallway.

"I've been wanting to do this for a long time," he whispered just before he leaned down and kissed Julia firmly on the lips."

"Just about the same amount of time I've been waiting for you to do it," Julia replied, and kissed him right back.

End *****

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