

Shake, Shake, Shake - Prolog

Benji set his school backpack on the bed and went over to the computer, just as he did every weekday after school, except Tuesdays. He went to Scouts before he came home on Tuesdays.

He was allotted a half hour right after he got home to check his e-mail, and then it was time for chores and homework until supper time. Some times the chore for the evening was fixing supper for his family. He didn't have chores on Tuesdays as he got home just in time for supper himself.

There was no e-mail, so Benji went downstairs and began his chores. He'd finished his regular Wednesday chores and told his mother he was going back upstairs to do his homework. He didn't have much and was a good student, anyway, so it usually went well. He had the homework done and was on the computer again when his mother called him down for supper.

As usual, the talk at the dinner table was about how everyone's day went. Also as usual, things went well. The Harrisons were, after all, a rather typical small town, well-to-do family of four.

Jack Harrison was the owner of the preeminent independent insurance agency in town. Sally Harrison owned and operated a successful antique and curio shop.

Benji's thirteen year old sister Sheri was an aspiring professional athlete. She was good, or better, in every sport the school and community would let her participate in. Though she was good at both, her mother's insistence on Sheri taking dancing and music classes was the bane of her existence.

Benji was into Scouting activities. Particularly the outdoor activities like camping and hiking. But Benji found himself attracted to matters of finance when he went for his entrepreneurship merit badge. His mother and father were eager to assist Benji in his quest for more knowledge about business and finance.

Sheri was content to let her mother and father handle her long range financial planning. She was happy with the allowance she got for her share of the chores around the house. Benji, on the other hand, when he wasn't otherwise occupied, was looking for, and doing, any and all odd jobs around the neighborhood he could get for his entrepreneurship badge lawn care business.

Jack and Sally, after long thought, agreed to help Benji set up a bank checking account of his own, complete with check card. They even direct deposited his weekly allowance. After he had proven his sense of responsibility, other than quarterly accounting sessions, they let Benji handle his own money. He set up a savings account on his own. The profit he got from the lawn care business went directly into the saving account.

Now, just turned fifteen, Benji started working toward the requirements of another merit badge. This one Emergency Preparedness. The thought came when he watched a Weather

Channel special on the possible outcomes of a major earthquake along the New Madrid Seismic Zone. Benji and his family lived almost right on the major fault line.

It took a while to earn the badge. By the time he was ready to sew it to his sash, Benji was hooked. While doing research on the internet for the various types of natural disasters in the area, Benji ran across some sites about preparing for more than the common natural disasters. He slowly drifted into becoming a junior prepper.

It started with the earthquake preparedness. The Harrison home was an older home, well built for its time. Jack and Sally renovated it after they bought it, primarily to increase its energy efficiency. They were somewhat into green, before green became cool. But that was before the more stringent earthquake resistant building code became effective.

With Benji's input, Jack brought in contractors to increase the earthquake resistance as much as was feasible, considering the age of the house. The hot water heater, cabinets, and appliances were strapped down so they wouldn't move in the event of a bad quake.

An automatic natural gas shutoff valve was installed to cut off the gas in the event of an earthquake. Tools to cut off the gas and water manually were purchased and all the family took Benji's training class to learn how to cut off the utilities, including the electricity.

The whole family took CPR and first-aid courses and put together a comprehensive first-aid and trauma kit for the house, as well as kits for each of the vehicles the family had.

Benji didn't stop at earthquake preparedness. The house had smoke detectors, but Benji asked for CO² detectors, escape ladders for the second floor bedrooms, and a fire evacuation plan, which everyone practiced from time to time.

Due to watching the Weather Channel fairly religiously, Benji learned about the dangers of tornados in the area. Two National Weather Service emergency notification radios were purchased and placed in the house. One in the kitchen and one in Benji's room.

The water table was too high in the area for a basement, though a tornado shelter was feasible. As an alternative, since Jack and Sally balked at installing one on the small lot on which the house set, Benji surveyed the neighborhood and found suitable shelter space in case of tornados, and made the arrangements himself to use the space for his family.

In the back of his mind, as a developing prepper, Benji noted the suitability of each of the places as a potential fallout shelter.

Along with the fire drills and earthquake drills, tornado drills were practiced. Benji started the next phase of the plan he was developing. Bug-out bags for everyone and each of the vehicles, though he didn't call them that.

Instead they were evacuation supplies. It was a slow process, as Benji was beginning to run into some resistance to his emergency preparedness activities for the family. It wasn't that the family couldn't afford the things Benji was suggesting. With sudden realization, Benji

understood what the term 'sheeple' that he'd seen on some of the websites he now visited regularly meant.

His family wasn't totally 'sheeple'. They had gone along with the natural disaster preparedness, up to a point, even to his mother double buying some of the foods Benji suggested, to get to the point where they had a two week supply of food and important consumables in the house.

Water was a different story. Though they kept a case or two of bottled water in the house for daily use, Benji wanted more. He took it upon himself to buy some storage containers, fill them, and store them in his shed in the back yard where he kept his lawn care tools. He did the same thing with gasoline, storing forty gallons in eight five-gallon safety cans. It strained his budget that month, but he did it, working in a few extra lawns mowed, and doing without a few things.

Benji decided that his family wasn't really made up of 'sheeple' when there was little discussion and no opposition to Benji going for the rifle shooting and the shotgun shooting merit badges. When he had completed the requirements for the badges they allowed Benji to buy both a .22 rifle and a 20 gauge shotgun, even contributing half the necessary funds as his sixteenth birthday present. Of course, Jack had to buy them in his name and then give them to Benji, to comply with the firearms laws.

On his own, using his check card on the internet, Benji got a few accessories for each of the long guns. Namely several high capacity magazines and a rear peep sight for the Ruger 10/22, and an extra barrel for the Remington which he sent off to have a Poly-Choke installed. He also added a rear ghost ring peep sight to the shotgun and a magazine extension tube. Benji added ammunition to his regular monthly budget preparedness items.

After a couple of hints for a handgun, that were casually rejected, Benji decided to leave a handgun off the list of things to get until he was of legal age.

July 3 was Sheri's date of birth. The family was out celebrating her fourteenth at Sheri's favorite restaurant. Just as their entrees were being served, the building began to shake. "Earthquake!" Benji whispered.

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“Down!” Benji yelled, sliding to the floor, going into a fetal position, hands protecting his head. Father, Mother, and sister all did the same, Benji’s earthquake training coming back to them.

It was well they did, for their server lost her balance and the tray of plates and food crashed down onto the table, sending hot food everywhere. She fell to her knees beside the table as non-structural decorating elements fell from the walls and ceiling of the restaurant. Benji had started counting when the shake began. He was up to twenty-eight seconds before the earth steadied.

“Out, everyone! Out,” Benji cried and helped Sheri and the server to their feet. Everyone seemed to be making for the main doors, but Benji guided his family and the server toward the emergency exit he’d made sure to note upon entering the restaurant.

The ground began shaking again, throwing everyone in the group to the ground shortly after they cleared the building. Despite the shaking, and the count in his head, Benji watched the restaurant building slowly collapse. Over the roaring sound in his ears, Benji heard screams coming from inside.

“Dad! Dad!” Benji said, as his father climbed to his feet.

“Stay here,” Jack said as he headed for the building. His family totally ignored him and followed as soon as they regained their feet moments after the second temblor stopped. By Benji’s count the second shake had lasted only thirteen seconds, but felt heavier. Car alarms were going off all over the place.

“No, Sheri,” Benji said, putting his hand on her arm. “Get the keys from Mom, and get the first-aid kit from the car. The gloves, too.”

Sheri nodded, despite the scared look on her face, and ran to her mother. Benji saw his mother give the keys to Sheri and then turn to follow Jack. Benji was right behind. Jack had centered on cries for help right at the front entrance of the restaurant. He began pulling debris free to hand to Sally so she could throw them out of the way.

Benji was looking for heavier pieces of the debris that he could use to prop up the area Jack was clearing. Jack smiled at his son when he placed the first support piece that allowed Jack to go deeper.

Sheri was back and handed out work gloves to all three of them and then moved back. She saw the server sitting on the ground, clutching one arm to her side and ran over. She opened the big fishing tackle box that was the first-aid kit for Sally’s car and began to follow the training she taken at Benji’s urging. It had been something of a nuisance, cutting into her training time, but she was suddenly glad Benji had cajoled her into taking it.

Benji and Sally were half carrying the first person Jack had reached in the debris pile toward Sheri. Sheri took the time to run back to the car and retrieve the wool blankets and one six-pack of bottled water, before working with Sally on the second victim. Benji ran back to help his father.

Beside the car alarms, there were now sirens sounding all over. But none of the emergency services stopped at the restaurant. Benji couldn't tell where they were, but suspected the roads were blocked. He and his family were on their own.

Jack had dug his way well into the restaurant and removed three more people, helping Benji get them to Sheri and Sally, before he went back inside, with Benji, to get the next. Jack was walking around the restaurant, calling out for any other survivors inside to yell out so he could locate them when the ground began shaking for the third time.

There were more screams, and they lasted for a long time. Longer than the seventy-eight seconds of the third quake. The entrance that Jack had created slammed closed, despite the bracing Benji had put into place.

This time, despite the longer shake time, most were able to keep on their feet. Jack began to go around the collapsed building again, crying out for survivors to answer him. But no one did. Benji saw the lick of flame where the kitchen had been and grabbed his father's arm.

"The gas, Dad! The gas!" he tugged, and his father followed him away from the building. They turned around when they got to Sheri and Sally. The flames from the candles on the tables had started a fire in the debris, and it finally set off the natural gas from the broken gas line where it entered the building. The explosion was small, as such things go, but the debris caught fire and began to burn at an increasing rate.

Jack's face fell and went white when he heard a scream from the building, which was suddenly cut off. "Oh, Lord," he whispered, and knelt beside Sally, tugging Sheri and Benji to him, trying to cover their ears with his hands.

"You did everything you could," Sally said gently. "You both did," she added, bringing Benji into her own hug.

They all looked up when a woman came running up to them. "Help! Help! We need help over here!"

Jack and Benji scrambled to their feet and ran after her when she turned around, pointed, and then took off in the direction she'd pointed toward. Sheri and Sally checked on the people they'd treated, to make sure they were stable and would be okay where they were for the moment, and then gathered up the first-aid case to follow Jack and Benji.

Sheri took a side trip to get another six-pack of water from the car before joining her mother at a cluster of people that apparently had come out of the business just down the street from the restaurant. It was heavily damaged, but it was possible to enter. Jack had stopped at the

entrance and put his hands on Benji's shoulders. "It's too dangerous, Benji. You saw what happened at the restaurant. Stay here and help outside."

"Only if you do, Dad," Benji said solemnly. "I want to help and there are people that need help."

Jack grabbed Benji in a head. "I love you, son. Be careful." He led the way into the building as a couple more people staggered out on their own. It was beginning to get dark when Jack and Benji decided there were no more people in the business building and made their exit. Benji headed for the car to get crank-up flashlights from the back of Sally's car.

Jack was with Sheri and Sally, standing among twenty or thirty people. People that Sheri and Sally had done the best they could to help with the supplies they had. Which were now non-existent. About all they had left was a birthing kit, which the all fervently hoped they wouldn't need.

There was some light from the fires burning, but not much. The family went around to check on each of the people nearby by flashlight. They'd done all they could and sat down together on some of the landscaping timbers around one of the buildings. Benji checked his watch. It was after 10:00pm. When he looked up he saw two firemen walking toward them, with powerful handheld searchlights.

Jack went over to them and began to explain what he and the family had been doing, along with many other people that had helped. "We're going to go see about our house."

The firemen nodded. One of them said, "Good luck. The roads are blocked all over."

The Harrison family gathered at Sally's car. "What do you think?" Benji asked. "Try to drive, or walk?"

"Benji," Jack asked, "What do you think? You're something of an expert on this. More so than I. I'd like your input."

"Well," Benji said slowly, thinking as he spoke. "We know the car should be okay where it is until they start clearing the roads. We have the trunk bag. I'd like to eat something and rest for a few minutes, then head for home on foot."

They all looked at each other, and then all nodded in agreement. Benji pulled the car BOB to him and began to hand out Millennium food bars and bottles of water from the last six-pack in the back of the Subaru. They sat in the car, the doors all open, as they ate.

Finally, the trash carefully gathered up and put away, Jack shouldered the backpack as Sally locked up the car. The four began walking the mile and a half to their home, using the flashlights so they could see where to step. There was debris everywhere.

Almost immediately they ran into blockage on the street that they wouldn't have been able to get around in the car. "Good call, son," Jack told Benji.

It took two hours to traverse the mile and a half. But finally they reached their street. Their hearts sank as they turned the corner. The houses all along their street were in serious shape. Some were completely demolished, others were standing, but barely. People were all over the place, mostly trying to get some sleep out on the ground in front of their homes.

The Harrison house was damaged as well, but in the lighter end of the scale. It still stood, but was leaning somewhat alarmingly. The front door wouldn't open. They went around to the back. The patio door was smashed and they were able to get in. When they saw water on the floor of the kitchen, Benji hurried out and turned off the water supply for the house. Jack got to the electrical panel and killed the electricity. Not sure if the automatic shutoff had worked, Benji turned the gas off manually.

After a short discussion it was decided to set up the camp gear in the front yard. Since they couldn't open the garage door either, everything was hurriedly carried through the house, out of the patio door, and onto the front yard. The chemical toilet was left just inside the door, to give some privacy.

Benji thought about suggesting they move the food in the pantry out, but everyone was tired. Hopefully there would be time after it got light to do more. For the moment, everyone wanted to just get to bed and get some sleep. Benji filled one of the ice chests with all the ice from the freezer and put in all the food from the fridge he could get in it.

Seeing his mother's and father's need to have him close and safe, Benji didn't use his solo camping kit. Rather he stayed in the family dome tent with Jack, Sally, and Sheri, though he used his own sleeping bag.

After very tired good nights all around, everyone fell to sleep. The others, like Benji, slept restlessly. Once, a little after five in the morning, according to Benji's watch, the ground shook again. But it was only a short temblor and not too powerful. It woke everyone and a few words were exchanged, but everyone went back to sleep.

Benji woke up to the smell of coffee. A little surprised, but very proud, Benji crawled out of the sleeping bag and left the tent where Jack and Sheri were still sleeping. He found his mother crouched over the Coleman two-burner propane stove, tending a coffee percolator.

It was well after dawn and Benji took a good look around the neighborhood. The look verified what he'd seen in the dark the night before. Significant damage to all the houses, with some much worse than others.

Benji hurried to set up the privacy tent for the chemical toilet and move the toilet to it so his mother could go to the bathroom in much more privacy than when it was in the open in the family room.

Benji followed suit. His mother gave him a cup of coffee when he came out and asked him to carefully go inside and get some bread. Jack and Sheri were stirring and came out of the

tent one after the other. Both used the facilities and Sally gave Jack a cup of coffee. She handed Sheri a bottle of water, since Sheri severely limited her caffeine intake.

Benji wound up the flashlight that had an AM/FM radio built in and tried the local news station. Sure enough, it was broadcasting. The news was all about the quake. Sally listened with the others as she started to put together a hot breakfast.

The area of destruction was broad, but not what Benji would attribute to 'The Big One'. It was certainly serious, but it could be incredibly worse, he knew. Out of the corner of his eyes, Benji noted several of the neighbors approaching. "Dad," he said softly.

Jack turned around and began to greet the people as they came up. Benji noted that some of them looked enviously at Sally's breakfast preparations.

"Looks like you made out okay," said Bill Bascombe. Benji didn't really care for him. It was always a hassle to get him to pay for Benji's lawn work.

"Considering," Jack replied. Benji noted the tightness in his father's jaws as he talked to Bill. His dad didn't like him much, either, apparently.

"Kitchen is kinda of trashed at my place. Reckon you could share a little with those that don't have it as good as you?"

Jack hesitated and looked at Sally. She gave an almost imperceptible nod. "If you want to get what you can from your house, we'd be glad to help prepare it," Jack said, looking back at Bill.

Bill frowned. Benji didn't like the look in his eyes. They suddenly looked mean, rather than just cynical. Jack continued before Bill could speak. "I'd be glad to help you get some things. It's not a good idea to go in these houses alone."

"I told you ours were a mess. Are you going to share, or not?"

"Easy, Bill," Jack said. "Of course we'll share, if someone can't contribute. For as long as our little stock of food holds out." Jack turned to Benji. "Check the cooler."

Benji made sure Bill got a look at the small amount of fresh food inside. He hated the feeling as he did so.

Several other people moved closer to get a look, too. "What are you going to do? That isn't enough for all of us," said another of the neighbors.

Benji was afraid his mother would mention the two-week supply he'd encouraged her to buy, but she didn't and Benji breathed a sigh of relief.

Jack faced the group and said, "If anyone has food that they can contribute, we'll try to get it cooked up for everyone."

"I have some," said Mrs. Saunders. She was a neighbor from three houses down. "But I would want it fixed just for me."

Bill turned a grim look on Mrs. Saunders. "Aren't you willing to share?"

"I only have a little." Mrs. Saunders cowered under Bill's accusatory glare.

"I have some," said another neighbor. "Should be enough to feed the street. I'd just bought groceries for the week and they'll go bad before I can use it all myself."

"Let's go," Bill said, not quite taking the man by the arm, though the inclination to do so was there.

People began to disperse, to get what they could, so the Harrison's could cook it. It didn't appear that anyone else on their street was equipped to prepare the food. Or willing. Not everyone on the street had shown up.

"Next time," Jack said, watching Bill walk away with the other man, "we set up in the back yard. I wanted to be out here to keep an eye on things, but... I didn't realize we had such neighbors."

"Nor I," Sally said. Sheri, Benji, and Jack all saw the tears in her eyes. "I... I... don't think anyone should say anything about the other food in the house," she said quietly. "I mean, I wouldn't turn away a child, or a pregnant woman. But we can't feed the world, can we?"

Firmly, Jack said, "No. Benji. Do you think it's safe to get your rifle and shotgun from your room?"

"Oh, Jack!" Sally said, worried eyes going to her husband. "Are you sure?"

"We'll keep them out of sight. But I want them where I can get to them. Benji, go get them."

When Benji returned a few minutes later, the cased long arms in their cases, he unobtrusively put them in the tent and uncased them. He loaded both and set more ammunition handy.

As soon as he came out of the tent he saw his father hurry around to the back of the house. He was back, having taken just enough time, Benji thought, to get to his and Sally's bedroom and back. He wondered about it for a moment, but the returning people drew his attention.

"What's that?" one of the children asked, pointing at the privacy shelter. "A privacy shelter for the chemical toilet," said Sheri.

"I have to go to the bathroom," the little girl said, tugging on her mother's arm.

“Do you mind?” the woman asked. “We had to go in the back yard last night and this morning. Gwen had a hard time.”

“Sheri,” Sally said, “Show Mrs. Handsett how the toilet works.” She cut her eyes up to Benji. “You think you can get a couple of rolls of toilet paper out of the bathrooms?”

Benji nodded and headed off to do so, well aware that his mother was aware of the several extra multi-packs of toilet tissue he’d talked her into buying that were in the garage.

It was after ten in the morning before people began trailing away from the Harrison’s place, having been fed and allowed to go to the bathroom in privacy. Benji had seen his father make sure that Bill saw that the ice chest was empty of any food, though there was plenty of ice left. Benji took the cooler back inside to the kitchen and moved the rest of the fresh food from the refrigerator and freezer to the ice chest. He took it outside, but left it out of sight.

They took turns taking naps, with two people up and alert, listening to the radio while the other two slept. There was talk of a rescue operation on the radio, but they saw nothing of it. They each took some time to go inside the house and begin moving important personal things out. Benji had told Jack he thought the house would be condemned and they wouldn’t be allowed in once the authorities showed up.

Jack discussed it with Sally, and then told Benji and Sheri to gather up the most important things to them and bring them outside. Jack and then Sally did the same thing in turn. They took another turn each, as more items came to mind. All took the time to pack a large suitcase and bring down their BOBs. Everything went into the back of Jack’s SUV, a dark grey Ford Excursion.

After talking it over with his parents, Benji set about moving all the stored food and other items useful for the situation just outside on the patio. He had one of the tarps he used for camping out and covered everything carefully.

Jack, Sally, and Sheri seemed surprised when people started drifting back to their house a little after noontime had passed. Benji wasn’t. Several people brought food to be prepared on the Harrison’s camp stove. Jack had to intervene several times when people that hadn’t brought anything objected to not getting some of the food that other people brought.

Benji saw the anger and tenseness in his father when Bill came up with a package of hamburger meat and the request to have hamburgers made and cooked for him, and him alone. It was a pound of meat and would easily have fed small burgers to five people, but Bill insisted on Sally making three patties, along with getting enough bread to make three burgers for himself. And complained about not having buns.

No fights developed, but it was close. As everyone drifted away again Jack and Sally put their heads together for a while. Benji and Sheri listened to the radio. More talk about some rescue work, but nothing in their area.

Jack headed for the house as Sally came over to join Benji and Sheri. Both listened carefully as she whispered the plan she and Jack had come up with. Benji was pleased. He wholeheartedly endorsed the plan.

Normally, according to most of the information he'd garnered from the internet forums, sticking at home after this type of event was the wisest choice. But Bill and the other neighbors were making that untenable.

Sally started the Excursion, which was normally kept in the garage, as was Sally's Subaru. It was sheer coincidence that it wasn't. Jack simply hadn't put the Excursion in the garage the evening before, since he was running a bit late to join the others for Sheri's birthday dinner.

After it started she turned it around and backed off the driveway, keeping it close to the side fence as she backed toward the back yard. When she stopped, Sheri and Benji began to load everything he taken out of the house and put on the patio. Sally went inside for a few moments and then Jack and Sally came out and began to help.

They took down the small camp in the front yard and loaded it. And then added all the camping gear from the garage shelves, and everything else any of them thought might be useful. Benji brought the water from his shed, and then the gas, much to the rest of the family's surprise. The water went inside the Excursion and the gasoline on a hitch platform. The rear of the Excursion was full, as was the roof rack.

When Jack pulled the Excursion forward, with everyone belted in, Bill was walking toward the house. He yelled and began to run toward them as Jack powered away down the street.

Once off their street, they saw the occasional tent set up in a yard, much as they had done, and all four wondered if they were having the same problems they'd had with neighbors.

Jack had to do some skillful driving to get around downed power poles once he got out of the residential development. And then there was quite a bit of weaving to avoid debris from a couple of larger buildings that had collapsed partially onto the street. From the reports on the radio, roads were buckled and nearly impassible, even in areas where there was no debris.

There were a few other vehicles moving, and the authorities were out in force. Jack was stopped a couple of times by Police, who cautioned him to be careful, but didn't stop him from continuing. There were other people that came out into the street to stop them. Most just wanted to know where they were going and if they could get a ride.

Jack had an easy time saying no, since the Excursion was loaded to the gills. Jack and the others, even Benji to a point, was surprised that so many people appeared angry, in addition to the standard, expected, reactions to the disaster, including grief and fear.

They managed to get out of town without incident, though it was slow going. As they traveled north Jack often had to put the Excursion in four-wheel-drive to get around uplifted or sunken areas of pavement that resulted in obstacles too high or too low for the SUV to cross.

When they approached the first bridge north of town Benji suggested they stop and inspect the bridge before they tried to cross it. It was obvious that they needed to stop when they got closer. One end of the bridge was down in the water.

“What about the Stevens?” Sheri suddenly said. They’ve got that pecan orchard. That wouldn’t be too bad to camp in.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jack said. “They are one of my customers. Let’s go see.”

Jack turned the Excursion around and headed south. He turned into the first dirt road to the west. About a mile in they came to the Stevens’ pecan orchard. Just before they turned into the driveway, Sally pointed out toward the farm field south of the road.

“It’s a sand blow,” Benji said. “I’ve read about them. Pressure from the ground waves force sand up and out. That’s why a lot of the fields around here have spots where things don’t grow as well as the rest of the field. Old sand blows. The sand just doesn’t have the nutrients that the rest of the topsoil has.”

Jack pulled to a stop on the gravel driveway. Harley Stevens was already coming out of the house. It didn’t look like it had suffered too much damage, compared to in town. He walked up to the Excursion as the family got out.

“What’s up, Jack? I’m surprised to see you out here.”

“Looking for a place to camp for a few days. Things got a little tense in town.”

Harley’s eyes widened. “Oh, yeah? That’s nuts. Why?”

“A lot of people don’t have food, or can’t get to it in destroyed houses. Ours wasn’t hit as hard, so we were able to get some food from the kitchen. We set up camp in the front yard and people saw us eating and wanted the lion’s share of what we had.

Harley looked a little strange. “Well, gee, Jack... I guess we could let you camp out in the orchard, but we don’t really have much ourselves. Not until FEMA gets here with the MRE’s and water. Power is off and we can’t get water.”

“Oh, we have what we need for a few days,” Jack said. He looked over at Sally and when she nodded he turned back and added, “Could spare a little water, too, if you need it.”

Harley’s eyes lit up then. “You could? Well, sure you can stay. Just pick a spot out in the orchard.”

Benji had been studying the orchard visible from the driveway. Some of the trees were standing at odd angles. "I think camping in the open would be better, Dad, Mr. Stevens. When we get another quake, some of the trees might come down. If we're camped among them..."

"You think there will be another one?" Harley asked, now looking worried.

Benji nodded and Jack said, "Benji has studied up on this. He knows what he's talking about."

"Well, I've got that section we just prepped prior to setting out saplings. You could use it." Harley walked toward the gate in the fence that separated the house lot and the orchard proper and opened it. "You do have to drive by this section to get to it. Is that okay?"

Jack and the rest of the family had reentered the SUV. Jack looked at Benji and Benji nodded. "No problem. As long as we don't get one as we go by." Everyone laughed. A little.

Harley followed along as Jack drove down the end of the orchard until he came to the section that had been prepared for the new trees. As soon as he stopped everyone got out and Benji began unload the camping gear.

"I really want to thank you for letting us..." Jack's words faded away as the ground began to shake.

It was much harder than any of the previous temblors. No one was able to stand on their feet, and with the crops barely out of the ground, they could see the wave motion of the earth moving to the north of them. Sheri let out a small scream when what Benji had explained just minutes earlier happened in the field just north of them. A huge sand blow had started. With thundering noise a column of watery sand fully ten feet in diameter shot into the air thirty or more feet.

It lasted for almost the full time the earthquake did, leaving a mound of sand a hundred feet in diameter and ten feet high in the center.

"That's the worst yet," Benji said, getting to his feet. The sand blow had startled him and he hadn't counted the time, but he estimated it at a little over a minute.

"The house!" Harley cried and turned to run back toward his house. Jack and the others followed suit. The earlier shocks had created little noticeable damage to the house, but this one compounded the unseen damage that had already been done.

Much like the Harrison's house, the Stevens' house was racked to one side. As they approached it they could hear cracking wood noises. Harley's wife Cecile staggered from the shattered front door, dragging the youngest Stevens, Angie, aged ten.

"Bradley! Where's Bradley?" Harley yelled.

Cecile was coughing from the dust of the building's partial collapse. "Still inside," she managed to say.

"Stay here," Jack said as he followed Harley into the house.

Benji went to turn off the valve of the propane tank that supplied the house, and then saw the old style electrical shut off mounted on the side of the outside wall. He pulled down the switch handle, not knowing if there was electrical power or not.

Then Benji went right up to the front door, but didn't go in. Sally and Sheri ran over to help Cecile and Angie. Both were on their knees, coughing and retching.

"Water," Sally said and Sheri moved like she did when she was running track. It was only a minute or so before she was to the Excursion and back, carrying a six-pack of bottled water.

Sheri helped Angie get a drink as Sally checked Cecile for injuries. She did the same to Angie when she found nothing major wrong with Cecile. Both drank the water gratefully.

Jack came running out of the house with Bradley Stevens slung over one shoulder. Harley and Benji were right behind him and helped Jack get Bradley down on the ground when they made it over to the women.

Bradley was unconscious. "I think his left arm is broken," Jack said, kneeling beside the boy.

"I'll get the first-aid kit," Benji said, and took off at a run.

Harley was hovering around, totally clueless as to what to do. "Will he be okay? Is he breathing? Shouldn't we call an ambulance?"

"We can try," Sally said, standing and taking Harley's arm to pull him away from the sight of his five year old son. Cecile had moved over to Bradley and was resting his head on her lap. Angie was sitting on her haunches, rocking and crying as Sheri tried to comfort her.

With her cell phone in hand, Harley watching intently, Sally tried 911. She got a busy signal. "We'll keep trying," she said gently. "But Jack has good first-aid training. We all do. And we have a good first-aid kit. Here is Benji with it."

Jack had checked Bradley's airway, and then his pulse, before doing the rest of the patient survey. It seemed the only serious injury was the broken arm and it wasn't a compound fracture. There were some bruises and cuts where the section of wall that had popped loose fell on him. There was a rising bump on the back of Bradley's neck.

Bradley began stirring and Jack quickly put a SAM splint on his arm so he wouldn't feel as much pain as he would if he was conscious. But Jack breathed a sigh of relief. He had started to worry about the unconsciousness. He checked Bradley's eyes with a penlight. They were even and both pupils constricted when the light hit them.

Pushing Jack's hand with the light away from him, Bradley groaned and then began to cry. Jack was able to get him to take a Tylenol with a sip of water, but that was the end of it. Having done all he could, Jack stepped back and let Bradley's family console him.

After a few minutes Jack touched Harley's shoulder. "Harley," he said, "We need to get some things out of the house for you, before another shake. Do you have any camping gear?"

"Trailer," Harley replied. "We have a camping trailer. In the old barn." He pointed to what had been a rather dilapidated structure before the earthquakes. From the looks of it, only the trailer inside was holding it up.

"Okay. We'll get it out, but later. Let's get everything from inside the house while we can." Reluctantly Jack let Benji help. Sally and Sheri were forbidden to go inside. But they did stand just outside the door and take things as they were handed out. Everything was piled out near where Cecile, Angie, and Bradley sat.

The ground began to shake again and Benji, Jack, and Harley ran out of the house and away from it. It was the shortest and lightest of the temblors so far, but it was enough to cause the house to slowly, and noisily, continue its tilt started before, until the west edge of the roof was on the ground, and the east side of the house was only five feet high. The north and south walls had buckled outward and lay on the ground in dozens of partially joined pieces.

Sally and Sheri went back to the Cecile, Angie, and Bradley. Cecile looked stunned. Angie and Bradley were still both crying, though quietly. Harley was looking at the ruins of his house in shock.

"Come on, Harley," Jack said, touching the man's arm. "We need to get your trailer out of the barn.

It seemed to shake Harley out of his shocked trance. "Yeah. Yeah. Let me get my truck."

Jack and Benji approached the collapsed barn carefully. It too had racked to one side. They gingerly moved the odd board here and there that had sprung free and threw them out of the way. Harley was backing his Dodge pickup toward the barn. When he got close he stopped and joined Jack and Benji. It took the three of them some time to struggle loose part of the wide, swing doors of the barn.

Jack was more than a bit doubtful about the decision, but Harley decided that enough was cleared for him to connect to the trailer and just pull it free. Benji looked at his father with a inquisitive look. All Jack could do was shrug. It was Harley's decision to make.

It worked, but the process did some minor damage to the twenty-four foot long tandem axle travel trailer. Harley pulled it out onto the driveway and stopped. Jack and Benji helped him get the support legs down and the trailer leveled after it was unhooked.

Fortunately the twin forty gallon propane tanks were both full. The deep discharge battery, however, had lost most of its charge while sitting. Jack had Harley back the Dodge close to the hitch and reconnected wiring harness so the truck alternator could supply power to the trailer and charge the battery.

The Harrisons helped move a few of the things removed from the house to the trailer. Mainly food items and a couple changes of clothes. Using a ladder hung on the outside of the barn, they braced the barn so Jack could duck in and grab a couple of tarps that Harley said were inside. The barn was still creaking and groaning, its falling down progressing slowly, so that was all Jack tried for.

They used the tarps to cover the rest of the Stevens' pile of things. Things calmed down finally, and Harley went over to Jack and shook his hand energetically. "I couldn't have done it without you. I'll never be able to repay you for what you've... you and your family have done."

"It's okay, Harley. You don't owe us anything." He looked over at the house. "I'm really glad you came to me for insurance. I don't see a problem getting a new start. I'm afraid it could be a few days before we can get an assessment team into the area."

He looked over at Sally. "Speaking of which, we need to get the camp set up and the truck unloaded so I can check on some of my other clients. They are going to need reassurance. Sally didn't look happy, but she nodded.

Harley shook Jack's hand again, but finally let go and Jack joined the rest of his family to help them set up the camp and unload the truck. It took a little more time to unload than it had to load.

To give the rest of the family more room, Benji set up his own tent to use for sleeping. He got the privacy shelter up and the chemical toilet placed. Jack had the folding table out and up, along with four folding camp chairs. The camp stove stand was next.

With the camp set, Sally, with Sheri's help, fixed a lunch while Jack and Benji sorted through their possession and organized them in some semblance of order. Sally continued to try 911 on her cell phone but continued to get the fast busy signal. Then, just before Jack was ready to leave, she got no signal.

"I think the cell service is down. All three of the other Harrisons tried their personal cell phone. It was the same on all of them. No signal. "Oh, Jack," Sally said, a worried look on her face. "There won't be any way to contact you if service doesn't come back up."

"I know, Honey. But I've got to try. My clients are going to be frantic."

"But will they even be able to get hold of you?"

"I'll try to go by everyone after I check the office. Assuming I can get there."

“Dad,” Benji said. He was filling the Excursion’s tank with fuel from the cans. “I don’t think you should take the extra fuel in with you. People might want it pretty badly.”

Jack nodded. “I’m afraid you might be right. Just fill me full and stash the other cans. Okay.”

“Okay, Dad. Dad, do you want me to go with you?”

Jack hesitated and Benji was sure he was going to say yes. But after that long pause Jack replied. “No, son. I don’t think so. I want you here to help and protect your mother, sister, and the camp. I’m beginning to think there could be some breakdown of the social order.”

Benji nodded. “I think you’re right. Like Mr. Bascombe.”

“As one example, I guess. Yes. Now, I want to check the radio before I go. See if there is any more news on when...”

There it was again. This time Benji thought the world might be coming to an end. He couldn’t even stay on his knees. Neither could any of his family. Lying curled up on the ground Benji counted the seconds and watch a half a dozen new sand blows spouting.

Though the jet wasn’t really close to them, sand from one of them blew over onto them. The ground was undulating like ripples in a pond. Benji quit counting when he reached one-hundred-twenty seconds and just lay there with his hands over his ears to protect them from the seeming endless roar.

But the earthquake finally quit. The Harrisons all slowly got up and looked around. Dozens of Stevens’ trees were down. The Stevens’ house was now just a pile of broken wood and shingles. So was the old barn.

It looked like the travel trailer had skidded into the back of the Dodge. The power lines and poles were all down now. Benji suddenly looked down at the ground. His feet had sunk almost an inch into what now felt like rubber when he moved.

“Benji?” Jack asked. He’d noticed the same thing.

The ground began firming up again as Benji replied. “Liquefaction. The ground just turns to jelly. Or more like quicksand. It’s all the water in the ground and the type of soil we have here. Some of the same reasons cause it as cause the sand blows.”

Jack nodded. They all ran over to check on the Stevens. They were terrified, but okay. The trailer wasn’t really damaged any more, nor was the truck where the hitch of the trailer had hit it.

The Harrisons went back to their camp and they began to clean up the camp. The table and chairs had overturned, as had the camp stove stand. But nothing was severely damaged.

They turned on the radio in the Excursion and tried one station after another. There were no regional stations on the air. Finally they picked up a news station out of Chicago. The newscaster's voice was quivering as he reported what was happening. The last earthquake in this series is being reported as a 10.7 on the Richter Scale, far higher than any projections from the experts.

"The earthquake was felt here in Chicago, up into Canada. Down to Texas, east to the Appalachians, with some areas even further east reporting ground shocks. The effects went as far west as the foothills of the Rockies. The entire midsection of the United States is affected.

"There are reports coming in about bridge failure after bridge failure." There was a long period of dead air and then the newscaster was speaking again, more quiver in his voice than before, if that was possible.

"I have been told every bridge crossing the Mississippi from Dubuque to New Orleans is down. The entire midsection of the US is without power. The President has declared a National Emergency and is in the process of Federalizing state National Guards. It is expected by our White House correspondent that Martial Law will be declared in the area very shortly.

Another short pause and the newscaster continued. "Here is more. The severe ground shocks have damaged many of the airports beyond use. It is becoming apparent that the recovery effort is going to be very difficult." He began to repeat what he'd already gone over and Jack turned the volume down.

"If I'm going, I'd better go," Jack said.

"After this?" Sally asked, near to tears.

"I'll be all right. If I run into any serious trouble I'll turn around and come back." He gave his wife and then both children hugs before he got in the Excursion and started it. Benji's eyes were wide while he watched his father drive away. As he was entering the SUV Jack's shirt had risen up and Benji had seen the automatic tucked behind the waistband of his trousers. His dad was definitely no sheep.

The rest of the family kept the windup radio/flashlight charged and the radio tuned in to the Chicago station. There was very little additional news. A blanket order for everyone in the area to boil their drinking water was issued. The order did not include bottled water. Then came the announcement that Martial Law had indeed been declared. Not just for the directly affected area, but for the entire nation.

Benji thought back to some of the posts on the preparedness forums to which he had become a regular visitor. Martial Law had some serious connotations, if it was abused. Which many people on the forums thought would happen.

An hour later Benji was digging a hole, in anticipation of the chemical toilet needing emptying. About the time he realized he could dump the chemical toilet in the Stevens' septic tank he looked up and saw his father walking toward the camp.

“Dad!” he called, dropping the shovel and running to meet him. “Dad! Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, son,” Jack said. “Just tired and feeling foolish.”

Sally and Sheri came out of the tent, where they’d been arranging things for a long stay. “Jack?” Sally asked. “What happened?”

“Oh, just four-wheel-driveitis.”

“What?” as Sheri.

“I never even thought about the Excursion not being able to cross one of the sand blows where it had covered the road. I got about thirty feet in and the Excursion started spinning. I tried gunning it, but I just sank deeper. Then I hit the brakes and tried to back out. No go. I’m going to have to dig it out.”

“Oh, Jack!” Sally said, trying to be sympathetic, but unable to control the small smile that curved her lips. “Men and their toys,” she thought, but didn’t say.

“I’ll help you Dad,” Benji said. Then with a sour look on his face he added, “I’ve been practicing.”

Jack didn’t catch on and didn’t ask.

“I’ll get the shovels,” Benji said, before turning around to get the D-handle round-point shovel he’d been using. His father was getting some water when Benji went to his equipment and took out Cold Steel Special Forces shovel. It was one of the items he’d seen evaluated on the internet and had picked it over the tri-fold military shovel for his use.

Together, Benji and Jack headed back toward the Excursion, Benji carrying his small pack with water bottles and a couple of Millennium food bars in it. This time Jack was carrying one of the six FRS radios Benji had bought, but forgotten to give out when Jack had left earlier. He was berating himself for his inattention, but Jack hushed him. “Come on Son. You’ve done more than the rest of us combined. If it wasn’t for you, we’d be at the house, out of food and water. Here we’ve got a fighting chance not only to get through this, but help people, too.”

“Okay, Dad. It’s just I hate forgetting things.”

“Me and you both,” Jack replied.

They walked silently until they got to the spot where the Excursion was stuck. “That sand is deceptive,” Jack said. “Gives way without warning.”

“Probably the water in it. Should we start here, or at the SUV?” Benji asked.

“I think at the Excursion. There is a chance that if we can dig out enough to get a good running start, I can back it out without digging out the whole track.”

Benji nodded and headed for the SUV. His dad was right. He stayed on the surface at first, but then his feet began sinking into the sand as it got thicker.

It took three hours to dig enough sand from behind and under the Excursion before Jack was willing to try to get the SUV out of the sand blow. Benji stood well out of the way as his father made the attempt. It was partially successful. He got over halfway out before getting out of the incoming tracks and miring up again.

“I’m sorry, Benji,” Jack said when he got out of the Excursion. “I couldn’t keep it straight.”

“That’s okay, Dad. It shouldn’t take much more to get it out.” And indeed it didn’t. Another thirty minutes of digging and another backward run of the Excursion and it was out. A bit wearily Benji loaded the shovels in the SUV and Jack turned it around and headed back to the camp.

“It’s too late to try to get back to town,” Jack said. “I’ll try again tomorrow morning. And drive a little smarter.”

Benji smiled at the humbleness in his father’s voice. Benji raised the FRS radio to his lips and called his mother. They were in range and Benji told her they were on their way back.

“Come on, Sheri. Let’s get dinner started for them. Benji sounded really tired.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, and signs of destruction all around them, the evening was rather enjoyable for them. It had been quite some time since they’d been camping and they were enjoying the time together.

The only bad part of the evening was the news broadcast they listened to. More and more reports had come in of massive destruction all over the Missouri/Mississippi River basin. Literally thousands of bridges were down, from wood deck bridges over local streams and ditches to all the major concrete and steel bridges over the larger streams and rivers. That included almost all of the railroad bridges, too, as well as highway overpasses.

With all but a couple of minor airfields unusable with distorted runways, the only incoming help was in helicopters. And there just weren’t that many immediately available.

Benji perked up at one report of a Marine detachment with AAV7A1 amphibious personnel carriers that would be used as amphibious trucks to move emergency workers and supplies across the rivers to the affected areas, and take survivors out.

But Benji knew it was going to be too little, too late. This was the big one. There was just too much area to cover. It was going to be a thousand times worse than Katrina in many ways. The thought suddenly came to him about four or five reports he’d read on the internet about

internment camps all around the US. Benji decided to keep the thought to himself. For the moment.

The night went fairly well, with only on minor temblor to disturb the family. Sally and Jack were up before Sheri and Benji. When Benji came out of his tent the two quickly stopped their conversation and started preparing breakfast. Benji wondered what they had been talking about, but just shrugged. "Grownup stuff," he thought to himself.

With breakfast over and everything cleaned up, Jack said, "Well, I'm off to give it another try. Benji looked at his mother, who stayed silent. Benji suddenly decided that was probably what his parents had been talking about.

"You want me to go, Dad?" Benji asked.

"Maybe," came the answer that surprised Benji. "With the problems yesterday, after the Big One, I could probably use an extra pair of eyes to look out for trouble. I need an honest answer. Do you think you can do that?"

Solemnly, for his parents were placing a great deal of trust in him, Benji said, "Yes, Sir. I'm sure I can."

"Well go ahead and get ready. I'll start the Excursion."

Benji grabbed several things from the gear beside and inside his tent and added them to his small pack. He came out of the tent carrying the Ruger 10/22. Sally and Jack exchanged a quick glance, and then Jack said, "Keep it out of sight."

Benji nodded, put the rifle behind the front passenger seat where he could reach it if need be. He put his pack on the seat behind him and then climbed into the front passenger seat and buckled up.

"Okay, Dad," he said through the open window. "I'm ready. Did you get some water?"

"Oh. Uh... no. Hang on a minute."

Sally handed him a couple bottles of water, with an amused smile. "Got your keys?" she asked.

Jack looked startled for a moment, but then leaned down and gave his wife a kiss. "Yes. I have the keys." He got in the Excursion and headed for the spot where he'd been stuck. He stopped well clear of the edge of the sand that covered the road to a height of almost five feet. The sand blow was only thirty feet or so off the road.

"What do you think, Benji?" his father asked as they looked at the blocked road.

“I think we should check it. The edges might have dried out enough to be solid.” Benji got out of the SUV and took his walking staff from the gear he’d put on the rear seat. He had a rope with him, too.

“Here, Dad,” he said, after leaning the staff against the SUV. “I’m going to tie into the rope so if something happens you can drag me back.”

“Benji, if you think it’s that dangerous, I don’t know if I want you doing this. Perhaps I should go.”

“Dad, you can pull me back a lot easier than I could you. I don’t think it’s a big risk, but I want to be careful. Get in the habit of doing things safely. Because we might hit situations that are dangerous.”

Jack thought about it for a bit and then nodded his head. Benji finished tying the rope around his waist. Benji had the rope done up chain fashion and it was easy for Jack to pay it out as Benji approached the sand.

Benji went down to the edge of the shoulder of the road and probed the sand. It seemed firm. He walked out on it, using the staff to probe in front of, and to both sides of his path. As the sand got thicker the staff started to sink an inch or two at times.

Benji turned around. “I don’t think the Excursion will make it, Dad.” He trudged back, his father keeping the rope out of Benji’s way. “We’re going to have to go around it,” Benji said when he got back to his father.

“I don’t know, Benji,” Jack said, looking around the flat farmland, now mounded here and there with the sand blows.

“I don’t think the owners will mind if we cut across the field. There is a way to get in back just a ways.”

“You know how important the crops are going to be, Benji? I hate to damage any...”

Benji didn’t say anything and let his dad work it out in his own mind. Finally Jack said, “Okay. Let’s give it a try.”

Benji left the rope tied and carried the excess looped over one shoulder as he got in the SUV. Jack turned it around and they backtracked to the ditch crossing that gave access to the field that was just showing the light green of soybeans coming up.

After they crossed the ditch Benji had his father stop. “I’d better probe the way until we get back on the pavement. There could be soft spots. You can hold the end of the rope while you drive and I walk.”

Jack didn’t particularly like it, but Benji seemed willing. And he did have the rope tied to him. He nodded and Benji got out of the Excursion. He walked around in front of it and handed

his father the free end of the rope. Staff in hand, Benji started walking, paying the line out as he went.

When he had the entire line laying behind him, He started probing, and Jack drove slowly behind him, slow enough to keep from running up on the rope. Jack stopped when Benji did and watched his son as he probed around what turned out to be a soft, wet spot in the field.

Benji angled well out to go around it and then turned back to the field road at the ends of the rows of soybeans. Jack followed him carefully. He had to look hard to see the difference in the section of ground Benji had decided to go around. But there it was. The sure signs of water near the surface of the ground. If the Excursion had tried to go through it, chances were he would have been stuck again. There was no telling if there was a solid bottom to the area or how deep the Excursion might have gone.

Benji stopped on the pavement after crossing the ditch from the field on the other side of the sand blow. He gathered up the rope again as his father drove the Excursion up to the pavement.

Jack continued down the pavement after Benji got back inside the SUV. They were able to travel some way before the pavement was buckled too badly for them to cross the raised edge. Benji got out of the Excursion and walked the shoulder and ditch around the blockage. It would hold the Excursion just fine.

They used the same method to get to the very edge of town. There were people here and there and just about every one of them called out to ask about the road to the north. Faces fell when Jack told them the bridge was out.

Jack was able to maneuver around the debris on the streets to get to his office. It had not fared well. When he tried to enter, by moving the broken door out of the way, debris shifted and a cloud of dust came blowing out.

"It's too dangerous, Dad!" Benji said, grabbing his father's arm to stop him from trying to enter the building again.

The three people waiting nearby all said the same thing. "Come on, Jack," said Roland Weaver. "I wanted to check on my insurance, but you can't go in there."

Jack sighed. "I really wanted to be able to work on the paper files. I have my laptop and I keep backups of the files on it. I can answer questions and such, but that's about all I'm going to be able to do until I can get hold of the individual insurance companies."

Roland said, "That's good enough. I don't see how we could ask for more. I'm just curious. Am I covered for any of this? House and barn look worse than your office. Assuming I can get running again, I'm going to lose half of my crops for sure. All of them if I can't get started up again."

Apparently word of mouth information about Jack being at his office spread. Even people that didn't carry insurance with him came walking up to ask his opinion on their insurance. Jack explained everything he could, Benji staying in the background.

It satisfied some. But not others. "Dad," Benji whispered in Jack's ear, "it looks like people are getting mad at you for no reason. Maybe we should leave."

Benji saw the reluctance in his father. He was an honorable man and wanted to serve his insurance clients in any way he could. But the small crowd was getting ugly, demanding to know when they would get insurance checks. They were even asking Jake about where FEMA and the National Guard were, as if it was his fault they weren't there.

Roland stepped up to Jack and said almost the same thing as Benji had, suggesting Jack leave before real trouble started. Jack nodded and closed the laptop. With a nod at Benji to get into the Excursion, Jack stood up and said, "I'm afraid that is all I can do until I get help from the Insurance Companies Headquarters. I'll try to get the information to you as soon as I can."

There were boos and catcalls from several people in the crowd. Jack saw Bill Bascombe. He was egging things on. Jack got into the Excursion as Roland tried to calm the crowd down. When Jack drove away the Excursion was pelted with pieces of rubble some in the crowd had picked up from the brick office wall that had crumbled.

Driving faster than he probably should, Jack got them away from his office. He suddenly slowed down and looked over at Benji. "You all right?"

Benji nodded.

"I guess your mother was right. I didn't accomplish much at all."

"But you tried, Dad. Doesn't look like many people are doing anything but wait for help."

"That may be what we have to do."

Benji didn't say anything, but he was coming up with a plan. He thought on it as his father retraced the route they'd taken in, to get back to the Stevens Farm.

Shake, Shake, Shake – Chapter 2

That evening, after supper, and after Sheri had gone to bed, Benji asked to talk to his mother and father. They naturally agreed and the three sat down around the camp table, in the faint light of the moon.

“You know, I did lots of studying on preparedness to get my merit badge.”

“Of course you did,” Sally said. “And we’re certainly glad you did. Your knowledge has really helped us all during this.”

“I know, Mom. I wasn’t looking for praise. It’s about some of the other things I learned.”

“Like what, Son? You sound very serious,” Jack asked.

“According to some of the information I ran across was the speculation that the government has set up refugee camps and...”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Sally asked, her face brightening.

“Well... Some people think they’ll be more like concentration camps. Sure, a place to put refugees, but also a place to put anyone that doesn’t go along with everything the government does under Martial Law.”

Again Sally spoke up. “Oh, Honey! I think you may have fallen in with some very suspicious type people. There are always these conspiracy type people that say all kinds of bad things about the government. If any camps do exist, I’m sure they are for refugees like us.”

Jack spoke up then, his voice soft. “I don’t know, Sally. I’ve no reason to doubt that the camps exist. But Benji may have a point about them turning into concentration camps. You didn’t see what happened today.”

“You said it was no big deal,” Sally replied.

“I know. And in and of itself, I really didn’t think it was. But if what Benji is saying is true, the possibility of abuses is almost a sure thing. If they start rounding up people, for their own good, they will wind up taking people like us.”

“But, if they have food and water and shelter...” Sally said, her words trailing away, a perplexed look on her face, even in the moonlight.

“But what if they don’t have enough? Or get some hotshot military guy that wants to get some glory. Or a pencil pusher like me that tries to save every dime for the boss, in this case, the government. Gruel three times a day...”

“Oh, it wouldn’t be like that! MRE’s at the worst!” Sally tried to laugh, but couldn’t.

"I think we have two options. Neither one very good," Benji said.

Both his parents looked at him, waiting.

"The first is we try to get out of the affected area. Mom, your family in Colorado would take us in, wouldn't they?"

"Of course they would. They must be frantic to find out about us! I didn't think about them until you brought it up."

"Go on, Benji," Jack said.

"But I'm really afraid we'd never make it and would wind up in one of the camps, anyway. There are so many rivers and streams to cross. We were barely able to make it into town on the road. I don't think there is any way to get there in the Excursion. That leaves being on foot, unless we can buy or trade for some bicycles. And making river crossings would still be a problem. It just not a very viable plan."

"You said you had another?" Jack asked.

"That's to hunker down, cache everything but enough to get by on a day at a time. And wait for the round up. Assuming the worst, going in, maybe we can avoid the worst. Get on good work details. Maybe even ones where we can be together."

"What do you mean, where we can be together?" Sally asked, alarm in her voice.

"From what I read, they are barracks style places. They split up the families. Men in one, women in another. May even split it down with male teens separated and female teens also in separate barracks."

"Oh, Jack! No! That can't be true, can it?" She looked at Jack frantically.

"I don't know, Sally. I just don't know. I don't think Benji is just trying to scare us. It is information he got from the internet. It is always questionable."

"Then it isn't true," Sally said firmly. "I just won't believe it."

Benji looked at his dad for support, but Jack shook his head slightly. "That's the two options, Benji?"

"Well... There is one other, I guess. Stay and hide out. Live off the land. Salvage things from abandoned buildings. Hunt. Fish. My water purifier will clean enough water for months of use. I just don't think we can do it. We'd certainly be declared outlaws. Even things that are just going to be bulldozed anyway, if we take them first, will still be considered looting."

"We are not going to loot!" Sally was adamant. She was also quite visibly upset. Benji drew away and went to his tent to leave his mother and father to work something out.

Benji was up early the next morning. He'd actually slept very well. If there had been another quake he hadn't felt it. His father was already up, making coffee. "Is Mom okay, Dad? I didn't mean to upset her last night..."

"It's all right, Benji. It's not really your fault. It's the whole situation. She put a lot of herself into the house and her business. You saw the place when we passed. Worse than my office. I had just told her about that when you asked to talk to us."

"Well, I'm sorry, anyway." Benji said. He went about helping make breakfast, using the last of their fresh food. It was ready when Sally and Sheri came out of the tent. It was a quiet meal, as they listened to their only source of information. The windup flashlight/radio combo.

Sally looked over at Benji when the newscaster began reading off a list of sites for people to report to, within the stricken area. It was basically a list of Wal-Mart retail stores. People were advised to bring only ID, a change of clothes, toiletries, plus all the food and water they could carry. Absolutely no alcohol; tobacco; or weapons of any type, including knives with a blade of more than two inches.

Those unable to reach the named camps due to the unavailability of transport were to stay where they were and wait for military transportation. There would be no relief rations or supplies airdropped or delivered in any other manner. It was go on your own, or wait for transport. Everyone hearing the message was to pass it on, word of mouth.

"Jack," Sally said, "There are people that won't have enough food to wait. I mean, if it wasn't for Benji, we would be out of food as of this morning. Why aren't they bringing in help?"

"I don't know, Sweetheart, but that sure sounded like an official broadcast. I'm not sure why the President hasn't addressed the nation."

"Daddy?" Sheri asked, a quiver in her voice.

"It'll be all right, Baby," Jack said.

Sally took Sheri in a protective hug. "It will, Sheri. It will."

"Why Wal-Marts?" Benji asked.

"I'm sure it is because they have plenty of space," Sally said. "You know. Those big parking lots. And they let RV's park there. And... I don't know. I'm sure there are plenty of good reasons."

Benji had his doubts, but he'd upset his mother enough.

“It isn’t that far to the Wal-Mart,” Jack said. “We’d have to leave the Excursion, and then wade or swim the river... Wouldn’t be able to take all the food, but if we leave our camping gear behind...”

Benji began cleaning up after the breakfast, thinking all the while. Then, with Sheri doing her exercises to stay in shape and Sally taking some quiet time in the tent alone, Benji went over to his dad. Jack was doing a mental inventory of their supplies.

“Dad? Can I talk to you a minute?”

“Sure, Benji. What is it?” Jack sat down on the ice chest.

Benji started pacing. Something he’d never done before. “Dad, I’m worried about going to Wal-Mart.” He saw Jack start to protest, so quickly continued. “I think we should go. But I think it would be a good idea to cache our stuff before we get there and just go in with the clothes on our backs and ID. From what I read on the internet, there is a big chance the authorities will just take everything we bring for general use.”

“Benji, don’t you think that is a pretty good idea? If enough people bring enough food there would be enough for everyone to share.” Jack suddenly got a startled look on his face. “Lot of ifs, though, huh?”

“I think so, Dad. And what if we decide we don’t want to stay. If we could get away, we’d have our equipment and supplies where we could get to them.”

“Benji, you keep making this sound like it is going to be prison.”

Benji stopped pacing and faced his father. “I think it will be, or so close you won’t know the difference if you’re inside the fence rather than outside.”

“Wal-Mart’s don’t have fences...” Jack’s voice was hopeful. Benji didn’t respond. “Let me think about this and talk it over with your Mom.” As he got up from the ice chest he asked Benji, “Would you sort our equipment and supplies? Using your assumptions?”

Benji nodded. He made a point to steer clear of the big tent. It was obvious his mother and father were having an argument. He just hoped his father won. With everything sorted, Benji got the shovel again and began to enlarge the hole he started earlier. It was for a different reason, now. If his father went along with Benji’s suggestions, it would be a cache of most of their supplies.

It was over an hour before Jack and Sally came out of the tent. Benji and Sheri could both tell their mother had been crying. Jack said, “I’m going to go talk to the Stevens. See if they heard the news.”

“Sweetie,” Sally said to Sheri, “Could you help me get the tent cleared and the sleeping bags rolled up?” She looked over at Benji, a sad look on her face. “You’d better break down your camp, too, Benji.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Benji said quietly. His mother was not happy with him.

Jack came back a few minutes later, alone. “I told him we were walking out. They’re staying. They did hear the broadcast and believe FEMA will come to the town to get them out. Harley is hooking up the trailer now. They’ll probably leave before we do. He said it would be all right to leave the Excursion here.”

Almost silently the Harrison family went about packing up. With a heavily loaded pack each set aside, all four helped line the cache hole with a tarp and put the rest of the supplies in it. Benji folded the tarp over the bundle and began to back fill the hole. He packed the fill down by stepping on it repeatedly and spread the extra dirt around the area. The first wind or rain and the spot wouldn’t be visible. To add to the security Jack parked the Excursion over the spot.

With Benji and Jack in the lead, carrying the empty ice chest, the family headed across the open fields to the first spot they would have to cross water. They developed the system they would use repeatedly to cross the bridgeless drainage ditches and streams on the route to the nearest Wal-Mart.

Jack and Benji would strip down to their shorts and ferry the packs two at a time across the water in the large ice chest. It would float even with two of the packs in it. Then as Benji got dressed, Jack would escort Sheri and then Sally across the water. Benji was waiting with dry clothes for the women to change into, as he and Jack kept their backs to them.

There were even a few cases where, though a bridge had collapsed, the family was able to make its way across on the remains of the bridge without even getting their feet wet. It seemed to Benji that many of the ditches and streams were carrying only a fraction of the water they normally did.

They camped early that evening. It had been a demanding day and would be so the next. They’d seen a few people traveling the same way they were, but everyone seemed leery about getting too close to anyone else. It suited Benji. He didn’t want a repeat of that first morning when Bill Bascombe started causing trouble.

Fortunately the land in Southeast Missouri is relatively flat, and with many of the tree rows downed by the quakes, Jack could see well ahead of their path most of the time. When he saw people starting to group up in the distance he quickly led the family off onto a side road.

“Benji,” he said, “If we’re going to follow your plan, this is where we’d better stop and cache the rest of our stuff.”

Sally said nothing, but stood stiffly out of the way as Jack and Benji took turns digging two holes. One for the ice chest and the other for another tarp covered cache. Everything went into one or the other, except for the day’s food Sally insisted on keeping out, and a few bottles of water, which went into Benji’s small pack, which he’d carried empty inside his big pack.

With the ice chest hole covered and the tarp cache almost covered, Benji laid the Cold Steel shovel in the hole with the tarp cache and finished filling it with his hands. He and Jack compacted the ground and scuffed it up with their feet to blend it in with the surrounding ground.

“Make a mental note where this is,” Benji said, putting on his small pack. Jack and Sally in the lead now, hand in hand, the family went to join the small group of people on the main road into town.

When they got closer they could see the camouflage uniforms of military personnel, though there were no vehicles in sight. They did see a couple of large helicopters fly over the area. Benji thought they landed nearby, by the way the sound changed and then cut off.

The first thing Benji noted, besides the camouflage uniforms, was the fact that all the military personnel were armed, mostly with M-4 carbines. They appeared to be loaded. The soldiers sure handled them like they were loaded, Benji decided.

For the moment, all the soldiers were doing was directing people along the route they wanted them to go. They were close to the Wal-Mart. As they got closer, more and more people around them began to look uneasy. There were commotions in front of them rather often.

When they were close enough, Benji and his family saw why. Some people were objecting to having their possessions taken. Obviously many had brought much more than instructed.

Then a real altercation broke out and half a dozen soldiers tackled the man and his family that were trying to turn around and leave. Benji saw his mother pale when one of the officers, Benji couldn't tell which, bellowed, “You come here, you follow orders or else!”

Sally moved close to Jack and he put his arm around her shoulder. Benji saw the scared look on Sheri's face and did the same for her. “It's okay,” he whispered.

When the family got to the check point in front of the entrance to the Wal-Mart, Benji's bag was dragged from his back even as he attempted to take it off. Two soldiers opened it and tossed the food in a bin behind him. The water went into another, the clothing in a third, and the bag in a fourth.

“Empty your pockets,” came a barked order. Jack and Benji hastened to comply. Benji had made sure he'd cached his good knife. He still had a Swiss Army penknife. Its blade was well under two inches. A soldier took it anyway and tossed it into a five gallon pail that contained similar items.

Sally and Sheri, both in jeans, were a bit slow to comply and soldiers tugged them aside and went through their pockets. At least they were searched by women soldiers. Benji wasn't sure it made that much difference to his father. Jack had a very angry look on his face.

Then all four were ushered forward, gone over with a metal detecting wand and then patted down. Benji could tell his father was using all his self control not to do something. Sally was shaking and near tears. Sheri was crying quietly.

But they made it past that point without Jack doing anything. As soon as they stepped inside the Wal-Mart they were separated into different lines. It was just as Benji had suggested. Men over eighteen in one line, pregnant women and women with children under thirteen in one line, other women over eighteen in a line, teen girls in yet another line, and finally teen boys in a line.

“Mother!” cried Sheri, attempting for a moment to get to her mother. She was yanked back in line.

A grim face soldier, at least six and a half feet tall and weighing two-fifty growled at Sheri. “Behave little girl, or you’ll wish you had.”

Jack couldn’t take it. He started to rush the man, but Benji, one line over, grabbed him. “Don’t Dad! Please! They’ll hurt you. We have to be calm.”

Jack, still staring at the big soldier, stepped back into his line. “Take care, pappa,” the soldier said. “What you do affects your family.”

Cutting his eyes down, as hard as that was to do, Jack moved forward as the line did. He was the first to reach one of the checkout stands, coming from the outside rather than the other way. There was a machine sitting on the bagging counter. As the operator asked for a name, date of birth, and social security number, the information was typed in and then a tiny pellet came out of the side of the thing.

Another soldier picked it up wearing latex gloves, inserted it into an injection needle, which was inserted into Jack’s right shoulder. Another step and a hand scanner was waved over the injection point. The soldier spoke a single word after looking at the register display. “Good.”

Apparently the process wasn’t completely perfect. Jack heard a “Bad.” behind him as he followed those ahead of him. He looked back, but was shoved forward by one of the soldiers forming the corridor for his line. “No concern of yours. Move on.”

Jack strained to see ahead, to see if the separated families were being rejoined at some point. It didn’t look like it. There wasn’t. Jack continued to follow the line and in one of many screened areas, was made to strip, get sprayed down, apparently for lice or something, and was handed a simple jumpsuit to wear and a pair of flip-flops.

He seethed inside, knowing his wife and daughter were going through the same thing. Benji, he knew, would hold up all right. He’d thought about this apparently and suspected what was happening would happen.

When they exited the building through the second entrance, there were several waiting helicopters. Again the groups were kept separate as they were loaded onto the helicopters. When

one group of helicopters were loaded, they took off. A few minutes later another group would land for their load.

Jack wasn't sure how long they flew, or exactly where they flew to. The helicopter had made several turns. They might be only a few miles from the Wal-Mart where they were processed. It was getting dark when they landed, but the area was lighted by searchlights on tall observation towers flanking the entrance to the double fenced compound.

Jack saw the razor wire on top of both of the chain link fences and cringed. There were military K-9 units patrolling the area between the two parallel fences. When it was their turn to be unloaded, they were marched single file between two rows of armed soldiers leading from the helicopter to the compound.

When Jack passed through the double gate his shoulder was scanned and he was told, "Barracks Nineteen. If you are found anywhere else in the next twelve hours and you will be disciplined." It was said in a drone. The man was saying it to every man passing him. Only the Barracks number changed.

Jack was directed by another pair of armed soldiers down the line of one of the groups of barracks he could just make out in the reflected light from the searchlights and other lights around the perimeter of the compound.

"Concentrate on your own barracks," said one of the soldiers that saw him looking around. "The rest of the compound is of no concern of yours until tomorrow morning."

When he reached the long barracks building numbered nineteen, there were five soldiers inside. "Take any bunk tonight. You'll be assigned a permanent one tomorrow." Jack couldn't help but shiver at the word 'permanent'. It had really bad connotations.

He wondered how the rest of his family was doing and tried to figure out some way to contact them. He was sure they were here in the same compound, as one of the helicopters in his group had carried some of the women from the same Wal-Mart. It wasn't until the early hours of the morning that Jack finally fell asleep, still wondering how his family was doing.

Sally, Sheri, and Benji had gone through the same procedures as had Jack. Sally stoically, constantly worried about Sheri. Sheri cried most of the time, but carefully followed orders after the first incident she'd had with the big soldier. Both kept strictly to themselves.

Benji was also careful to follow the instructions, but he constantly looked around, trying to learn everything he could about the place. But he was careful not to look anywhere for very long, having seen others reprimanded for doing so. He quietly talked to any of the other male teens that would talk to him, trying to find out exactly where they were.

Also like Jack, they all went to bed hungry. At least there had been a water fountain in the barracks, along with a multi-toilet bathroom with a large hand washing station. There were no stalls.

The following morning sirens sounded the wakeup call at five o'clock. Each of the Barracks occupants were marched to one of two large mess halls in turn for a simple breakfast of oatmeal, a carton of milk, and a carton of juice. There was no extra butter, no toast, no coffee, no tea. Only the oatmeal, milk, and juice.

When breakfast was over everyone was marched back to the barracks they used the night before. Then, one Barrack full at a time they were marched to an administration building. Right arms were scanned and clerks began getting additional information from each person. The data was entered into a computer, the implant scanned again to add the additional information, and the individual was given a new Barrack and Bed assignment. Each one of the Harrisons asked about seeing the other members of their family. Each got the same basic answer. "Not my department."

Once the individual was processed they were sent out into an exercise yard to wait until everyone had been processed. Finally, slowly, one person at a time, the individuals were sent to their new Barracks and told to settle in and wait for the evening meal. There would be no noon meal.

There was no end of speculation about the future among the occupants. Some were indignant about the situation. There were a few that were thankful to be where they were, having been in the process of becoming starvation victims without help from somewhere. Others, like Jack and Benji, constantly watched quietly, waiting for any opportunity to contact their other family members.

Those that tried to buck the system were dealt with harshly. Usually tackled by four or more soldiers, they were taken down and worked over with nightsticks for several blows, then yanked to their feet and marched/carried off somewhere that was yet to be determined by those that saw the altercations. So far, none of those that had received the treatment had returned.

Suddenly, just before six in the evening, the PA speakers that were mounted all over the areas of the compound that any of the occupants had seen, came to life. "Attention. Attention."

Another voice came on then. "This is Colonel James Arcadia, in command of this facility. My staff and I welcome you to this camp. Be assured, that if you follow the rules, you will be well cared for during the earthquake crisis. I know some of the rules seem unnecessary, but all the rules are for your own good, and to make this camp run as smoothly and safely as possible for the duration of the crisis. Beginning tomorrow, those willing to work will be given the chance to help their fellow citizens of the camp. Enjoy your evening meal."

The evening meal turned out to be an MRE, no choice of which meal. There was some attempted trading, but the soldiers spaced around the dining hall quickly discouraged the practice.

One of the conversations the Harrison family had conducted on the way to the Wal-Mart, was what jobs they would try to get, if that opportunity arose. Sally and Sheri would volunteer for the kitchen. So would Jack and Benji, in hopes of being able to work together, as slim of a hope as that was.

It turned out they didn't have a choice. Soldiers went down the lines of bunks the next morning, after reveille, with everyone standing at the end of their bunk. They assigned a job to an individual. If the individual protested, the soldier would make an entry on the handheld scanner each carried and scan the person's implant. When asked what was happening the soldier just went to the next person.

Out of pure coincidence, Sally and Sheri were picked for kitchen duty. They met at the kitchen and shared quick hugs. The scene drew the eyes of the soldiers and the two quickly stepped apart and whispered back and forth quietly, keeping their faces forward until they were given instructions on what to do.

Jack got the unenviable job of digging holes outside the compound. It suddenly dawned on him that he and the rest of the men with him under guard were digging graves. Jack put it out of his mind.

Probably one of the worst jobs was cleaning the bathrooms in each barrack and the common shower rooms. Benji was tagged for that job, among many of the other male teens from different barracks. There was much outcry and many of the teens had their chips updated, again without any specific explanation. It slowly dawned on everyone that those that caused trouble of some sort were the ones getting tagged. Benji was careful to remain calm and collected, but didn't want to look too eager. Not that he was eager to clean bathrooms, but he wanted to get on the guards' good sides.

The good attitude seemed to pay off. One of the friendlier looking of the guards whispered to Benji, "Don't worry. Once there are enough infractions of the rules, you won't have to be doing this."

Benji got the message loud and clear. Keep on the good side and you got the good jobs. Cause trouble and you got the rough details. Benji worked hard, keeping his mouth shut, just about the only one of the teen boys that wasn't complaining the entire time.

The worst of the offenders, the ones that slacked off on the work as well as complaining, had their chips updated. Then, to Benji's dismay, he was asked to step out of the line. His chip too was updated. But the soldier quietly said, "Good job today, son."

Apparently you could get good marks if you did what they wanted, plus more, and didn't complain. Benji felt a bit like a goody two shoes, but decided to continue to try and keep on the good side of the guards. He vowed silently to himself that he wouldn't become a Quisling and get others in trouble. He'd only do what he could to make it better for himself, and hopefully his family, without causing anyone else grief. Benji knew it was going to be a fine line to walk.

The family hadn't met that morning on the food line, since Sally and Sheri were both working in the kitchen area, mostly washing dishes. But for the evening meal, again an MRE, they were in the line handing them out. It was all each could do not to break ranks and hug each other when first Jack, and then Benji passed the two.

Quick 'how are you' and 'I'm okay' phrases were passed back and forth and that was it, except for huge smiles on each of their faces.

That evening, when it was time for showers, Benji had to admire his work. The shower he used was spotless. It was one he'd cleaned. He watched for his dad as the teen boys filed out and the adult men filed in, but it was a different barracks.

Life settled into a routine for the next two weeks. The trouble makers wound up doing the dirty jobs, or staying in the close confines of the punishment cells. The Harrisons continued to work anytime they were picked for a job.

It turned out to be counter productive to volunteer and ask for specific jobs. All four Harrisons saw it happen to others before they tried it themselves and so saved themselves from demerits, which is what people had started calling the quick to happen chip updates when a person did something a guard didn't like. There weren't that many positive marks given and they were usually given in an unobtrusive setting.

Jack was regularly picked to do the grave digging. Though it was only the second time he was doing it, he saw that some of the graves were filled back in. There had been no mention on the PA system about anyone dying. When a guard saw him looking at the filled graves he suggested, forcefully, that Jack forget what he'd seen. It would not be good if the information got around. Jack just nodded.

Sunday of the second week their interment the Harrisons all got a welcome surprise. They were all called forward individually and sent to one of the buildings they'd not been in before. It was for the purpose of a family visit. There were hugs all around, some crying, and plenty of 'how are you holding up?' questions.

Not long into the visit Sally put her hands on Benji's shoulders. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Benji. Your warnings were right on the mark. I simply couldn't believe it."

"That's okay, Mom," Benji said, giving his mother a hard hug. "I wish I'd been wrong."

"I wonder why we were allowed to see one another," Sheri asked. "I know lots of separated families are asking for time like this."

"I think it is because we are all behaving the 'proper' way. Doing our jobs and not causing trouble."

"I think Benji is right," Jack said. "I know how hard it is to accept things, even when they are happening to others, but that is what we must do to get through this whole and healthy."

Jack lowered his voice. "Benji, have you seen or heard anything that might aid us in getting out of here? The right way or... escape?"

Benji shook his head sadly. "Security is just too good. The risk of getting seriously hurt is too high. I'm just hoping those with lots of good merit points get chosen to leave first."

“You think that might be possible?” Sheri asked breathlessly.

“I don’t really know. It’s more of a hope than a real feeling.”

“Oh.”

“But it is something we can hope for to keep up our spirits,” Sally said, hugging Sheri again.

From the guards’ movements it was obvious that the visit was coming close to ending. It had been fifteen minutes, Benji noted, according to one of the few clocks he’d seen. There was one in the visiting area.

The group broke up and left without fuss when the guard put her head in the door and said, “Time’s up.”

One night, a month into the interment, Jack and Benji both woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of gunshots nearby. Sally’s barrack and Sheri’s barrack were both well away from the gate and neither heard the commotion or knew about it until the next morning.

The information was sketchy the next morning, but apparently a group of men had attempted to storm the front gate when a helicopter was delivering more people. They overpowered a couple of the barracks guards and attacked the gate guards when the gates were opened. There was no word that it had been successful. The guards all looked grim and were much more harsh in their treatment of the camp occupants for several days.

On Jack’s next turn digging, he noted that there were more than thirty newly filled graves. Usually there was only one or two between his rotations. He decided that there would be no attempt for the family to escape, unless things became really dire in the future. He made it clear to the rest of the family during their next visit, which came two weeks after the first.

After three months in the facility and Jack was reconsidering his decision to not try to escape. Meals were down to one a day, often just a full loaf of whole wheat bread each and water. Showers were allowed only every third day. The lightweight flip-flops that had been issued were all wearing out and people were going barefoot as fall arrived.

All the radios that had managed to be smuggled in during the first days had all been found. There was no knowledge of what was going on outside the compound, except what the weekly announcements from Colonel Arcadia stated. It could have been recorded and replayed each week. “Follow the rules. They are for your own good and safety.”

The Thanksgiving Day meal had been a lone MRE. More and more people were being ‘disciplined.’ Things suddenly changed shortly after the thankless Thanksgiving. People started to be released, a few at a time, without advance notice.

Rumors spread that the people were being given a couple of MRE's each and two bottles of water, and told to head west for Oklahoma. Many had come back to the camp, begging to be let in. They'd run out of food the second day of the trip and knew they couldn't make it all the way to Oklahoma before they either died from the weather or died of starvation. Or worse, drank unfiltered water and died from a waterborne disease.

Jack and Sally were ambivalent about the situation when their family was called in, given ten MRE's, a six-pack of two liter bottles of water, and a ragged daypack, not the one Benji had brought.

All four were barefoot and their jumpsuits were in less than excellent condition. Benji didn't hesitate. He strode away from the compound gate with vigorous strides. Jack, Sally, and Sheri had to hurry to catch up with him.

"Benji, wait a minute," his dad called to him. "We need to discuss what we're going to do."

"I thought it obvious," Benji said, stopping and turning to face his family. "Get our caches and then go toward Oklahoma."

"The caches," Sally said. "I'd forgotten all about them!"

"I finally found out where we were. Heard one of the guards talking about it. At the old Blytheville Arkansas Airbase. We just bear north to get the caches outside of Kennett, and then west to get the cache at the Stevens' farm. Then straight west to Oklahoma. There should be enough food if we're careful. The bottled water they gave us will last until we get the Kennett cache. My water purifier is in it."

"I didn't realize where we were," Jack said softly. "Once again you've come to our rescue, Benji."

"Aw, gee, Dad!"

"It's true. I don't know if we would all have made it without your knowledge." He looked at Sally and Sheri. "I say we follow Benji's lead."

The others simply nodded, turned, and followed Benji as he started hiking.

Everyone felt much better four days later when they reached the cache south of Kennett. It was intact, something Benji had worried about but hadn't mentioned. A tarp cache was not a good cache.

Crossing the rivers, streams, and drainage ditches on the way from Blytheville had been grueling. So had walking barefoot. At least at first. They had been able to find suitable shoes for everyone, going through some of the abandoned houses outside of Blytheville. They hadn't been able to replace their clothes, but the shoes helped immensely. So did getting a couple of kitchen

knives and a box of matches. The three blankets, though they were lightweight, were a welcome addition to their supplies, as well.

There had been some discussion about doing the scavenging, but they had decided to do it. But Sally put her foot down. They had what they had to have. No more scavenging.

It was luxury to put on their own clothes. The shoes they'd scavenged would have to do. They spent one leisurely afternoon and night resting up before they headed to the Stevens' farm. It was easy to retrace their steps. There was no one traveling the route they were currently on.

Despite the two weeks worth of food buried at the Stevens' orchards, and traveling in the Excursion as far west as they could go in it, it still took some accurate rifle and shotgun shooting by Jack and Benji to get them enough food to make the month long journey across northern Arkansas to the Oklahoma border.

They were even furnished a meal or two as they traversed the Arkansas Ozarks. There were people living there that were doing okay on their own. Even some of the bridges had been repaired enough to carry foot and horse traffic so they didn't get soaked crossing every stream.

Shake, Shake, Shake – Epilog

They were a lean, trail hardened group when they finally got to Tulsa, the first place things were essentially back to normal. It took several weeks to get their identities verified and gain access to the money the family had in the banks they used. During the interim they all worked odd jobs to make ends meet. Prices had jumped dramatically.

Jack was finally able to make contact with the insurance companies he represented and worked out a claim for the family's losses. He was grateful that the companies had been trying to do the same for all his clients that they could find. The federal government was helping fund the insurance payouts.

With the insurance payment, and the investments that Jack and Sally had made, the family was able to relocate and start up Jack's Insurance business again. Having been treated so well in the Ozarks, they picked the area, on the Missouri side of the border, for their new home and business.

With Benji's urging, the entire family became preppers, hoping they would never have to use them, but bound and determined never to have to go to a refugee camp again, no matter what.

End *****

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