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MATCHMAKER BRANDON

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Matchmaker Brandon

“Come on, Johnny! Let’s get out of here before the cops show up!” There was near panic in Anita’s voice.

“We’re not doing anything wrong!” Johnny insisted, keeping his place in the large group gathered to express their displeasure with the way the economy was going. “We have the right to peaceably assemble.”

Anita tugged on Johnny’s arm. “That may be true, but you know how the authorities have been responding to these peaceable assemblies. They are sending in goon squads to start something and then the police come in to break it up. People get hurt here, Johnny! I don’t want to get hurt, Johnny!”

“You won’t get hurt, Anita. I promise. I can protect you.” Johnny opened his jacket slightly. Hanging from a string was what looked like a small baseball bat, but was actually a heavy tire checker that drivers used on big trucks to test their tires to make sure they weren’t low on air.

“Oh, Johnny! What are you going to do with that? You’ll just get in more trouble...”

Before Anita could finish her sentence, a large man, dressed in black jeans and pullover sweater bumped into her, throwing her into Johnny.

“Hey!” Johnny protested, shoving the man away.

“Big mistake, kid,” the man said. He let a steel spring baton slide into his hand from its hiding point under the sleeve of his sweater. A quick flick and the tip slid across Johnny’s right cheek, raising a welt and causing intense pain.

Johnny staggered back, fumbling to pull the tire knocker from under his jacket. He got it free and tried to swing it but another man, dressed the

same as the first, had come up behind him and grabbed the knocker before Johnny could swing.

“Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” cried Anita. She lunged toward the second man and began to hit him with her tiny fists. The first man laughed and swung the steel baton. He really did only mean to give her a hard smack in the shoulders, but when the second man threw her away from him, the blow landed on the back of her neck and Anita dropped to the pavement.

There were many like altercations going on between the goon squad members and members of the protest. But none turned out as bad as the one with Johnny and Anita.

Knowing what he'd done, the first goon, furious at himself and Johnny for what happened beat Johnny down without mercy, the second man doing the same. Fortunately Johnny went down as soon as he realized that fighting back would probably get him killed. And perhaps even Anita.

It wasn't until a final twist of his body to try and avoid another blow did he see Anita. She was face down, her left cheek on the pavement. Her eyes were open, but sightless. Blood ran from her nostrils and corner of her mouth. That was the last thing Johnny saw. The last thing he heard was the sound of police sirens approaching.

Johnny came to in an ambulance. He cried out in pain when he tried to move.

“Easy, buddy. You've taken a severe beating. Don't be trying to move around. I'll give you something for the pain, but it won't be much until a doctor can check for head injuries. I don't see any, but I'd rather wait for the doctor. You're eyes are focused right and one is dilated. You probably do have a concussion, but I'm not sure.

Johnny croaked out, “Anita! Anita! Where is Anita? I think she was hurt really bad.”

The two attendants in the back of the ambulance looked at one another, and then the first one spoke again. "I'm sorry. She is dead. There was nothing we could do. She apparently took a blow high on the back of her neck and suffered a broken spine which cut her spinal cord. That is preliminary, but I think my conclusion will hold up. I'm sorry."

Johnny went numb, but not from pain medication. It was the numbness of disbelief, of grief, of anger. The goons had killed his wife, and they'd been sent by the authorities to stir up trouble so the police had reason to come in and break up the protest. Johnny closed his eyes and began to grieve.

He gave little response to the hospital staff when the ambulance crew turned him over to them. He was checked into a ward, helped off with his clothing and on with a gown, and then placed on a hospital bed.

It was some time before a doctor came in to see him. She checked his eyes, felt of his skull, and asked a multitude of question that gained only a 'yes' grunt or 'no' grunt in response. The doctor was sympathetic from the beginning, and she was almost crying when she had to tell Johnny that, yes, Anita was dead. And so was the baby.

"Baby? Baby? Anita was pregnant? She didn't tell me she was pregnant!"

"I'm sorry the doctor said. "Only a few weeks. She wasn't showing. She might not have known..."

"Our baby... They killed my wife and my unborn baby." Then Johnny let out a primordial scream of rage that rocked the doctor. Johnny was trying to get out of the bed, but his legs were entangled in the sheets and he couldn't get free before three burly orderlies had him pinned to the bed.

The doctor spoke to one of the nurses that had come in as well. A minute or so later, as one of the nurses held Johnny's arm down, the doctor gave him an injection. The orderlies held on for some time, but finally the doctor indicated they could release him.

"Such a sad, sad story," said the doctor. "But we have to take precautions. Strap him down."

Restraints were brought and Johnny's arms and legs were strapped to the bed rails. The doctor would have to get the okay from way up to keep them on, as restraints were frowned upon. But she had no doubt that they would be approved until Johnny was in control of his emotions again.

Johnny slept through the night, in part from the injection and partly from the emotional exhaustion. When he did wake up he felt the restraints and started to struggle. But only for an instant. He wasn't going to break them, and there was no need to exhaust himself further trying.

Instead, he called out in a low, calm voice, "Nurse. Nurse! I'm awake. Could someone get a doctor?"

One of the floor nurses thrust the hanging curtain aside slightly and looked in on Johnny. "Okay. I'll inform doctor Blueman you are awake. We're all sorry about... Well, we're sorry."

Johnny nodded and softly said, "Thank you."

When the nurse paged Dr. Blueman and then told her that Johnny was awake she also said, "He wasn't fighting the restraints. But he just looked so sad and lost."

Dr. Blueman nodded. "With good reason. Have the orderlies stand by. I'll take the restraints off myself, but I want them right by the curtain."

"Yes, doctor. It'll be just a couple of minutes."

Dr. Blueman nodded and went into the ward and moved the privacy curtain enough to enter. “Good morning, Mr. Bachmann. How do you feel this morning?”

Johnny took a second to analyze the feelings. The body was hurting, but the mind was numb. And so he told her so.

“I see. Can I trust you to not attempt to get out of bed if I release the restraints?”

“That’s over,” Johnny said calmly. “It was just a gut reaction. I’m sorry if I hurt anyone.”

“No one was hurt. And I will release the restraints, but I want a promise from you first.”

“What promise?” Johnny asked, expecting the answer he got.

“I want you to promise to see a grief counselor, as soon as you get out of here.”

“Very well,” Johnny said, “You have my promise.”

Johnny was very still as Dr. Blueman undid the restraints. He rubbed his wrists when his arms were free. When the leg restraints were off, he wiggled his legs around a bit, and then his head went down on the pillow. “I do need to go to the bathroom. It is becoming urgent.”

“I’ll have an orderly come in. Not to take you in, but just to be here in case you are about to fall.”

“I don’t think I’ll fall. But that’s okay. I can wait for the orderly.”

“Okay.” Dr. Blueman left the bedside and ushered in one of the three orderlies.

To Johnny's surprise, he did need help to the bathroom down the hall. His legs would barely carry him and they ached terribly when he took a step. The orderly did wait outside the ward bathroom for Johnny to do his business and come back out. This time the orderly only had to steady Johnny on his way back.

"Better?" Dr. Blueman asked when Johnny was back in the bed.

"In a sense. But I hurt more than I thought I would when I woke up."

"You were beaten and kicked savagely. There were a number of cases... None as severe as yours. And no other deaths."

Johnny closed his eyes at the mention of Anita's death. Dr. Blueman watched him, but he got himself under control quickly and neither cried out or lashed out.

"I'll give you something for the pain. I hate to rush you out, but we're overloaded at the moment. And there isn't much more I can do other than address the physical pain. That will fade. So will the other when you see the grief counselor."

Johnny nodded and said, "I understand. Thank you. You've been very professional and I appreciate it."

He settled himself as comfortably in the bed as he could. No position eliminated all the pain, but it was reduced. A nurse was back soon with a pill in a paper cup and a glass of water. Johnny swallowed the pill and took all the water. He relaxed and waited for the pain to fade.

There wasn't too much pain when he set up to eat the breakfast that came shortly after he took the pill. And it wasn't long after that when a nurse came in carrying his folded clothes and belongings. "I'll be back with a wheelchair shortly, Mr. Bachmann. We're releasing you. Do you need to make arrangements for transportation?"

“Can I call a cab when I’m all checked out?”

“Of course. I’ll leave you now to get dressed.”

Johnny emitted more than a few grunts and groans as he dressed. The pain medication wasn’t that powerful. But once dressed and seated in a chair the pains faded away again. He waited for the nurse with the wheelchair and then took nearly a half an hour to get insurance things lined out for his short stay. He called a cab on his cell phone and another nurse wheeled him outside after handing him a script for more of the pain medication.

He was quiet on the ride first to a nearby pharmacy and then to his and Anita’s small, tidy apartment. When he arrived, paid off the taxi and went inside, he stumbled to the bedroom, fell onto the bed and began to cry, deep wracking sobs of grief.

Johnny cried himself out and fell asleep, utterly exhausted. It was late afternoon before he woke up. When he moved it was with pain. He got up gingerly, retrieved the bottle of medicine from his jacket pocket and took one of the pills with a glass of water.

Now he was listless, not wanting to eat, but knowing he should. Anita was a fabulous cook and often cooked double meals so there was almost always some leftovers in the refrigerator. Johnny rummaged around and pulled out a plastic container of last week’s spaghetti.

He ate slowly, trying to think, but just couldn’t seem to put two thoughts together. As he washed the dishes, a firm rule of Anita’s that they never be left in the sink for any length of time, Johnny realized he had to make some arrangements for Anita.

But those were put off when he got a call from the morgue to come down and ID Anita’s body. He wasn’t sure he could get through it, but he did. And made the calls to arrange for the cremation and interment. Then he had to call and tell Anita’s folks about the death. He was

exhausted again when he went to bed that night. At least the next day was a Sunday and he didn't have to go to work.

Johnny spent that Sunday going through the apartment and gathered Anita's things up. There were tears in his eyes most of the time, making the process a little difficult. Everything would be donated to the Salvation Army. The life insurance Anita had insisted both carry would just cover the interment, with very little left.

Another frozen meal that evening and Johnny, again emotionally exhausted, fell into bed at seven and slept the sleep of despair. How was he going to get along without Anita? They'd been almost perfectly sympatico. The only real disagreement they'd had was the decision to go to the protest. And Johnny's decision had cost Anita her life.

Johnny dragged himself out of bed when the alarm went off the next morning. He was feeling half human after his shower. He skipped breakfast, however. He needed to stop at the deli down the street where Anita had worked on his way to his job at a hardware store a couple of blocks further on, but on the same street. Anita's boss, when he'd called, said she would have Anita's last check ready for him if he would stop in.

It was difficult. Anita had been well liked by the owner of the deli, the employees, and the customers. The owner and employees all needed to express condolences. And even a few of the customers that came in while Johnny was there, when they found out about Anita, also expressed condolences.

Johnny endured. He didn't want condolences. He wanted Anita back. But, he quickly realized, he had grieved, was still grieving. Others that knew Anita needed the same opportunity. Expressing their feelings was good for them. And, he discovered before he left the shop, it was good for him, too.

It was proof that Anita had been respected and loved by many more people than Johnny had ever thought about. He was much the loner, except when it came to Anita. She had been counter-point to his point.

While not pleased, Johnny was feeling a little better when he arrived at the hardware store. He went through the same process at the store that he had at the deli. And it was okay. There was no problem when he asked Bert, the store manager, about taking off for the funeral the next day.

“Of course not, Johnny! Why would you even think to ask? It’s the only right thing to do. If I could, I’d be there myself. But I will be in spirit. Anita was a delight to all who met her and I’ll treasure the moments that I was in her presence.”

Johnny blinked back tears, but held his composure. He went to his section and began to do an inventory. He was one of three in the store that worked Monday through Fridays. A rotating crew worked the weekends and various days of the week so everyone got their forty.

The next three days were a blur to Johnny. The funeral, the meeting with Anita’s parents, who blamed him for Anita’s death. They barely acknowledged his presence and left without saying good-bye.

Wednesday and Thursday, after work, the insurance agent came by with papers for Johnny to look over and sign. Friday, after work again, he went to the funeral home and settled up the cost of the funeral. The money left from the check he’d received went into the savings account in the bank. He didn’t know if he could ever spend the money.

Six months had passed since Anita’s death. Johnny was coping, with the help of the grief counseling, but without Anita to share things with, he just wasn’t interested in doing much. Their friends had actually been Anita’s friends. He’d simply been part of the package of knowing her.

He started to spend a lot of time on the internet, at first looking for information on how things were going around the US, and even the World. Johnny tried to get involved with the protests again, but just couldn't bring himself to do so. It wouldn't change anything, and the memories of that first attempt were just too painful.

Some of the sites he was visiting talked about, not changing things, but getting ready to simply survive them. He followed a link or two, and ran across several of the so-called Prepper or Survivalist sites.

Johnny quickly decided he wanted nothing to do with the fringe elements that were out to change things by force. What the media usually called Survivalists. Prepping seemed much more to fit in with his new attitude.

Gradually, after getting hooked on some of the fiction, especially that by Tired Old Man, he found about prepping. There was no way for him to do some of the things TOM wrote about, but he was getting valuable ideas from him, and from the forums on the sites.

Slowly, Johnny laid out a plan on what he would do. Even leaving New York City was becoming an option. That would take a while, Johnny knew, but still, it might be an option in the future if he was careful with his money.

But as fate would have it, Johnny never got past the planning stages for prepping. The one thing he had accomplished was to make the acquaintance of one of the truck farmers that brought produce and other farm goods into the Farmer's Market held nearby each Saturday.

Johnny wasn't sure how the subject of prepping came up in one of their conversations, but it did. After several more conversations, Brandon Scopes up and told Johnny, "I feel for your loss, and understand. Look. I have a bit of trouble keeping hands. If there is ever a time when you

need a place to bug out to, keep my place in mind. I like you, Johnny. I think you'd fit in with the family and permanent hands just fine."

"I don't know anything about farming," Johnny protested.

"I can teach you that, if need be. I need someone smart. Someone that can learn a lot of different skills. Someone with no ties that can be there when I need them the worst. If something major happens, I'm a bit vulnerable. One thing. You'd have to learn to use a gun and be willing to defend the place."

"A gun? I never thought about getting one. It is so hard here in the City, and... well, I just don't know much about them."

"Take some training where the outfit provides different firearms to try. Once you get into it, you'll like it. It is a fun sport, with very handy other uses. Think about it?"

"Okay. I will," Johnny told Brandon. "See you next week? I should have decided by then."

"Excellent! If the answer is yes, we'll make arrangements for you to come out and get the lay of the land before a final answer."

Johnny nodded, paid for his purchases, and headed home. He was in a bit of a daze the next few days, but it came from making a tough decision. The answer turned out to be yes, on Wednesday of that week.

On Thursday morning, right before four, the acronym that Johnny thought was a little silly immediately popped to mind when the apartment building shook enough to throw him out of bed. TEOTWAWKI.

Shortly after the shake, Johnny heard the loudest sound he'd ever heard. It rattled the window in the bedroom of the apartment. Johnny scrambled up in the darkness and ventured near the window. One quick look was

enough. The mushroom cloud of a nuclear device going off was unmistakable.

Johnny's next thought was to head to Brandon's. But how? And, he realized, there would be fallout. "Better get dressed!" he muttered. He was able to see by the light from the mushroom cloud well enough to get to the doorway and flip the light switch on. Nothing.

"EMP" Johnny decided. He was able to get dressed in the fading light still coming from the mushroom cloud. But it had faded by the time he gathered up a second change of clothes, with two sets of underwear and six pairs of socks.

He put them in the backpack he used when going to the park for a picnic. Feeling his way into the kitchen in the darkness he opened up a cabinet drawer by feel. Johnny found the flashlight Anita kept there and turned it on. By its light everything remotely edible that would last more than a day went into the pack. It wasn't much.

A last thought had him grabbing a couple of kitchen knives. These he carefully inserted into the pack, making sure they wouldn't punch through.

"What else? What else?" he thought. "Water!" There was half a case of bottled water in the small closet where the cleaning things were kept. The wrap was still mostly intact, so after putting on the pack Johnny picked up the water and tucked it under one arm. It was going to be difficult to handle, but he knew he had to.

Flashlight in his free hand, after checking for his keys, Johnny left apartment and headed downstairs. Apparently he wasn't the only one with the same idea. There was a small crowd in front of the door to the steps to the basement of the building. Some had grabbed some things like Johnny. Some were bare handed. Some were even still in night clothes.

“What is the hold up?” Johnny called out.

“No key,” someone said.

Another added, “No one brought their basement key.”

“I’ve got mine,” Johnny said. While a few gave way immediately, several people Johnny had to bull his way through. He handed his keys to the guy closest to the door. As soon as it was open the rush from behind almost had Johnny falling down the steps. He barely maintained his balance, but made it down the steps without further mishap.

The same key opened the door at the bottom of the steps. The man unlocked it and gave Johnny his keys back. The crowd behind was already pushing Johnny forward. There was barely room to pull the door open. When it did open Johnny was again pushed through. This time he went down to one knee. But he kept his back hunched and let the human river flow past him.

He managed to stand up. As he did, a man just coming through the door yelled, “Lock the door! Lock the door! There are more people coming!”

“Can’t do that,” Johnny barked out. “Everyone deserves a chance.” The keys were still dangling from one finger of the hand holding the flashlight. The man that wanted the door locked snatched the keys, nearly breaking Johnny’s finger in the process.

Johnny was mobbed by those wanting to keep out others. They threw him out of the way and held the door closed while it was locked. Down on both knees now, Johnny felt someone tugging at the pack. Someone else had already picked up the partial case of water and disappeared with it.

Several kicks to his ribs and Johnny was down. He faintly heard the pounding on the door before he passed out. Johnny came to after only a few minutes. He scrambled, painfully, to get up. When he did he saw the

rest of those in the basement looking at him. Rather angrily, he thought. He also saw that his food was being eaten, and his water was being drunk, all in the light from his flashlight.

Johnny checked his pockets. Everything was gone, including his wallet. Only his handkerchief and watch were left. At least he was still clothed. He looked around at the door. Three people were there, keeping a watch on the door. One of them had Johnny's key in the lock, ready to relock it if someone on the outside had a key.

There were still some feeble banging on the door, but nothing like before. Something hit Johnny in the back and he spun around. It hadn't hurt. It was his pack. "There's your pack, dude. Shouldn't have tried to keep everything for yourself."

"That's right," came from several people.

Johnny just shook his head at the incredible ludicrousness of the statements. Though painful, Johnny leaned down and picked up the pack, slipping into the straps with even more pain.

"Can I have my flashlight back?" Johnny asked evenly.

"Sorry, dude," said the same man. "It's the only one we have. We need it. You don't. You screw around and try something; we'll throw you out of here."

Johnny weighed his chances of survival in the basement and out of it. The wind was blowing from the cloud toward the apartment building. Probably already had fallout on the ground. The decision made to stay at least forty-nine hours, when the radiation would be down to one percent of what it was now; Johnny ventured over to a large pipe running close to the basement wall and sat down.

He isolated himself from the rest of the group. Stayed out of the arguments and fights that raged as the food and water ran out. He dozed

off and on, ignoring everything. And the group left him alone, having taken everything they perceived they needed from him.

Johnny was thirsty and hungry and needed to go to the bathroom desperately when the forty-eight hour mark rolled around. He stood up, and announced, "I'm leaving. Open the door."

"There might be more people out there wanting in," someone said.

Another added, "You might let the radiation in!"

"Naw," said the 'dude' man. "Ain't been no knocking for hours. Everyone out there is dead. And he will be too, if he leaves. I say let him go. He gives me the creeps the way he just sits there, looking at us."

Rather reluctantly, the three men at the door now carefully unlocked it and tried to push it open. It was difficult. When Johnny stepped forward and through the narrow gap sideways, he saw what was blocking the door. Bodies. Five of them. There was nothing he could do for them or about them. He just held his breath and headed up the stairs. He was cautious when he got to the upper door.

A quick glance told him there was no one lurking about. Johnny made a bee line up to his apartment feeling his way in the darkness and into the bathroom. Things might not work, and they didn't, but he was past caring. He did his business and then quickly left the apartment for the last time. Johnny's next thought was water. It had not occurred to him to tap the water in the pipes in the basement, or the water in the toilet tank in the apartment

The knowledge he'd picked up over the few weeks of becoming a prepper was spotty. Some things he knew and could remember. Otherwise he was almost clueless. But he did know, that despite the reduction in radiation in the first forty-eight to fifty hours was great, his safety depended on just how high it was even after that drop. He had no

idea where he could find a meter. Besides, water and food were of paramount interest at the moment.

Johnny took the time to get another change of clothes, underwear, and socks. It was all the 'rough' clothing he had. Everything else was dress pants and shirts. He headed out of the apartment and onto the street. It was still early, and daybreak was still an hour away. But Johnny could feel the sandy roughness under his shoes. The layer wasn't too thick, but the fallout was there, without doubt.

Johnny hurried on his way, wanting to get off the sidewalk. It was eerie out. Nothing was moving. There were no lights anywhere, just star-light from the clear sky. No cars moving. No people on the side walk.

When he reached the deli he reached for the door handle and discovered the door had been jimmied. Suddenly even more cautious, Johnny opened the door and stood listening in the dark room. There was no sound at all. It was almost painful on his ears, trying to hear sound that wasn't there.

Moving carefully in the dark, Johnny moved by feel over to the display case. He just couldn't be sure of anything. He felt around for the stool that whoever was working the front counter had to sit on when things weren't busy. He found it, sat down, and leaned back against the wall to wait for some daylight.

He dozed off three times, jerking awake just as he was about to fall off the stool. The third time he could discern things in the store. With each second the light became brighter as the sun rose.

Johnny checked the rear of the shop, holding the dividing door open so he could look in. There didn't seem to be anything disturbed, so he turned back to the meat case. He sighed. It had been cleaned out. He'd waited for nothing.

Then he remembered Anita telling him that the cooler for extra stock was past the rear bathroom door. It had been the only place to install the walk-in cooler so many years ago. He felt his way into the rear part of the shop and down the short hallway. He'd propped the swinging door open so he could have at least some light back there, but when he found the door handle of the cooler and opened it, light flooded the interior.

"Must be on a battery system," Johnny decided. It sure made his job easier. He was tempted by several things, but limited his selection to hard sausages and hard cheeses that would keep okay and not require any cooking. He loaded up the back pack almost full as he munched on one of the sausages, closed the already warming cooler, and went back to the front. Seeing the breads on the rack, already getting stale he decided to take a couple of the hard loaves. They went into the back pack, too.

He grabbed a bottle from the small cabinet cooler that held water and soft drinks for sale. Two orange juices and then a full liter of water had his stomach swishing. He filled up the pack with the loose bottles of water and picked up two six-packs of the largest size bottles that came packaged that way.

Johnny muttered his apologies to the owners for having taken the food before he left. But leave he did. At a brisk walk he headed for the hardware store. Still no one else out and about. When he reached the store he was surprised to find it locked up as usual. There were no signs of intrusion.

After hurrying down the street, a left turn, and then another left to put him in the alley, Johnny made his way to the delivery doors of the store. He was glad he'd not managed to talk his boss out of keeping a spare key hidden behind a brick in the wall at the base of the doors. Bert had been known to forget his keys from time to time and always used the hidden key to enter the store when he did.

Johnny got the key, unlocked the doors and put the key back. He opened the doors just enough to slip inside after picking up the water bottles he had put down before. Locking the door from inside, he worked his way through the dark store by feel. He knew the place by heart and quickly found the flashlights and batteries.

Opening a battery package he inserted a pair into the heavy duty rubber coated flashlight. He decided to work by the light from the flashlight rather than open the vertical blinds that covered the front window.

The first thing Johnny did was to change clothes. Though the jeans he was wearing were almost new, he opted for something tougher and more suitable for a trip to the country, the hard way. Stopping to think every so often so he wouldn't forget something important, Johnny exchanged his medium pack for a much larger one, transferring everything to the new one, except the jeans and shirts. Those were replaced with a change of the same Dickies work clothes he was now wearing, along with the Redwing boots. Light and medium jackets were added.

Going through the store he carefully selected items to go into the pack. Even as well stocked as the store was, it carried no guns or hunting equipment. There was just no legal market for them. So Johnny looked over the tool selection. He picked the top of the line machete, and a steel slim bladed roofing hammer that looked more deadly than the hatchets in the camping section. Johnny hadn't really thought about the camping section earlier, other than wanting a larger pack and weapons of sorts. So when he saw the freeze-dried camper's meals he pulled a large rolling duffel from the luggage department and stuffed all the meals the store had into it.

Since he'd decided to take the duffel, he also decided to load it up with a few more things. A Stanley 30" entry bar. It could be handy on the trip. A couple hanks of rope. Camper's toilet paper. A stove and cook set with several bottles of fuel. A water filter. He thought about a tent, but that would call for yet another bag and he wanted at least one hand free

so passed on it. Same with a sleeping bag. But a slim self-inflating sleep mat went into the duffle.

He did grab a handful of various space blanket products and throw them into the duffle. He added a wind up flashlight, but added more batteries and bulbs for the industrial flashlight he was using to get around.

“What else? What else? What else?” he muttered to himself. The banging on the front door decided him he had enough, hopefully, to get to the truck farm. He added the two six-packs of water to the duffle, closed it up and made for the back door.

The front door flew open under the impact of a sledge hammer wielded by the intruder. Johnny eased the back door closed and headed down the alley as fast as he could go with the pack on and pulling the duffle. Fortunately it was a good one, with larger than normal wheels and pulled easily.

When he reached the cross street he quickly made his way down it, away from the hardware store. He was panting by the time he thought he was far enough away that the intruders wouldn't be attempting to find him, if they even tried.

Thinking as hard as he could, he tried to think of another building with a basement that he might get into. It had to be one without any people. He wasn't going to lose everything he'd accumulated.

Then he spotted the manhole cover. It wasn't sewer or electric, it was telephone vault. Dropping the duffle, he opened it and took out the Stanley Entry Bar and managed to get the manhole cover off, though it was a struggle. He shined the light down into the vault and saw that it wasn't very big, but it was dry, and it was underground, though without much overhead coverage.

But it was the best he could do. He lowered the duffle and pack down using the rope he'd brought along. Then, down in the vault on the built

in ladder steps, Johnny worked the manhole cover back into place, barely avoiding smashing his hands in the process. Then he had to lift one edge again to insert a prop. He would need the opening for air. It was only an inch at the highest, but he hoped it would be enough.

Using the wind up flashlight to preserve the batteries for the other one, Johnny arranged the pack and duffle to provide a useable area where he could stretch out on the floor. Letting the sleep pad inflate, Johnny crouched down and ventured down the conduit for the phone and cable lines. One only went a few feet and ended in a blank wall with the wires going through it.

It was the same the other way, but it went a full twenty feet before he saw the same type of wall the other conduit had. Johnny quickly decided the long one would be his bathroom, using one of the trash bags he'd brought.

He shifted the pack and sleep pad into the other, short conduit and made a bed. There was much more mass over the conduits than the vault itself. Johnny figured he be safer staying in the conduit, coming out only to go to the bathroom and stretch his legs.

The duffle bag was rolled over close to the sleeping chamber. Johnny decided there was nothing more to do and stretched out on the sleep pad, with a ditty bag of underwear from the duffle his pillow. Surprisingly, he was asleep in minutes.

It was a boring few days. It was the boredom that drove him out of the vault days earlier than he intended. He had planned to stay a full two weeks. He knew he could not stay the days and months that TOM recommended in some of his stories. Johnny decided that the risk of getting radiation sickness was the lessor of two evils. He simply couldn't stand to be in that vault any longer.

So nine days after his voluntary isolation, Johnny carefully lifted the manhole cover a bit more and took a peek. Nothing moving. He checked

the other three directions with the same result. His arms were shaking by the time he maneuvered the heavy iron manhole cover off the opening. He rested only a minute before climbing out, relishing the freshness of the air.

Johnny had no idea how close he came to carbon dioxide poisoning in the vault. Barely enough air entered through the small slot of the propped up manhole cover to keep the air breathable. He had headaches a couple of times, but getting up and moving around in the vault seemed to eliminate them. It was the closeness to the manhole cover that gave him enough fresh air to stretch out again. Being sedentary, as he had to be, he used less oxygen and exhaled less carbon dioxide.

After pulling up the pack and duffle, Johnny looked around, made sure he was facing the right direction, and set off for Brandon's truck farm. Fortunately the route was away from ground zero.

Johnny saw no one else that first day on the trail, if walking the empty streets of New York City could be considered walking a trail. Every so often he'd see a shop of one sort or another mixed in with the residential sections. Some had been broken into, especially any that carried food or water.

It didn't occur to him until nearly evening that he could be conserving his supplies that he was carrying, if he took advantage of the looted stores. Except those looking for life giving water and food had cleaned out each one. He'd felt bad about the deli, and couldn't bring himself to break into another useful store that had yet to be broken into.

He found an unlocked house late in the afternoon and entered cautiously. The smell of decaying flesh drove him out. And then, when he tried another house it was the same. That was when Johnny decided no more homes. If need be he'd sleep outside.

That was exactly what he did that first night. He was able to find an inset doorway where he could put down the sleep pad and keep the pack and

duffle behind him. It was not a pleasant night. Not only did it get considerably colder than Johnny expected, but he kept waking up what seemed like was every few minutes.

The following morning Johnny ate another cheese and summer sausage sandwich for breakfast, the same thing he'd had for supper. He intended to use up the sausage and cheese before it went bad. Then he would start on the campers' meals. He found an alley and did his morning business in a corner clear of pavement. He was glad he'd thought of the trowel for that very purpose. Leaving human waste exposed, he'd learned on the forums, increased the chance of communicable diseases during disasters.

Johnny did see several people that day, though all saw him and hurried out of sight. He really wanted to talk to someone. Anyone that might know what happened, what was happening now, and if it was actually safe to be out in the open all the time the way he was doing.

But that was not to be for some time. The one person he saw the third day came at him with a large knife upraised, ready to stab him. But Johnny brandished the roofing hammer with its sharp edged hatchet blade that he had taken pains to sharpen on the pavement during one of his rest breaks. The man slid to a stop and left.

Johnny realized he was being followed by the man and picked up the pace. The man had looked gaunt, and Johnny hoped he would fall back and stop following if Johnny made it too much work.

Naturally lithe and lean, Johnny was able to maintain the pace and finally could no longer see the man skulking behind him. But he kept going until after dark, headed for a small city park he knew of on the route. There was a small shed between the bathrooms. It was locked, but Johnny made quick work of getting the door open with the Stanley Entry Bar.

He slept much better that night but came awake suddenly. He checked his watch. Five in the morning. He quietly got up, rolled up the sleep pad

and slung the pack. He had the roofing hammer in one hand and the handle of the rolling duffel in his other.

Peeking through the door he opened a crack he saw three women getting water from the small pond in the dawn light. A man stood watch with a shotgun cradled in his arms. Johnny debated on whether to approach them or not, with the intention of asking for news of any sort. But he decided that it was just too dangerous. There would be a better time.

He was getting low on water. Johnny had started keeping the empty bottles instead of throwing them away as he had the first day. So he waited until the small group had the water they wanted and left. He eased out and hurried to the pond, realizing he should have done it the night before, after dark.

But no one else appeared until just as he finished up. It was a family. A man, grown woman, teen girl and adolescent boy. "Hey, mister!" called the man, holding his hands out to his side.

"Could we borrow your filter to fill our jugs? Someone said the pond might not be safe to drink."

"Won't loan it to you, but if you'll have the boy bring the jugs over I'll fill them. The rest of you just stay where you are."

"That's fair," the man said. It took the boy two trips to bring the various jugs and bottles to be filled.

Johnny kept an eye on the group as he filled each container in turn and the boy carried it over to the others. "You know what happened? Any news at all?"

"You must know we got nuked," said the man.

"That I know," replied Johnny. "But how widespread? Why isn't the National Guard or FEMA or someone checking on survivors?"

“Aw, man! It was worldwide. I don’t know why, but I was watching a movie when it happened and just before the blast here there was a warning that the US was under attack by Russian and Chinese nuclear missiles. I guess just about everywhere got it. The only thing I heard on my portable radio, the day after the attack, was a warning to stay inside for two weeks at least. And for neighbors to help neighbors. And we thank you for the clean water.”

“I see,” Johnny said almost too softly for the man to hear. Then, a bit louder, “That’s okay. I don’t mind. Do you know if there are many others around?”

“We’re keeping to ourselves. Well, us in the apartment house. Only twelve. The water is for all of us. Only seen two other groups and they were friendly, but distant. That I understand. So far no sign of brigands or gangs.”

Johnny nodded. He stood up with the last filled container and handed it to the boy. Before they turned to leave the man asked, “Will you be around here much? We could use some more help, especially with the water filter. Boiling it is a bit difficult.”

“Sorry. No. I’m headed... Elsewhere. Good luck to you.”

“And to you, sir.”

Johnny was a bit nervous when he turned his back to the group as they were leaving, to head back out to the street in the other direction. But they kept going and so did Johnny.

The next few days Johnny avoided everyone he saw. All were armed and all looked like they would shoot at the drop of a hat. None attempted to intercept him or follow him. It seemed they were just guarding their small piece of civilization and intended to continue to do so.

But on the fifth day he came up on a large group on the move the same direction he was travelling. Johnny was moving much faster than the group, which included people of all ages. They were travelling at the speed of the slowest members. There were all sorts of carts, wagons, rolling suitcases and such. Even two game carts, though Johnny didn't recognize them for what they were.

No one seemed to be watching their back track, so Johnny followed along behind them for a while, trying to decide whether or not to try and get around them. When the group suddenly stopped, and there were shouts followed by shots, Johnny made the quick decision to get off that street, and go around the altercation.

So he made a quick right turn, and headed up a side street. No sure how big the area was that was being protected, Johnny carefully checked for guards on the streets heading the way he wanted to go.

It took him the rest of the day to get around the enclave of streets and buildings. Johnny didn't know how that many armed people could be all in one place, or how a group that big was surviving. He wondered for a few moments and put it out of his head. He had a destination that would provide him with the necessary items for his continued survival, if he could just get there in one piece.

After that near encounter, Johnny was even more cautious than before. There could easily be other groups that were hiding, waiting to waylay a person or a group, rather than being right out and open about it.

He was as lucky as he was good. Rather mediocre, actually. Johnny barely missed being taken down half a dozen times before he reached the area where Brandon's truck farm was. When he saw the blockade ahead, he stopped. But for some reason they didn't look as threatening as a couple of the others he'd bypassed. So he walked forward slowly, right up to the two vehicles blocking the road.

“Where you headed, mister?” asked one of the three men manning the roadblock. “No room for staying, but we can escort you through if you want to keep going.”

“Oh,” Johnny said. “I’m headed for Brandon Scopes’ truck farm. I was invited to come there in case of a major disaster. Is it beyond your territory or should I head off another way?”

“You Johnny Bachmann?”

“You know my name?” Johnny asked, flabbergasted. He nodded.

“Well, boy doggies!” declared another of the men. “You did make it. We’ve kind of been keeping an eye out for you. Boss said you had what it takes. None of us believed a real City boy could make it on his own all the way out here. But you sure did. And all in one piece. Though a bit worse for the wear. Welcome to the Scopes Territory.”

“Territory?”

“Yep. Brandon has been busy since a couple of days after the missiles flew. He’s taken over several farms where the people didn’t make it, and arranged with several more to provide help to them in return for joint operations for the duration. He was the only one in the area that had really prepared for this.

“Everyone he asked was anxious for additional protection. Some had already been hit by raiders looking for food. Brandon put a stop to that. Led the strike team himself and wiped the raiders out where they were holed up. There is another group testing the defenses from time to time, so we can’t let our guard down yet.”

It was the third man that told Johnny, “Come on through. I’ll take you up to Brandon’s farm.”

The man fastened Johnny's duffle in place on the cargo rack of a quad, got on, and Johnny climbed on behind him. It was only a few minutes ride before they arrived at an impressive farm spread.

The man drove right up to the front porch and shut down the quad. Johnny hopped off and stepped back. He looked up to the porch as the man unloaded the well-worn duffle.

"Well, I see my trust was well placed," boomed Brandon Scopes. "Welcome! What do you think of the place at first sight?"

"It looks great," Johnny responded. "Like nothing at all has happened."

"And that is the way I intend to keep it. With men like you and the others that have joined up. Come on up. There is someone I want you to meet."

Johnny shrugged out of the pack and set the duffle on the porch before going through the front door of the house that Brandon was holding open. "Gwen? Where are you?"

A stately woman stepped into the room. "She's upstairs. She'll be down in a minute."

"Honey, this is the man I've mentioned before. Johnny Bachmann. Johnny, my wife and helpmeet, Samantha."

"How do you do?" Johnny asked.

"Doing good. You must be tired from your trip. You certainly are dirty." Samantha said, looking over at Brandon. "Get him into the bunk house so he can clean up. And get him some clothes from stores if he needs them. Supper at six, as always. Welcome to the spread, Johnny."

Johnny just stared for a moment as the woman turned and left. Brandon chuckled and said, “Don’t worry about Samantha. Despite her rather brusque manner at times, she likes you. I can tell.”

“Well... Okay if you sa...” Johnny’s jaw dropped when he looked toward the staircase. A woman, about his age, he thought, was coming down the stairs. Though she wore a form fitting khaki shirt, and a pair of trim cargo pants, she looked absolutely beautiful to Johnny. He felt a moment of guilt for the feeling, so soon after Anita’s death, but simply could not help the feeling.

She had long blonde hair, up in a ponytail, and bright blue, intelligent, eyes.

“Sweetie, Johnny Bachmann. Johnny, my daughter, Gwen.”

“So, you’re the one?” Gwen asked. She pulled on a pair of light leather gloves and stepped off the last step onto the floor.

“The one?” Johnny asked, barely able to pull his eyes away from Gwen.

Brandon laughed. “Gwen has the impression that I’m bringing you here to marry her.”

“Marry her? I just met her.” Suddenly the guilt was back. “And Anita...”

“Father said you lost your wife recently. I’m sorry. I had the same misfortune. My husband died a year ago of cancer.”

“I’m sorry. It has been so hard...”

“I understand. But know this. I’m not in the market for a husband now.” She looked over at her father rather sternly. “So I won’t appreciate any attempts to hook me up with anyone. Like I’ve told you before.”

Brandon lifted his hands, palms forward. “I am totally innocent. You’re the one reading things into my actions.”

“Yeah. Well...”

“Mother wants Johnny taken over to the men’s bunk house and given to Paco.”

Gwen frowned. But said, “Well... I was headed out to the north fields... But... Come on, Johnny. Let’s get you settled.”

Stopping at the front door, Gwen strapped on one of the gun belts hanging from a series of hooks that held several more. She checked the thumb snap on the semi-auto pistol in the holster. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Johnny grabbed the pack and duffle as they left the porch. He had to hurry just a bit to keep up with Gwen’s long, purposeful strides. He managed to get out, “I had no idea your father was setting me up for marriage to you. I’ll make sure I dissuade him from any thoughts like that. I just lost my wife recently and... well, I just don’t want a relationship now.”

“That’s good. No offense, but I’ll be holding out for someone that can pull their weight here and while I can take care of myself, I want someone that can take care of things if I don’t make it.”

“Oh. Well, that sure leaves me out. I’m totally new to the prep game.”

“That’s what Father said. To be blunt, I’m surprised you made it here, from his description of you.”

The front door of the bunkhouse was open, but Gwen stopped at the steps up to the porch. “No women in the men’s bunkhouse and the opposite in the women’s,” Gwen told Johnny. And then, in a loud voice she called out, “Hey Paco! Got a newbie for you!”

A short, rather lanky Hispanic man came to the door from inside. “Amigo! Come in, come in! Always room for another.” Johnny noticed he was armed, too.

“Mother wants him ready for supper, Paco.”

“Ah. Of course. Cleaned, shaved, and shined. I will see to it myself.”

“Yeah. You do that. But don’t shine him up too good. Father has him earmarked for my next husband. I don’t want anything encouraging that.”

“Sí, señora Hooper. Not too shiny.”

“Very good.” Gwen looked at Johnny. “See you at dinner, I guess. But you’ll be staying here, of course. Don’t let the others get to you. This can be a rather rowdy bunch.”

Gwen tried not to let Johnny see the smile that curved her lips at Johnny’s startled expression. “City boy,” she muttered under her breath and strode away, headed for the stables.

“One nice lady, Señora Hooper, no?”

“I’m sure she is,” Johnny said, hefting the duffle and pack again. “And I bet she has plenty of suitors competing for her hand. I have no intention of being one of them.”

“Sí. Is not good to go after an heiress so soon after arriving. There are many señoritas here. Any would be a fine catch. But be careful, amigo, many are being courted now, by many of the men. It would not be good for someone new to steal away one from an old hand.”

Paco’s tone was light, but there was a genuine warning there. “Nothing to worry about from me,” Johnny said. For the next hour he was busy as

could be, introduced around to the men and women headquartered at the truck farm, now a large farm and ranch operation.

He was assigned a bunk, shown the bathrooms and change room, and while he showered and shaved, with toiletries Paco got from the supply room, Paco disappeared. But he returned in time for Johnny to put on the clean clothing from a warehouse elsewhere on the property.

“You’d better hurry,” Paco said when Johnny pulled on the boots Paco had also provided. “Señora Scopes does not like things when one is late to an engagement.”

“Thanks for the tip,” Johnny said. He hurried over to the house, up onto the porch and knocked.

“What are you waiting for, Johnny?” Brandon’s voice carried from wherever he was. “Come on in, boy. You’ll miss the best eating you’ve had since the war.”

Johnny opened the screen door and went inside. Just in time to watch Gwen, now in a pretty sundress, come down the stairs again.

“Not a word,” she warned Johnny. “Mother expects everyone at her table to be dressed nicely, unless we in the middle of something that precludes it.”

Johnny had to almost hold his tongue to keep from telling Gwen how beautiful she was. He let her precede him into the dining room further inside the house. Brandon stood up as Gwen started to take a chair. A look from him had Johnny pulling the chair out and seating Gwen. He thought he heard a low growl, but dismissed it.

Johnny immediately got up again when Samantha came into the dining room carrying a large platter. His mouth began to water at the aroma of the large beef roast surrounded by potatoes, carrots, and onions.

Brandon was standing and took the platter from her and placed it before his chair. Samantha sat down, and Johnny did as well.

Johnny watched as Brandon carefully carved the roast. When it was ready Gwen passed her plate to Johnny for him to hold for Brandon to serve the meat and roasted vegetables. He held his plate ready after returning Gwen's to her.

Finally, after the meat was served, Brandon placed it near the center of the table and the side dishes made the rounds. Coleslaw, green beans, yeast rolls, and butter. The water glasses had been filled when the table was set, though there were two pitchers of heavily iced water on the table.

Johnny picked up his fork, but saw the others bow their heads. He quickly clasped his hands in his lap and looked down at them as Brandon said a quiet, but heartfelt Grace. The last of it was the thanks that Johnny had made it safe and sound.

"Dig in, boy," Brandon said after the 'Amen'. "You have to be hungry as all get out."

"Yes. Very much so. But I don't want to gorge myself. Though it will be very hard. This food looks and smells fantastic."

"Thank you, Johnny," Samantha said from across the table. "I take pride in my cooking. A young, healthy appetite in a young man is just what I like to see. Makes all the hard work worth it."

"Mother!" Gwen said. "Laying it on a little thick, aren't you?"

Johnny kept his eyes on his plate. He missed the twinkling eyes of Samantha and the grin on Brandon's face. And also missed the aggravated glance Gwen turned on him.

“Oh, this is wonderful!” Johnny said after the first bite of the roast. He was glad he had on the tall boots when Gwen kicked sideways under the table.

Johnny gave her a ‘What?’ look, but she was calmly talking to her mother about how the chickens were doing. He looked at Brandon. Brandon just looked back at him, a rather smug look on his face.

A shake of his head, and Johnny was again savoring every bite of food he took. And though he protested, Brandon put another serving on his plate.

“Don’t worry, Johnny. Just the two servings. Have to leave room for desert.”

Brandon suddenly chuckled when Gwen passed her plate to Johnny and told her father, “Just a half serving, Father.”

Without saying anything Brandon carved a half slice of the beef and put it on the plate Johnny was holding. One small potato and three pieces of carrot were added.

Johnny handed the plate back to Gwen and she said, “Thank you.”

All four finished about the same time and Johnny and Brandon rose when the women started to, hurrying to help with the chairs. “Grab a load, Johnny,” Brandon said, picking up the half empty platter of meat and vegetables.”

“Father, we don’t usually have guests clear the table,” Gwen said firmly.

“That’s right,” Brandon replied. “Get the green bean bowl and roll platter, Johnny. Kitchen is right through here.”

Johnny followed rather meekly, wanting to accommodate Gwen, but knowing his future depended on Brandon. He made two more trips. On

one, while Samantha and Brandon were both in the kitchen, Gwen growled over at Johnny, “Don’t get used to this. You aren’t family, and aren’t likely to become so.”

“I understand.” Johnny was satisfied at just watching Gwen when she wasn’t looking at him. She was beautiful. Anita had been beautiful, but in a different way than Gwen, he decided.

In the kitchen, Samantha was asking Brandon, “How long do you think?”

“I give it a month, no more than two. When I first met him, and then learned a bit about him, I knew he would be perfect for Gwen. She just doesn’t see it yet.”

“Well, the sooner the better. I’d like grandchildren before I’m too old to enjoy them.”

“I think just letting nature take its course now will be the best way to go. Though perhaps with a nudge now and then.”

“You are the devious one, my man.”

“What are the two of you plotting?” Samantha asked when she entered the kitchen again, followed by Johnny with the last load of dishes from the dining room table.

“Not a thing, Sweetheart. Just getting a little snuggly.”

Gwen shook her head. “I swear...”

“Now, now, dear, you know I don’t allow swearing in this house.” Samantha said.

“I didn’t mean... Oh, why do I even try?”

“That’s just the way you are, Sweetheart. How about you help Mother with desert while I go show Johnny the maps in the den.”

“I... Yes, Father.”

Johnny and Brandon were still standing at the large map board on the wall of the den when Gwen and Samantha entered, each carrying a tray.

“Brownies and ice cream,” announced Samantha. Coffee or tea.”

Johnny moved quickly to take the tray from Gwen as Brandon did the same for Samantha.

“Better get the brownies you want quick, Johnny,” Brandon said. “Gwen...”

“Father.” It was a stern command not to continue.

“Oh well. He probably needs to learn these lessons on his own. The lessons stay with one better that way.”

Samantha was serving and handing things to everyone. They all took seats on the sofa and two club chairs in front of the desk, and Brandon behind it.

They were about finished with the desert when Brandon broke the silence. “Beginning tomorrow, I want you, Gwen, to get Johnny familiar with the whole operation. I’m going to be busy with getting the north section ready for next year.”

“Paco...”

Now it was Brandon’s turn to look stern.

“Paco will be with me and the crews. You know more about the whole operation than anyone except me. I want Johnny to be that knowledgeable. He’s going to be taking over the books for me.”

“The books! Are you serious Father?”

“I second the question,” Johnny said. “I’m not an accountant.”

“Don’t have to be. And you told me you’d taken some courses in college. All you really have to do is use the software I set up. And it is very straight forward.”

“But...”

“No buts, Johnny. That’s the deal. You become my money man, and you have a place here for as long as you want.”

“Father, you have...”

“Honey. I’m going blind. I can barely look at the computer screen anymore. It is too hard on the eyes. Gives me a headache you wouldn’t believe.”

“Blind? You haven’t told me that.”

“No. But I am now. So. Johnny is bound to be tired. I know I am. We’ll clear the dishes and then all get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be the first day of an interesting time.” With that he stood and helped Samantha gather up things and put on the two platters.

“One last trip before you go to the bunk house, Johnny.”

Johnny took the other tray and followed Brandon to the kitchen.

Gwen stopped Johnny before he left the house. She looked around to make sure her mother and father weren’t within earshot.

“You tell me the truth! Did you know my Father was going blind?”

“No. I swear. I had no idea.”

“Oh. Okay. I just thought... Never mind. Good night.”

“Good night.” Johnny made his way over to the bunkhouse, took care of some business, and then turned in.

“It was the following morning when he was brushing his teeth that he noticed the blood on his teeth and gums. And then when he combed his hair, far more strands came out than usual. And he suddenly felt nauseous. He thought he would throw up, but managed not to.

He barely made it to the stool when shooting pains in his stomach informed him of a bad case of diarrhea.

It took him long minutes to recover. When he left the bunkhouse, Gwen was waiting, with a very annoyed look on her face. “We try to be prompt here, Johnny. No...” She took a good look at Johnny’s face and noticed how pale and gaunt he looked, compared to the night before. There was even a tiny spot of blood at the corner of his mouth.

“Are you alright? You do not look well. How much radiation did you receive on the trip here?”

“I don’t really know. I was in a good shelter the first two days, and then in an underground utility services vault. I just couldn’t stand that any longer and came out and headed this way.”

Gwen saw him blanch even whiter. “Excuse me,” Johnny managed to get out before he turned and ran for the bunkhouse and a bathroom again.

Lifting the handy talky from the case on her gun belt, she squeezed the transmit key. “Father, are you listening?”

“Yes. As always. What is it?”

“We have a problem. I think Johnny has a case of radiation poisoning. He’s not going to be doing anything for a few days, I’m thinking.”

“I see. Okay. Get him over to the clinic. I’ll be right there.”

When Johnny came back outside, Gwen took his arm firmly. “You aren’t up to anything today. It is probably radiation sickness. We’re going over to our little clinic and have our medical team look at you.”

“Radiation poisoning?” Johnny asked weakly.

“I think so. You have bloody gums, unless I miss my guess. Any hair loss?”

Johnny nodded. His stomach was in turmoil, from the diarrhea and the sudden fear of impending doom.

Gwen got him inside the modular building just in time. He made a beeline to the bathroom he saw through an open door.

“What’s up?” asked Dr. Benjamin Crane.

“Radiation sickness in our newest resident.”

“I thought we’d seen the last of that.” The doctor nodded toward the bathroom door. Diarrhea or nausea?”

“Diarrhea for sure. He ate really well last night. He wasn’t showing any symptoms at the time. He’s been traveling on foot for several days, no sheltering at all after eleven days of moderate sheltering.”

“Probably a minor dose. Everyone has different tolerances to radiation. Apparently our boy has a pretty high one. Took a while to sneak up on him.”

Johnny came out of the bathroom, holding onto the door frame. The doctor and Gwen grabbed him before he could fall and guided him into another room and onto a bed.

“Lie back,” Dr. Crane said. “I’m Dr. Crane. “We’ll give you some privacy to get undressed. There is a chemical toilet right here if you need it. Call out when you’re in bed.”

“But I need...”

“You need to get well. Bed rest will help that tremendously. We’ve already had half a dozen minor cases and they all made it through. Chances are you will, too. So don’t worry about it too much. I’ll be back in a few minutes and waiting outside the door.”

Johnny nodded. It was a struggle to get out of his clothing, down to his shorts. He had to use the toilet once, but he was feeling marginally better afterwards. He heard Dr. Crane say, “No you don’t, Gwen. You don’t need to be here. The nurses and I will take care of him just fine.”

“But...”

“He’s right, Daughter,” Brandon said, having come into the clinic to hear the exchange. He grinned inwardly. Gwen’s concern for Johnny was a good beginning sign. “Go ahead and make the rounds you had planned. I’ll fill you in this evening about his condition.”

“Well... Alright. There really is no need for me to concern myself, I suppose. He’s just another hand.”

“Of course,” Brandon said. He watched Gwen leave, and then turned to the doctor. “Prognosis?”

“Don’t have one yet, you old coot. Now, let me see to my patient and I’ll let you know in plenty of time to inform Gwen.”

Brandon laughed. He and Dr. Crane had been friends since childhood.

While the prognosis was good, it took three months of very little but bed rest, good food, and lots of water and replenishment drink for Johnny to get back on his feet. As soon as he was able, however, Brandon brought over a laptop computer and began Johnny’s lessons.

He begged off after two days, citing eyestrain using the computer, and asked Gwen to continue the education. Brandon expected some resistance, and got some, but not as much as he expected.

As Brandon had told his wife, nature took its course and Gwen finally let her tightly controlled emotions relax during the many talks other than lessons that she and Johnny had. The pain of the loss of Anita began to fade and Johnny found himself falling for Gwen. In a big way.

Gwen was slower to realize it, but she began to have feelings for Johnny. It would be a year before the wedding, but Brandon was able to see his grandson born before he lost his sight completely.

Gwen took over the running of the operation, with Johnny’s now skilled help. Johnny and Gwen both decided that Brandon had actually been right all along. His matchmaking had been right on.

End *****

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