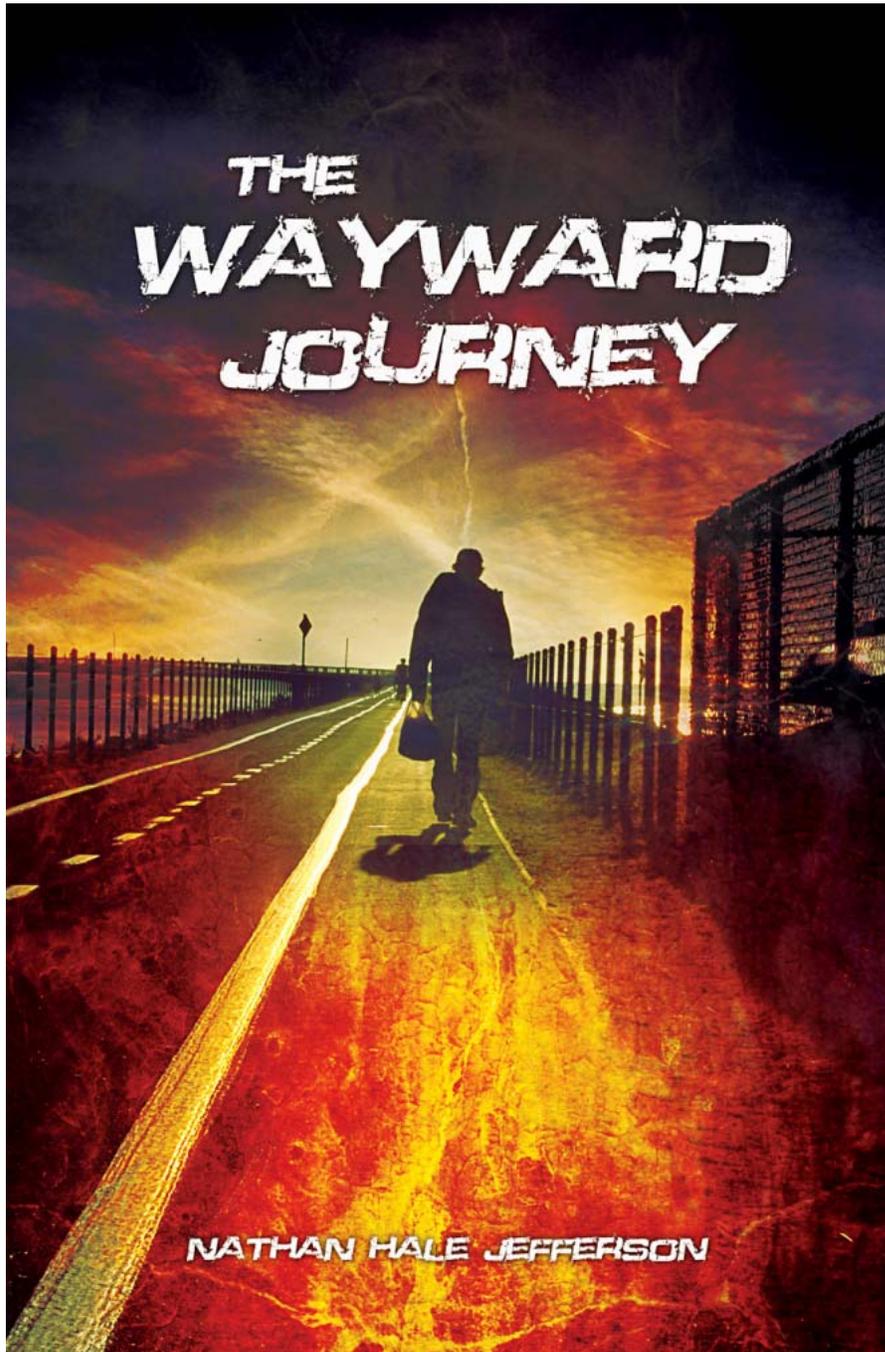


THE WAYWARD JOURNEY



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The Wayward Journey

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Stay tuned for Part II and Part III of The Wayward
Journey: *Fires at Home* and *Winter Without Walls*

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Foreword

While this is a work of fiction and many liberties may have been taken with the events contained in these pages, there is still a great danger posed from earthquakes in large portions of our country. During two months in 1811 and 1812, three of the ten strongest earthquakes that hit the continental United States were produced in the New Madrid seismic zone. This fault line is still active, and while there have been only smaller shakes in recent years, the chance of another large event to occur still exists as an ever present danger.

Because of the dangers posed by earthquakes in this region, it was the scenario used in the 2011 National Level Exercise, the first national exercise to simulate a natural hazard. This multi-state exercise simulated a 7.7 earthquake along the southern segment of the New Madrid Fault, which was followed by a 6.0 magnitude earthquake in the Wabash Valley Seismic Zone.

For more information about earthquake hazard programs, please visit:

<http://earthquake.usgs.gov/prepare/>

According the USGS records, since 2000 more than 55,000 people on average have died due to earthquakes each year. Here are a few notable examples:

May 12, 2008, China: 7.9 earthquake left nearly 90,000 dead and over 5 million people homeless.

January 12, 2010, Haiti: 7.0 earthquake left over 316,000 dead, 300,000 injured, and 1.3 million homeless.

March 11, 2011, Japan: 8.3 earthquake left 15,647 dead, many more homeless, and kicked off a series of nuclear tragedies that will haunt the world for years to come.

Please prepare and be safe!

Chapter 1

Radio Broadcast: Tonight, we bring you an update to one of the ongoing stories that we've been reporting. So far, both New York City and Chicago are being affected, and garbage is really starting to pile up, now that the strike is into its second week. Now, there are talks of this strike moving to other cities as an act of solidarity. These are just some of the latest responses to the strain caused by the rampant inflation facing our country. As you are aware, with the continuing oil shortage, prices continue to rise, causing many people to make hard decisions on which bills to pay.

The President released a statement assuring that the shortage will be under control within a few weeks and that the government is doing everything they can to stop the economy-crippling inflation. They are working with the Federal Reserve Chairman to tighten standards and should have a decision on whether to raise interest rates. Hopefully a solution is found soon. We will continue to follow both of these stories here on your nightly news.

"Do you really have to go?" Margaret asked as she started clearing the dinner table and loading the dishwasher. "I don't know if your going on this trip is the best idea with all the problems popping up everywhere."

She was never very vocal in sharing her concerns about John's new job because she knew it was the best option for their family. But with the new problems facing the country, she was even more nervous than before and her gut told her that something about this trip was going to be especially bad. The nightmare she had had for the

past few nights didn't help either, but she dismissed it for what it was: just a dream.

"I don't want to have to deal with the swamped grocery stores and gas stations without you. They are swamped. It's crazy. It will be especially hard since I don't have anyone to help watch these kids now that mom can't come over." The financial problems and oil shock facing the country had been causing traffic jams and lines at gas stations to become common occurrences.

Normally, Margaret's mother would come over several days a week to help watch the kids so Margaret could run errands and have a little time to herself. But, for the past two weeks, Margaret's mother hadn't been able to make the trip, and it was starting to take a toll on Margaret. She had been watching the two kids while looking hard for a new job, not getting any breaks ever since losing her job several months ago. It didn't help that her husband John took a job where he had to work at least ten to twelve hours a day, seven days a week and was on the road four or five days a week.

In addition Margaret had a special resentment for John's new job. Since he was a salaried employee, he was not getting extra compensation for his increased time and effort, while the company he worked for—one of the largest oil drillers in the country—was raking in more money than they ever had, thanks to the ongoing gas shortage.

Ever since Margaret was let go from her job as a highly paid attorney, John had tried everything he could to bring more money home for the family. He finally took this job that had him flying across the country weekly while still working extremely long days when he was home. With the sudden boom in oil prices, there was an increasing need for engineers to oversee and sign-off on the work being performed across the country. While it was possible to run the heavy machinery and drill holes with skeleton crews or crews brand new to the industry,

without reviews from certified engineers like John, work could only proceed so far.

"I promise it will only be for a few days, and I'll be right home. It will be a whistle-stop tour of about a dozen different sites, but I will have the crews work around my schedule and I'll be in and out faster than last time," John said. He tried to make his wife feel better about his latest assignment to fly out to the middle of nowhere near the Montana and Wyoming border to approve the work on some new wells they were drilling, but even he knew his explanation wasn't going to help.

He had been out to that region a few times this year, surveying and preparing the sites. Now the wells should be ready to go, drilling and setting up the pumping equipment, to start bringing up the oil that the geologist promised was there.

After a few moments of silence, John continued, "You know it's very important I get out there to help with this. Every new well that starts producing helps alleviate part of the shortage problem. I'll demand a vacation or something for all my extra time. Besides, heaven only knows how much profit we are going to make this quarter, and a big profit is going to lead to a big bonus!"

He purposely left out the part where he was supposed to remind her that ever since she lost her job, it was getting harder to maintain their lifestyle. Even though they were frugal with their money, and the only debt they had was their mortgage, the loss of the larger of two incomes was hard on the family's finances.

Not satisfied, Margaret replied, "Well, I still don't like them forcing you to work so much, and under these conditions." She shut the dishwasher door, headed upstairs to start getting the kids ready for bed.

Alone in the kitchen, John grabbed his laptop, popped it open, and shot off a few emails. He laid out the agenda for the next week, trying to squeeze as much action into as short a time as he could. He knew he would have to find a driver to take him from site to site

while he slept in the truck—there might be little to no time for him to sleep in a real bed. He then booked his flights and sent the itinerary to his co-worker Bill, who would need to know when to pick him up from the airport.

Just as he started closing his computer, he remembered what he told his wife about getting a bonus or a vacation for his extra work and travel. He started crafting an email to his boss, asking for a little something that would help with household expenses, especially since gas, groceries, and other necessities had gone up considerably—at least by a double digit percentage—since his last raise 6 months ago. He hit writer's block when he got to the point where he wanted to suggest a number that was adequate and fair for his time, effort, and expertise. He wanted to be careful with his request because prices for most basic goods changed almost daily. Not sure what to write, he decided to sleep on it. He shut down the laptop, loaded it into his bag, and began packing for his flight, which was leaving early the next morning.

The kids were cleaned up and ready for bed when John made it upstairs. They were both eagerly waiting on the couch, sitting in the small loft at the top of the stairs, with a pile of books between them. John spent the next half an hour reading some of children's favorite bedtime stories to them before giving them each a kiss goodnight and tucking them into bed. A few tears welled up in his eyes at the "I love you, Daddy," and "I'll miss you while you are gone" that he got from each of them.

As he walked to his bedroom he thought, *I'll miss you, too, but right now, it's important that I work hard so I can take care of you the best I can.*

"You're lucky you're such a good father; otherwise, all this traveling around might make me rethink our situation," Margaret said coyly as she lay in a slightly provocative pose on their bed.

She was trying to liven the mood by giving him his favorite compliment of being a good father. John grew up as an only child to a single mother, and above everything else, he strove to be a good father. And by all measures, he was doing a fantastic job.

“I’m lucky I have such good kids!” he replied with a smile. Not wanting to let her get away with her last comment, he continued on, “Now if I only had a good wife, too.”

Margaret laughed at him and then gave him a playful shove.

“Alright, that’s enough from you, young lady!” John said, grabbing her into his arms and hugging her tight. He kissed her on the forehead and then lay down in bed next to her.

That night Margaret had another nightmare of her and her kids stranded alone in the dark. She didn’t know exactly what was going on, but they were in danger. John wasn’t there, and he was the only one who could save them.

When she woke in the morning, she dismissed the dream again. Unfortunately for her, and as she was to soon find out, dreams sometimes offer a prediction of what is to come. This was one of those times.

Chapter 2

Radio Broadcast: We're here live inside the loop in Chicago where the teachers union just walked out this morning because of, what they say are, completely deplorable conditions. Conditions they say wouldn't even pass for acceptable in the poorest countries of the world. For the past few weeks, the Chicago school system has been out of money, even though the school year has just started. It has not been able to pay vendors, and because of this, several of the vendors have stopped supplying the schools with necessary materials including supplies, food, and in some instances, electricity.

Now, to be clear, the schools that had power turned off weren't completely shut down. The power company just turned off the regulators installed on air conditioners and what they termed other nonessential hardware, while still leaving on the lights, computers, and other necessities in the classroom. The spokesman for the power company only had a short statement, in which he confirmed the details and assured the public that the utility provider will continue to work with the schools to ensure the safety and education of the students. He also clarified that the company had been working with the schools to solve the electricity issues for months. It has been over a year since the schools have paid a single penny for electricity, and it is with deep regret that they have to rely on such drastic measures.

Stay tuned for our continuing live updates as they unfold.

At 3:30 a.m., the alarm on John's phone went off, forcing him out of his half-sleep. He reached over, hit snooze, and muttered under his breath about not wanting to get up. Five minutes later, the alarm went off again. This time, he begrudgingly turned off the alarm, slid out of bed, and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower. After getting ready, he grabbed his packed roller-board suitcase, threw it along with his backpack into the back seat of the car and jumped into the front seat to begin his trip to the airport. About 45 minutes later, he pulled into the parking garage and took a spot close to the end, several hundred yards from the entrance to the airport. Luckily, he had woken up early and hadn't run into any traffic but he was cutting his timing as close as he could.

Walking into the terminal, he glanced at his ticket and headed toward the security line leading to his gate. The lines were short today, a situation probably due to the extra fuel surcharge and higher ticket prices that had been imposed over the past few weeks. Smaller numbers of people were flying now. Fewer passengers was a good thing, at least for a business traveler like John—shorter lines, better seats, and less hassle getting in or out of airports.

As he stepped up to the TSA agent to have his boarding pass and ID checked, John realized that a soldier stood behind each agent. He didn't notice the soldiers when he arrived at the airport, as members of every branch of the military were always traveling in uniform, so they didn't stick out. But now, he realized that about a dozen extra men and women wearing BDUs, the standard military camouflage clothing, were standing in strategic positions in the security area.

"Good morning, how are you today?" John said cordially as he handed the agent his papers.

"I'm pretty good, except that this is going to be a long week, which I'm not really looking forward to," the agent

said as he started ticking off details on John's boarding pass.

Not one for subtleness, John went on, "What's with the army men all around here this morning? Is everything ok?"

The agent started to respond, but the young man in camouflage interrupted him. "Sir, we are from the National Guard, not the army, and we are just here for a training and readiness exercise. The Governor has issued an order to call up all guardsmen for an additional training exercise."

Slightly annoyed, the agent rolled his eyes as he nodded his head. "Yeah, just a training exercise. This has happened a few times in the past, but this week, it's going to be happening all day long for the whole week. Before, it would be half a day at most."

"Oh Ok. You guys have fun with that. Have a good week!" John quickly interjected, as he took back his papers from the agent.

"You too, and safe travels."

After getting through security, John had just enough time to grab a coffee before boarding his plane. He normally wouldn't pay the crazy prices charged for coffee at an airport, but while on a work trip, he was paid expenses for things like that.

The flight to O'Hare was short and uneventful. When he got off the plane, John wasn't surprised to see several Chicago police officers who looked as if they were ready to handle a riot in their black, bullet-proof vests worn over their uniforms. Some officers even had helmets, complete with face-shields, and one or two even had large plastic riot shields that up until now, John had seen only in movies or news clips.

Running to his next gate, John was just in time for his connection. This flight was going to be about two and a half hours, so he immediately put on his headphones and turned on his MP3 player, and went to sleep.

He wasn't disturbed to power down the device as the plane took off.

"Sir, you have to turn your electronic device off. We are about to land," the flight attendant said, gently touching John's shoulder to wake him up.

He grudgingly obliged, moving his seat to the upright position, powered down his MP3 player, and tucked it into his pocket.

The plane touched down and taxied to the gate of the small regional airport. As soon as the plane stopped, John hopped up, grabbed his roller-board from the overhead compartment, and stood in the short line to deplane.

He then shot a quick text to his ride, Bill, letting him know he had landed and was ready to be picked up. Next, called home to let Margaret know he had safely landed.

"Hi, sweetheart! Just wanted to let you know I'm here safely!"

"That's good. I'm glad you are *there* safely ... Sorry ... I just wish you were here right now. You know it's hard without you around. They just canceled school for the week and are working on a new plan to cut down on busing."

"Well, I'm sure they will have it all resolved before Jane starts kindergarten next year," he said sarcastically.

"John, don't get smart. Just get everything finished and come home. Please?"

"Got it. I'll be back as soon as I can. I love you."

"Love you, too. I'll talk to you later."

John made his way to the baggage claim area and waited for his backpack. He hated checking his bag, but his tools always received extra security attention. Once, TSA threatened to throw away a \$2,000 rotary laser level. After that incident, John started checking the bag and took the opportunity to pack a few other items that he wanted to have on hand but that were against the

carry-on rules. By the time he made it to the carrousel, his bag was out and making its rounds.

Service is really quick when only a dozen people are on the plane, he thought.

He grabbed his bag and headed outside. He quickly found his ride, a large company truck with tool and equipment boxes built into the bed, among the four other vehicles waiting to pick up passengers.

If I have to travel, this is the way. Traveling sure is a lot easier when there is no one else to contend with!

John opened the passenger door and greeted Bill with a warm "Good morning!"

"Good morning, boss. How was the trip?" Bill asked.

"Not bad. Weird, but not bad. Mostly, I just hate waking up so early, and it's going to be a long few days for you and me. Did you get the agenda I sent?"

"Yeah, got it. We'll make it work. But what was so weird about the trip?"

"Well, other than the armed National Guard and police decked out in riot gear at the Columbus and Chicago airports, not much," John said, drawing an odd looking scowl from Bill.

"Yeah, weird stuff is going on all over, but it's good for business ... at least for us. With all the overtime I'm pulling, I'll have the old homestead paid off in under a year."

"Well, if you can keep up with these hours for that long, you sure will deserve it! Now, let's get moving so we don't lose any time," John said as he threw his luggage into the back of the extended cab and hopped into the passenger seat.

Bill was happy to pick John up from the airport, even though he had to drive several hours out of his way. Bill never could put his finger on it, but like all the others on the various crews, he liked working with John. He wasn't sure if it was his no-baloney attitude or his willingness to get down into the mud and muck to help solve problems,

something no other engineer or supervisor would do. Or maybe it was something entirely different that he didn't recognize. But Bill did know that he and everyone else that worked with John held him in great respect.

Not wasting any time, they started going over the itinerary John had laid out. The plan required them to make a run from the airport on the west side of South Dakota up to Helena, where he would depart from three days later.

With five stops along the way, each requiring an 8- to 10-hour inspection, the duo was going to be very busy. The job was to go to each site, validate the installation and setup of all the drilling and pumping equipment. This wasn't necessarily a hard job, but it was tedious, and because of different regulations and laws, only a certified professional engineer could authorize and sign off on a completed inspection. Even though Bill wasn't a certified engineer—not having had enough experience yet—he could help by validating measurements and setups, cutting down the time at each site, thus allowing the compact schedule to be accomplished.

A few hours later, they pulled into the first site and spent the next half-hour just trying to find someone to talk to. They eventually located a lone worker sleeping in the cab of a truck parked behind several trailers.

"It's about dang time you got here." The guy said as he, handed over several binders full of documents. A few days ago, the rest of the crew finished all the setup and moved on to another drill site because work was at a standstill until John and Bill approved moving ahead. This guy had thought he was lucky, but three days spent sitting with nothing to do, stuck in the middle of nowhere, wasn't the vacation he'd imagined.

"Yeah, sorry. Hopefully, we can knock this out, so we can all get on our way," Bill said trying to diffuse the situation.

"Well, everything you need should be in the binders. Here are the keys to the office, the trucks, and everything else you will need. Here is my cell number, but if you have any questions, I won't be able to answer them anyway. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to go home for a few hours and then catch up with my crew," the man said.

He waited a couple of seconds to see if they had questions. When none came, he curtly tipped the bill of his ball cap and jumped back into the truck. He quickly started it and drove off without looking back.

The next few hours went by rapidly. Both engineers checked dozens of specs and setups and recorded all the results on their itemized checklists. After the lists were completed, the two men climbed back into their truck and headed for the next site. John sat in the passenger seat again and went through each line of the papers, double-checking the data and the initials of whoever validated the spec. He always double-checked everything because any missed point could cost thousands in noncompliance fines and tens of thousands in stopped or delayed productions, neither of which he wanted to be at fault for.

Pulling into the second site, they found the crew, who were working on several platforms that held generators and other equipment to run the heavy machinery. Grabbing the binders, they set to work, repeating the process they'd completed earlier in the day. When they were halfway through, the foreman came over and got their dinner orders, giving them a choice among a burger, two different cold cut sandwiches, and pizza from the local store, which was about a 20-minute drive away.

Discussions with the crew at dinner spun around many news topics, none of them good. The main discussion was the President's latest announcement that he was releasing more of the nation's strategic oil reserves. This would be the third sale from the reserves in the past two months, and the total held in reserve was already down by more than 75% from a year earlier. The

latest release would leave the country with as little as a week's worth of oil in reserve. The mainstream media had ignored this fact and focused only on how great it was that the administration was taking such drastic steps to relieve the country's suffering.

Other discussion topics included rampant inflation and the strikes that had spread to most major cities. Gas prices alone were up over 50% in the past 2 months, and things people actually needed, especially food, had risen 20% to 30% in the past few weeks, a situation which was upsetting a lot of people.

Individuals of all types—teachers, construction workers, people who collected government assistance—banded together to demand a solution to their problems. These groups grew in number and started to break off into splinter groups, many trying to blame each other for their economic woes. These factions clashed, causing riots, most of which were small scale at this time, in a dozen cities.

As soon as John and Bill finished their sandwiches, they returned to work and finished up shortly after the setup crew left to go home for the night. They jumped into their truck and decided to stop at the nearest motel for the night; it was already past 10:00 p.m., and they still had to finish today's paperwork and talk to their wives who were hundreds of miles away.

After checking in to a small motel, John put his Bluetooth headset on and called his wife.

"Sorry that it's so late, honey. We just really wanted to finish up the first two sites today. If we didn't do that, it would be impossible for me to come home on Wednesday night, and I'd be stuck here until Thursday."

"I know. You're busy. I just wish you had called earlier. It is getting worse here at home. Did you know police had to shut down the interstates going downtown? People were protesting and blocking traffic all around downtown, and the protestors turned the interstates into a parking lot with people waiting for hours to get on or

off exits. The news said that some people just got out of their cars and walked away. It was so bad. And then people started setting those abandoned cars on fire."

"Well, it's a good thing you never go downtown anymore!" John joked, but he immediately knew he shouldn't have. His attempt at a joke just rubbed salt into the wound still left open after Margaret had lost her job.

"You know darn well I'd still be going down there every day if I was working. It's not my fault I lost my job. Everyone in my office lost their job. If you hadn't noticed, the unemployment rate is still over 15%. And for another thing—"

Interrupting her, John apologized repeatedly. He knew the job loss was still a sore spot and would be for some time to come. Margaret had poured her heart into her work and was a rising star in her company. She was also the family's main breadwinner before the entire company had been purchased by a foreign competitor and shut down with no warning. The loss of her job was a major blow to her self-esteem, and even though she was taking it very well on the outside, he knew she was hurting on the inside.

He apologized again and promised to call earlier tomorrow. He followed up with the standard "I love you's" before hanging up and heading to bed.

Chapter 3

Radio Broadcast: Today we are following up on the story of the President's address last night. The President has called for patience and solidarity and for Americans to come together to help weather and solve this crisis. He discussed his plan to ensure law and order by sending the National Guard units from across the country, at the state Governors' requests, to California and several states along the east coast to help maintain law and order amid the many protests that have turned into riots.

Over 30,000 members of the National Guard will make it to California tonight from various states and 15,000 more are heading to the Northeast and there will be almost that many more making it there by tomorrow night.

The President has also detailed a special tax rebate program that will be paid to everyone in the country. Private employees should be able to expect a rebate check within three weeks, and public employees and those who receive government benefits like social security or SNAP will be given an extra month's payment, which will show up sometime tomorrow.

Waking up at 5:30 a.m., John took a hurried shower and threw on his clothes, meeting Bill at the truck just 15 minutes later. With a two-hour drive to the next site, and because they knew it was going to be a long day, they wanted to get there early and decided to eat breakfast on the go. John got behind the wheel, giving Bill a break since there was no paperwork for John's review.

"So how was your night?" John asked.

"It was ok. Actually it was good. I got some great news last night,"

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"My wife picked up a couple of presents for me yesterday, and for next to nothing."

"She already ruined the surprise, didn't she?"

"I think she was just proud of the deal she got," Bill said, with a hint of pride in his voice. "She just happened to be at the pawn shop looking for coins when a guy came in trying to sell a pair of custom 1911's, a full size and with the matching compact. They offered him only \$500 for the pair and all accessories. They were trying to blow smoke about the law limiting the purchase to that much and they wouldn't separate the items to different tickets to get around the law. The guy stormed out, and my wife followed, and picked them both up for \$500, even though she offered to pay more. He was just so pissed that he wanted to sell them for that just to spite the store."

"Wow. That is one heck of a deal. I have always wanted a nice .45 like that, but I never did want to spend that much money on a show piece," John said, clearly jealous of the new toys Bill had waiting for him at home.

"Yeah, you and your cheap little plastic guns. You can keep them. With these new .45s, I can finally get rid of the little toy I keep in my truck and replace it with my current .45."

John said in a sarcastic tone, "Hey, careful there. I'd call your shiny hunks of steel toys! They are like spoiled little models—they look great, and you love showing them off to your friends. Maybe they are a lot of fun if you don't have to put up with all their whining and demands. But my plastic toy is tried and true."

"Yep," Bill interrupted him, laughing out loud. "I get it. I can ride my Harley while you fart around on your Honda. Hooray for gas mileage!"

They both laughed at the jokes and turned the conversation back to work.

A couple hours later, they pulled into the worksite and got to work. This site was also abandoned except for the one lucky guy who was assigned to meet the engineers.

This time, the man left behind had waited for only about an hour. John had known for a year or so that being left behind was a coveted position. Guys left to wait for the engineers would set up shop with a radio or portable television and treat the day almost like a day off, but now, the crews were getting a bonus for every milestone they completed on a site, and everyone wanted to work as fast as possible. The guys taking the day off were ribbed pretty hard and goaded into working more to make up for the lost time. As soon as the paperwork was handed off, the guy on site jumped into his company truck and drove off.

John and Bill worked together very well, performing their third inspection in just over 24 hours, knocking it out about an hour ahead of schedule. It didn't hurt that whoever was in charge of documenting all the details made sure everything was legible and provided extra information where he thought the inspection crew would want it. John made a note to provide this feedback up the chain—whoever did this deserved a pat on the back.

On their way to the next site, which was a few hours away, John decided to check in at home.

"Hi, sweetheart. How is everything going today?" John asked in his sweetest voice.

"It's ok, I guess. I can't help it though, I can't turn off the TV."

"Well, don't get too wrapped up in everything. There isn't really anything you can do at this point."

"I know ... it sounds as if things around here are at least a little better. The protests have quieted down, and the rioting is under control, but from what I'm seeing in the news, almost all of southern California is going crazy."

"Well, I'm glad things are getting better. I told you everything would work out!" John said compassionately, purposely glossing over her last piece of data.

"I know. I know. But this is only one day, tomorrow is another, and who knows how that is going to be. I mean could you have ever dreamed that there would be over a dozen riots yesterday?"

"No. No, I can't say I could. But anyway, how are the kids?" John asked, in an attempt to change the subject.

"Today? They are both acting like their daddy—stubborn and strong-headed!" Margaret said with a playful tone.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. But I don't think I'm the only one to blame."

"Well, until you get back, everything is your fault. Even the grocery prices." She paused for a second to laugh at her own joke. "Mom just called and said she is coming over to take me and the kids grocery shopping. She just did her weekly shopping, and the prices she paid were appalling. Now, she is making us go and buy a few weeks' worth of food. She says it's to stay ahead of the prices."

John replied, "Well, I'll have to agree with her this time. A blind squirrel and all ..."

"Haha ... Mr. Funnypants over here."

"Hey, I've got to take my openings when they come! But seriously, I think you should take both cars and stock up on as much as will fit. Actually, definitely fill up. Worst case, we will donate it to the church's food drive at Thanksgiving. That will save us a trip then."

"Ok, I think that sounds like a good idea. I better start making a list. I think I'll need a legal pad instead of a notecard for this one," Margaret said.

Knowing that she thought she was being funny, John feigned a few laughs before telling her how much he loved her. After that, he spent half-hour talking to his kids and telling them grand stories about the wild, wild west. They knew he was making up the stories and loved

them the more wild and outlandish he made them. He finished the last story, telling them he loved them and that he would be home soon.

When John and Bill were almost to the next site, they stopped at a small highway gas station to grab lunch. They usually passed by such places since they filled up from the tanks at the worksites per company policy. But this time, they had no idea where else they might get food in this sparsely populated area.

Going down the aisles of junk food, John didn't find anything appealing for lunch, and he had to settle for some not-so-fresh-looking fruit, a bag of beef jerky, and a bag of pretzels. He was trying to maintain the healthy eating habits that he'd developed over the past year while preparing for the half marathon he'd completed a few weeks ago.

John looked at his watch. He figured that they would make it to the worksite just as the crew there would be about ready for lunch, so he decided to buy a bunch of snacks for the guys. He and Bill ended up spending over \$200 on chips, jerky, drinks, and other snack food, but because of the previously high convenience pricing and the recent rapid increases from inflation, the snacks filled only five plastic shopping bags.

When they arrived at the site a few minutes later, they put out the spread of goodies and marveled at the speed with which the food disappeared. Even though the company paid all of its employees well—very well, in fact, especially many of the “roughnecks” who easily made twice what they would working for a different company—the men were happy to save a little money on lunch. Everyone said thanks and was grateful, and by the way they acted, an outsider might have figured they hadn't eaten in days. After John and Bill finished their lunch, they set to work, inspecting and recording details. They sped through the work and were able to pack up and head out shortly before sunset.

They stopped for dinner at a greasy spoon and checked into another roadside motel for the night. The call to Margaret that night revolved mostly around shopping—how much things cost and how much she'd spent. After making one trip with her mother and being shocked at spending over \$1000, Margaret had dug up the food pantry wish list and sent her mother back to the store, spending over \$1000 again on the usually cheap staples on the list.

Even though the family now had more food stacked up than she knew what to do with, she felt more stressed by the current situation than the news of protests and riots had stressed her the day before. She fretted that if they, an upper-middle class family, had to spend this much for food, how could people making less or feeding a larger family to get through this. The reality of what caused the riots hit home.

John's story for the kids that night described the scene from lunch, where mud and slime-covered monsters—a description not too far from the truth for some of the men—climbed up out of the ground and devoured their meals before slinking back to the depths. The kids ate it up and laughed and giggled the whole time.

“When will you be home, Daddy?” Jane asked.

“Soon, sweetheart, very soon. Daddy loves you. Good night,” he replied.

Chapter 4

TV Broadcast: On your screen, are some of the video feeds that are trickling in showing the mass confusion in response to the special rebate payments that went out as part of the President's package outlined yesterday. An error gave peoples' accounts ten times the amount they should have received, effectively giving recipients almost a year's worth of pay or benefits instead of a single month's worth. Many are blaming this accounting error for the renewed protests and mayhem that has broken out across the country.

Along with the confusion from the mistake in the much-needed benefits, renewed actions of violence and looting are spreading throughout LA. In reaction to the increased presence of the National Guard attempting to subdue aggression in many areas previously hit, coordinated flash mobs are now descending into affluent shopping districts, destroying some of the most upscale shopping centers in the world.

To top off the day, the Northeast and Canada have experienced rolling brown-outs attributed to record-setting high temperatures.

Waking up at 5:30 a.m. again, John performed his ritual of showering and getting ready in a hurry. As he repacked everything nicely and neatly in anticipation of his flight later that day, he laughed, noting the exercise clothes and shoes he always packed. *Carrying around a lot of dead weight*, he thought and wondered what else was stashed in the suitcase that he would never use on his trips.

John and Bill grabbed breakfast at the greasy spoon and ordered to-go meals for lunch to shorten their down time. They arrived at the site early and went to work. Before long, they realized it was good that they had gotten there early: the paperwork was incomplete and illegible, and the crew was frantically working to complete the last steps needed to pass the inspection. John and Bill spent almost the entire morning rewriting and filling in the blanks on the documents.

By lunchtime, it was evident that this site wasn't going to pass inspection that day. The engineers met with the foreman and laid out a plan to get everything inspection-ready by the next morning.

A call to the company's travel agent and John's flight was rebooked for the same time the next day. Those were the easy problems to solve. Next he had to resolve the most important and pressing issue at hand, how he was going to break the news to his wife.

"Hi, my love! How are you today?"

"I'm just counting the minutes until you get home tonight. The kids and I are very excited. Plus, I've got a special present for you!" Margaret said cheerily.

After a short pause and no response from John, she continued, "And you are calling to tell me that you aren't coming home today, aren't you?"

"Well, no, I'm sorry. We won't be able to finish up today. But we will have more than enough time to get everything ready tomorrow."

She replied in a very sad tone, "You promised ... I can't stand this. I really wish you were here!"

"I know, I'm sorry, I'll make it up to you. Somehow."

Working through the rest of the afternoon and evening, the site was almost completed by the time they headed out for the night.

Waking early as normal, John got ready, and he and Bill headed to the site to help with the work. Working alongside the crew, they installed piping and wiring for

the pumping equipment. By the time lunch rolled around, they were able to begin working through the sign-off process. Making good time, they spent three hours finishing all the validations, ensuring the site was ready for the next steps of breaking ground.

After packing up everything, Bill drove John to the airport and dropped him off at the gate. Going to the counter, John checked his backpack full of tools and headed to the security line. Lines were short here at the tiny Helena airport, and he zoomed right through. He thought the TSA agents seemed different than they did back in Ohio: friendlier, less authoritarian, or maybe just more accommodating instead of combative.

After going through the metal detector, he walked to his gate and waited for his flight that was due to take off in two hours.

Watching the news running on the screens throughout the airport, he could barely believe what he was seeing and began to regret not being at home. Stores across the country were madhouses as people blew a year's worth of government subsidies in a single day. Even though it was announced that the bonuses were going to be clawed back, people tried to spend them before that happened.

The TV showed people stuffing their carts full of junk food, steaks, and anything else that hit their fancy. News stations also showed people offering to trade their bounty for cash, cigarettes, booze, or other items that they couldn't buy with the standard allotment. Even knowing that TV cameras were on them, people boldly hawked their benefits—possibly even more boldly—as they wanted to get their fifteen minutes of fame by showing how cavalier they could be while “getting theirs.”

Looking to the flight status board, John noticed that his flight was now delayed by 45 minutes.

The delay is a good thing for everyone else because I'm the only person around this gate area waiting for a flight, he thought. Even with the scheduled flight over

an hour away, several other people would usually be waiting nearby.

Returning to the TV, he saw the continuing coverage now showing the shelves, almost completely bare, inside the store. The news cut through different feeds to many areas across the country showing the same outcome, whether it was downtown Chicago or backwoods Kentucky. Getting antsy, he decided to call home and see how things were going.

"Hello, my love, how are you?"

"We are ok. We just miss you."

"Well, the good news is that I'll be home soon! I can't wait!"

"Neither can we. We've been hanging out here all day playing games, reading books, and telling stories about what we are going to do with Daddy when he is home. But don't worry, I kept my plans to myself. The kids don't need to hear what I have in store for you!"

"Well I'll be home in just a few hours. I'm sorry it's been ...," John paused for a second as he noticed the newly updated flight board; his flight was now delayed two hours.

"John? You there?"

"Sorry, the board just updated, I'm delayed two hours now ..."

"You're joking, right?"

A long pause took over the conversation as the reality of the situation set in. In their experience, almost every time his flights had two or more delays like this, the flight ended up being cancelled, usually due to "mechanical" problems.

Margaret picked back up, "Are there any other flights out? Any other options?"

"No, there are only two other flights out for the rest of the night, one to California and the other to Texas. And that one isn't until 10:30 p.m. I'm sure I can't make it home tonight after that flight ..."

Silence took over the conversation before John continued, "I'll give you a call back as soon as I know more. I love you. Tell the kids I miss them and kiss them for me."

"I love you, too. I hope we have some good luck today. I'll talk to you later. Love you."

John then called Bill, telling him the situation and letting him know he might be hanging around town. Bill was still in the city doing some shopping and was actually planning on staying the night before heading to pick up his own truck in the morning.

Twenty minutes later the flight was cancelled. A few phone calls to the travel department, and he was booked on the first flight out in the morning.

Bill drove up, and John jumped into the cab, tossing his backpack and roller-board into the back seat. Seeing that the senior engineer was distressed at the turn of events, Bill turned the conversation straight toward dinner, and how he knew of one of the best steak houses in the country, located only a few minutes from where he was staying. On the way to dinner, they stopped at the motel and got a room for John, and he dropped off his luggage.

Dinner was great. They each ordered the house special: a 44-ounce porterhouse steak with corn hash, au gratin potatoes, and creamed carrots. They finished early and headed back to the motel to try and get a good night's sleep.

After another call to the Mrs., with an extended chat with the kids, John turned in. His new flight was supposed to take off at 6:00 a.m.

Chapter 5

"What the heck was that?" John nearly shouted as he bolted upright from sleep.

He looked around the room and didn't see anything out of the ordinary. He stood up, turned on the light, and looked around. Nothing.

He walked to the door, and he heard a car alarm going off outside. He put on his pants over his boxers and stepped outside to look around. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

Just as he was about to turn around and head back inside, another patron a few doors down stepped outside, asking, "What the heck are you doing out here? You scared the crap out of me!"

"I don't know, I just heard something and came out to see what it was," John replied.

A few other patrons stepped outside, trying to find the cause of the disturbance. They all stood around chatting for a few minutes and looking around, but did not find the cause.

The consensus of the group was that the noise must have been a car crash, probably by a drunk person who backed up and drove off.

It was just after 2:00 a.m., and at this time of the night, this explanation was good enough, and John went back to bed.

The earth started trembling, then violently shaking, and within twenty seconds tens of millions of people were roused from sleep, and entire cities, with millions of inhabitants, were left utterly devastated.

In St. Louis and Memphis, almost all buildings were damaged so badly that they would have to be condemned. In other nearby cities, some high rises were at best cracked in their foundations, while others lost large

chunks of concrete and glass. A few close to the epicenter collapsed, taking out other nearby structures in their demise.

Almost as soon as the vibrations stopped, fires broke out all across the region. Explosions from natural gas spewing forth from ruptured lines compounded the fires.

The power grid that covered the entire central region of the United States went out as dozens of conventional and nuclear power plants went off line and transmission lines fell to the ground like dominos.

Bridges and dams crossing rivers and lakes, especially the mighty Mississippi River, cracked and fractured, causing chunks to fall into the water below and allowing previously held back water to flood into farmland and cities lining the waterways. Hundreds of barges sank as waves caused by the quake or the deluge from broken dams flooded the barges with water.

Seconds after the shaking stopped, people, who could, fled their homes and apartments to the safety of the outdoors. Those trapped in ruins desperately tried to escape. Others tried to free trapped loved ones. The only sounds louder than the rampant fires were the cries of children seeking their missing parents and the shouts of parents trying to find their children.

Chapter 6

Radio Broadcast: The latest details are still flooding in from all across the country. Too many to share, but here are some of the more dire items we've been notified about from the effects of the 8.2 magnitude earthquake that struck along the New Madrid fault line last night. The entire city of Memphis, Tennessee, with about 800,000 residents, is in complete ruin after the effects. Few, if any, structures larger than two stories remain in the entire city, according to reports. St. Louis is also reeling from major damage, and we have reports of catastrophic flooding in the city of Chicago.

The President will address the nation regarding this in the early morning. No time is currently scheduled, as the President and his entire administration are putting every effort into mitigating this devastating catastrophe.

Rolling out of bed at 4:00 a.m., John grabbed his luggage and tossed it in the truck. A few seconds later, Bill came over and got in the driver's seat. John hated that Bill had to get up this early to drop him off at the airport, but he needed the ride.

They arrived at the airport and instantly recognized that something wasn't right. The small terminal was much darker than it normally was at this time. The majority of the lights were off, and no one was in sight except for the two uniformed police officers leaning against their car in the middle of the lane. The police waved them over as they approached.

"Guys, all flights are canceled because of the earthquake," the first officer said.

"Wait, what?" John replied.

"There was an earthquake last night. Turn on the radio. The whole Midwest is messed up ... bad. Sorry guys, but we don't know if or when they will start flights back up," the officer said as he started walking slowly back to his position next to the car, signaling the conversation was over.

Dumbfounded, Bill drove on, not knowing where to go next as John pulled out his cell phone and began dialing home. He got an "all circuits are busy" message. He hung up and tried again, same message. Again, same result.

"What's wrong?" Bill asked.

"I can't get through. All the lines are busy," John replied.

"Alright. Well, how about we grab something to eat and figure out our next steps," Bill said as he turned the car down the road to a favorite diner of his.

On the way there, they turned on the radio and tuned to a news station, which was actually the local hip-hop station broadcasting the same information that every station was currently sharing: a massive earthquake had struck the Midwest. The death toll was already in the tens of thousands, an initial estimate based on a few of the affected areas, and the number was expected to increase exponentially over the coming days as more details became available.

Pulling into the diner at 4:30 a.m., they noticed it was already packed. They took a corner booth to get away from the patrons discussing what they'd heard so far as well as from those glued to the TVs at each end of the bar. As they sat down, John tried the cell phone again and got the same response.

Not wanting to give up on air travel yet, John found a pay phone that was connected by a landline. His first call was to his wife, but he received the same all-circuits-busy message. Next, he called the travel department and got through. They assured John that everything was okay and that flights were already being resumed. They found him a flight leaving later that day that would take him to

Detroit where he could fly to Columbus the following day or rent a car and drive home.

It's the best I'm going to get for now, so I need to take it.

John and Bill sat in the diner taking in the news while Bill waited with John for the airport to open and start flights again. After watching the news for hours and putting down lunch, they were ready to leave for the airport. They returned the bill to the waitress, who laughed a little bit when she opened it up.

"Hon, didn't I tell you cash only, today? Our machine is down, and we can't run plastic right now."

"Oh, sorry, didn't know that. Let me take care of that," Bill said, as he pulled out his wallet and handed her a pair of twenties.

John and Bill didn't feel it, but on the way to the airport, a large aftershock earthquake—even stronger than the first—struck, further devastating the already affected areas. The radio reported the bad news within minutes.

When the aftershock struck, the roadways had been clogged with millions of refugees fleeing by car and foot, trying desperately to make it out of the impact zone. The debris and rubble from the first quake had compounded their problems, leaving the majority of people moving forward at a crawl. The renewed shaking threw people to their feet and tossed cars from roadways. Thousands more were trapped and killed as roadways and bridges fell apart above and below them.

By the time the shaking stopped, almost 200 of the 221 bridges crossing the Mississippi were total losses. Any oil and gas lines that survived the first quake were sheared, leaking their contents into the wild and severing the entire eastern half of the country from getting much-needed fuel. Waste-water treatment centers leaked raw sewage into flooded reservoirs and water ways,

contaminating the drinking water for millions of people. The iconic St. Louis arch that had remained standing after the initial quake toppled over into the now flooded park below it.

At the last functional gas station for hundreds of miles, hundreds of people were milling around when the aftershock ruptured the tanks which caught fire and exploded. Hundreds were killed; hundreds more were horribly burnt.

Many of the looters robbing refugees and looting broken buildings became casualties when already damaged buildings came down around them. Thousands of relief workers in place or in route now required assistance to help save themselves instead of providing aid to those in the affected zone.

Luckily, the death toll from this quake, even though it was stronger and more violent than the first, was much lower. That's because the majority of the population was outside fleeing. The infrastructure and buildings weren't as lucky; buildings from Wisconsin to Louisiana were damaged.

Pulling into the airport again, John got out of the truck and headed in for his flight. Bill insisted on waiting until he actually saw John's plane take off. After hearing the same song and dance of delay and then cancellation, John was very happy at Bill's insistence.

It was dinner-time and not knowing anything else or anywhere else to go, John and Bill headed back to the greasy spoon for the third meal of the day. As they walked in, Bill saw John's brow furrowing at the new bright, red sign on the door: CASH ONLY. No credit card was a slight problem right now, but every hiccup that happened now would become a bigger problem further down the line.

The local news came on. It showed local gas stations and grocery stores that had been smashed and looted,

some by those fleeing the quake zone and some by those who either couldn't afford food because of the rapid inflation or who just wanted to get their share of free stuff. The news also described travel restrictions that were being put in place and warned that officials were on the verge of enacting marshal law.

With little hard information to go on, John and Bill started devising a plan to get John home. The airport was a no go. All flights had been cancelled. The landline still worked at the diner, but John and Bill could only reach people on the same branch of phone lines, which included phones in about a ten-mile radius. With no other options they could think of, John was going to have to drive back.

Bill still needed to pick up his truck from the worksite where he had switched it for the company truck. That site was about a six-hour drive from where they were. Luckily, it was in the right direction for John. They decided that instead of leaving the truck there, John would drive it home and worry about getting it back to the proper location at a later date. They figured that worst-case scenario; John could pay to have it shipped back west. That would probably cost less than a plane ticket anyway.

Their main concerns were about gas and clear, passable roadway. Gas shortages were happening across the country, so John wasn't sure he could get enough gas to make the trip without waiting in long lines or dealing with the odd/even rationing schemes that the government had created. These schemes, which had been put in place in different locations, limited the ability to buy gasoline based on the last number of the car's license plate. Now that mass devastation had occurred throughout the heartland, no one knew how hard it would be to find available gasoline.

The second concern hinged on how John would get across the Mississippi River. From what they heard on the news, the worst destruction ran right along the river.

The news reported downed bridges, new lakes, and even some instances of the river flowing backwards.

They grabbed the atlas from the truck and continued planning John's route home as they ate breakfast. From their current location in Helena, they were going to drive back to the worksite in northeast Wyoming to drop Bill off, gas up both trucks, and pack John's truck with every gas can they could find. From there, John would need to hop on I-90, drive east, cross the Mississippi on I-90, turn south on I-39 until he could get on I-74, and then get on I-70 and drive all the way back to Columbus.

Easy enough. No problem. John choked on the water he was drinking, nearly spitting it out, in response to the sarcasm he had running through his head.

By this time, the sun was starting to set, and both men agreed that driving at night in this situation wasn't the best plan. Getting a room at the motel was hard, but the clerk recognized them as patrons from the previous two nights, and snuck them to the front of the line. Dozens of people had lined up, looking for a place to stay, having just fled their homes because of the earthquake.

Because of the demand for rooms, the clerk gave them one room, but charged them the price they had paid for two the night before. John didn't mind since the clerk pulled out an old carbon copy machine and let them use their credit cards, preserving their precious cash.

John tossed and turned all night and didn't feel as if he got any sleep. He didn't know how his family was doing or what was going on.

They need me now, and I'm way out here where I'm of no help. I need to make it home, and fast.

They got up at 5:00 a.m. and jumped straight into the truck to begin the journey. Before leaving town, they stopped at several banks, trying the ATMs at each one. On the third try, they were finally able to get cash out. John withdrew the maximum amount he could on his

debit card and credit cards, giving him \$900 in cash in addition to the \$74 he already had in his wallet.

Bill pulled the maximum amount out as well, but he only had a debit card, which got him \$300 in addition to the \$150 and change he already had. *I always knew I was supposed to carry cash in case of an emergency, but that's a lesson I'm learning a little too hard right now.*

They then began the long trip through the great wide-open "Big Sky Country." As they drove down state highways, they passed cars and trucks stopped along the road that had run out of gas, most of them packed full of belongings. Sometimes the occupants were seen hanging out nearby, sometimes they would try to flag down the truck, and sometimes the cars looked completely abandoned.

A little over an hour later, they were running low on gas. Pulling into the first gas station, they noticed that the prices weren't listed, just as they weren't at all the other stations they had passed along the way. A man in blue coveralls ran up and told them, "Cash only, \$15 a gallon, limit of ten gallons a person." They took a second, looking at each other, trying to gather themselves. Ten gallons would get them about half the way to the site where Bill's truck was.

Bill wanted to kick himself for not filling up earlier, but company policy was to fill up from a company tank whenever possible, so he had been trying to wait.

"Alright, I'll take 10 gallons," John said and then he smiled really big and cheesy, "and he'll take 10 gallons too."

"Sorry, no can do. 10 gallons per car," the attendant said, rolling his eyes. This obviously wasn't the first time he heard that today.

"Well, I'll tell you what. I need at least 20 gallons, and I've got \$340. Why don't we make a deal?" John said, giving a wink with a big cheesy smile.

This got the attendant's attention, and he looked around real quick and said, "Ok, you got cans in the

back? If I get caught selling more to you, I'll get my butt chewed. So you hop out and head over behind that truck, and I'll set it up. Just wait for me to give you the thumbs up."

Carefully, John took \$340 from his wallet, making sure that the attendant couldn't see that he had several times that much—he didn't want to get bid up in price and spend more of his precious cash than he had to. Luckily, most people didn't have enough cash to buy the 10-gallon limit, and the chance to make a few extra bucks was all it took to get the attendant to play along.

Bill hopped out and grabbed the two gas cans from the back. They had a few gallons of gas in each, so he put that in the tank and then headed over to the pump the attendant had indicated.

The attendant called over the radio and told them to put ten gallons on the pump where John had pulled up. Then, the attendant slowly walked to where Bill was standing, waited a couple of seconds, and told Bill to put 10 gallons on that pump.

A stern reply could be heard coming over the radio, "You already sold them their 10 gallons!"

The attendant started cobbling together a story about how it's for the guy who walked up with the gas cans and told the lady inside to look out the window and see. A few other quips back and forth before the gas was authorized and Bill started pumping.

Before walking away, the attendant told Bill to walk across the parking lot and get in the truck when he's out of the manager's sight. Bill nodded and as soon as he finished filling his 10 gallons, he started hoofing it across the parking lot.

John, not clued in to what happened, spent a few minutes waiting for Bill before he saw him about 150 yards away, sitting on a sidewalk. After jumping back into the truck, John drove over and picked up Bill. Since the truck was about 2/3 full, he decided to wait until later to put in the remaining 10 gallons to avoid overfilling.

Back on the road, they kept driving and stopped only once to refill the tank.

Around noon, they arrived at the worksite. There wasn't a soul to be seen, and the site eerily reminded John of what a real western ghost town would be like, with everything intact but completely abandoned.

They filled up the truck, the gas cans, and Bill's truck from the bulk tank at the worksite. Then, they spent about fifteen minutes scrounging up gas cans and anything else they could use.

They found three more five-gallon cans and filled them up. Next, Bill put two in the company truck John was going to drive and the other in the back of his truck. He apologized, telling John that even though he had a bulk tank back at his farm with several hundred gallons, he might not have enough to make it all the way there, even with a full tank and the extra five gallons.

As they were getting ready to part ways, Bill went to his truck and came back with a small black canvas bag.

"Hey buddy. How about you take this piece of junk back with you? I can't stand looking at it anymore," Bill said, handing him the bag.

Looking inside, John saw a black handgun, several extra magazines, and a couple boxes of ammo along with other standard range gear, like earplugs and safety glasses.

"Bill, I can't accept this ..."

Bill interrupted by holding up his hand, "I've got my sweet new pieces at home, and I'll be home in a few hours. Besides, it would be illegal for me to sell this to you, so I'm just loaning it to you for a few weeks until you come back out here. "

John started to reply, but Bill cut him off, "Boss man, just take it. Please? It will make *me* feel a lot better knowing you've got it with you on your trip home. We've been dodging it all day, but we both know it is probably

going to be a lot harder than just a 20-hour drive, even if nothing else goes wrong."

John looked down at his feet, "I know. I just can't believe this is happening ..."

"But it is, so take this," Bill said as he handed him the canvas bag, "and this for the gas you paid for earlier. I would have had to do that anyway, and I'll go ahead and put in an expense reimbursement form for it," Bill said, as he handed John the \$300 he had withdrawn earlier.

John thanked him and promised to bring back the gun. He wasn't going to get rid of it that easily. The men shook hands and drove in opposite directions.

Chapter 7

Radio Broadcast: For those who are just tuning in, we have been covering the unfolding of events. FEMA has been activated, and all states' National Guard and army reserves have orders to call up all available personnel. Unfortunately, the ability to contact reserve members has been difficult due to power outages across the country. The international community is making preparations for thousands of relief workers from around the world to help in the heartland following the devastation caused by the earthquake.

Death toll estimates are already over 100,000. And almost 20 million people have been displaced from their homes as a result of the structural damage, flooding, and security factors, such as ruptured gas and sewage lines.

Stay tuned for all the latest updates and for the live broadcast of the President's address later this evening.

John was on the road cruising down the highway at a steady 75 mph; there were hardly any cars in sight, especially going his direction. He could easily speed up, but he didn't want to use more gas by going faster. He periodically tried calling home, but every time he tried, he got the same message that all circuits were busy.

He turned the radio off since he was not getting anything worthwhile from the news—just more scary details from the major cities that were affected. The information wasn't something he thought would be helpful since the news wasn't giving any specific information regarding which roads were open or closed,

or anything else that pertained to his travel. Luckily, he hadn't heard any mention of his destination, Columbus, Ohio. That, at least, made him happy, and he hoped that there wasn't too much damage since the city was about 400 to 500 miles from the quake's center.

A few hours into the drive, John came to Chamberlain where he had to cross the Missouri River, and everything looked fine from what he could see. He did notice several crews that appeared to be surveying and inspecting the large bridge that I-90 took over the river, but the road was open.

Even though he didn't face any problems here, a pit started welling up in his stomach at the thought of getting across the Mississippi. He knew this would be his biggest obstacle as he had heard news reports that most bridges were damaged, many completely closed and impassible, if not outright collapsed. Although he planned on taking the bridge on I-90, which was around 500 miles north of the epicenter, he was still very worried.

The news stories had described how the river was flowing north from some point along the southern half of Illinois. Many of these bridges were designed and built to manage the flow of the river, but were reinforced in one direction only—the natural direction of the river. Understanding this design flaw, the reversed flow of the river was washing away what remained of many bridges crossing the mighty river, along with more of John's hope.

Seeing that the gas gauge was getting below a quarter of a tank, John started looking for somewhere to fill up. Of the first three exits he tried, two didn't have gas stations that he could find and the third was closed with cones and barricades blocking the way.

On the fourth try, John found an open station, but the attendant wouldn't sell him any gas. The Governor had ordered rationing by your license plate number, and according to the gas station attendant, today wasn't

John's day, but John was more than welcome to spend the night in the lot and buy gas tomorrow. It was already a little after 5:00 p.m. and John didn't have time to waste. So, instead of waiting until tomorrow to buy gas at \$30 a gallon, he emptied two of the gas cans into the tank and drove on.

He continued to try exits. But now, he was more selective and took only those where he saw definite signs of a gas station. He reasoned that every extra bit of gas he burned looking for gas was that much less he could use toward getting home. Finding two more stations, he got the same reply—no gas until tomorrow. Luckily, the attendants told him this before he waited in the 50-to-60 car-long line. He tried bribing the employees, but this time, his trick of offering cash didn't work. Evidently, the attendants had been warned about people running random stings to catch anyone who was breaking the law.

About 7:00 p.m., John came to the outskirts of Sioux Falls, which he thought might be a good place to spend the night and get some food. Sioux Falls was one of the larger cities around for at least a few hours drive. Although the thought of sleeping in a hotel instead of being home made his stomach turn, he knew he was going to be stuck sleeping somewhere since he was low on gas and needed to wait until tomorrow to buy enough gas to keep going.

Before getting to the first exit, he saw a construction sign blinking a message: "All Local Exits CLOSED" and then it flashed "All Exits to I-229 CLOSED." Sure enough, as he passed the first exit, he saw a line of orange and white barrels blocking the path, as well as what looked like chains running along the ground in front of and behind the barrels. He figured the chains must be tire puncture devices to help dissuade anyone from driving through the barrels, even though the exit looked deserted and anyone could have easily moved everything from the path. The next few exits looked the

same, but he did notice that the westbound lanes were manned by at least one, and sometimes, two police cars.

Since he obviously wasn't wanted by the police, he decided to motor on. He would pick a lonely field somewhere to get a few hours of sleep while waiting until he was allowed to buy the needed gas. He was a few miles from the South Dakota and Minnesota state line, and decided to just play it safe and stay in the state he knew he could get gas in the next day. For all he knew, Minnesota was rationing gas, too, and their days might be reversed from South Dakota.

Throughout the day, he had seen more and more cars that had run out of gas along the road. They all seemed to be fleeing the area where he was heading. Not wanting to bother—or be bothered by—anyone, he decided to hide. A few miles east of Sioux Falls, he pulled off on an exit for a northbound road and started looking for a quiet place to park for the night. The population density of the area was about 10 people per square mile, making it in the bottom five states population-wise, so finding a spot was pretty easy, even with the addition of the new inhabitants who were fleeing the ravaged areas.

By now, it was little after 8:00 p.m. and John realized that he hadn't eaten anything since morning. He looked around the truck and was surprised to find a bagful of food, left from the gas station spread he shared with the work crew a few days earlier. A few sports drinks, several bags of different chips, and a couple other odds and ends were packed into the plastic shopping bag. Normally, he wouldn't touch most of this stuff, but after the day he'd had, he was giddy at the idea of wolfing down the over-processed starches and grease. He figured he had enough food to last him another meal or two, allowing him to spend more on gas if needed.

Not knowing what time gas stations would open John set his alarm for 3:30 a.m., and planned to get to a station by 4:00 a.m. at the latest. He thought that if he didn't have any delays getting his gas or on his drive to

the station, he could make it across Minnesota in time to have a victory breakfast on the eastern shore of the Mississippi.

Rolling down the windows to let a breeze through, John eventually dozed off into a light sleep.

Chapter 8

Radio Broadcast: This just in. In addition to the devastation from the earthquake putting the heartland into chaos and affecting supplies of electricity, food, and materials to the Northeast, there is now renewed and more frequent unrest in the southwest where power is intermittent in many areas. The National Guardsmen has pulled out of those areas to help with the earthquake relief efforts. Reports estimate that as much as 90% of the country is currently out of power or under brown-out conditions. We hope that even those without power are still able to hear us and the emergency broadcasts being sent out by the government.

John slowed as he approached the stop sign and looked both ways. Not seeing anyone coming from either direction, he slowly started into the intersection. In the small parking lot across from him, he noticed two men getting out of a beat-up old truck—why didn't notice them there before? Come to think of it, he didn't even notice the parking lot or building when he came to the stop sign.

Suddenly one of the men raised a gun in John's direction. Everything slowed. He could see the muzzle flash, and what seemed like a lifetime later, John watched as the windshield became an intricate pattern of spider-webbed glass. He swore he could actually see the bullet as it came toward his face. His head jerked back violently, and everything flashed bright white.

Jumping awake, John looked around—darkness—and wiped cold sweat from his forehead, feeling for a wound. Trying to calm down, he scanned his surroundings again. The windshield was fine. *A dream.*

Hitting the button to turn the light on, he glanced at his watch, 2:00 a.m. He had been asleep for several hours and decided that was enough. He started the engine and slowly drove back to the road. A few minutes later, he pulled into a gas station.

The light inside the store was on, but none of the lights in the lot were on, and John couldn't see anyone or any other cars in the lot. He pulled up close to the door and turned off the engine, figuring he would wait until someone showed up—at least, he hoped someone would show up.

Within a few minutes, John saw someone moving inside. It looked as if the person was trying to not be noticed as they moved closer toward the windows. John sat up and leaned forward and raised his hand to wave, trying to convey friendliness. Taking the hint, a small woman with gray hair stood up inside. She was holding what looked like a shotgun. As he opened the door to get out of the truck, John heard the unmistakable sound of a pump action shotgun being racked right behind him.

"Slow and easy," said a voice from near the back of the truck's bed.

"All right. No problem. Take it easy," John replied as he froze in motion.

"Go ahead, step out, and tell me what you want. Or were you just looking to bust in and take what you want?" The voice said.

"Just gas. I'm here to get some gas and maybe food." John replied as he slowly stepped out, keeping his hands on the door and easily visible to the person behind him.

The man standing behind him came up and lightly probed John's waist with the barrel of the gun, evidently trying to find any weapons.

"You have cash? Card machines aren't working, and we wouldn't use it anyway if it did," the man said after the probing.

"Yeah, I have cash. Are we ok now?" John said, turning around to see his assailant, a man who looked to be in pretty good shape and probably in his mid-30s.

"Yeah. Just stay out where we can see you. There won't be any gas for another hour. We have to run the generator for the pump. If you want anything from inside, we can go on in. Just keep your hands out of your pockets."

The two men walked to the door as the lady inside held the door open. With her shotgun in a low ready position, holding it diagonally in both hands pointed at the ground. The man kept an ever-watchful eye on John, and held his shotgun tight across his chest. He introduced himself as Matt and said he was the son of the owners. He introduced his mother, the lady already in the store, and said his father would arrive shortly to open the pumps.

The food prices were all hand-written on post-it notes throughout the store. Figuring he should grab as much food as he could afford while still leaving himself enough cash to fill up on gas, he walked down the aisle of packaged food. There he saw several post-its stating that everything on the shelves was "listed price x 4," and, of course, underneath that was the obligatory "cash only" post-it. He balked at those prices. Even though he had over a thousand dollars cash in his pocket he knew he had to save as much as possible for gas.

Matt noticed John's reaction and pointed out that if John wanted cheap food, he should look in the refrigerated section, as prices were still as marked. He told John they wanted to get rid of the cold food quickly so they could stop wasting gas running the cooling unit. He led John to the back of the store and showed him the racks of food, still cool but obviously warmer than normal. John picked out a few packaged sandwiches that, under other conditions, he would have joked about running to the toilet after eating.

Grabbing a couple of bottles of water—the cheapest he could find—he went to pay. He figured he had enough food and water to get him through two days of driving, more than twice the time required under normal circumstances. He figured he had two large meals, or three small meals, a day, and he should be able to find places to refill the water bottles if need be. The total came to \$44. Just a few weeks ago, he would have been able to pick up a couple steaks and some beer for that much.

John went outside and lowered the gate on the truck bed and sat there opening up one of the sandwiches. Matt came out asked John a few questions about who he was and where he was headed. More importantly, he asked John how in the world he thought he was going to get there.

Matt then provided information that began to cast a dark shadow over John's plan. Matt explained that they expected to run out of gas in the tanks today and that they were informed yesterday, before the power went out, that there was a zero chance of resupply in the foreseeable future.

He described how they had lost power yesterday morning, and according to the local radio broadcasts, the shutdown was planned to relieve stress on the grid. Power companies were turning off rural areas to keep the cities going.

He described in detail what he had heard about the quake zone. And he mentioned how he thought John's plan for getting home to family was an honorable ambition, but it was one that he thought was near suicide at this point. He described what he had seen on TV before the broadcasts had gone to a recorded loop from the emergency alert system. They showed entire cities, of hundreds of thousands or even millions of people devastated, of buildings on fire, and of people fleeing in droves. The cities had no electrical power. They showed the response that was being mounted in a few select

locations. Even then, the response was completely overwhelmed. He recounted footage showing a couple of dozen National Guardsmen and a few FEMA agents among tens of thousands of refugees, all fighting for help.

By this time, Matt's father had shown up in a small import car that looked as if it belonged in a junkyard instead of on the road. A few other cars and trucks started to trickle in, all waiting for gas. Matt let John go first since he was there first, and they were running only one pump on the generator.

The price was a "low \$25 a gallon" since it was probably the last gas available for miles around, and Matt knew places back in town were charging \$40 to \$50 a gallon. He reasoned that his parents needed enough money to cover mortgage and taxes for the next year, so they did some calculations and priced the gas to hit that number. They just wanted to sell the entire inventory as fast as they could, and close down the shop until the resupply runs were back.

John put a hair over 20 gallons in the tank, and then topped off the four gas tanks for a total, rounded down to 31 gallons. This gave John 46 gallons of gas, only enough to get him a little over 2/3 the way home and left him with a little over \$200 in cash. From what he'd heard, getting more gas before he reached his destination might be impossible. He brainstormed ideas, but kept coming back to one: sell or trade everything in the truck, bolted down or not. There were several lockers full of tools and other equipment. He could even sell the lockers themselves.

Selling and trading went on until about noon, and some deals were very one-sided, but John acquired another pair of five-gallon gas cans full of gas, a CB radio, and some more food and drink to tide him over. To get these items, he sold or traded everything in the truck bed. The tools alone had cost close to \$10,000 new. He figured that by getting rid of as much as he could, he would help increase his gas mileage, too.

With the extra gas, he could make it to Ohio if he didn't hit any big snags. But he would still need to go another 100 miles to 150 miles.

After going through the zone, when I make it that far, 150 miles will be like a cake-walk.

Digging into another one of the sandwiches for lunch, he pulled the truck onto the highway and started driving east.

Chapter 9

Radio Broadcast: This report comes straight from the local emergency management agent, who is asking people to stay in their homes if they are habitable, even if utilities are out. There are mass exoduses happening in many major population centers, causing logistics problems that cannot be handled. FEMA is coordinating transportation, housing, and food for as many people as possible, but the supplies are limited and it may take several days to reach all affected areas.

The President is requesting additional help from former members of all branches of the military. Because of desertion and lack of response the number of members of the military forces available to respond to the crisis is dangerously low.

Driving I-90 at a slower pace this time, keeping the speedometer at 55 mph to try to conserve gas, John noticed more and more cars coming the other way, and more and more stopped along the road. He figured that the number probably wasn't even as many cars as normally seen on this stretch, but the traffic was more than he had seen for the past day or so.

The look of the cars had changed dramatically, too. Instead of sedans and pickups—the latter being very popular around here—he saw more mobile homes and trucks with campers or tow-behind trailers. All the cars and trucks were packed to the gills, and many of them showed rifles and shotguns, either held in passengers' hands or propped up in the seat next to the driver. He saw only one other vehicle going west, a pickup that passed him like he was sitting still, only to pull off the next exit.

After a few hours of driving with no incidents, other than the new stream of counter traffic and the occasional blocked exit, John rolled up to the clover leaf crossing of I-90 and I-35. Before getting to the overpass, John saw barrels as well as signs flashing "Road closed - Take ramp for detour." This was the first quake damage John had encountered so far on his journey home.

Going down the long exit ramp, he followed the few detour signs that lead him to I-35 and then pointed him back to I-35, forcing him to drive in the wrong direction. He stopped for a minute, scanning the roads, trying to see what the traffic situation was like. He wondered why the detour directed vehicles to drive the wrong way on the interstate.

Seeing that the road was also blocked going both ways under the bridge he made the turn and found the next detour sign directing him to cross the median where a gravel path connected the lanes. The gravel had been originally placed there for police and other emergency vehicles to make U-turns. From this spot near the bridge, he could see large cracks and fissures throughout the structure and a number of concrete chunks littering the ground below.

He followed the remaining detour signs, which instructed him to drive the wrong way on I-90 to the I-35 exit. Back on the interstate, he resumed his slow steady pace, and turned on the radio to catch up on the news and find out what was happening. He didn't want to know, but his better judgment said that he should learn as much as possible about the situation. All stations he found played the same messages on a loop, asking people to stay home if at all possible or head to the nearest FEMA relief station. Everything would be fine as soon as relief workers could get to everyone. Since that was an exercise in futility, he turned the radio off and enjoyed the drive in silent anxiety.

After a few miles, he came to another overpass, this time going over the interstate. Barrels were lined up and

signs were posted again, but this time, a lane's worth of barrels had been knocked over and rolled around on their sides beside the highway. Not seeing anything blocking his way and figuring the chances of anything actually falling on him were pretty slim, he drove on through. This scenario presented itself several more times in the next few hours. Two of those times required him to drive around or over large chunks of the fallen bridge. From what he could see, this bridge, hundreds of miles from the worst hit areas, would require a lot of work and time to fix the infrastructural damage.

After driving another few hundred miles, he was finally nearing the Mississippi. A few miles away, the road was blocked, by a row of cement dividers backed up by a police car. He had noticed similar blockades on a few of the exits, but they were all for traffic heading west. This was the first blockade he had seen for east-bound traffic and the first that just popped up in the middle of the road. A large sign read, "Road closed," which was followed by "I-90 Bridge out."

Slowly coming to a stop a couple of hundred feet from the blockade, John tried to figure out his next move. Before reaching a conclusion, two officers decked out in black on black riot gear and holding rifles, stepped out of the car and waved him back. John hesitated for a few seconds, trying to comprehend this, but quickly got the hint as one officer again motioned, this time quite violently, to back up, and the other laid his rifle across the hood of the cruiser as if he was lining up a shot.

John put the truck in reverse, did a three-point turn, and drove about a mile up the road where he pulled off to the side. He dug through the atlas to see what other options he might have.

Trying to think, he refilled the gas tank, completely emptying three of his six gas cans and most of a fourth in the process. He had a full tank and probably 12 gallons left in the cans, so he was right where he had estimated

he would be. Too bad he had no idea how far out of the way he was going to have to go.

Even though he wanted to head south to find another crossing point, he figured he had a better chance of finding an intact bridge further north, away from the quake. Looking at the atlas, he saw that an exit he'd passed about 10 miles back headed north to a small town and a bridge across the river. And if that bridge was out, too, there was a state highway running along the river that he could keep following until he found one that he could drive across.

Since he was already stopped and it was almost 7:00 p.m., he went ahead and ate dinner, a delicious pre-cooked, vacuum-sealed burger that he'd bought from the refrigerator at the gas station.

While he was sitting there, he noticed lights driving up behind him. He turned in his seat and could see what looked like at least two or three dozen cars driving on the interstate in single file, with a police cruiser in front. It was a long line of cars, trucks, campers, and more, just like he had been watching drive by all day. As they passed, he saw two more cruisers, flanking the procession and another taking up the rear. The car at the rear slowed to a stop parallel to John's truck. A few minutes later, another car came back from the convoy to join the one already waiting. Out of the two cars stepped five men, all dressed in riot control black and carrying rifles.

One of the men lay out in front of one of the cars, deploying a bipod on his scoped rifle and pointing it right at John while the other four slowly walked across the median. The two leading the group carried their rifles in low ready, but the two slightly behind and to the outside kept their rifles up in firing position and pointed in John's direction.

Thinking that he needed to get the heck out of there, he fired up the engine. Putting the truck into drive, he saw the men sprinting toward him, all guns up now. One man was running to intercept his path, holding his hand

up for John to stop, and another was running straight toward his passenger side window, motioning him to kill the engine. With five guns pointed at him from less than 50 yards away, he decided to comply. He put the truck back in park and turned off the engine as the men surrounded the front of the truck.

"Hands up where we can see them!" shouted the man nearest him.

John complied, raising his hands above his shoulders.

"Now I'm going to open your door, and you are going to step out. Keep your hands where we can see them!" the man continued shouting as he stepped up and yanked the door wide open.

Slowly, John climbed down from the cab of the truck, stepping forward as the man kept motioning him.

"All right, hands behind your head," the man continued. At least this time he wasn't shouting at the top of his lungs. One of the other men came around the truck and frisked John while the others kept their guns leveled.

"Anything I can cut or stick myself on?" the man patting him down asked.

John shook his head no, and the man patted him down, top to bottom, and then the man who had been shouting a few seconds earlier did the whole exercise again, this time reaching into John's collar, pockets, and waistband. He pulled out John's wallet and cell phone, which he laid on the ground a few feet away.

"Anything in the truck we need to know about?" He asked next, heading over to the truck.

John said quietly, "Just my pistol, a map and a little bit of food and water." This drew an icy glare from the man asking the question.

"SO ... You're packing? I'll bet you wish you had it right now don't you? You want to fight back? Shoot us? I can see it in your eyes!" he said, and then turned to rummage around in the truck.

He came back with John's backpack and pulled out the range bag containing the pistol and ammunition and laid it next to his wallet.

"So you stole a truck and a gun from someone, and now you want to come into my town and steal some more, right?" The man continued getting close enough to John's face that John could feel the hot air of the man's breath.

"No, no ... No. I'm just trying to get home," was John's stuttered reply.

Looking to the other guys, John noticed their rifles were now pointing down to the ground and at least one of them looked as if he was trying to hold back a smile.

"All right. Cut it out, Tom," another man said, half laughing.

The questioning officer, who was apparently Tom, turned and snapped that man an icy glare and snarled, "You cut it out! Cut out your bull crap! You think he's all innocent, and I shouldn't press him?"

The other man raised his hand indicating that Tom should stop. "Tom. Cut. It. Out. NOW."

A few seconds passed and the man continued, "Go back to the car and get on the radio and make sure everyone knows everything is ok, and find out where the escorts are."

Obviously still angry, Tom stormed off toward the cars.

The other man introduced himself as Chris, the sergeant and ranking officer of the group, and apologized for Tom. He then made a joke about Tom's "little man's" syndrome.

Only then did John, at 6'1", realize that he stood a good head taller than the man who was trying to get in his face. Chris said that Tom probably thought his action was necessary because of the recent robberies and looting. People fleeing the worse hit quake areas were taking anything they needed or wanted in their trek across our small town.

The road closing was a ruse to steer people away from town. And the group didn't know what to do with someone approaching from the west since no one had come that way since the men had blocked the road. The bridge was still up and currently passable, but large cracks were seen throughout, and in several places, huge chunks had fallen into the river below, limiting the width to about one and a half lanes.

Chris explained that on the east side of the river, they were running two blockades. One was several miles outside of town, and had been setup to get people to turn away down other roads. The second blockade was right on the outskirts where they stopped all cars, secured any weapons, and then funneled the cars across the bridge, one at a time. Then several times a day, they escorted all the cars about ten miles down the road and returned any weapons that had been held. They told the drivers not to return.

Their actions were in response to several factors. First was the dangerous condition of the bridge, which might not support too many cars on it at the same time. Second, looting had gotten bad very rapidly: people tried to hold up the gas stations in town, drain gas from parked cars, and even invaded a home the night before last. No one was seriously hurt in these crimes, but the looters did take food, weapons, and all the gas from the homeowner's car and garage. After that incident, the police officers decided the outside world could fend for itself. They were going to do what they could to protect their families, friends, and community. That was when the roadblocks went up.

Since it was late, the officers weren't planning any more runs across the river. They told John if he wanted to cross on the bridge, he had to check his gun and ammo with them and sleep in his truck on the highway down by the river. The directive was put politely, but in a very non-negotiable way: if John didn't like this arrangement, he was free to turn around and not come back. Thinking

this was a better choice than back tracking and trying to find another route, John agreed to the terms.

The sergeant picked up John's range bag and walked back to the cruiser. John followed them down to the bridge where he parked at the foot of the bridge. He opened another sandwich and washed it down with a warm 20-ounce soft drink. Rolling the windows down to let some air through, John wondered how he was going to sleep, or otherwise pass the time, until he could cross sometime tomorrow morning.

Homesick , John barely slept that night, but when he finally fell asleep, he dreamed of a weekend trip the family had taken earlier in the summer to a small cottage on a lake. He remembered it as one of his favorite trips, where he taught his kids how to swim.

Chapter 10

Radio Broadcast: Today's updates: the death toll continues to climb, and the official count is now over 150,000. The number of displaced people also continues to climb. And utilities continue to fail all across the Midwest and there are portions of the Northeast that are without power and other basic utilities, even though the Northeast suffered only light structural damage from the quake.

Sanitation is a major concern, so please drink only clean water to reduce the spread of waterborne disease. Boil advisories are in effect for most of the country because of cracked and damaged pipes. Without electricity or piped natural gas, the majority of people are unable to clean the water properly.

John woke up shivering in his T-shirt and rolled up the windows in an effort to keep the warm air from flowing out. He dug into his suitcase and pulled out one of the button-up shirts, which he had worn when working at a drilling site, and pulled it over himself like a blanket.

It was early morning and several hours before the sun would rise. He spent the next few hours staring out the windows, trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep. From where he sat, he could see the lone watchman posted at this end of the bridge. Across the water, several lights were visible. There must be more watchmen near the town itself.

His thoughts raced to his family and wondered how they were faring while he was gone. It had been four days since he last talked to his wife, and he had no idea how she or the kids were doing. Even before the earthquake, people had been rioting and running out of gas, and from

what he had seen, these troubles were increasing exponentially.

Luckily, they had plenty of food. After Margaret's last trip, the family probably had enough food to last at least three months. The kids, and Margaret for that matter, might not like everything, but they wouldn't go hungry. That was the biggest shopping trip she had ever been on, and then the return trip that her mother went on had to have provided even more food. He didn't get a breakdown or description of that second trip like he did of the first trip, but he knew it was mostly comprised of cheap bulk foods, like large bags of rice, flour, sugar, lots of canned goods and other staples. These bulk foods would greatly extend their ability to feed themselves, even though when they were purchased, they fully intended to donate them to the local church when things quieted down.

Thinking that the family's food situation would be okay for several months, John started thinking about water. Both bathrooms had large water bladders he hoped were full and he thought they still had a gravity filter purchased a few years ago when Margaret was pregnant. The idea had been to drink only the purest water and these filters were the ones they found that also removed fluoride. If they filled the bladders, and used that for drinking, they could be all right at the house for several weeks or months.

Security shouldn't be a problem, at least at home, since they lived in a nice upper-middle class subdivision and knew most of their neighbors.

Having been afraid of getting run over by the price increases at the grocery store had put them in a much better position than they would have been in otherwise. Someone or something had been looking out for him and his family during the past few days to help them be prepared for this storm.

As the sun started rising in the east, he ate his last sandwich purchased from the gas station's refrigerated section. He thought that it probably was still okay

because of the nitrates and other preservatives, but he wouldn't want to eat it any later than now. He dug through all his food and drink and realized he had a little more than he had thought. After trading the \$10,000 worth of tools and equipment, he was still light on gas, but he did get plenty of junk food.

Probably worth about \$50 before everything went to crap. Over \$10,000 for \$50, and I made out like a bandit. He laughed out loud at how he had actually thought he did well on those trades.

After the sun was all the way above the horizon, the guard walked over and motioned for John to roll down his window.

"You ready to go?" the officer asked.

"Ready and waiting," John replied.

"All right, well I'm going to ride in the bed. Keep it SLOW, like below 5 miles an hour. There are a lot of cracks and a few big fissures. Just steer clear of them," the man said as he started to scale the side of the truck to sit in the bed.

John fired up the truck, put it in drive, slowly crept to the bridge, and started across. He wondered if this was the right choice. The bridge was visibly in shambles, and he wasn't sure whether driving across it was safe.

This is going to be a total loss for a bridge. He couldn't imagine how much replacing it would cost, especially as he observed its length. It didn't go straight across the river, but it hopped across several small islands and one large island that had numerous houses and a small airport on it before touching down on the eastern shore.

They passed ramps leading to the airport. Barrels and cars and trucks parked sideways blocked the ramps and were backed up by two men sitting in a police cruiser. A short distance later, they were on another bridge that was just as bad as the first, but luckily shorter. On the other side of the bridge were a few more on-and-off ramps, blocked by parked vehicles, but John

didn't notice anyone stationed there. He guessed that police probably had someone at the other end of the ramps. At the officer's direction, John sped up to about 25 mph when they were on solid ground, and he drove for about two and a half miles before they came to a large roadblock in the middle of the highway.

There were barrels, concrete dividers, police cars, a fire truck, a few shipping containers, and a couple of dozen cars and trucks, all parked and placed in strategic places across the road, median, and all the way down the shoulders for a few hundred feet.

Impressive for such a short period of time, they didn't spare anything to block this off. The blockade even continued over to the access roads that paralleled the highway and across those roads until a small forest took over the work. In the area, he could see at least a dozen men and a few women, in strategic spots, armed with some type of long gun.

One of the men directed John to pull to the side and stop. As soon as they stopped, the officer in the truck bed hopped out and commented about how they really have upped the game since yesterday. The man who directed them told a story of how a group had become rowdy and threatened to run the blockade—two vehicles even tried. They had rammed the cars blocking the road. He pointed to two fancy SUVs—both now riddled with bullet holes—and stated that those SUVs had been the first additions to the new blockade, which they had worked on all night long.

The officer told John to pull over to the first opening and wait there while the officer retrieved John's wallet and gun. About three minutes later, he returned with the range bag and tossed it into the truck bed. "Just leave it there until you get past the second roadblock." Then he slapped the truck on the side and waved goodbye.

John slowly weaved through the blockade. The winding path was four layers deep and required him to slowly snake through a double S pattern to get out the

other side. About 100 yards further out, he could see another pair of cars parked sideways to create a buffer for traffic. On the other side of the road, several hundred cars had lined up, two or three wide, waiting for their turn to cross the river.

Evidently more and more people are trying to get out of Dodge.

Driving between the two cars, John waved at the men posted there. They waved back, waved him through, and urged him along. Since he was driving the wrong way, and now heading directly into traffic, he quickly cut across the median and onto the open road heading east. He had to dodge a few parked cars and a few makeshift camps that were setup on the road, and then he was on his way. Looking at the westbound traffic, he passed an estimated 400 or 500 vehicles.

A few miles down the road, he came to another roadblock of two cars and a sign flashing "Road closed - Bridge Out." John smiled at the setup. It had been conveniently placed where it was easy to turn off the interstate to medium-sized state highways.

About a quarter mile past the last roadblock, he pulled over and grabbed the range bag from the back of the truck. He checked the pistol to make sure it was loaded. It was, with a round still in the chamber.

Good to go.

He checked the other contents of the bag, something he hadn't done before in earnest, and found two loaded magazines, two boxes of ammo—one of cheap full-metal jackets and another of expensive hollow points that looked like the rounds already in the magazines. There was also a cheap, padded, nylon holster for the gun, a spare magazine, several sets of earplugs, safety glasses, and a small cleaning kit with a bottle of lubricant. In the side pocket, he found pens, a pocket-sized flip notebook, and a crumpled boonie hat.

He decided to keep the pistol at hand, just in case, so he threaded and fastened the holster onto the center

seatbelt and then fastened the seatbelt, securing the holster to the seat beside him. Then he put the pistol and an extra magazine in the holster and returned the other stuff to the bag. He figured that would be the easiest way to secure the holster in case he had to swerve, stop, or do anything that might make it slide off the seat. Wearing the cheap holster would not be comfortable. Then John took off again, keeping his speed at a steady 55 mph, and drove for about half an hour before coming to the end of the interstate, where it merged into I-94.

He had seen numerous cars along the way: some of them had been abandoned, some had people in them, and some were charred remains. He cruised through the merge and could see several manned roadblocks going north and west. These roadblocks seemed strange since they didn't look as if they were protecting a city or anything. He hoped the roadblocks hadn't been setup to rob or loot people who drove by, but John's guess was that was exactly what was happening. Luckily, setting up such a roadblock heading east, the way John was going wasn't as profitable, and the lanes were open.

Over the next few miles, John kept the speed at 55 mph but decided to drop to 35 mph after he had to slow down when coming up on random groups of people or cars. He slowed enough to stay vigilant but fast enough to keep anyone from rapidly sneaking up on him. Many cars were heading west and more had been abandoned or parked and the owners were milling about. Some people had setup makeshift campsites. Other cars had been burned out or ransacked or were full of bullet holes and no one was around.

John saw more people walking, most were dragging luggage or carrying bags strapped over their shoulders. The loaded trucks and RVs that he had seen the past few days were few and far between. He could tell that the people he was passing now weren't nearly as prepared and were trying to leave without a plan.

Occasionally, he passed more exits, some of which were blocked by debris that had fallen from nearby overpasses. By driving up the exit and back down the on ramp on the opposite side of the road, he was able to get around the debris. Most of the roads beside an exit were manned by armed men and women, not always in uniform so he tried to not stray from those roads. A couple of these people pointed their rifles his way, and while no one shot at him, he would accelerate for a few seconds to speed away.

It was late in the afternoon when he came to the junction of I-90/94 and I-39, which lead into Madison. John didn't know how much damage to expect there, so he had no idea if the interstate would be passable. After seeing the damage he'd seen all day, he figured it probably wouldn't be.

The damage John saw became worse as he continued his journey. Looking at his atlas, he thought there may be quite a few large overpasses and elevated exit/entrance ramps likely to be in shambles.

He pulled to a seemingly safe spot to review his options. From where he sat, he determined that there was still at least one more exit before the interchange. But if the past exits were any indicator, he probably wouldn't be able to drive through the exit. He saw that there were a few small roads close to the highway, so if he couldn't use the road at the next exit, he could bypass it and do a little off-roading until he came to a side road to drive around the interchange.

He didn't particularly like the idea, but he couldn't think of anything better. At least he knew the truck could handle it. All the company trucks had been upgraded with four-wheel drive and off-road package enhancements. To get to several worksites, he had had to drive these trucks over terrain much scarier than the current setting. But he still didn't like the idea, knowing that it increased his chances of encountering trouble.

Getting ready for the next adventure, he grabbed a bite to eat and topped off the fuel tank with 10 gallons of gas, an amount close to full without overflowing. After filling the tank, he tied all the cans together with a piece of rope that was in the bed and then lashed them to tie-downs so they wouldn't tip or bounce out while off-roading. He also tied the plastic shopping bags of food and drink closed and, for extra measure, stuffed them and the range bag into his backpack, stretching it to its fullest capacity. Satisfied that everything was ready to be jolted around, John started the truck and drove slowly toward the next exit.

Just then, he noticed a group of men, at least 100 yards away, walking his way. John was sure that they were heading toward him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up as he saw the men, and he didn't know why. There was no quantifiable reason for them to scare him, but they did. He stomped the accelerator, hurtling more or less straight toward them. He turned the wheel slightly to the inside shoulder, enough to visibly avoid a collision path with the men, but not enough to really take him off course.

The truck didn't accelerate nearly as fast as he had hoped, but in the few seconds it took for him to close the gap, he saw the men spreading out to cut off his new angle. John laughed as he saw them raising their hands, trying to flag him down or slow him down by standing in his path: a handful of guys standing on the ground versus a ton of V8-powered steel. This was a game of chicken he knew he'd win.

As the truck got up to speed, he saw several of the men's arms swinging wildly. Maybe they were trying to warn him not to go that way. Before he could react, a loud crack pierced his ears as the first rock slammed into the hood of the truck. If they were hoping to stop or slow him, the rock throwing didn't work. Instead his reaction was to push even harder on the accelerator, even though it was as far down as it could go.

As he passed the men, the few that were in his direct path jumped out of the way at the last second. The others kept throwing rocks, and he continued to be pelted until he was safely out of range. After a few hundred yards, he slowed down to 35 mph. He didn't realize right away that he had been going over 90 mph in his panic to get away. He cursed at himself a few times for going so fast.

How could I let those men get that close without knowing it? I need to be more vigilant. He thought he was being careful and had only stopped for about 10 minutes, maybe 15 minutes, but that was all it took for someone to find him. He cursed at himself for being so lax.

He knew the danger of driving on the highway, but he didn't know any other way to go. He could take hundreds of smaller highways and side streets, but doing so would slow him down and use a lot of the gas that was in short supply. Besides, taking those smaller highways and side streets could potentially expose him to more places where others might jump him.

The next thoughts in his head cursed what was happening, it has only been four days since the earthquake, and already, things seemed to be falling apart faster than he ever thought possible. Then again, things were already falling apart too quickly before the earthquake, the shaking just helped hasten the fall and destroyed the infrastructure that was needed to get everything back on track. His last thought, before banishing the whole train of thinking, was that he was lucky they just had stones.

A few minutes later, he arrived at the last exit before his most likely off-road trip. He slowed as he approached, realizing this was going to be more difficult than anticipated. The exit was on the other side of the cross road behind the fallen overpass. He surveyed the area, looking for a way around, and saw lots of faces looking back at him. Dozens of people were milling about. Some were setting up tents or campsites now that it was near

sunset, and some were congregating in cliques that reminded him of his run-in a few minutes earlier.

Not wanting to give anyone time to start in his direction, he put the truck into four-wheel drive and drove off the side of the road. He cut across a field heading toward the exit ramp to get back on the highway. No one seemed to be on his side of the road and the distance between him and everyone on the northbound lanes seemed adequate. He wished he could have cut straight and gotten further away, but small clumps of trees blocked his path. He could navigate through the trees if he needed to, but only at a much-reduced speed that would leave him open to being easily overtaken.

Many eyes followed him, but no one seemed to care enough to do anything about his driving by. He made it to the ramp a few seconds later, running over a wire mesh fence, which luckily slid under the truck and didn't slow his speed.

Now the sight before him was something wildly new. He had grown accustomed to seeing cars parked and abandoned or parked with people camped out around them, but here, on the far side of the overpass, backed up for as far as he could see, were cars, trucks, vans. The road was blocked, the median was packed, and the shoulder was overrun. Thousands of vehicles were stuck in a huge unmoving parking lot. He wouldn't even be able to get on the highway itself for several hundred yards because the southbound lanes were also flooded with cars.

Uncountable numbers of people were standing, walking, and building camps. Everyone who heard his truck was staring wide-eyed, many trying to wave him over and some of the closer ones came darting toward him. Not wanting to have another repeat of a few minutes ago, he kept moving ahead, running down the outside of the shoulder, driving as quickly as he could

while dodging the occasional car or truck that was in his path.

Pulling around a truck that was blocking his way, he slammed on his brakes as a small child stood in his path. Behind her was the rest of her family, sitting in their little makeshift campsite on the other side of the truck.

Coming to a complete stop, just inches from the little girl, John mentally said a little prayer that he was able to stop in time and that the girl wasn't hurt. He thought of his own daughter, hundreds of miles away. This girl was probably a few years younger, but just as cute and sweet looking. John could feel tears start to well up in his eyes as he realized the hardship this girl was going to face. He hoped the family had somewhere to go instead of waiting here for help to arrive.

A clicking sound to his right snapped him back to reality. Someone was trying to open the passenger door, which was locked. Looking over, he saw a man, probably this girl's father, trying desperately to open the door. No matter how much John felt sorry for them and no matter how much he wanted to help, he knew he had to keep driving. If he stopped here, he wasn't going to start the truck again. He was one man versus hundreds. At best, he figured only his gas would be stolen, and he would be on foot. The situation would most likely be worse than that.

John slipped the truck into reverse and gunned the engine, breaking the man's grip on the handle. He yanked the selector into drive, and in his haste, he dropped it all the way down to D1, and gave a strong push on the accelerator. He noticed his options were shrinking as additional people flocked his way. He picked a path that would let him sprint about 50 yards before making another turn and nearly ran over three people in his path. He felt bad, as if he was cold and uncaring, but he knew he was doing what he had to. After his 50-yard sprint, he kept going. Luckily, the cars were fewer on this side of the highway, and he was able to keep up speed

and stay away from anyone else who might slow him down.

Slowly, he worked back up to the highway, only to see another downed overpass ahead of him. This was a much smaller bridge, and somehow, the northbound lanes had been cleared letting the train of cars through.

This one probably came down with the first quake.

He knew he couldn't get through to the other side since it was full of parked cars, even though the path was clear of debris the cars were blocking his path. He ran off the outside of the road, off-roading until he hit the pavement of the road that once crossed the highway but now dead-ended at a broken bridge. Figuring he was, at most, a couple of miles from the next large interchange, which was an obstacle he decided to steer clear of. He decided to stay on this road, speeding away from the interstate and the downed bridge.

The road took him on an angle back toward the last exit, but he decided not to stop to find a better route. He kept driving until he came back to the state highway and turned south, going even further from the interstate. He drove for a few minutes and took a smaller county road, trying his best to get away from all the people and chaos. After putting a few miles between him and the highway, John found a secluded section of road and stopped to look at the atlas.

He didn't like his available options. Before, he figured that his only problem might be the interchange where the two interstate highways met, and he didn't look further ahead. Now, he realized that a few miles away was another river to cross, and he had no idea how he was going to cross it.

He scanned the atlas for a few minutes and found a route that looked as if it would take him in the right direction and away from civilization. The sun starting to set, so he needed to find somewhere to spend the night. The sound of his truck was enough to alert people to his

presence, but the bright headlights would act as a beacon for as far as the eye could see.

A few minutes later, he was alone in the middle of a small clearing off of a small county road. He turned off the engine and walked around for a few minutes, listening. Not hearing anything, he grabbed a few snacks from his backpack and cozied up in the bed of the truck.

He didn't sleep much, constantly checking his surroundings and listening for anyone approaching. The night went uneventfully, and the little sleep he did get was better than none.

Chapter 11

Radio Broadcast: This is the BBC reporting live from London with a breaking news report. Russia has banned the export of all food and beverages, with the exceptions of vodka and caviar. Even though that country has pledged to aid the United States, which has been stricken with the largest natural disaster in US history, Russia has already stopped food aid from being sent. The official message doesn't provide any reason behind the move, but looking at some statistics, it's easy to determine the cause.

The United States is the largest food exporter in the world, accounting for about 10% of all food exports globally. Because of the earthquake-caused disaster, the amount of US exported food will drop dramatically. The future markets in Europe and Asia reacted with wild speculation, the cost of most food commodities for trade have gone up huge percentages, wheat and soybeans leading the way, both increasing at over 200% in a few hours.

The world's number one economy is in shambles, and we are now starting to see some of the more drastic effects this will have on the world stage.

John woke up and looked at his watch. It was only 4:00 a.m., but he knew he wasn't going to be able to fall back to sleep. He replayed the events of the previous day over and over. He felt bad for the people he'd passed on the road, and his eyes filled with tears, remembering the little girl he had almost ran over. He worried about what would happen to them in the next few days. Things seemed to be getting worse, not better. Despite his concern, he couldn't have helped those people. The best

he might have done was to give them his food or gas, both of which he needed. Both were very temporary solutions.

It was still too dark out to read the atlas, and John wasn't going to risk turning on a light. It was perfectly dark and quiet. No lights, no cars, nothing except for the sounds of the forest around him. Anything he did now could easily draw attention to himself. He knew he was part of an ever contracting few, people who had gas in their cars and that fact painted a big target on his back. Luckily, as long as he had that target on his back, it would be extremely hard for someone to catch him.

He tried to figure out his next steps. He had another decent-sized river to cross, and he didn't have much hope of finding an intact bridge.

Even if I can get across this river, what about the next one? Or the one after that?

He wondered how many more times he was going to run into the same predicament. He had figured that once he got across the Mississippi, most of the bridges would be small and not badly affected. But he hadn't expected to see so many overpasses collapsed on the interstate, nor had he expected to see wave after wave of cars broken down and blocking highways.

He started worrying about what he would do when he did run out of gas. He began to realize that it might be impossible to get more. He needed to formulate a plan for that outcome. He mentally went through what he would need and what he had on hand. He had a pair of high quality running shoes and a couple pairs of good wool running socks as well as shorts, t-shirts, and a pair of sunglasses to complete his exercise outfit. Several pairs of thick cotton work pants and shirts, a few undershirts, a few pairs of underwear, and cotton socks rounded out his clothing. In his backpack, he had stuffed his food and water, and under that, he had a small set of tools, most of which wouldn't be of any use if he were on foot, except for perhaps his multi tool and flashlight.

His next thoughts were about food and water. He had enough food to snack on for probably three or four days if he ate light. But before, he and a buddy could down the amount in one sitting while watching a single football game. Either way, he wasn't too worried about food, even though there wasn't a whole lot of it. Everything he had was packed full of more fat and sugar than a person really should eat, which meant enough calories to keep him going. Also, he knew he could go for quite a few days without eating at all; though, the idea of having food to keep him going was nice.

Water was a little tighter than he would have liked. Three cans of soda, three 20 oz. bottles of water, and two 1.5 liter bottles of water were a lot for now, but if he had to start walking, his water wouldn't last long without a resupply.

He grew tired of thinking, since every new topic made everything seem harder. John decided to get up and exercise to try to lift his spirits. He spent about 10 minutes doing a stretching and warm up routine. He hadn't walked more than a few hundred feet in the past few days, and he was quite stiff. By the time he had stretched every muscle group in his body and was warmed up, he had decided to keep the exercise slow and simple, and did a few sets of push-ups and sit-ups, not even breaking a sweat. The workout lasted about 5 minutes, and he followed it with another 10 minutes of cool down stretching. He knew he had to keep active, but was afraid that if he did too much, he could easily fall into a situation where he would need that extra bit of food or water.

By this time, the sky was starting to turn lighter shades of blue. It would still be a while before the sun came up, but the sky was slowly getting brighter. John had a little snack from his larder, and then changed his clothes, which he realized smelled horrible, having not been changed in several days. After putting on fresh clothes, he put his dirty clothes into a shopping bag, tied

the bag shut and stuck it in the bed of the truck. No need to smell it up here with me, he thought.

A short wait later, enough light was available to start reading the map. John found a couple more rivers blocking the path he planned to travel today. Luckily, most were smaller, at least on this map, than the one in front of him here. When he started tracing the river he faced now—the Wisconsin River—he realized it wasn't very large, but as fate would have it, it was much wider where he was currently than anywhere else on the map. He traced a route, taking him along the river and around Madison. He hoped to get on a highway somewhere that was at least somewhat straight and fast. Even with the experiences on the interstate yesterday, he knew an interstate would probably be safer than traveling on the back roads.

After deciding on a route, a backup route, and the backup to the backup route for the next 50 miles or so, John stretched then started the truck. The sky was just starting to turn pink, but it was light enough to see without turning on the truck's headlights.

He left the clearing and pulled onto the narrow county road at 20 mph. At the first possible crossing, the bridge was down, crumpled into chunks of stone submerged in the river below. He backtracked to avoid the small town ahead, and turned to the backup route. Even though there were at least two other bridges, between the first one and the backup, both were closer to small towns than he wanted to go. He had no idea what would happen if he drove into one of them.

Another hour later, the sun was up, and he came to the backup bridge. Normally, the trip would have taken about 20 minutes, but he was travelling extra slowly and cautiously. The river was narrow and shallow here, and this bridge was also out. But, by the way the partitions had fallen, and because the river was shallow, the bridge remained above water. Not seeing anyone around, he got out of the truck to survey the damage. He quickly

realized that there was no way to get across, but as he turned back toward the truck, he saw what looked like another bridge a few hundred feet to the north. Returning to his truck, he looked at the atlas but didn't see anything on the map.

Backtracking to go to the third route he'd identified earlier, he noticed a set of old dilapidated train tracks that he had crossed before. He'd studied them in both directions when he crossed them, but he hadn't thought about their need of a bridge, too. He didn't want to drive the truck down the track and chance getting stuck, but even more than that, he didn't want to leave the truck on the road while he checked the bridge so he decided to just go ahead and try driving.

He pulled onto the tracks and realized getting on was easier than he thought it would be. He hoped he wouldn't have to backtrack, not only because he hoped the bridge was still good, but because he didn't know how he'd get the truck off the tracks without chancing a flat.

A few hundred feet down the tracks, he crossed a small bridge over a stream. About a quarter mile and several hundred bumpity-bumps later, he stopped at the bridge he'd seen. It looked pretty sound. He got out of the truck and surveyed it closer, walking almost half way across to inspect it. He noticed a few broken beams and supports, but overall, it looked solid. It had been built to withstand trains weighing several thousand times more than his truck, so John figured driving across it would be ok, but he wouldn't want to drive a train across it now. He got back into the truck and a few minutes later, he was on the other side.

Back in his truck, he drove to the other side, and pulled onto the first road he came to. Luckily, the tracks were flush with the road so pulling onto the road was simple. He wasn't sure which way to go, but he cut a hard right and headed back to where he figured he could return to his planned route. He would have liked to verify the direction, but there were a few houses around and he

didn't want to stop close to anyone. A minute or two later, he turned onto the highway he had planned to use if the backup bridge had been intact.

The highway was a two-lane state highway that ran east to west and he planned to go a few miles on it before taking another highway south. He made a snap decision not to use interstates now that he was close to Chicago.

The number of people he had seen yesterday didn't register with him until he decoded the situation later. The number of refugees and broken down cars was staggering. There had been easily several thousands in that small area, across several natural barriers that had to have stopped even more from making it across.

How many people were fleeing Madison? Chicago?

He remembered hearing about flooding and other problems in Chicago immediately after the flood. Several million in the city and its suburbs must have been affected. How many people lived even closer to the center of the quake? He couldn't recall exactly, but he knew both St. Louis and Memphis were referred to by name and had to have millions of residents each.

Next break, I need to check the atlas to see what major cities had been in the vicinity of the quake.

He slowed and stopped the truck along the side of the highway. He scanned the area; then, scanned a second and third time even more slowly.

No cars or buildings. Should be good for a few minutes.

Flipping open the atlas, he turned to the national map and took a few measurements. The situation was worse than he had thought. He measured the distance between where he first encountered serious damage and the quake center. It was about the same distance from the quake center to his home in Ohio. If the damage is this bad here, it could be just as bad in Ohio. Unbeknownst to him, several of the bridges he had seen down had been slated for renovation and replacement. But for the past several years, work on the bridges had

been neglected, as the state didn't have enough money necessary repairs in its budget.

He sat for a few seconds to compose himself. He then mapped out a few possible routes and pushed the gas pedal. He accelerated to 55 mph, faster than before, caring less about scanning surroundings. He couldn't drive slowly anymore—his family needed him. He reasoned that other families along the way also needed what he had, and he didn't want anyone to take what he had or slow his trip home. The faster he drove, he reasoned, the less time anyone would have to interfere.

He blew through many intersections and by small clusters of houses while breaking pretty much every traffic law in the books. Near sundown, he stopped by the side of the road somewhere in Illinois. Although too mentally exhausted to continue driving, he couldn't stop the day's images from replaying. He saw hundreds of abandoned cars side streets and small highways. He saw groups of people on foot, usually walking down the center of the street. This image especially gave him pause. He had hit at least two people hard enough to severely injure them.

The accident had occurred as John approached a gathering of 50 to 60 people walking in the street. They had refused to move as he approached. He'd slowed to about 25 mph and laid on the horn, but they seemed intent on stopping and surrounding him. Gripping the wheel with his left hand, he buried his right elbow into the center of the steering column to sound the horn. He didn't know why but he'd thought that if he pushed harder, the sound would be louder. As he sounded the horn, he floored the gas pedal. The truck started to pick up speed as fast as the eight cylinder engine could push it.

Most of the people jumped out of the way at the last second. But one person was a split second too slow. The truck struck his lower body, and he cartwheeled to the side. Another person didn't budge from his spot directly

in front of the truck, playing chicken with the much larger machine. John heard the impact as the man hit the hood of the truck, forcing him directly under the truck. John felt the bumps as the rear wheels went over him.

John chewed on a couple pieces of jerky, not enough to fill him, but he didn't feel like eating anyway. After the sun went down, he burst from the parked truck just in time to clear the cabin as he threw up the contents of his stomach. He didn't sleep that night, his mind replaying what he had seen and done. And he feared what still might prevent him from getting home.

He wasn't willing to admit the fear of not being able to make it home, so he made a different excuse to stay awake: he didn't want anyone to find him while he was asleep.

Chapter 12

Radio Broadcast: This is BBC finance reporting on the ongoing problems in the international markets. Most exchanges are in turmoil as embargos and trade restrictions appear across the globe in response to the earthquake in the United States. Russia's restrictions on food and gas trades have exacerbated the situation. And OPEC has unanimously voted to no longer accept dollars for oil, moving to accept only the Chinese Reminbi, Russian Rubles, or Euros at a penalty discount up to 20%, or to accept gold at a fixed rate of an ounce per barrel. The gold exchange rate has skyrocketed, raising the cost of oil from the OPEC countries over 500%.

It has been five days since the earthquake hit and three days since the power went out and stayed off. It was off immediately after the quake but came back on for a few hours here and there over the next two days. Each time the power went out it stayed out longer, until it never came back on.

Luckily, John and Margaret had installed a generator in the garage and connected it to the freezer and refrigerator for such emergencies, and Rick, a neighbor who lived a few houses away, was happy to help Margaret start it.

Rick and a few other men in the neighborhood have really stepped up in the past few days, Margaret thought.

They were helping with not only starting generators to keep freezers and refrigerators going, but cooking and getting water and other necessities. Since the power has been out for the past three days, they have started conducting nightly meetings near the playground and were helping to keep the neighborhood functioning. Being in a nice upper middle class neighborhood, you would

think this was easy, but everyone could see the large cracks forming in the community around them, but Rick and his team were doing a good job of holding it together.

Margaret was especially grateful for her neighbor's assistance since John wasn't home.

John, why did you have to go? I really miss you and hope you're okay. That theme kept playing in Margaret's head. She cried herself to sleep each night, wondering if her husband was ok and when he would be home.

At the previous night's meeting, everyone had agreed that gas and electricity needed to be rationed and that food should be consolidated in one or two large freezers and refrigerators. Today, Margaret and the kids would be busy consolidating everything from her neighbors' freezers and refrigerators into John and Margaret's refrigerator and into the large standup freezer in the Goldsmith's garage. They spent the morning marking food with stickers, donated by a neighborhood schoolteacher to indicate whose food was whose, loading the kids' radio flyer wagon, and hauling food between each house. This is what finally won over a few of the families who were hesitant about "sharing" food with others.

When lunchtime rolled around, all the food had been moved, so Margaret made lunch for her kids and neighbors. She was distressed at seeing how little food the Goldsmiths, a retired couple living next door, had. They had always been nice to her and John and sweet to the kids.

She was also scared at how little food the Rogers had. They had three kids, and their food would last only a few days. But all three of the kids were picky eaters and complained all morning about there being nothing to eat because they didn't like their food options. Little did they know, those few options they currently had were shrinking.

The Rogers' kids' main topic of conversation, other than their picky eating habits, was how their game systems and MP3 players weren't working and how if their parents really loved them, they would find a way to get them up and running again.

The lunch Margaret provided came from some of her food, giving each person a choice of salami, ham, or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. She had plenty of each and figured the meats might go bad before she and her kids could eat them. She also opened a bag of chips and filled a pitcher with water plus ice that didn't fit in the consolidated freezer. The Rogers kids complained about their lunch the whole time while their parents scolded them to no avail. But they wolfed down their sandwiches, grabbed seconds, and polished off the chips before everyone else got any.

Getting the idea that's how kids were supposed to act, Sam, Margaret's 4-year-old, started complaining, too. Jane, his older sister by two years, giggled at him. Her giggling encouraged the behavior, making Sam think he was cute or smart, but in reality, she was laughing because she knew as soon as the guests left, Sam would find out that he was not supposed to act like that.

Initially, Margaret gave Sam two polite warnings; then, she sternly told him to stop. After that, she let Sam blend in with the other brats. After the second warning, Jane's face became bright red as she bit her tongue trying to hold back her laughter. She loved her brother, but there was something extra funny to her about seeing him act out then act out more after he had been scolded. It was as if he was begging for a spanking.

After lunch, Margaret said goodbye to the neighbors and cleaned up the mess. Once the kitchen was in order, Sam got two swift swats to the rear end. He got the message. Even though he wasn't hurt or in pain, he started to cry.

His sister giggled at his misfortune. She knew better than to act the way he had and thought it was funny

when he started to cry. She knew the spanking didn't hurt.

That evening's meeting started with bad news. Three houses had been broken into last night, and someone had tried to force his way into another house in the middle of the day. Luckily, no one had been hurt beyond a few bruises and scrapes, but the thieves had made off with a few easily replaceable electronics. Rick told them the police haven't been notified yet, since the landline and cell phones have been out for days. They intend to have someone drive to the police station first thing tomorrow morning to file reports.

After sharing this news, Rob, one of Rick's new companions, stood up and outlined steps that should be taken:

A.) Supplies and volunteers were needed to fix a few broken windows and doors from the robberies.

B.) Volunteers were needed to setup a neighborhood watch. For tonight, they already had several volunteers, but they wanted everyone to start thinking about keeping everyone secure *around the clock*. (He said that last part very loudly, as if he was trying to scare people into action.)

C.) A set of rules for people living in the neighborhood was needed. They needed a curfew, and they needed to prevent people from coming in.

D.) A trip to the stores to get more food and supplies was needed, but it needed to be coordinated, since several people who had left to go to the store previously hadn't returned.

After this, people started muttering among themselves, and the meeting was effectively over. But Rob made closing comments, shouting above the noise of the crowd. He said that everyone had to think about his

points and that tomorrow they would stop by house by house to discuss the ideas.

Chapter 13

Radio Broadcast: Tonight, we bring you some good news. At the President's request, Mexico is mobilizing all resources it can spare to help with the unrest embroiling Southern California. In order to help maintain order and peace and enhance public safety, government officials are going door-to-door collecting all registered firearms. According to the President, these measures are necessary to help bring order where there is massive rioting. In those areas, the National Guard is moving resources into position to support FEMA, which will provide relief aid to those who have been displaced by the New Madrid earthquake, which has crippled the center of the nation.

The sun rose, but John could barely see the daylight because of the heavy clouds and pouring rain. His stomach still felt queasy, so he drank a little water and started the truck to defrost the windows. The damp air and his breathing all night long left a layer of fog inside the windows.

He took a few minutes to find his location on the map and to plan a travel route for the day. He was disheartened when he found he was almost directly west of Chicago. The heart of the city was 40 to 50 miles east of his position, luckily people fleeing the city didn't seem to be flooding this area. The realization that he was at least 75 miles or so further north than he thought didn't sit well with him.

He couldn't believe how much he had driven to get not very far on winding back roads and small state highways. He hoped to get farther today. Rain, though, would play in his favor, so at least one thing was looking up for him. After a few minutes and a few slides across

the muddy field he had parked in, he was driving along a state highway heading south.

He passed several houses, but didn't see any signs of life. The heavy rain was keeping people indoors. The first sign of civilization was a pair of houses a couple hundred feet away on opposite sides of the highway. Fires were burning brightly through the rain. People were running around outside both buildings. At first, John couldn't tell what they were doing.

Surely they are trying to put out the fires.

As he got closer, he could see there were no buckets or hoses, no efforts to put out the fires that engulfed both houses. Instead, people seemed to be fighting over boxes and bags. And a few people seemed to be violently kicking a few unlucky people on the ground. *So much for friendly help.*

He stomped on the gas, picking up speed as quickly as possible. No one seemed to have noticed him until he was a few hundred feet away and going 75 mph. The delayed reaction didn't stop a few people from trying to run after him, and a few others produced flashes from gun barrels pointed at him. He didn't hear any bullet impacts and kept speeding on through. The raging fires pierced the rain and darkness, providing a vivid and horrifying portrait. At least five people lay on the ground, completely motionless, two others were surrounded by part of the mob, and were being kicked and beaten with bats and other clubs. Other groups were fighting over the spoils salvaged before the fires took over. John could see a few small clusters of women and children huddled under tarps, watching the show before them.

John slowed after passing the burning houses, but the rain and the lack of light—he had decided to drive without headlights—made driving fast hazardous. He realized that if he'd had headlights on, he probably wouldn't have gotten nearly as close as he did without being noticed. A few minutes later, he passed another house. The yard was littered with the contents of the

house, and he wondered if the same group had looted all the houses.

How many more houses might they loot?

A few abandoned cars, several tents, and makeshift campsites later, John turned down a side road and started looking for a bridge to cross the Rock River. He thought there had to be dozens, if not hundreds, of bridges crossing it in this highly populated state. His task was to find one that was traversable and not blocked by damage or two legged varmints.

Driving down a small county highway, he noticed a small construction site. It was too dark for him to see much, but he saw a backhoe, a bulldozer, and several other implements as well as the requisite cones and orange barrels. He slowed down to check it better. He couldn't see anything awry. He didn't have enough time to stop when he saw a large steel drainage pipe laid across the road.

He hit the brake hard and could hear and feel the ABS system shudder as he slowed. But he didn't slow enough and he hit the pipe with enough force to jar him forward and cause the truck to lurch. Immediately, the backhoe's lights flipped on, illuminating the silhouettes of three people coming toward the truck. He hadn't regained his composure when he saw the first flash, followed immediately by the windshield shattering into thousands of pieces and a baseball size hole appearing in front of the passenger seat.

Ducking below the dash, he tried to figure out his course of action when the windshield was hit again, creating another large hole right where his head had been a split second earlier. After what seemed like ages, he found the pistol strapped to the seat beside him. He pulled it out of the holster and grabbed the spare mag with his other hand. He chanced looking out the window, but he couldn't see anything through the windshield. Out the passenger side, he could see two of attackers coming

his way. Luckily, they didn't notice him. He didn't see anything on his side of the truck.

He popped open the door and rolled to the ground, landing hard on the wet pavement. He drew more gunfire. The sound rang in his ears as the buckshot peppered the truck. He scooted back to the rear wheel well and crouched low as the first person came into view.

He saw a second person. Both were pointing long guns in the direction of the cab, making small sweeping motions, and looking for their quarry. John reacted first, unconsciously raising the pistol, lining up his shot, and firing off a string of rounds. He couldn't tell if the man dove under his own power or fell from being shot. The thing that mattered now was that the assailant ended up on the other side of the tail pipe.

John looked around and under the truck. Then, he sprinted to the side of the road and dove into a muddy drainage ditch running along the road. Rolling to a prone position with the pistol pointed toward the truck, he waited until he saw movement on the far side of the truck and responded with three rounds. Flashes responded from the other side. But none of the impacts were even close to John's position.

After a few seconds, the firing stopped, and John didn't see any more movement. He didn't hear anything except for the rain, so he decided to try to back up further from the truck and the guns. He moved about 50 feet away when he saw three figures running across the field. Not wanting to take any chances, he kept creeping away from the truck and moved in a wide circle, coming in behind the heavy machinery. No one was in sight, but he kept up a very slow pace as he rechecked every detail.

Finally, he made it to the truck and was relieved there was no more contact. He thought they might be watching him and be back soon.

Why set up a blockade like this and not be more organized or determined?

If for no other reason than to prove it to himself, he tried to start the truck. No dice. It didn't really matter since the windshield was shattered, the front end had curled up under itself, and the driver side tire was flat. So he grabbed his backpack and the range bag and threw them over alternate shoulders. He then grabbed his roller-board out of the back seat and ran. He hoped to put distance between himself and the fire. He ran for about 10 minutes before he slowed down and started looking for some shelter from the rain. He needed to rest and regroup.

In the opposite direction, the three conspirators hobbled across a bean field, one on each side of the wounded third being carried by the arms. The leader was wiping tears from his eyes, from the throbbing pain in his head where he had landed after tripping backwards over their barrier and from the realization that his best friend had just stopped breathing. They had been out there that day, shaking down people fleeing the city. They hadn't expected anything bad to happen to them. He wondered how everything had gotten out of control so quickly. Just a week ago, the only thing on their minds was the next freshmen football game.

John ran into a small copse of trees and found an oversized beech to lean against. The tree was so large that even though several inches of rain had fallen, the ground near the trunk was barely damp. He slouched, gasping for breath, his body shaking. He had never felt an adrenaline rush like this before. He leaned back against the tree, using it to steady his shuddering body. His mind raced at the possible consequences— what would his fate be?

I shot them, at least one. Why else would they have run?

He focused on the memory and recalled the site picture from his first shot. It was squarely lined up on

the upper chest of the dark figure. He couldn't remember "calling" the second and third shots, but he knew at least the first one hit home.

It won't be hard to link the truck to me. I did properly sign it out of the lot, and my finger prints are all over it. Even the most backwater police station will be able to put me at the scene. So what? The shooting was self defense, clean and clear. Those guys ambushed me. They got what they deserved. My family needs me, and I will make it home. No matter what.

A few minutes later, his breathing had slowed, and he took inventory of his situation. He was soaking wet and caked with mud. He had a few days of food and water left, but nowhere to sleep and no means of transportation, other than his two feet. His shoulders slumped heavily at that last realization. Walking would mean many more days of travel. But at this rate, it might be safer than driving.

Luckily his roller-board suitcase and backpack were water resistant, and the contents were only slightly damp. He pulled off his muddy garments and exchanged them for a clean set of clothes. As soon as he was relatively clean and dry, he opened a soda and downed half of it before tearing open a bag of chips. Walking around the area, he found the river he was attempting to cross was less than a hundred yards away. He washed down the chips with the rest of the soda and started making a mental list of what he needed.

1. Food
2. Water
3. Shelter
4. Transportation
5. Protection
6. Money

He return to his makeshift base under the tree and transcribed the short list onto a notepad from the range bag. Food and water: he had enough for a few days, but not enough to get him home, though.

Shelter: That was a problem. He had been sleeping in his truck, but it was no longer helpful. Even though it was mid-September and the temperature was in the high seventies, it would probably drop to the sixties tonight. Wet and cold was not how he wanted to spend the night. Getting sick, or worse, wasn't an option.

Transportation: Two feet. Maybe he could find a bike, but as he'd found, driving was out of the question.

Protection: He had that and had proved that he knew how to use it.

Money: He still had a few hundred dollars but he didn't know if it would be worth anything.

It was late afternoon, and he didn't realize how much time had gone by since the incident—it still seemed as if it was just minutes ago. Since the rain wasn't letting up, he decided to try to find somewhere to sleep. He wanted to wait for darkness in order to enact his plan.

Chapter 14

"What was that? What the heck did you do?" Garret said, shouting at the top of his lungs, shoving his wife who had been sleeping beside him.

"... I... I didn't do anything. Is somebody breaking in?" she replied fearfully.

"Dumbass picked the wrong house to break into!" He said, getting up from bed. He launched into a tirade of the most vulgar expletives he could conjure up.

He reached behind the headboard and pulled out a shotgun stored there for emergencies. He continued cursing loudly as he walked across the room. He opened the bedroom door with a snap of his arm, and quickly racked the shotgun. .

"Hey asshole, I'm coming for ya!" he shouted into the dark hallway.

He flipped the hallway light switch, but the lights didn't turn on.

Smart one, cut the power before coming in, he thought.

Stepping into the hallway, he thumbed the pressure switch to turn on the flashlight mounted on the front of the shotgun. Quickly, but deliberately, he swept the hallway with the bright light as he slowly cleared each section of the house. A few minutes later, he had cleared the whole house inside and out and found nothing out of order.

"I don't know what that was, but something ain't right," Garret said, walking back into the bedroom.

He grabbed his cell phone from the nightstand and tried bringing up the Internet, but he couldn't get any websites to load. Next, he decided to try calling his friend across town to see if they heard the noise, too. All he got were "all circuits are busy" messages. After making his way down to the garage, he pulled out his radio scanner

and powered it up. He then turned on the emergency radio he kept next to the scanner.

The scanner started chattering as soon as he had it on, and he could tell the dispatcher was overwhelmed.

Evidently the noise, whatever it was, woke up the whole city, and these idiots don't know what happened.

He flipped the scanner off and tuned into the emergency station on the radio.

No news on what had happened. All right, something hit us here, don't know what. If it's real big, it will be on this station, but it might take a while. I should go ahead and fill up the gas tanks like I meant to yesterday, just in case.

A few minutes later, he drove down the road and pulled into the first gas station with lights on. The first two were completely dark, like the rest of the buildings he had passed. Two other cars were already getting gas, which was abnormal for this time in the morning. He tried putting his card into the machine to pay, but the machine wasn't working.

"Cards won't work out here. Have to go inside," a man at the pump across from him said.

"Nothing works anymore, right?" Garret said, with a laugh. "Do you know what happened?"

"Best guess is earthquake. That or we got nuked. I mean, could be a bunch of things, but I'm betting on one of those two."

Garret stood there, dumbfounded for a second.

Earthquake. Ok. But nuked? I know people hate us, but who is that stupid?

He shook his head and walked into the store to pay for the gas. The man behind the counter had a manual card machine for making carbon copy of Garret's card for payment. He said the owner bought it a few years ago so they could keep the store running when power and phones were out.

Carbon copy, I don't even remember ever being charged on one of those things. If we were nuked, that

carbon copy isn't even going to matter. Heck even if we weren't, my interest rate is probably lower than inflation. Might as well stock up.

He spent the next few minutes grabbing all the empty plastic gas cans in the store, along with a few armloads of food. He went outside, and filled the truck, the gas cans brought from home, and the new ones. By the time he was finished, the parking lot was almost full. As he sped home, he noticed more cars on the road.

He unloaded the truck into the garage. Then he hurried back out, speeding at over double the speed limit. This time he headed to the big box store up the road. He was late to the party. A crowd had already formed at the front doors, and a police car with its lights flashing was parked on the sidewalk next to the entrance. He pulled into a parking spot close to the front and turned the truck off. He debated what to do next. He turned on the radio and scrolled through the channels until he found one that was broadcasting.

The broadcaster didn't say much except that an earthquake had occurred in the middle of the country and that several large cities had massive damage.

Not good. Really not good, but this is what I'm good at, making the best of bad situations.

He watched the crowd at the front of the store shuffling about.

Zombies. All unprepared and needing food. I need food, too, but I'm going to make sure I get what I need.

He grabbed a ball cap from behind the seat and put it on. Next, he pulled a pair of aviator sunglasses from the visor and put them on even though it was still dark outside. Then, he pulled leather gloves from the glove box and slid them on. Finally, he picked up his pistol, which he always kept underneath the gloves in the glove box. He slid the pistol into his jacket pocket.

Ok, ready for anything now.

He walked up to the crowd and shoved his way to the front, where he could hear a desperate store employee

begging people to stay calm. He told them that the store, which was normally open 24 hours a day, would reopen as soon as power returned.

That could be hours from now, or it could be never. I'm not waiting.

He shoved his way to the outside of the crowd and looked for his next move. The crowd was loud and upset, but with the police presence, they were orderly enough. So, he looked for another way in.

I could start a problem, but I don't want to be caught as the one instigating.

He walked back to his truck and drove around to the back of the store. He first checked the loading docks where a few trailers had backed up. All the doors were shut.

Those will be locked tight.

Next was the garbage compactor. The door beside to it looked promising, but he held out for one more.

Bingo.

On both sides of a single door, picnic tables had been set out for an employee break and smoke area. He backed the truck up near the door and got out. He tried the door handle. It was locked, as he expected. He pounded on the door three times. No response. Three more times and still no response.

He started looking for the best way to take the door off its hinges when he heard someone call from the other side of the door.

"We're closed, go away!"

"I know we're closed, I just got pushed out from up front and need to get back in," Garret lied.

"What? Who are you?"

"It's Steve."

"Who? Who's Steve?"

"I'm Steve from receiving"

"And how'd you get out there?"

"I was up front looking at the crowd and, uh, having a smoke break. The door locked behind me."

"I let you in, you gonna let me bum one off you?"

"Sure thing. Just let me in."

The door opened a few inches, and Garret pulled it the rest of the way open.

Offensive jerk, I'm not letting this little twerp question me!

"What are *you* doing back here?" Garret barked at the young man standing inside the door, taking him by surprise.

"I'm, wha—"

Garret interrupted him, "Are you taking the whole night as a break because the power is out?"

"No, I ..."

Garret cut him off again, "I've still got trucks to unload, what are you supposed to be doing?"

"I am sup..."

Garret cut him off by shoving past him. "Man, I'm gonna get back to work. Don't get us both in trouble."

The helpful employee stood dumbfounded trying to think of something to say when Garret produced a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and popped two into the younger man's hand.

"Just don't get us both in trouble," Garret said as he stomped away.

A few seconds later, with a pallet jack in hand, Garret was walking the floor of the store stacking hundreds of pounds of food on a plastic skid. He went completely unnoticed the entire time. Everyone was too busy milling about the front doors, watching the spectacle, or hiding in the break room, shirking their duties in the darkness. He filled two pallets in the span of fifteen to twenty minutes. Not wanting to be short-changed, he went back and filled another pallet with more food and booze. He transferred this last pallet onto the scissor lift in the back of the store, and used the remote to raise the pallet all the way up. He then disconnected the battery so the lift wouldn't operate.

I'll come back for this later.

He rolled up one of the dock doors, jumped down, and ran to his truck. He then backed his truck to the open door. A few seconds later, he had the first two pallets loaded into the bed of his truck and covered with some thick plastic sheeting. He headed down the road toward home.

As he pulled into his neighborhood, he noticed a few lights on in houses.

Candles? Flashlights? Still no power. Whatever. They are all suckers. I'm going to pull this rig into the garage and no one will be the wiser. I'll be set like a king.

Pulling past a particular house, a few doors down from his own, he slowed a bit and tried to peak inside as he always did.

One of these days, one of these days, I'll catch a glimpse of something nice. Sarah, you sure are a fine piece.

He spent most of the day moving the stolen goods from his garage to multiple caches throughout his house. What was left of his day was consumed with listening to radio reports of what had happened and trying to estimate the extent of the damage.

Need to know what happened, so I know what to do.

Later that night, Garret returned to the big box store, driving slowly without lights on to prevent drawing attention. He smiled as he passed store after store and building after building. Even in the dark he could see they had been victims of looters or other criminals. When he arrived at the big box, he saw that the store's doors had been smashed and the store had been looted. Scraps and destroyed merchandise littered the ground.

It's amazing what can happen in a single day.

He snuck to the back of the store and found the scissor lift as he had left it.

Figures, no one is smart enough to simply put the wire back on the terminal.

He hooked the battery back up, lowered the lift, and then reloaded everything onto another plastic skid. A

little while later, he headed home with enough booze to last several lifetimes.

The radio made it sound bad, but I didn't think it would be this bad. Not here, so far away. An evil grin crossed his face. This is going to be fun.

Chapter 15

Radio Broadcast: Today, we bring you some updates on the continued unrest in the southwest. Power is out in most of California and in large parts of its neighboring states, and there has been massive rioting and chaos. And the departure of various National Guard units to aid in the areas devastated by the earthquake has meant there has not been a force large enough to quell the fires. Luckily, a plan to regain control is being built with the help of the Mexican army. The President of Mexico has pledged full support of the United States, and has said he is willing to do whatever it takes to help its closest ally get back on its feet.

Before the sun was up, Margaret had already been up for hours preparing for the day. She ran the generator to keep the refrigerator cold, prepared an oatmeal breakfast for the kids, and as soon as there was enough light to see, she was out in the garden pulling weeds and picking the harvest.

It was a small garden, grown as a hobby. The fresh vegetables were small supplement to the food they ate, and because of the garden's small size, she easily noticed the missing tomatoes. Several of the largest, ripest fruits were gone. Not on the vine, not on the ground, and not strewn about, half-eaten like they would be if eaten by raccoons. She didn't like thinking that someone had taken her vegetables. Now, since the stores were closed and food couldn't be bought, every bit of food she didn't get from this garden was food she and the kids didn't get to eat.

Not wanting to condemn people just yet, she found the wire cage-like trap in the garage and set the cage next to the garden. She then went into the house to find

the dog treats used to bait the trap in the past. She found them in the back of a drawer—almost two years old and extremely stale, but the bacon smell was strong and completely unmistakable. Tossing a few treats into the back of the cage, she propped open the door and set the trap just in case her intuition was wrong.

By the time Margaret had finished, it was time for the kids to get up. She yelled upstairs to wake them and after a few minutes, she went up and helped them get dressed for the day. Their cold oatmeal breakfast was low on their favorite foods list, but they were hungry and ate it all. Even at their young age, they knew, at least somewhat, how lucky they were.

A few books and games later, Margaret heard a knock at the door. Sarah, Rick's wife, was there. Margaret and John didn't know everybody in the neighborhood, but everybody knew, or at least knew of, Sarah and Rick. It's not that they were overly social, super friendly, or the bad neighbors people liked to complain about. Actually, it was Sarah herself. She frequently went for runs through the neighborhood and walks with her children, providing a chance for everyone to ask, "Who was that?" She was six feet tall, had blonde hair and blue eyes and looked as if she had stepped out of a Victoria's Secret catalog. Looking at her, neighbors would guess she wasn't even 30 years of age, much younger than the other women in the neighborhood, who ranged in age from late 30s to 50s. Because of her stunning good looks, many neighborhood women gave her the cold shoulder, even though she was an outgoing, sweet woman.

"I'm sorry for bothering you, but we are trying to get to everyone's house today and go over what was talked about last night," she said.

"No, no, that's ok. I was expecting someone. Why don't you come in? Is Rick coming too?" Margaret replied.

"No, he is busy with some of the other families, and he wanted me to talk to you and a few of the other single women in the neighborhood," Sarah said.

Realizing she made a misstep, she continued on, "Sorry, I don't mean to say you're single, but—"

"It's ok. I understand. I know what you mean. I think that's a good idea. Thank you for coming," Margaret interrupted, trying to save the woman any embarrassment.

A little flushed, Sarah continued, "Ok, I really am sorry. But back to the topic. Since you are here alone, we figure it won't be necessary for you to help out with most of the duties." Noticing that Margaret's facial expression changed, she added, "I want to be clear that we aren't saying that because you're a woman, but because you have kids, and you need to take care of them. There are a few single dads in the neighborhood too ..."

As Margaret's facial expression softened, Sarah continued, "There will be ways you can help. We want everyone to be part of the neighborhood watch. There were more incidents last night, and we need to do everything we can to keep everyone safe."

Noticing that Sarah was fishing for feedback, Margaret told her about the situation in the garden and how she was willing to do what she could to help out. Margaret noticed that the news of food being stolen drew a frown on the woman's face.

She genuinely does care and wants to help, Margaret thought.

For the next few minutes Sarah explained the steps they were taking and laid out some rules they wanted to put in place. Most of the rules were regarding the curfew and visitors. The curfew was to be from 8:00 p.m. until 7:00 a.m., roughly dawn to dusk. Anyone outside after that time would be considered unwelcome and would be stopped for questioning. And if need be, the individual would be escorted away from the neighborhood.

As for visitors, the watch group was going to setup checkpoints around the neighborhood, especially the entrances and exits, to make sure anyone coming or going was supposed to be there. Visitors had to know the name and address of whom they were coming to see. An escort would take them to the address to verify.

"Do you have any objections to this, Margaret? We don't want to just go around doing things in the neighborhood without everyone being on board," Sarah said.

"No, I think these are good ideas. I just hope it will be enough," Margaret replied.

A few pleasantries later, Sarah was out the door to the next house on her list.

Time passed slowly recently, Margaret noted. She realized that it wasn't even lunchtime, and she felt as if it should be dinnertime. Not that she was bored. It had more to do with how much more she was able to get done without interruptions and distractions. The kids were playing with toys on the floor—a pretty normal occurrence—but there was no TV, Internet, emails, or phone calls. Without all the noise, she was getting a lot more done than before the quake.

Later in the afternoon, there was another knock at the door. It was Rick and Sarah, with kids in tow.

"Hi, Margaret," said Rick. He reached out presenting two of the largest tomatoes Margaret had ever seen. "I heard about the mishap over here, and I'm sorry that happened. And since we have extras right now, I figure you could use them."

"Thank you. These look amazing!" Margaret replied.

"And the kids have something for yours, too," Rick continued as he nudged his two daughters forward, both several years younger than Sam and Jane.

In unison, with huge smiles, they said, "we brought these!" And each held out a chocolate chip cookie.

Margaret called her kids. Both were delighted to get a fresh baked cookie. Sarah reached into her purse and pulled out two more cookies, handing them to her girls with instruction to play with Sam and Jane while the grown-ups talked.

Rick asked to see the backyard and garden. A waist-high cedar fence enclosed the yard on all sides, leaving a view of the entire garden. He walked around a few times. He said he was looking at different angles for views and places to enter or exit. He wasn't happy with what he saw: there were too many places to hide and too many places to get in or out. It would be hard to prevent another theft without watching the garden all night. But he knew of a few things to help.

"Any empty soft drink cans, or soup cans? We can use those to make an alarm system to surround the garden, and if we can get enough cans, we can set some along the fence in key areas, too," Rick said.

"We've got plenty of both, especially since trash hasn't been picked up," Margaret replied.

"Lead the way," Rick said as he followed Margaret inside.

"We do a pretty good job of sorting our recyclables, so there shouldn't be anything too gross in the bag, but we haven't been rinsing everything as we normally do," Margaret said, as she opened the door to the mud room, leading to the garage.

"Whoa, wow. Look at what you've got here," Rick blurted, as he stepped into the mud room and noticed the stacks of cans and other food filling up about half the room. The supplies were the majority of the large hauls she'd made a little over a week ago.

He continued a second later, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude, I just have verbal diarrhea sometimes. It's good that you have that, I'm glad you do have it. Pretty much everyone I talked to today is already running out of most things."

"Yeah, we normally don't keep a fraction of this, but somebody was looking out for us when I made a few *large* shopping trips just days before the quake. We've actually got more in the garage that was set aside for the food drive," Margaret replied, a slight smile on her face.

"Ok. Great," Rick replied. He tried to speak, but it took him several seconds to find the words, "It's great that you have this, but like I said, most people are already running out of stuff. Sure they have enough to last them a few weeks when you start getting down to brass tacks and cook stuff. I mean everyone has five pounds of flour, five pounds of sugar, and a host of condiments, so I don't think people are going to turn into skeletons, at least, not for a while."

He paused for a second, and Margaret tried to interrupt, but he held his hand up. "Who else knows you have all of this?"

"Just my mom, and John," Margaret replied quizzically.

"Ok, good. Keep it that way. I don't even want to know about it, ok?" Rick said. When Margaret gave an awkward nod, he continued, "Don't let anyone know you have this. I suggest sticking most of it in a closet upstairs. If people know you have all of this ... you *will* be a target."

Shocked and not knowing what to say, Margaret nodded again, "Ok ... I'll do that."

Her head was spinning, thinking about everything. It was starting to become too real.

I trust Rick and Sarah and feel that he was speaking in my best interest, but did he have to be so blunt about it? Yes. He knows what might happen if things don't start moving again, and every indication is that everything is slowing down, not speeding up. Today, it was just some of my tomatoes, but if someone takes this food, we have nothing else. I need to try to help my friends and neighbors. Everyone needs to pitch in to make it through this storm, but I need to think of my

kids and me first though. I need to care for them first and foremost.

A little while later, they had constructed a makeshift alarm from fishing line and soft drink and soup cans filled with gravel. The alarm surrounded the garden and ran along the fence in a few spots. Soon after completing the alarm setup, Rick and Sarah left. Margaret had just enough time to move the majority of her stores to the guest closet upstairs before she and the kids went for the nightly meeting.

The meeting covered the same topics discussed with each individual homeowner earlier that day. The rules were put to a vote and were passed unanimously. The men who had gone to the police station had returned, with many wild stories, and the direction to note the time, location and details of any crime and have a witness sign the document. They were assured these details would be suitable to file insurance claims when the dust settled, but in the meantime the police were unable to respond to anything that wasn't a life or death situation.

Margaret put the kids to bed reading them story after story. Picking the next story was her trick to change the subject whenever they asked, "When is Daddy coming home?"

Chapter 16

Radio Broadcast: This is a BBC international breaking news alert. After reportedly taking fire from a Taiwanese patrol boat, China has launched a full-scale invasion of Taiwan. Tensions had been building for weeks, but in the past few days, with the United States out of the international picture, China had preemptively been amassing troops ready for a potential invasion. Overnight, hundreds of transport ships were launched from mainland China, and China has established dozens of beachheads on the island state.

John rolled from under the downed tree he was lying under.

Bad idea, he thought.

Lying under the tree had kept him pretty dry, but he was stiff from the hard ground, and he could feel a couple of dozen bugs crawling under his clothes. Finding a way around the discomforts would be great, he thought. Being sore and tired wouldn't make the hundreds of miles ahead of him easier. He gathered up his belongings and started working his way out of the forest, back toward the direction of the truck he'd fled hours earlier.

The rain was only a drizzle now, and John used the darkness to sneak his way back to the truck, stopping every few seconds to look and listen. He figured that whoever set the ambush ran away when he did, but even the remote likelihood of anyone being there was enough to make him go slowly. It took him almost half an hour to traverse the area that took him only minutes when running.

A few hundred feet away, he could make out the outline of the backhoe, and he paused, unsure if he should continue. The idea was to sneak back in, grab the

gas cans and use them as barter to get what he could to help him get home. But now he was second-guessing his plans. He didn't even know if gas was still there. He knew that surely, if anyone had come back, the gas can would be the first thing they would take. If someone was there, he'd have another fight, and that wasn't worth anything he could barter.

He had a feeling that he should turn around and head on his way because maybe the chance he was taking was too great. He paused, taking in all the surroundings, hesitating.

Hesitation will get me killed.

He pulled one of the stones from his pocket. He had scrounged it from the forest for its size, and hurtled it toward the motionless hunks of metal. A sharp clang rang out, not very loud, but definitely enough to alert anyone lying in wait. No movement, no response. Not wasting any time, he kept walking in a low crouch toward the implements.

Still seeing nothing, he pulled a second stone from his pocket and chucked it toward the truck's windshield, smashing out more of the glass and making plenty of noise. Still no response. He broke into a quick jog, making a straight line for the truck. He was committed now, and all he could think was to get in and out quickly.

Coming up beside the truck, he pushed off the top of the truck bed, vaulted in, and pulled the gas cans loose from the tie down. He jumped down with two full cans in tow. Just seconds later, he was sprinting back toward his remaining gear. A few seconds later, he was balancing the five-gallon can on his roller-board and holding the smaller two and a half-gallon can in his free hand. He had hoped to take two five-gallons, but the other five-gallon can had a through and through bullet hole half way up the can. The can was mostly empty now.

Carrying the gas was more awkward than he anticipated, and he was forced to stop several times to

readjust the larger can. Eventually, he pulled his mud-soaked shirt from the suitcase and put the can inside. He used the shirt's sleeves to tie the can to the suitcase's handle. He had to walk about five miles to the next small town. He figured it would take him about two hours to walk the distance in the rainy darkness.

On the outskirts of town, he came to a sports complex and lay down to sleep until sunrise in a baseball dugout.

This dugout is cozy, dry, and has a roof. I'll be lucky to find something like this next time it rains. He shook his head in disgust. *I've made a few mistakes, but I've gotten lucky. Any one of my mistakes could have ended my journey, left me injured ... or dead. I've been lucky. Now it's time to quit playing on fate and step it up. My family needs me.*

Looking around the diamond, he saw the small building that looked like it normally held a concession stand. The side door laid flat on the ground and several boxes and bags were strewn about the area.

There will be no food, but I'm sure there is something I could use. He walked over and looked inside. It was a total wreck.

People not only took whatever they thought was valuable but smashed, knocked over, or destroyed everything they didn't want.

Sure, the earthquake started it, but the footprints on top of everything help to paint another picture.

Digging through the rubble, he found a few things that he quickly added to his possessions: several large black plastic trashcan liners, paper packets of salt and pepper, plastic utensils, and a few big handfuls of wet wipes. He grabbed plenty of wipes because he could clean up a little, using most of what he'd grabbed.

Heading back outside, he walked around the building and found the bathroom. Its door had also been ripped off the hinges and the toilet inside broken into pieces. The sink was still intact, although hanging at an angle from the copper piping supporting it from below. He tried the

water. No joy. The cinder block wall sported a few cracks, but the mirror, probably acrylic or some other plastic, was still whole and firmly attached to the wall.

John spent the next few minutes using his wet wipes to clean his exposed skin, underarms, and a few other extra smelly spots. Happy with the cat bath rejuvenation, he turned to walk out when something caught his eye.

OH MY. Lucky, lucky day. I can feel it now. Today's going to be good!

A smile spread across his face as he reached down and picked up three rolls of toilet paper sitting behind the yellow mop bucket.

Some luxuries are worth their weight in gold, he thought with a smile on his face.

Back at the dugout, he resituated his belongings, adding the new finds and doing his best to hide the gas cans. This was pretty easy to do now with the large bag liners. The garbage bags not only covered the gas cans but also added to the refugee effect he wanted to personify.

After packing everything, he headed into the town. It wasn't long before he started to see signs of life—armed and dangerous life.

The town was pretty small, but probably had a few hundred, maybe even a few thousand inhabitants. Several of the houses and buildings looked newly abandoned, with broken windows and doors ajar, and a few houses had visible, large cracks and crevices in the exterior. A few others had collapsed completely. A few of the better off houses were definitely occupied. "Looters will be shot!" and similar signs were posted on several houses, and a couple had men sitting in front of them, sporting rifles or shotguns in hand or within reach.

Discarded belongings littered the front yards of some houses, and more piles were around abandoned cars lining the streets. There were several campsites with three or four tents or lean-tos built from tarps in a group. All were utilizing the same fires, storage, and security.

People were milling about and poking through the refuse on the ground. Anything that once had value was mostly likely ruined from the previous day's rain.

Even after changing clothes last night and cleaning up in the bathroom, John smelled bad but seeing the others milling about the town, he knew he wasn't the worst off. People glared at him and at one another. Everyone looked tired and on edge, and no one seemed to be welcoming. Most people quickly averted their eyes whenever he returned their stares, even though he tried to smile and look friendly.

Yesterday, he wasn't sure how this was going to play out. And now, he feared his heroic plan of liberating his gas was not going to work. Food, water, maybe a sleeping bag—these were the thing he'd love to get, but now it looked as if he might not get anything. The extra time and energy used to carry the gas wasn't much, but the risk he took to reacquire it was. He knew gas had to be one of the most important and valuable commodities; even before the quake, the shortage was hurting many people. He also knew food and water would be worth their weight in gold, but gas was going to be scarcer. He needed to find the right people to sell it to.

Walking down one of the main streets, John stopped by a small group of people sitting around a fire and cooking on a cast iron skillet.

"Which way to the bridge? I'm looking to get across the river," He called out, carefully keeping about 50 feet away.

One of the men set down the child who was sitting on his lap and stood up. He motioned in the direction John was heading.

"Keep heading that way. You'll hit the river. The bridge is three blocks south," the man said, lazily returning to his seat.

John noted that another man and a boy, who looked to be in his late teens, had shifted into ready to respond positions from their previous laid back positions.

Not too friendly, but I might as well try.

"What are you guys cooking up?" John said. He could see the group rolling their eyes and making faces of mild disgust, obviously they were getting tired of people asking this question.

"If you have extra, I have money. Would love a hot breakfast," he added, figuring he might as well finish the attempt.

"Yeah? How much money?" the man responded in a sarcastic tone.

John paused for a few seconds and thought to himself.

Enough, not enough. Doesn't matter, I'm not telling you. I've played this game before.

Before he could respond, the man continued, laughing, "We could use some money, but it doesn't burn as well as newspaper."

"I know you're hungry. So are we, but I wouldn't trade my breakfast for \$50,000 cash."

John knew the man was right. Even before the earthquake, the few hundred dollars he had were quickly becoming worthless. Now it likely wasn't even worth the paper it was printed on—it didn't burn well.

"Thanks for the directions," John said, waving to the man, who nodded in return.

He kept walking a few more blocks and passed more campsites. He saw a few people on their porches and a lot of people wandering about. People seemed to be coming from everywhere—cars, damaged buildings, tents, and boxes. Some even looked as if they had probably been holed up in dumpsters.

What a sad state of affairs, and I get to walk through this for a few hundred miles.

He didn't feel too threatened walking by himself, but he did keep his pistol tucked into his waistband, loaded and ready to use. He consciously switched from side of the road to the other to avoid the people who were

starting to crowd the street. He even made a couple of turns when he felt as if people might be following him.

Nobody continued to follow him after he made the turns, since he appeared to be like all the other people, covered in dirt and seemingly aimless.

If they knew I had gas and food, they would probably tear me apart.

He knew they could do it, too. Even with his pistol, he was no match for a large crowd. There were too many people, and they were armed, too. About a third of the adults, mostly the men, had a gun of some sort visible. And pretty much everyone else had a baseball bat, large knife (many just large kitchen knives), or some other threatening device.

A few minutes later, John was at the foot of the bridge, or at least what used to be a bridge. Even though there wasn't enough of the bridge left to drive a go-cart across, let alone a car, there were dozens of people making the trek on foot. All were coming toward him. None were going his way. They were walking in an almost single file line. Families walked together with the kids sandwiched in the middle.

Refugees. It would be the saddest thing that I've ever seen, if I wasn't one of them. And I'm walking right into the place they are fleeing from.

Starting across the bridge was easy, but he was making a lot of people angry when they had to stop to let him cross at the choke points. Many times they wouldn't let him through, and he waited for gaps in the human wave to make his move. Twice, he thought he would be pushed into the water when the counter flow of human traffic just kept coming, right toward him. The first attempt may have been an accident. The second attempt clearly was intentional.

While slowly balancing on the only still-standing, metal I-beam, two men at the lead of the second group sped up, in an attempt to cut off his progress.

They are up to no good.

"Hey guys. You might want to slow down. This part is tricky," John called out to them, holding his right hand up, motioning them to stop.

They looked at each other, and one said something to the other that John couldn't hear, but they kept coming closer and a little faster.

Been here before, too. Opportunity is knocking, huh, guys? You don't even know what I have, but you're willing to jump me to take it?

"Hey man, I think your kid back there needs some help. You should stay together," John called out again. The men paused for a second to look back, but when they did not see anything wrong, they came toward him again.

"No, they are fine. YOU need help," the first man said, pointing toward John with a knife that looked as if it had come straight out of a Rambo movie.

You don't even care that your kids will see you doing this? Plus, that looks like the cheapest piece of junk knife I've seen in a long time.

John methodically pulled the pistol from the holster in his waistband and pointed it in the man's direction. By the time he got the pistol leveled, the man was about 10 feet away and closing fast.

"Drop the knife."

"Screw you!" was the reply, as the man continued to charge forward.

Less than half a second later, the man started a blitz straight ahead. A fraction of a second after that John fire the pistol and the man was falling into the water below, his screams could be heard all around.

I don't know why I did that. What was I thinking? Why? Why did I shoot him in the leg ...?

Leading with the pistol, John forced the other assailant back and made his way across the rest of the bridge, watching closely the families who rushed after the fallen man. They seemed to have lost interest in John after realizing he was armed and in control of the situation. They were now completely absorbed with

retrieving the screaming man and quieting the crying children. Even though everyone heard the gunshot, no one other than those directly affected seemed to care, and no one said or did anything to John.

The city on the other side of the bridge was larger than the one he had come from, but just as dreary. More people were wandering about or sitting, aimlessly and helplessly. It was mid-afternoon when he wove his way to the outskirts, and he was getting very hungry. But, he didn't want to chance stopping to eat. He didn't see anyone eating in the open, though he did see a few trying to hide behind tents while they ate.

A little past the outskirts, John walked by an all-stone, ranch-style house when the man sitting on the front porch hollered at him, "You're going the wrong way!" He pointed at the groups of people walking in the opposite direction.

John stopped for a second and reaffirmed what he noticed on the bridge: refugees were streaming through in large quantities, but in one direction only.

John yelled at the man, "I guess that just depends on where you are heading. And I'm heading that way," as he pointed east.

"Well there is less that way than where you are coming from, so no sense in heading that way. You'll just find trouble that way."

"Home is that way, and if there is trouble, then I need to get back as soon as I can."

"How far?"

"Far, pretty far." John didn't want to give him too much information.

He noticed that this man, probably in his 60s sat leisurely on the porch of his house, rocking back and forth on a dark wood rocking chair, a glass in his hand and no weapon in sight.

That is a first today.

The house seemed to be in much better shape than any of the others around, and the yard was clean and free of debris and refuse that littered most of the others.

Might be worth a chance.

John continued as he slowly walked up to the porch, "Further than I've got food and water for, but I've got money, or I can trade if you have food to spare."

"Food to spare? That's a riot!" The man was laughing.

He continued, "Even funnier than wanting to pay for it, I'll bet you have a couple hundred bucks, tops. You know how many thousands some of these folks coming from shitcago were offering for a single meal?"

John couldn't help but laugh at the potty humor name the man used for Chicago.

"Yeah, cash is worthless, but I can trade you for it."

"That's close enough, just wait right there," the man said when John made it into the front of the yard. "You come any closer with that pistol at your waist, and you're asking for trouble."

He's pretty good. I think only one in a hundred people I've passed even know I'm packing.

"So your goal is to talk me into disarming, then mug me for my cash?" John said in his most joking tone.

"You got me!" The man said, laughing. By this time, a few other people were starting to walk up behind John. "You guys keep on moving. Ain't nothing here for you!"

The small crowd milled about for a few seconds and then shuffled on, obviously used to the treatment.

John started to step away also.

"Not you. You can stay, for a minute. Just leave your bag and piece right about there." The man said as he pointed to the middle of his yard.

"No, I best be on my way."

"I'll trade you a glass of lemonade for your story. It's not fresh squeezed but it's pretty good."

John stopped to think it over.

He's ok. If he wanted my stuff, I'm sure he could just take it. There are at least two guys behind those windows. And he is probably my best, if not only chance to trade off this gas. He has a good setup going here, somehow, and I'll bet he has food enough to spare.

John complied and left his bag and roller-board in the middle of the yard and slid the firearm into the backpack before walking up to the porch. John climbed the stairs and sat on the top porch step. He waited while the man went inside and returned with a tall glass of lemonade. The man took a large drink from the glass before handing it to John, trying to emphasize that it wasn't full of poison.

Over the next few minutes, John gave an overview of his trip so far and where he was heading. His host sat back and soaked it up. This was the first entertainment he had had in days. After he finished his tale, his host described the current situation.

The hordes from Chicago started heading out of the city a day after the earthquake. The pace of the exodus picked up on days two and three, and the number of people coming through on foot was staggering. About 10 million people lived in the Chicago metro area, and because this town was 40 or 50 miles away from the city, a huge portion of those people were heading directly toward them. None were prepared for travel: food, water, and shelter were all scarce. At best, some were equipped with their weekend camping gear. Most arrived on foot. On the first day, many people were driving, on the second day less, and by the third day, almost no one was driving. They either were out of gas or had been stopped in a manner similar to what happened to John.

The man didn't have much to worry about, according to him. He had plenty of food for his entire family and more than enough firepower to back it up. He and his two sons were all former Marines and they had a few neighbors staying with them. They were all armed. It

wouldn't be until after the masses trudged through that he'd be concerned.

"Repelling these zombies is easy. Just yell at them with authority, and if that doesn't work, point the guns at them. If that doesn't work, I give them a spray of this and that works every time," he said holding up large can of bear pepper spray. "It's the wolves that will come out at night, especially when the numbers let up. Those are the ones to be afraid of. But it will probably be a while before we see them."

Another glass of lemonade later, John brought up the main reason he was there on the porch: to trade. The man laughed at the subject. That was until he found out that John was toting seven and a half gallons of gas. Then, he became excited. They had gas enough to run their generator, but they would need more. So a deal was struck.

John stayed for dinner, which was already being delayed because of his presence. He also got a box of protein bars and two cans of stew. Even more importantly, he won a small vial of water purification tablets, enough to treat 15 quarts of water. Not wanting to be cheap, but also not wanting to trade away more of his food, the man gave him a dollar's worth of dimes: silver dimes, he explained, and a knife.

"See this here?" he said pointing to the emblem etched on the blade. "Good knife. Normally, a week or so ago, it would go for ten times that much gas. Take care of it, and it'll take care of you."

After dinner, the family set him up with a bedroll in a tent in the backyard. And even though they left him disarmed at night, including his new knife, he knew he was safer there that night than he would be anywhere else around.

Homesick, John spent several hours staring at the ceiling and thinking about how he was going to make up his absence to his kids and wife.

Margaret will be ok, but I can't ever let Jane and Sam think I won't be there for them.

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