

SEMPER FI

It fell from the sky and hit the sidewalk with a loud, wet, plopping sound, barely missing Jerome's regulation spit-shined shoes. The knot of shoppers surrounding him and his companion broke apart like an overripe melon splattering to pieces upon impact.

Instinctively, Jerome bellowed "Get down!" as he pushed Katie into the shelter of a doorway and dropped into a protective crouch in front of her, weapon drawn, eyes raking the now agitated crowd of shoppers.

"Hey, buddy! Put that thing away!" The big guy at the front edge of the crowd had his weight balanced on the balls of his feet, his arms extended, palms out. "Just chill, man! It was a water balloon, okay?" Jerome's eyes followed his pointing finger. "Look! Look up there. See, just some kids on the fire escape, up there. They're laughing their heads off, the little bastards. This is not a situation, just a prank. Okay?"

He moved slowly toward Jerome, hands out. "Okay? No problem here. We're all safe."

Jerome locked eyes with the approaching stranger and ratcheted down. Lowered the gun. Looked around and found Katie, with her hand on his shoulder.

"Easy baby." She put her hand on his and guided the gun back into its holster. "I'm all right." She looked up at the peacemaker and smiled. "We're all right now. His trigger finger is just a little twitchy, but he's not going to hurt anybody."

She extended her hand to the stranger. "Thanks for trying to help."

"No problem, Miss," he said, keeping his eyes on Jerome's gun hand while he shook Katie's. "Just want to make sure nobody gets hurt, that's all."

"Yeah. Yeah, man. Thanks." Jerome extended that gun hand and smiled. "Name's Jerome. Still dealing with reflexes from 30 months with the 4th Marines in Iraq. But the damn gun ain't even loaded." He nodded toward Katie. "She hid my ammo."

"No prob, man. I'm Simon. Simon Baxter. I did my time with the 2nd Division in Desert Storm. Glad you're OK." The men clasped forearms and bumped chests. "Semper Fi. "

Katie watched Simon walk away. "Nice man," she said.

"Yeah." Jerome wrapped his left arm around Katie's waist and they stepped over the water-drenched slivers of latex that had almost made the headlines. "Good to have Marine backup in a maritime encounter."