

## Only Fourteen

Joshua Livingsdale was only fourteen. He was tired of hearing it. Things would be so much better when he turned fifteen. And eventually eighteen. That's when he would join one of the military services. Probably the Army. US Army Combat Engineers, to be precise. His grandfather and father had both served in the Combat Engineers when they were in service and had long careers in civil engineering afterwards. It sounded like a good plan to him.

But his mother didn't want him to. She just wanted him to stay home and be a momma's boy. Oh, he didn't mind helping around the house. It was good experience for when he was on his own. But she wanted him to stay home all the time. She was terrified he would be shot by a gang member.

Yeah, there were some gangs around, but he knew their haunts and stayed well away from them. Didn't give any of the members any reason to target him specifically. If there was a random shooting, yes, he was at risk. But so was everyone else in school.

He wanted to go out and do things. Have some fun, but that wasn't the main reason. He wanted to learn things. How to survive in the wilderness. And how to survive the bad times that the people on the prep and survival forums he read every day said were coming.

Since he was twelve he'd been interested in survival and had begun saving money for gear and supplies. Joshua was saving all the money he got for birthdays and Christmases from his maternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, and from the one thing his mother encouraged, his grass mowing business. Plus he got a generous allowance from his absent father. Joshua had never met him, but he did pay Joshua's mother more child support than he had to, plus gave money as birthday and Christmas presents, in addition to the allowance.

He had quite a bit of money saved up, but he wasn't going to spend any until he was sure just what he wanted. Where he and his mom lived was a nice neighborhood, but it was part of the city and the city was going downhill fast, in Joshua's opinion.

It wasn't just the gangs. City services were already getting cut because of the economy. And if there was a disaster, power, water, sewer, and probably cell phone service would probably go out. Joshua had checked it out. If the power went, water and sewer would too, as the system was dependent on electrical pumps. The cell towers had battery backups, but were overloaded sometimes on normal days and would probably not be useable in a crisis.

And that was just normal emergencies like storms. If one of the mega disasters, like those the Weather Channel and History Channel showed were possible, things would be hundreds of times worse. Particularly the one that could really be big trouble where Joshua lived. He lived within the New Madrid Seismic Zone.

Sure that his mother wouldn't approve of many of the things he wanted to get, Joshua decided to start slow, with some things that didn't scream out survivalist. Something that would have dual purpose.

He'd pretty much outgrown his old bicycle, and had been hinting around for another. Sure he had the money to buy one himself, but if he could get his mother or father to help pay for one, so much the better.

"Mom," Joshua said, "What do you and Father think about me getting a new bike?" It was Saturday and Joshua had just returned from mowing five large yards in the development that day.

"You've really been working hard, haven't you?" Shelley asked her son. "Let me talk to your father and see what we can do. You deserve a new bike." She smiled. "One of those fancy mountain bikes, I bet."

"Well," Joshua said slowly, surprised that his mother had brought it up. "Yes. I do kind of have my eye on one particular bike. And it is a mountain bike. Can't get it locally. Have to order it on the Internet."

"Your father is out of the country at the moment. As soon as he is back, I'll talk to him. You go ahead and order the bike you want. Here's my credit card." Shelley was digging in her purse for the card.

"That's okay, Mom," Joshua hurriedly said. "I'll just put it on my debit card and put the money in the bank when you and Father give it to me."

"Oh! You sure you want to do that? Do you have enough? I know the good mountain bikes must be expensive. Oh. Be sure to get a new helmet, too. I noticed you couldn't wear your old one the last time you rode."

"I'm okay for the money. And I'll get a new helmet. Thanks, Mom." Joshua gave his mother a big hug, feeling a little guilty at not telling her the full story. But he kept silent and went to his bedroom to get on the computer and order the bike. The helmet he would pick up at a local bike shop.

The bike he ordered was a Montague Paratrooper Folding bike. Not the most expensive bike, but one of the toughest, and that was what Joshua wanted. While he was on the Internet he checked again on the trailer he wanted to get for it.

Actually, it wasn't a trailer. It was a game cart he wanted to convert so it could be used as a trailer for the bike while still maintaining the original capability. Depending on just how much money his parents were willing to give him on the purchase of the bike, he'd order it, or wait a while.

Joshua shut down the computer and leaned back in the chair. He wondered for a moment what his friend Keith Rodenour would think of the bike. Keith was sixteen, but he and Joshua had been friends since both had been volunteered by their mothers to model tuxedos in a fund raiser for the civic center.

Neither had particularly been looking forward to it, but upon seeing how the girls reacted to Keith, fourteen at the time, Joshua decided it wasn't so bad. Keith finally admitted to Joshua that it had been fun. Keith's family was already into prepping, though it was some time before he admitted it to Joshua. His family preferred it be kept a secret.

But it wasn't long before their conversations went from sports to camping out, and then to discussions of the Mega-Disasters shows on television. When Joshua said he was worried about the New Madrid Seismic Zone, Keith told him that his family was prepared for it.

Now that they both went to the same school system, they were able to pal around more than the occasional meetings at the civic center when their mothers were involved in something. Keith was two years ahead of Joshua, but it didn't seem to bother the Junior to let a Freshman hang out with him. Neither one had many friends, and none of the ones they did have had any interest in prepping.

Joshua had talked to Keith about getting a bike and the game cart. Keith said he could help with adding a hitch arm to the cart so it could be connected to the bike with a suitable hitch, since he was taking metal shop that year.

On Monday, the two boys met in the gym to shoot hoops with a bunch of other guys, as they often did before the first bell rang. "Got the bike ordered, Keith," Joshua told his friend as he threw him the basketball. Keith took a shot before he answered.

"The good one? The Paratrooper?"

Joshua was grinning. He caught the ball that one of the others tossed to him and took a shot. He wasn't nearly as good as Keith, but he managed to sink one now and again. "Yep. And my parents are paying for at least part of it. Don't know how much yet. If it's enough, I'll get the Super Mag game cart with dual wheels from Cabela's.

"Sweet! You still want me to rig a hitch?"

The two both took shots before Joshua answered. "Absolutely. I wish the teacher would let me in to help."

"It's okay. I'll get one of the guys to help if I need it. Bunch of them owe me. I've been helping almost everyone in class with their projects. I almost always get mine done first and have time to help them. And boy, do some of them need it." Keith made a jump shot that swished through the net just as the bell rang.

Racking the basketballs in the cart the two joined the others headed for classes. But they met up again at lunch. Careful to never discuss preps where someone might hear them, the two talked about school work. It wasn't until after school, as they walked toward the spot they had to take different directions, that Keith asked Joshua if he wanted to go to the range the coming Saturday. "My Dad bought a couple of M1 .30 Carbines for Jessie and Sandy. Going to try them out."

“Wow! That would be cool. You sure your parents don’t mind? I know the ammo can be expensive.”

“It’s okay. He bought a bunch just for practice. I already asked him if I could ask you. He’s always looking to get someone new into the shooting sports. Oh. My mother is going to bring a picnic lunch, so you don’t have to worry about food.”

“Then I’m in. I’ll figure out something to keep my mother happy.”

“Okay. Good. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Keith turned up his street and Joshua continued until he came to the street on which he lived with his mother.

She was still at work, as usual, and Joshua made himself a snack and started in on his homework. The sooner it was done, the sooner he could get on the forums and see if anyone had posted any fiction or good information posts.

When he heard the kitchen door open and close he hurried to help his mother bring in the groceries she bought nearly every day. One of the things that Joshua wanted to change was the way they stocked food in the house.

They basically didn’t now, except for sometimes getting enough for a weekend during bad weather so she didn’t have to drive in it. Joshua wanted a full pantry. But his encouragement of buying in bulk was still falling on deaf ears. His mother just didn’t see the need. The market was between work and home and it was easy for her to pick something fresh up every day.

“Chicken sound okay for supper, Joshua?”

“Sure, Mom. Sounds great.” He went out to the car and brought in the two plastic grocery bags. “Can I talk to you a minute?”

“Sure, Honey. Oh. Did you get the bike ordered? Your Father happened to call today and I brought up getting you a new bike. He’s sending a check tomorrow. I’ll give you one when it gets here to go with it.” She smiled. “I think you’ll like how much. But you’ll just have to wait until your Father’s check gets here.”

“That’s great, Mom! Thanks. But that wasn’t what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” she asked, intent on preparing the chicken.

“Well, Keith’s family is going...” Joshua almost slipped up and said ‘shooting’, but quickly said, “On a picnic Saturday. Keith asked if I wanted to come along.”

Shelley grinned over at her son. “Keith’s sisters going to be there? You know they both have a crush on you.”

“Aw, Mom!”

“Come on now, Joshua. You might as well admit it. Because they do, you’re going to have to be careful not to hurt either one’s feelings.”

“You mean I can go?”

“Yes. I have some things to do this Saturday, so I don’t need your help around the house. Are you caught up on lawns?”

“Yes ma’am. Or I will be. Mrs. Hutchenson doesn’t want me to mow hers again until Thursday. That will be the cycle until it starts over next Monday.”

“Very good then. Your homework done?”

“Of course,” Joshua replied. He always did his homework as soon as he got home.

“That’s a good boy. You can start the potatoes and then set the table.”

Joshua didn’t mind at all. He was going shooting Saturday. And Sandy was going to be there. Jessie was only twelve, but Sandy was the same age as Joshua. If she really had a crush on him... Wow. “Boy. I sure hope I do okay shooting,” he mused. “I’d hate to embarrass myself in front of Sandy.” But what to do about Jessie... He’d ask Keith the next day what he recommended.

It turned out it was pretty simple. In theory, at least. “Jessie’s got a new hunk in her sights, Sport,” Keith told Joshua with a laugh. “But you’d better watch out for Sandy. I think she may actually have her sights set on you.”

Keith laughed when Joshua blushed. “Yeah. I don’t get it either. But you know how girls are.”

“I wish!” Joshua muttered and Keith laughed again.

But come Saturday, things worked out just fine. Joshua wasn’t the only person to have been invited to go shooting at the range. It was one of Mr. Rodenour’s business associates. A young one. Very good looking. Just back from a tour in the Sandbox. Even Sandy was giving him doe eyed looks from time to time, though she spent most of her time close to Joshua.

He had a blast shooting the light carbine, after a lengthy gun safety class with Mr. Rodenour. He did as well as Sandy, which was all he cared about. After the shooting, the family plus two went to the park for the picnic. It was a fun day and Joshua was in a good mood when he got home.

His mother noticed and grinned at him. “It went all right, then?”

“Yes. No trouble with the Rodenour sisters. Jessie has a new hero.”

“Oh. I see. So that left it wide open for Sandy.”

“Aw, Mom!”

Shelley laughed. “You go on to your room and get showered and changed. We’re going out to eat tonight. I don’t feel like cooking.”

It was automatic with Joshua now. “You want me to fix something?”

“That’s sweet of you, Joshua. But I didn’t stop to get anything. We’ll just go out.”

Joshua nodded. It was just one more example of not having a pantry.

It was several days later that Joshua found the FEDEX note on the door that they’d tried to deliver a package, but no one had been at home. Joshua did his homework in record time and then waited anxiously for his mother to get home.

He helped her put away the groceries and then she took him to the FEDEX depot to get the bike. They stopped at the bike shop and Joshua got the helmet and cable lock, along with a tool kit that he wanted.

While Shelley made supper, Joshua set up the folding bike and took it for a test ride to get everything adjusted to fit him. He was grinning when he went back into the house.

“What you were expecting?” his mother asked him.

“Sure is, Mom. It’s great.”

“The check from your Father should be in tomorrow. I’ll take you down to the bank after school and you can deposit it and mine.”

“Sounds good, Mom. Thanks.” Joshua didn’t ask how much the checks would be. It didn’t matter too much. He had the bike and was going to order the Cabela’s game cart no matter what he got from his parents. It was getting close to the end of school and Keith didn’t have access to a welder to convert the cart to a trailer, except at school.

He ordered it that evening, with a Saturday delivery date. It came in that Saturday while his mother was out, and Joshua had it put together before she returned. It, like the bike, was just as advertised. Once he had the hitch made, he’d have the means to move a great deal of equipment and supplies if the need ever arose.

“What do you think, Keith?” Joshua asked. He’d ridden over to Keith’s house, pulling the cart along with one hand Sunday after church.

“Think you have a winner,” Keith said, looking over the bike and cart. He got a tape measure from the garage and made some measurements. “I’ll draw it up on the computer tonight and get started on it Monday. Timing is perfect. We get to do one last project of our choice before school is out.”

“Thanks, Keith. You’re a good friend.”

“Yeah. For a Freshman, you aren’t too bad, either. Hey. There’s Sandy. She made some cookies today after church. Pretty good. Come on in.”

After some cookies and milk, Joshua went home on the bike, leaving the cart behind. He would ride the bike to school the next day and Keith’s father would take Keith and the folded up cart in to the shop building.

Keith was as good as his word. He had the drawing ready and showed it and the bike and cart to the shop teacher, who checked some dimensions and then gave the go ahead for Keith to do the work.

Not particularly fast, since he was still learning and wanted to do a good job, Keith took the full week to make the adapter to turn the cart into a bike trailer and the hitch to connect it to the bike. When not connected to the bike, the trailer tongue part folded under so as not to interfere with pulling the cart manually. He got an A+ on the project and a big thank you from Keith.

“Will you bring it over to the house?” Keith asked on Friday when the two went to the shop building so Joshua could pick up the bike and cart. “I’d like my dad to see the work, and see the combination. I think we might want to go with something the same or similar. Right now, if we can’t use the truck, we’d be on foot. Sandy and Jessie have bikes but they’ve both grown out of them. And you know what happened to mine.”

Joshua managed not to laugh at his friend. Keith had run over his bike the very first time his dad gave him a driving lesson. Joshua thought Keith had a pretty good reason. Even his dad admitted that the clutch on their truck was very stiff and a bit hard to control.

Keith’s dad looked the rig over without saying much until the end. “Good job, Son, he told Keith. “You do good work. You’ve got a fine rig there, Joshua. Take care of it and it will take care of you.”

“Thanks Mr. Rodenour. It’s going to be my bug out vehicle if we can’t take the car for some reason.”

“Good thinking. You’ll be a fully fledged prepper one of these days.”

“Yes, Sir. I’m planning on it. Keith is a lot of help there. And thank you again for letting me go shooting with you.”

“No problem. Excuse us, Joshua. Keith and I have some work to do before supper.”

“Sure,” Joshua said. “I need to get home, anyway. My mother will be there soon and she worries if I’m not there.”

Joshua almost winced, wishing he hadn't said what he did. It did make him sound like a Momma's boy. But neither Keith nor his father said anything. They just waved as he rode off on the bicycle.

He had the bike and trailer disconnected and folded up, stored out of the way, when his mother pulled the car into the garage.

"Where's your bike?" Shelley asked.

"In the garden shed," Joshua said. "I didn't want to take up too much room in the garage."

"That's sweet of you, Joshua! Always thinking about others. You are such a good boy. I hope what we gave you for the bike was enough."

"Enough," Joshua said. "And enough to pay for the helmet, lock, and tools, too. Thanks, Mom." Joshua didn't admit that he needed the room for the cart.

"I'll tell your father you were pleased. Help me with the groceries and I'll get supper started."

With school now out and summer well on the way, Joshua's mowing business kicked into high gear. He discovered an unanticipated use for the bicycle and cart. Normally he just pushed the lawnmower, with the other yard tools strapped on it, from yard to yard with one hand while carrying a fuel can in his other. It wasn't too bad as most of the yards he did were close to his house.

But with a bit of lumber and some woodwork, over at Keith's and with his help, Joshua was able to set the cart up so he could load the mower, along with a fuel container and his other yard service tools. It made it a great deal easier, and he was able to expand his mowing route further out, since it was so much easier to get to those locations.

When Shelley first saw the cart with Joshua's mowing equipment on she asked about it and Joshua explained that he'd ordered it at the same time. And since it was going to be used for his lawn mowing business he bought it using those funds. "I don't think it's right for me to expect you to pay for something that is making me money."

"I see. You're becoming quite the entrepreneur! That's very adult of you to think of things like that."

Joshua wasn't sure his mother quite liked the fact that he was growing up to be a man on his own.

While they were making the platform for the mower, Keith and Joshua made a lightweight wooden cargo box for the cart so it would be easy to load with bug-out supplies if the time ever came they would be needed. It even included a stand so it could be stored loaded and the cart backed under it, where upon it would be lowered and fastened securely to the cart frame.

Joshua set it up in the garden shed where he kept his yard tools, the cart, and the bike. Now he just needed to fill it. It would be a slow process.

He managed to get quite a few pieces of equipment and many supplies over the summer. His newly expanded grass mowing route was paying well, despite the economy. The city required lawns to be maintained and many people simply couldn't do it themselves.

The drawback was the fact that he had very little time for anything else except watching the news, studying on the internet about prepping, and searching for the best deals on equipment and supplies. Some he picked up locally, others he ordered on-line.

He even had to turn down a chance to try out some of the new gear on a camping trip that Keith invited him to go on with his family. The camping gear items were some of his first purchases. He wanted the ability to have a decent camp not only for camping, but in case the house was damaged in a big earthquake, which was highly possible. It wasn't built to any type of earthquake building code having been built before the dangers of the New Madrid Seismic Zone became well known.

Three days before his fifteenth birthday his preparations became known to his mother. Shelley was just coming into the house, with Joshua carrying the grocery bag for her when the house began to shake.

Joshua tossed the bag of groceries to the counter and grabbed his mother. "Down, Mom! Get down! Here by the counter!"

Shelley let out a scream when the kitchen window broke, and the house shifted on the foundation. But Joshua managed to get her into a crouch and finally, all in the space of seconds, into a fetal position with her hands protecting her head. Joshua took up the same position, hoping the counter would support the ceiling if it collapsed.

The shaking seemed to last forever, and the house made many strange noises as the ground undulated under it. The total time was only fifty-three seconds, but it felt like hours. The shaking finally stopped and Joshua helped his mother to her feet.

"Outside, Mom! Careful! There's glass all over."

Shelley, without a clue as what to do followed Joshua as he checked the garage door into the kitchen. It hadn't swung shut when they'd entered and the shaking had locked it into the open position when the walls warped.

"This way," Joshua said, pulling the small flashlight he always carried from his pocket and turning it on to see in the darkness of the closed up garage. There was water spraying from the pipes to the hot water heater that had been thrown off its stand in the garage.

The back door of the garage was stuck and Joshua had to kick it several times to get it open enough for them to slip through.

“What do we do, Joshua?” Shelley asked. “Oh. FEMA will be here soon. Don’t worry, Joshua, between FEMA and Red Cross, we’ll be okay.”

“Yeah. Sure, Mom,” Joshua replied. He was thinking fast and hard. “But until they get here, there are some things we need to do.”

“What? No. We wait,” Shelley insisted.

“We can’t wait! Look!” Joshua pointed a house down the street. It was burning. “I’ve got to turn the gas and water off. Stay here.”

Shelley watched in surprise as Joshua ran to the garden shed. She saw him yank on the door and heave it open. The small building had warped out of plumb almost as badly as the house.

Joshua came running back, carrying a couple of metal items. He ran to the gas meter and quickly had it shut off. Then he ran to the alley and opened the cover for the water meter. Kneeling down, he shut the water feed off.

The electrical meter was on the outside wall of the garage and when Joshua went over to it his mother objected. “What are you going to do, Joshua? Don’t mess with the electricity! You could get killed!”

“Mom, I’m pulling the meter to cut off the power to the house. There could be shorts in the circuits and with the water that’s leaked from broken pipes it could be too dangerous to go back into the house and cut it off at the breaker panel.”

“You are not going back into the house until help gets here!” Shelley, Joshua saw, was bordering on hysterical. “Okay, Mom. I’ll wait a bit before I go inside. But I have to pull this meter for safety sake. I don’t know how much gas might have leaked and a spark from an electrical short could set it off.”

Shelley stood silently, arms across her chest. At least she wasn’t too cold. She and Joshua both still had on their jackets they’d been wearing when they got home from the store. Joshua broke the seal on the electrical meter and used his Swiss Army Knife screwdriver blade to open the sealing band. When it was free he gripped the meter carefully and gave it a sharp pull. Joshua almost fell backwards when the meter suddenly came free, but he caught himself before he did.

Setting the meter down, Joshua went back to the shed. Afraid it might come down with an aftershock, which was almost certain to occur, he quickly emptied the shed of all of his accumulated preps.

Shelley walked over. “What is all this?”

“My preps. I’m a fledgling prepper.”

“What do you mean? Prepper?”

“I prepare for disasters, natural and human caused.”

“You’re a survivalist?” Shelley sounded stunned.

“No, Mom. Not like the media portrays them. I believe in the power of the vote and want the government to continue. I just want to survive whatever might happen. Like this earthquake. I have the equipment and supplies to make it easier to get by until the help gets here. If it does.”

“Of course it will!” Shelley said. “Don’t say things like that. There will be someone here soon.”

Joshua wanted to go back into the house and get some more things out, but the fire down the street took priority. “Mom, I’m going to go see if I can help at the house on fire.”

“No, Joshua! Please? Stay here with me?”

“Mom, I have to try to help. You’ll be okay. Just stay away from the house.” Joshua carried over one of the totes containing his supplies. “Here. Sit down and keep an eye on things. If you see any signs of smoke or fire in the house you come get me.”

Shelley was glad she was sitting down as Joshua started to turn toward the street and the ground again began to shake. But this one lasted only a few seconds and as soon as it stopped Joshua took off at a run down the street.

He didn’t stay long at the house. There was simply nothing he could do. There were half a dozen people standing around, watching the fire. The people on either side of the burning house had hoses connected, but even as he watched, the streams they were spraying on their houses to keep them from catching fire slowly slowed until they were just a trickle.

None of the people standing around were the occupants of the house. Apparently no one was home when the first quake occurred. Joshua hurried back to check on his mother. She was using her cell phone. Or trying too. Joshua saw the look on her face and knew she wasn’t getting through.

“I’m trying to call 911. It rang twice and then I lost all my bars of signal. Why isn’t the fire department at the fire? It’s been almost twenty minutes. They never take this long.”

“Mom, listen to me,” Joshua said, going to one knee so he could look at her face to face. “This is probably happening all over the area. There are more fires than the department could ever hope to fight, even if they can travel very far from their stations, which I doubt. Look down the street. See how the pavement buckled? That’s just a little one. There could be much bigger ones around. People are not going to be able to travel very far, if at all, in vehicles.”

Shelley’s face had slowly turned white. “But FEMA... Red Cross... What about them? What do we do?”

“It’s okay, Mom,” Joshua assured his mother, putting one hand comfortably onto her shoulder. “I have what we need to get by for some time. Right now I’m going into the house to bring out more things that can help in that.”

“But you said there would be other earthquakes! We’ve already had two.”

“I know, Mom. But I’ll be careful. I want to do it before there are any more shakes.”

“But Joshua,” Shelley pleaded.

“I’ll be careful, Mom. You sit here and wait for me. Is there anything you want from the house? Anything I can grab and carry easily? This may be the only chance I have.”

Shelley looked startled. “But...”

Joshua just looked at her.

“My jewelry! The picture albums! Oh, Joshua! There is so much!”

“I’ll get everything I can, Mom. You keep thinking what you just have to have, in case the house catches fire or collapses completely.”

Shelley’s lower lip was trembling as she watched her son go back toward the house. She couldn’t bear to watch, in case the house did fall on him.

Knowing the risk he was taking, Joshua moved quickly but carefully. Out of respect for his mother, he went into his mother’s bedroom and scooped up her jewelry box from the dresser top. He hesitated but then opened the drawers and took out several sets of underwear, and then went to the closet and got what sturdy clothing she had. A quick trip through the living room and he added the three big family photo albums to the pile he was barely able to handle.

He simply dumped everything on the ground beside his mother and ran to get one of the still empty totes he’d bought on sale to fill later. “Here, Mom. You can put your stuff in here.”

Shelley was staring at the pile of clothing. “I didn’t think of clothing...”

“I know, Mom. I know. It’s scary. Is there anything else you really want?”

Shelley suddenly looked up at her son. “Oh, Joshua! What will we eat? Water? What if I have to go to the bathroom?”

“Got it covered, Mom. Now don’t worry. I’m going to make another trip through the house.” This time Shelley watched Joshua head for the house, seeing him in an entirely different light than she had perceived him before this crisis.

Joshua actually made five more trips, and was headed toward the house again when another aftershock hit. This one was even worse than the first quake. Joshua went to his knees and watched the house collapse some more. He looked around him.

He could actually see the ground undulating in waves. Suddenly, almost directly across from their house a huge sand blow erupted, spraying sand and water high into the air. Three people were nearby and before Joshua or anyone else could do anything they were buried alive.

Joshua tried to rise to go help, but he couldn't get up and the sand blow continued, with the occasional massive tree trunk being ejected along with the sand. When the eruption finally ceased, the mound of sand was over the roof of the house across from theirs, and encroached on the edge of their yard.

Joshua got up when the shaking stopped and made a move toward the huge mound of sand. But there was nothing he could do. "Those poor people!" Shelley said.

Joshua looked around. His mother was crying. "That was Gwendolyn, Vance, and Bree! I can't believe they are gone."

"It could have been us," Joshua said softly as he looked at the pile of sand, the water from it running down the street and into storm drain. At least at first. In moments the water just pooled over the drain opening in the curb. The drains were filled, or more likely broken. That meant the sewer system was, too.

But Joshua was ready a couple of minutes later when Shelley touched his arm, and looking even more distressed, told him, "Joshua. I need to go to the bathroom..."

"Okay, Mom. Just give me a couple of minutes." Joshua hurried to the gear he'd retrieved from the now heavily leaning garden shed. Pulling one large bag free of the pile he quickly erected a privacy shelter and set the chemical toilet inside, along with a roll of tissue.

"Okay, Mom," Joshua called. He was getting a bottle of water and a tube of camper's soap when Shelley hurried over."

"Oh, Joshua! I don't know..."

"Mom, it's this or do it out in the open in a pit."

Shelley finally nodded and stepped inside the enclosure and zipped the door closed. Joshua moved away, leaving the water, soap, and a camper's towel where his mother could find it when she came out.

It was already beginning to get dark. Joshua began to set up the tent he took from the cargo box that was now mounted on the cart. His mother came over and looked inside. Joshua was setting up two sleep mats and sleeping bags. A windup LED flashlight was hanging from a fabric loop in the top of the tent, providing light.

“When did you get all this, Joshua?” Shelley asked as she looked at the gear in the cart and on the ground.

“The last few months, Mom,” Joshua replied. “I’ve been getting ready in case something like this happened.”

“I had no idea. All with your own money, too.”

Joshua nodded. Shelley moved back as Joshua exited the tent. “I don’t want to start a fire to cook with now. I’ve got some ration bars and other things we can eat unheated.”

Shelley watched, rather in awe, as Joshua went to one of the totes and came back with several items in his hands. He handed her a vacuum zip-lock bag of jerky, one of gorp, and what looked like a candy bar.

“The jerky is for protein,” Joshua said. The gorp for protein, fats, and sugar. And the Millennium Bars are to fill in the general nutritional needs plus some additional calories.”

Shelley watched as Joshua began to chew on a piece of jerky he took from the bag in her hand. She slowly followed suit. A look of distaste crossed her face in the darkness, but it faded as she chewed the jerky. She was hungrier than she’d thought.

Joshua sat down on another tote and handed Shelley a water bottle. She took a long drink, and then another, before going back to the jerky.

“Thank you, Joshua,” she said softly. “I don’t think I would have made it this far without your help.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I set this up for the two of us, for just such a situation.”

Another aftershock, a light one, completed the destruction of the house and the garden shed. The other shocks, as they came, just bounced the remains into a slightly more compact pile. Just before full dark, Joshua gathered up everything and put it away into the extra totes, which he stacked near the side of the tent away from the street. Better that people not know what he had available.

Though the temperature dropped significantly, Shelley and Joshua both slept warmly in the sleeping bags that had been one of Joshua’s more costly purchases. The tent had been a tough decision, but he decided that night he’d made the right one in getting the three person, four season tent.

Both woke several times during the night as the ground moved under them. But finally, emotionally drained and tired from the interruptions in their sleep, both fell into deep sleep that even the additional small temblors didn’t disturb.

Joshua came awake quickly in the early dawn light of the morning. Something had wakened him. Moving quickly he got out of the sleeping bag and unzipped the tent front door. There were two people by the tent, in the process of opening one of the totes.

“Hey! What are you doing?” he said, fists clenched, ready to do battle to protect the supplies.

“Just checking what you got here, Sonny. Don’t get steamed. We in a pickle here and have to share and share alike.”

“Oh, yeah? What do you have to share with us?”

“Joshua?” Shelley asked, her head in the tent door. “Abraham? What are you doing here?” She asked when she got a look at one of the men.”

“Nothing, Shelley. Nothing. Just out looking for some water. Thought you might have some to share.”

“Joshua?” Shelley asked again.

“I do have some,” he replied, stressing the ‘some’ firmly. “Wait here and I’ll get you a couple of bottles.”

Still in his boxer briefs, goose bumps rising on his skin in the chill air, went over near the downed shed and shifted a couple of things around, his back to the tent and the men. He retrieved four bottles of water he had stashed and returned to the men. He gave each one a bottle.

“The other two?” asked Abraham.

“One for me and one for Mother,” Joshua said evenly.

“You might want to watch about being on that high horse of yours, boy,” said the other man.

“Please leave, Abraham,” Shelley said. She was still kneeling in the door of the tent.

“Okay. But you think about what could happen after an event like this.”

“Hey!” Joshua said, his hands clenched again. Abraham’s words had sounded like a threat against his mother to him.

“Watch your Ps & Qs with me, boy,” growled the second man.

“Come on, Breverton,” Abraham said, walking away toward the street as the sun peaked over the horizon.

The man named Breverton followed, slowly, glaring at Joshua the entire time until another shake lasting just a few seconds took his attention.

“Joshua,” Shelley said. Hearing the note of fear in Shelley’s voice, Joshua looked down, surprised. “What do we do?”

“We get up and go about our day. And don’t worry about the water. I have a filter that I can use to clean up any water that is available. I don’t plan on handing out our bottles of water willy-nilly. I’ll get a hot breakfast started. Just let me get dressed.”

Shelley had gone to bed clothed except for her jacket. She put it on and came out of the tent so Joshua could get in. She looked around at the devastation. There wasn’t a house untouched by the destructive forces of the earthquakes.

Joshua didn’t waste any time getting dressed. Not only was he chilled, he wanted to be outside so he could keep an eye on things. When he came out, Shelley, a bundle of clothes in her hands, reentered the tent.

It didn’t take long for Joshua to set up his one burner camp stove and get water on to heat. He had two packages of freeze-dried camper’s breakfasts ready for the water when it was hot. He poured it in, closed the bags and set them aside to rehydrate. He added more water to the titanium teakettle and got out a package of hot chocolate mix and an instant coffee bag.

“Is that coffee I smell?” Shelley asked when she came out of the tent dressed in a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. “You have coffee?” Shelley was obviously amazed.

“Some. Have to stretch it out. I don’t have all that much.”

“Any is a real luxury,” Shelley said, taking the stainless steel double wall cup from Joshua when he handed it to her.

“Have scrambled egg with bacon or sausage,” Joshua informed his mother.

“The bacon I think if you don’t mind.”

“Oh no. Either one is good for me. I’ll eat the sausage one.” Joshua produced a set of stainless steel flatware and handed one set to his mother, along with the colorful bag of rehydrated scrambled eggs and bacon.

“Oh, this is pretty good!” Shelley exclaimed after a couple of bites. “I thought these things would taste terrible.”

“Some are better than others,” Joshua replied. He was eyeing a small group of people approaching, including a couple of small children.

“Abraham said we should come here to get some water,” one of the women said.

“Oh, he did, did he?” Joshua said, suddenly angry. He didn’t get angry very often. His was a calm soul. But he hid the anger and said, “Go get some kind of container and meet me down in the street.”

“But he said you had bottles of water,” protested the man that was with the group.

“Not enough,” Joshua replied, hoping the answer would satisfy the group. He did have enough for everyone for one or two bottles each, but after that, everyone would be out. Instead, he’d use the purifier to clean up the water that had drained out of the sand blow and pooled in the street.

When the group moved off Joshua went to a tote as his mother watched in silence. He stood up a ditty bag. He took out the water filter it contained and headed toward the street with it in his hands.

Shelley stood up and followed her son. It was only a minute or two before the first of the group returned, this time with a couple of empty water bottles in hand. As Joshua knelt down on the grass at the edge of the pooled water from the sand blow, the woman came up and said, “I’m not drinking that water!”

“I’ll filter it,” Joshua said calmly. The water, though a little cloudy, wasn’t muddy. It had come from nearly pure sand. He dropped the end of the intake hose into the water and began to pump the filter handle. In a few moments a stream of clear water came out of the outlet. “Your bottle?” Joshua asked.

Rather reluctantly the woman held the bottle while Joshua continued to pump the filter. When the first bottle was full, the woman carefully took a sip. She looked amazed. “It’s good!”

The others began to gather and Joshua kept filling bottles until his arms ached. “Someone else is going to have to pump for a while,” he said. He looked at a boy pointedly and handed the filter to him. “Just nice and slow and regular. Don’t try to pump fast or really hard.”

The boy nodded and took up where Joshua left off. “Keep an eye on things, Mom?” Joshua asked. “I want to get the rest of my breakfast before it gets any colder.”

“Okay. And thank you, Joshua. You’re a good person. You’re doing the right thing.”

Joshua just nodded. He wasn’t so sure. But helping was probably better than trying to ignore everyone else. It just wouldn’t work. From what he’d learned on some of the Prep Forums he was on, it was better to be cooperative, on his own terms, than not do anything while others could see what you had. There were enough people that if it came to a showdown, he and his mother could have everything he’d worked so hard to accumulate for them taken away.

Keeping an eye on the operation from the small camp he’d set up, Joshua finished his breakfast and washed it down with the last of a bottle of water. He carried the empty with him down to the street and took over the pumping again. He filled the bottle, took a long drink, and refilled it before starting to fill another container one of the group set down on the ground beside

him. He wanted people to see that he was using the same water they were, so they wouldn't think too much about him perhaps having more unopened bottles.

Shelley went back up to the camp a few minutes later and sat down, continuing to watch the activity by the pool of water in the street. Joshua switched off pumping with a couple more people, to rest his arms, for most of the rest of the morning.

When the crowd finally dispersed, Joshua walked slowly back up to join his mother. "I'll get us some lunch in a few minutes, Mom," he said. "I want to lay down for a bit. My arms are aching. Would you keep an eye on things for me?"

"Of course, Joshua. You take a nap. I'll make sure nothing happens."

"Thanks, Mom."

Before he could get into the tent yet another earthquake shook the ground. This one was even longer and more violent than the other two big ones. It went on for seventy seconds. While it was occurring, the sound of two large explosions sounded in the distance. Then came the roaring of half a dozen sand blows erupting in the neighborhood. But they, like the explosions, weren't near enough to cause any problems at the camp.

Joshua climbed to his feet when the shaking stopped and helped his mother get up. She'd been shaken off the tote she was using for a seat. Joshua righted the tote, which had turned over, and helped his mother sit down again.

"I don't know if I can handle this, Joshua," she told him. She was trembling and it wasn't from the chill in the air.

"It's okay, Mom. We'll be okay. I have what we need to get through this."

"I'll try... I'll try... I need to lie down..."

Joshua helped her back up and into the tent. His nap would have to wait. He zipped the tent door partially closed and then went about straightening up the camp. His totes had been stacked and most had fallen over.

He righted them and then sorted through the jumble of things he'd taken from the house and the garden shed, organizing them for future use and taking stock of just exactly what he had available for use in light of the others in the area.

Joshua made sure to have most of the food in totes, on the bottom of the stacks, as well as the bottled water. When he checked on his mother, she was sound asleep. Joshua shrugged. He could nap later. Hopefully. Right now it seemed better for one or the other of them to be up, keeping an eye on things.

There were a series of much smaller shakes over a twenty minute period. Joshua felt them, but amazingly enough, his mother slept through them. Joshua set about getting a lunch

ready for the two of them. This time it was a two-serving freeze-dried meal of spaghetti in meat sauce, to be followed with a handful of gorp as desert.

When the meal had re-hydrated, Joshua called to his mother through the half open door of the tent. “Mom! Hey, Mom. Lunch is ready.”

She jerked awake and looked wildly around her, taking long moments to remember what had happened and where she was. “Oh. Thank you, Joshua.” She began to climb out of the tent and Joshua stepped away. Shelley went first to the chemical toilet privacy shelter before coming over to sit down on a tote facing Joshua.

He was dividing the spaghetti onto a pair of stainless steel plates and had a water bottle ready for each one of them. These weren’t the commercial bottles of water. He wanted to conserve those. Instead he had taken out two of his stainless steel water bottles for continued use with filtered water.

Joshua had just finished eating and was heating water to wash the plates and flatware when three women and two men came walking up the yard toward the tent.

“Need more water?” Joshua asked.

“No...” said one of the women.

But she was interrupted by one of the men. “Actually yes. We do need more water. But we need food for our families. It’s obvious you have some. We want our share.”

“What do you mean your share?” Joshua asked. “What food I have is for me and my mother. You had just as much chance to have things ready as I did.”

“Look, Kid,” said the other man. “That’s all beside the point now. I have a three year old and a baby to take care of. If you have food, I want it.”

Joshua knew his mother was looking at him. He hesitated only a moment. “I’ll give you enough food for the children. But you’d better start looking for someone else to loot because I don’t have all that much.”

The first man took a step forward, his right hand rising as if to strike Jason. “We’re not looting! It’s not fair for you to have things and the rest of us not!”

“I owe it to you, huh?” Joshua said, standing firm.

One of the women grabbed the man’s raised arm. “Don’t Alvin! He’s just a boy.”

“He’s a boy with a mouth on him and no respect for his elders or authority,” growled Alvin, but he lowered his arm.

“Just show us the food and we’ll take what we need and leave you the rest. We won’t come back.” It was one of the other women that spoke.

“Hey, June! Don’t be saying that. We might need more before the Red Cross gets here.” It was the second man.

“How many children are there?” Shelley asked.

The third woman answered. “Seven. Fourteen adults.”

“You go back to your group and I’ll bring the food to you in a few minutes,” Joshua said.

“You’re out of your mind!” said Alvin. “We’re taking what we want, now. And just to make sure you understand it isn’t neighborly to be selfish, we’ll be taking all of your food. You can starve like the rest of us.”

“I don’t think so,” Joshua said softly.

“Oh, Joshua! Be careful! They might hurt you!”

“He’ll definitely be getting a lesson in respect,” Alvin said and took a step toward Joshua, intent on bodily damage. When Joshua bolted, Alvin laughed delightedly. “No stomach for a licking, Smart Mouth?” He looked at Shelley. “Where’s the food?”

Before Shelley could respond, Joshua was back, at a run. He dropped something behind his mother and took two more steps forward, his right arm swinging wide. The five people facing him had no chance to react before Joshua had a lightly weighted mesh net spinning out to wrap around Alvin.

The others he motioned back with a wicked looking frog gig fastened to a length of wooden dowel. Alvin was fighting to get loose of the net and fell to the ground. Shooing the others back with the gig, Joshua stood over Alvin and put the gig close to his face.

Alvin quit struggling, the fear in his eyes real as he contemplated the damage that Joshua could do with the improvised weapon.

“You will go with the others and I’ll bring you the food. You try anything; I’ll stick you like a rabid dog.”

Alvin started cursing as the other four hurriedly stepped forward to help him get untangled from the net when Joshua stepped back and nodded. He quickly stooped down and retrieved the object he’d dropped.

Alvin was loose and started for Joshua when Joshua stood up with the 24” machete in his right hand, the gig in his left. “You want a piece of me, just come and try to take it.” Joshua’s words were low, but intense.

“Come on, Alvin! The kid is nuts! Let’s just go. Wait until he’s asleep and get him then.” It was the woman that had stopped Alvin from hitting Joshua. Apparently she’d changed her mind about hurting Joshua.

“You’ll get yours, Smart Mouth!” Alvin said. He turned around and marched off, the others following suit.

“Oh, Joshua! You shouldn’t have!”

“Mom, they intend to take everything we have eventually, if the authorities don’t show up soon. And they might even take our supplies themselves, to redistribute. I’m not going to let you go hungry or without water if I can avoid it. You call out if someone comes back.

Shelley didn’t know what to say about what Joshua had said. As she watched and thought about it she decided that he was probably right. Almost shamefully she wondered if that wasn’t what she would have been demanding if the shoe was on the other foot.

She turned around a few minutes later when she heard Joshua grunt. He was carrying a large white plastic bucket, filled to overflowing with what she determined were packages of food. He stopped, pulled his belt from his pants far enough to thread the machete sheath on it, and then re-buckled the belt.

He arranged the net to hang over his left shoulder securely, and then picked up the gig in his right hand and the bucket in his left. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll be right back. And then we’ll take some measures to prevent this from happening again.”

Shelly had no idea what he meant, and almost started to plead with him not to go. To let them have the food and anything else they wanted, but managed to hold her silence. Joshua had been right up to now. She should trust him and his opinions. “Be careful,” was all she said.

Joshua nodded and headed toward the street. There was a group approaching, too quickly for Joshua’s taste, so he stopped in the middle of the street and set the bucket down. He up-ended it with a shove from his right booted foot and then quickly squatted and dumped the bucket.

With the empty bucket in hand, he started backing away from those approaching. He raised his voice to call out, “The food is for the children!”

Just as he’d hoped, all interest in him was diverted by the presence of the food. People were scrambling to get ‘their share’, so Joshua hurried away. He heard more than one person protesting that many of the adults were taking the food meant for their children.

Shelley had moved down toward the street so she could watch. Her eyes were on Joshua’s when he hurried up to her. “Come on, Mom. We’re getting out of here.”

She saw the fire in his eyes and hurried after him when he strode past. “What do you mean?”

“We’re leaving. Taking our equipment and supplies and getting away from this group. Might be going from the frying pan into the fire, but I’m not sticking around for that Alvin to sneak up on me and beat me to a pulp.”

“But how? We can’t carry...”

Joshua smiled. “Oh, we can manage. Trust me, Mom. I’ve thought about situations like this a great deal. I could use some help, though. I want to leave as quickly as possible. The fight over that food won’t last long and some of them will be back for more.”

Shelley decided to just follow along. Joshua certainly seemed to know what he was doing. It was to her great surprise that Joshua was able to hook up the cart to the bike, and have it loaded with the totes in just minutes.

“Help me with the tent and privacy shelter, Mom,” Joshua said then. A few minutes later the chemical toilet was on the cart, and the tent and privacy shelter bags piled on top. Expecting Joshua to stop, Shelley watched as he strapped on a shovel and some other tools to the mounded load on the trailer.

“I guess that’s all we can take,” Shelley said, looking longingly at the few remaining items, including her clothes and Joshua’s that he’d retrieved.

But Joshua grinned. He picked up what turned out to be folded up duffle bags and tossed one to Shelley. “Put your stuff in that. And hurry, please.”

Shelley hurried. When the two bags were loaded, Joshua strapped them onto the bike, one on each side.

“Let’s go, Mom,” Joshua said, putting his left hand on the handlebar of the bike, and his right on the seat. He began to push, slowly, but then bike and trailer were moving at a good walking pace.

Shelley trotted up to join Joshua. She’d been frozen in place for a few moments at the sight of all their remaining belongings headed toward the street on a bike and cart.

“This was what you planned all along, wasn’t it?” Shelley asked Joshua as she took position on the other side of the bike, ready to help push if needed.

“Yes. As an option. I really wanted to just stay where we were until help did arrive, but the risk of losing everything became too high.”

“You handled yourself very well against Alvin and the others,” Shelley said, surprising herself even more than Joshua.

He looked over at her. “Thanks, Mom. It was the only thing I could think of. I have the net and gig for protection against feral dogs and wild animals, and the machete against them and

snakes and to cut light stuff to build a shelter with. I have a tomahawk, too, but I wanted the reach of the long machete in this instance.”

“I see. You’ve thought about needing to defend yourself... us... against animals and people?”

“Yes.” He glanced over at Shelley, but the expected censure wasn’t in her look. It was relief.

They heard shouting behind them and Joshua picked up the pace. Shelley began to help push on the bike and they picked up speed to a slow trot. The shouts faded away as they made a sudden turn down a street that wasn’t as badly damaged as theirs was becoming as they went further away from the house.

Both were breathing hard when Joshua slowed them down to go around another sand blow covering the street. There were parts of automobiles sticking out of the pile that was almost as big as the one that had erupted across from their house.

“I think we can take it slow, now, for a while,” Joshua said. Shelley nodded. She didn’t have the breath to speak for a little while. When she did, she asked, “Do you know where to go?”

“Yes. I think we should go to the Rodenour’s. If anyone is okay and ready to deal with the stuff we’ve been dealing with, it will be them. If there is a problem, I want to help. They’ve been good friends for a long time now.”

“I remember Mrs. Rodenour from a couple of things from your school. She seemed nice.”

“She is. So is Mr. Rodenour, and Keith and his sisters.”

There weren’t very many people in evidence, Joshua noted. When they did see someone they took a quick turn and went around the group, not wanting to be stopped and have their possessions taken away from them.

It was almost dark when Joshua stopped the bike and trailer, which stopped Shelley. “Stay here with the stuff,” Joshua said. “I don’t want to just appear out of the darkness. It could be dangerous.”

“Dangerous? How?”

Joshua didn’t answer. He was already headed further up the street. He stopped and called out, “Hey Keith! It’s Joshua! Is everything okay here?”

“Joshua! Are you all right?” asked Mr. Rodenour, striding out of the darkness between his house and the pile of rubble that was one of his neighbor’s houses. Joshua suspected the house on the other side would also be down. The Rodenour’s house, what he could see of it, looked undamaged. At least it was still standing.

“Is your mother okay, Joshua?” Mr. Rodenour asked, bringing Joshua out of his thoughts about the house.

“Yes. Can we come up and stay here for a while, Mr. Rodenour? People were intent on taking our stuff over where we lived.”

“Of course it is, Joshua. Go get her.”

Joshua hurried back and told Shelley. “It’s okay.” He began pushing the bike and cart again as she walked beside him.

“So, it worked,” Mr. Rodenour said when he saw the bike and cart.

“I’ll say,” Joshua said. “Like a charm. We’d have been out of luck without it.”

“Mrs. Livingsdale,” Mr. Rodenour said. “Glad to see you’re all right.”

“Shelley, please,” Shelley said. Her eyes went to the shotgun slung over Mr. Rodenour’s shoulder.

“Shelley it is. Mike.” He held out his hand and Shelley shook it.

“I hate to be... girly, but I need to go to the bathroom,” Shelley said.

“Martha.” Mike said into a walky-talky he took from his belt. “Shelley and Joshua are here. Could you come take Shelley inside? I want to talk to Joshua for a minute.”

There was a flare of light as the front door of the house opened and then closed again.

“Come, Shelley,” Martha said. “It’s nice to see you. Wish it was other circumstances, though.”

“Thank you, Martha.” Shelley hurried after Martha and Mike turned to look at Joshua in the light of the stars.

“You really okay, son?”

“Yes. Really. Had a close call, but I managed. But I’m glad we’re here. I don’t know what I would have done if...”

“Don’t worry about it now,” Mike said softly. “You got your mother to safety, and yourself, with most of your equipment and supplies intact. That is a very great deal more than most in this area. Come on up to the house. Keith will help you get your gear into the garage. Don’t dare leave anything outside.”

“Okay. Thanks Mr. Rodenour.”

“Sure thing.” Again Mike lifted the walky-talky to his mouth. “All clear. Come lend Joshua a hand.”

Joshua heard the squelch break twice in response. He watched Keith, moving like his father, come forward out of the darkness.

“Hey, Man! You made it! Uh... Sandy has been worried.”

Joshua felt himself turn red in the darkness as Mike chuckled.

“Yeah. Me, too,” Keith added quickly. “Come on. Let’s get this inside.” Keith shifted the carbine slung over his shoulder out of the way and helped Joshua push the bike and cart up the lawn and to the garage.

Keith disappeared for a moment, but the garage door began to rise almost silently. “Got the automatic light turned off for security,” Keith said as he rejoined Joshua. “Black out curtains up on all the windows. Don’t want to advertise the fact that we have a genset.”

“That’s good,” Joshua said. “I’ve read about keeping a low profile during a disaster.”

“Yeah,” Keith replied. When they had the bike and cart inside, Keith lowered the door. “Come on in. Get something to eat and drink.”

“Bathroom first,” Joshua said.

“Sure,” Keith replied.

Joshua blinked when Keith opened the door from the garage to the kitchen. The light seemed extra bright after the time spent in only starlight.

“Hello, Joshua,” Sandy said, staring at him intently. “You okay?”

Joshua nodded.

“Keith, Sandy, Jessie, let Joshua take care of business and then you can talk,” instructed Martha.

Joshua hurried to the bathroom and returned just in time to hear his mother finish telling the Rodenour’s about what had taken place earlier.

Sandy’s blue eyes were huge when she looked around at Joshua. “You were so brave! I would have been terrified!”

“Nah,” Joshua said, dropping his eyes away from the adoring ones on him. “Just did what was necessary.”

“Believe me,” Shelley said firmly, “He was quite brave to stand up to those people. And he tried to help, on his own, but they wanted everything. I don’t know what I would have done if he hadn’t been home when all this happened.”

The house trembled slightly and Shelley gasped.

“We’re good, Shelley,” Martha hurried to reassure her. “Mike built this house to stand up to quakes. It’ll take a lot worse to do much damage.”

Shelley nodded. “I’m just kind of spooked. We were in the house during the first one and the ceiling came down and...” Shelley’s words faded away.

“Come, Shelley. Let’s get you where you can lie down for a while. Jessie, move some things to Sandy’s room for the time being. Mrs. Livingsdale can use your room.”

“Yes, Mother.” Jessie hurried off and Martha helped Shelley to her feet. Shelley was exhausted, both physically and emotionally, and it showed.

“You hungry, Joshua?” Sandy asked tentatively.

“Starving,” Joshua replied. “We didn’t stop to eat after we left.”

“I’ll make you a sandwich. Daddy said we need to use up the rest of the fresh food quickly.”

“Thanks, Sandy. That’s nice of you.”

Keith poked Joshua and Joshua moved out of his reach. Keith thought it was great that his sister had such a crush on Joshua. But that didn’t mean a guy couldn’t hassle a friend, now did it?

After an hour of catching up on what each family had gone through so far since the first big earthquake, Keith got up and said, “My turn for watch duty.”

Taking the .30 M1 Carbine from its resting place near the front door, Keith eased out of the house, careful not to let the light show for more than a second or so. Mike came in a few minutes later.

“Off to bed, you two,” Mike said, looking at Jessie and Sandy pointedly. Both hurried off without a word. “Time to get you settled, too, young man,” he added. He put the shotgun down by the door and said, “Come along. We’ll put you up in Keith’s room. Be a pallet on...”

“I have my sleeping bag and pad, Mr. Roenour,” Joshua said quickly.

“Even better. Wasn’t sure what all you did have with you. Let’s go out to the garage and get what you and your mother will need for a few days.” When they entered the garage, Mike flipped a switch and the overhead light came on.

“You’ll let us stay for a while?” Joshua asked, relief in his voice.

“Surely will, my boy. As long as needed. You’ll be expected to lend a hand when required, such as taking a watch from time to time. Little hard labor, too.” Mike chuckled. “Survival can be hard, dangerous work. But it pays off big time at the end.”

“Yes, Sir!” Joshua said with feeling. “It sure does. I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t started prepping.”

“Thankfully you did. Now let’s grab the gear and get you settled.”

Quakes continued for over a year, some as large as 8.5, which continued to destroy the makeshift repairs to the bridges on the main transport roads into the area. And the area affected was huge. From the Dakotas south to the Gulf, and from the foot hills of the Rockies to the foot hills of the Appalachians, there was heavy damage and great loss of life. Even beyond these limits the quakes caused some minor damage and were felt over most of the US.

It was over three months before anything except a census of the area was taken by FEMA workers. No food drops, except in special cases, no influx of rescue and medical personnel, no quickly set up trailers for the homeless.

There was no longer any direct connection between eastern and western areas of the US. Too many bridges down, too many roads buckled, too many rail lines ripped apart. Airport runways destroyed. Every isolated area was on its own for that time.

Helicopters were the only reliable means of transport into and out of the area. And there just weren’t enough to go around. Only the edges of the area received any real help initially.

But FEMA did finally show up and begin handing out checks to those that lost their homes. The Red Cross gave token assistance. Their local resources had disappeared within the first few days. The Salvation Army was out in droves locally doing what they could.

And hundreds of thousands that wished to move were hauled by helicopter to receiving centers outside the affected area, where they had a choice of places they could go to relocate and start over.

Without the vast quantities of foods from California, not only did many suffer starvation in the Mid-West, where the earthquake damage was the worst, but many of those east of the area suffered the same, if not quite so severe, fate. There just wasn’t food to be had. And the winter was a rough one, claiming more lives of people forced to live in makeshift hovels cobbled up from damaged houses. Many had tents, but few were capable of withstanding the hard winter.

Mike Rodenour, through strength of character, kept his small neighborhood domain sheltered and fed, using foods salvaged from destroyed stores and warehouses, and saw to it that the shacks and shanties being built by his neighbors would stand the test of winter.

The whole family, plus Shelley and Joshua, pitched in to help. Shelly and Joshua were the only people that Mike allowed to take up residence with him and the family. Everyone else got what help Mike could arrange or engineer, but they had to show a willingness to lend a hand wherever it was needed. When they did, they got a share of the salvaged goods that Mike made sure were obtained.

It was another twenty-five years before things began to get back to normal, with useable roads, railroads, and airports. Trillions of dollars were spent in the rebuilding. Joshua, no longer fourteen, was a big part of the rebuilding. And as soon as he could, he restocked his preps and added to them. Never knew what might happen next.

End \*\*\*\*\*

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