PROLOGUE

EARTHQUAKE!

December 21, 2012: Breaking News: The U.S. Geological Survey reported a massive earthquake this morning at 8:36 am EST in the Memphis area. Early reports indicate massive damage. Please stay tuned for further details.

Noon Update: A strong earthquake shook the middle of the country early this morning, collapsing buildings and causing widespread damage across several states. The quake hit at 8:36 EST in the Memphis area, with the center at New Madrid, Missouri.

The State Emergency Management has unconfirmed reports of injuries, but because of communication failures there is scant information. Tennessee Governor Nelson issued a disaster declaration, saying there has been widespread damage to buildings and roads. There are unconfirmed reports of fatalities.

Breaking News: The U.S. Geological Survey has reported a massive aftershock at the New Madrid site, strong enough to be felt in St. Louis, Missouri, Cincinnati, Ohio, Nashville, Tennessee.
Breaking News: Another aftershock has been reported. Follow up three days later: Critical infrastructure (essential facilities, transportation and utility lifelines) has been substantially damaged in the 140 counties surrounding the earthquake zone, including 3,500 damaged bridges and nearly 425,000 breaks and leaks to both local and interstate pipelines. There are approximately 2.7 million households without power. Over 130 hospitals are damaged and most of them in the Tennessee–Missouri area. Injury and death numbers are estimated in excess of 80,000 with continued search and rescue being hampered by difficulty getting access as well as the heavy snowfall and severe winds. Evacuation camps are being set up in neighboring states with estimates as high as seven million people displaced and two million people needing temporary shelter. 

Further strong damaging aftershocks are predicted.

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The Great Earthquake has had a direct economic impact on eight states: Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee. The damages bill for these states may total nearly as much as $300 billion, while indirect economic losses are estimated to be at least twice this amount. Collateral damages to neighboring states are still being tallied. It is the highest economic loss due to a natural disaster in the history of the USA.

To compound the already devastating effects of the massive quake, the National Weather Service has issued a winter storm warning for north-east, north-central and south-central parts of Kansas with predictions of six to ten inches of heavy blowing snow. Residents are warned to be prepared for hazardous conditions and low visibility when driving. Power outages may occur.

The storm will continue eastward and may impact the states hit by the earthquake.

During the President’s Address to the Nation on Christmas Eve, just three days after the Great Earthquake, there was
another massive aftershock that rocked the chandeliers at the White House. This was captured live.

The United States has had the largest national disaster in its history.

Natural gas and oil transmission line damages affected service as far away as the East Coast and New England.

There are fifteen nuclear plants in these eight states that are being checked for safety concerns.

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West Memphis was eighty-three percent destroyed then buried in a snowstorm. They were still finding bodies in the spring. Ruptured gas lines exploded, burning down several towns. Fire services were helpless when water lines broke as there was no water pressure. Many dams broke and flooded areas below them, but the Kentucky Dam, a TVA project that had produced the largest artificial lake in the eastern U.S., held. Six states filed bankruptcy and the Fed cut services because of lack of cash and resources, inflation rose because the Reserve was printing money without backing. Power grids collapsed. Those left standing continued to be damaged throughout the winter because of lax maintenance, and were not replaced in many areas. The main bridges across the Mississippi collapsed, preventing truck east-west transportation. The west was already suffering a drought. The East Coast rapidly ran out of food causing riots in the cities. Martial law was declared but not before parts of the cities were destroyed.

The Internet was still functioning, but dependent on the towers, many of which have not been replaced.

The insurance and finance industries were hit hard. Medical services were not restored to anywhere near full capacity. Much employment had been in the service industry rather than manufacturing. Both were hit hard when money wasn’t circulating. All this happened as the United States was coming out of the worst recession in modern times.
“Too rich for my blood,” came the comment from across the room. The scrape of a chair and the jingle of coins as someone’s winnings were removed from the table followed.

Deborah Steele only half-listened to the poker game in the far corner as she watched the wind whip snow into a growing drift blocking the door of the roadside diner. She took another swallow of now lukewarm coffee as she measured the frost crawling up the window. That ancient heater labored more every time it kicked on and she wondered whether it would last the night. She hoped so. They were lucky enough that the train had reached Lincoln. These days engines rather than the passengers were babied but having a halfway decent train schedule between Richmond and Logansport made it worth the occasional inconvenience. It sure beat the twenty-mile hike she had been making after her truck had died. She just couldn’t cost-justify a truck replacement when there was so much she considered more essential. So she had welcomed the news that they were rebuilding the track and now looked forward to the day when it was repaired and ran again.
all the way to Kokomo. It worked well for her as it was because the train transported the repair crews between Logansport, Richmond and Kokomo. In the morning there was a run to pick up crew and take them up the line, in the evening in reverse. Then they ran a scheduled route midday. If she planned carefully, she had a run whenever she wanted.

As for now, if they were going to be snowbound, she much preferred being at the diner rather than caught in an unheated train. Here were shelter, heat and even hot meals. She had been through enough snowstorms in the past five years that it took little to convince her to spend the night here.

Well, she had wanted some downtime, she thought, as she laced her fingers behind her head and stretched out. She needed to get away from the house occasionally, have some distance so she could see where she was, what she had to do. She just was not cut out for group living and living with eleven women in the house taxed her endurance. Going into town helped, but what she had really wanted was time to just do nothing. She could not remember the last time she had been alone with no agenda, no one needing her for anything. A luxury, and she would take it even if it had been delivered by a snowstorm.

She got up and stretched, wondering if the storm would blow itself out soon or whether it’d snow all night and they’d be stuck here yet another day. She hoped not. While she did appreciate the downtime, there were things she had to do at home. She wandered over to the counter, lifted her cup in question to Luella, the owner who was sitting in a booth gossiping with another of the train passengers.

“Go ahead,” Luella waved her behind the counter.

She’s probably enjoying the added business, Deborah thought as she glanced around the filled tables.

She returned to stand before the plate glass window, sipping coffee, watching it snow. She had loved snow as a kid, but now she could never see it without remembering the blizzard that hit Memphis after the Great Earthquake. Destroyed buildings covered with heavy wet snow that hampered the search and rescue teams. She had tried to pick out familiar landmarks as she watched on the television but it was impossible. Such devastation. She never could look at snow the same way again.
The death toll had been tremendous, over seventy-five thousand directly from the earthquake. Then the bad winter with massive homelessness, cities running out of food, out of fuel, out of just about everything increased those numbers. Financial failures, the insurance companies almost totally wiped out, the investment companies tanked. Banks toppled. Investors fled. Civil unrest abounded, people went where they could to survive, confronting those already there who barricaded themselves in. Riots broke out and martial law was declared across vast areas. Government was reduced to the most basic level, delighting some, terrifying others. The nation had a big black hole in the middle of the country sucking up all their resources and nothing but need oozing out.

The Great Earthquake had changed her life like it had so many others. She had come home to Indiana to take care of year-end family farm business. If not for that, she would have been there in Memphis when the New Madrid Fault moved with such shocking consequences. She might not have survived. As it was, she lost everything. Well, relatively speaking. She lost her job, her home, her community, a whole lot of friends. But she had a house and land here in Indiana. She had her life. And like most survivors, she wondered why she had been spared.

Slowly, by happenstance, she found family, women who had no one, no resources, women who couldn’t survive alone. Some had simply passed through, some stayed.

“Hey, Deborah, want to join in?”

Deborah broke her reflective mood. The poker game. She hadn’t played for years, but she’d always had good luck. And from the looks of the snowfall, they weren’t going anywhere soon. It would pass the time. Besides, there was always gossip around the poker table. She might learn something.

“Why not?” she said to no one in particular so she picked up her jacket and headed down to the other end of the diner. On her way she passed Todd stretched out on three straight chairs, his hat pulled down over his eyes, apparently asleep.

“Don’t get snookered,” he commented in a low voice as she went by.

“I’ll try not to.”
Just as she reached the midpoint a blast of cold air hit them all and the room turned to see the engineer from the railroad crew. A wave of anticipation went through the dozen or so passengers as the moving snowman stomped his boots free of snow and brushed the sleeves of his heavy coat. The scarf fell from his face, dropping clumps of snow at the door on the old linoleum.

“Any luck?” Deborah asked.

He pulled his hat off and slapped it free of snow, looking around to meet everyone’s expectant gaze with resignation. He shook his head. “Can’t see the tracks. As soon as we get them clean, they’re buried again. This whole stretch is questionable. Can’t see them—don’t run. Sorry. Looks like we’re here for a while.” Everyone settled back down into their seats, turned back to whatever they were doing to kill time. “Coffee hot, Luella? Sure could stand a mug.”

That settled that, Deborah thought as she continued on to the open dining area where the card players had taken over the round table. She could smell the heat from the vent right above them as she tossed her long jacket over a neighboring table. She pulled the chair out and looked around as she sat down, nodding to the players already in the game. She knew two of them. They had farms down by Seven Mile. She had gone to school with them, old county families, same as hers. Another two she only knew by sight, having seen them at the grain elevator or other places she did business. Then there were the two strangers.

She had noticed them when they had boarded the train in Richmond because they had also come from the hotel just like she had. But what had caught her eye was the woman accompanying them. She hadn’t gotten a good look at her. The two men had kept her isolated, quick to steer her where they wanted her to go. City people, Deborah surmised. But there was still the question about the woman, who had kept her head down and turned away. She looked for her now.

“What’s the game?” she asked no one in particular as she looked around the open room. There was a couple with a kid at one table, a woman knitting at another nearby table, maybe the wife of one of the players, a bored-looking woman bundled up against the cold, her legs stretched out. And then back in the
corner booth, about as far from everyone as she could get, she saw the mystery woman.

“Stud. Jacks or better to open. Nothing wild.” Brad, one of the farmers she had gone to school with, answered.

Deborah nodded as she hauled change from her pants pocket. These were all small-time farmers. There wouldn’t be a lot of money floating around.

Deborah kept glancing back at the woman, at her threadbare jacket thrown across the table, that once upon a time had been denim with a flannel lining, the flannel shirt that at least added another layer. She couldn’t see her face but she looked pinched and cold. She sat with her legs drawn up, her arms wrapped about her legs, her face turned toward the windows. Deborah could see the metal bands on each of her wrists, signifying she was contract labor registered with the state. That alone got Deborah’s sympathy. Contracts such as these, who had been in one type of conflict or another, and had fallen under state regulation, were never treated well, and she particularly hated seeing female state contracts in the company of men. What was originally protection for them now only marked them as fair game. There was just too much opportunity to abuse them in ways she hated to contemplate.

As if she sensed Deborah’s scrutiny, the woman raised her head. Without looking around, she pulled down her sleeves to cover the bracelets, wrapped the shirt tightly around and turned so her back was to the room. Perhaps, Deborah thought, she was merely curling up to conserve body heat but more likely trying to get some privacy from prying eyes.

Deborah accepted her dismissal and turned her attention to the card dealer. Sympathy wasn’t always welcome and besides, there was nothing she could do. Chance and luck decided things in life as well as in cards, sometimes bad and sometimes just not so bad.

“Now what I really need is a beer,” one of the poker players was saying. “A tall one, ice-cold. Too bad we get stuck in Lincoln.”

“Could have been worse. Could have gotten stuck at Anoka.” There was general laughter and Deborah smiled. Anoka consisted of a wide spot in the road several miles further down the track, where a general store used to stand. Now it was just another
empty building. At least Lincoln had the train station, the diner, a
gathering of houses and a church. There had been a convenience
store once too but it was long empty. She almost wished they were
stuck at Anoka. She’d be close enough to walk home, even in this
weather.

“Gotta watch him,” Carl, one of the men she knew by name,
said, indicating with a crooked thumb the stranger as he leaned
to one side in a falsely conspiratorial whisper. “Thinks we’re all
rubes and he’s gonna clean us out.”

Deborah nodded. Carl’s tone was kidding, friendly, but all the
same he was a good judge of character. His cheerful face and hail-
fellow-well-met made people underestimate him.

“Name’s Gentry, ma’am,” the stranger introduced himself.
“Came up here from Memphis.” Big man, barrel-chested, broad
face, sandy hair. Well fleshed, meant he ate well. Wore wool
instead of denim, not a laborer.

Deborah caught her breath and focused on her cards. Strange
how such casual words could be like a punch to the gut. Memphis.
It showed up in the most unexpected places, invariably catching
her off guard. She focused on her cards, shut away those memories.
“Earthquake zone,” she commented in a steady voice.

She wondered if anyone at the table even remembered she
had lived in Memphis. Probably not, just that she was from an
old county family, had gone away somewhere “out there” and
had come back to stay. Memphis was just someplace where some
disaster happened. That had been there. They were here, safe and
sound. Sorry for them, relieved for me. That was all that mattered.

“Yes, ma’am, that New Madrid Fault hit us hard. Took out
over half the city.”

Half the city and then almost half the country, followed by
a winter with weather that broke the records. Bitter cold and
record snows, the Great Lakes froze over. Snowed clear into
May. By that time, the refugees had scattered across the country,
and somewhere in the mix of people and emergency conditions,
came new infectious agents. People said it was like the earthquake
had released virulence into the air to kill what it couldn’t do
directly.
She didn’t like remembering that winter. She hadn’t handled it well. She had been obsessed with what she had lost, being back where she started when she had worked so hard to leave it behind her. Every time she turned around, she had to deal with another loss. She hadn’t found her footing until spring when she finally told herself she could either founder and die or get up and deal with it. She had it better than most.

She had hunkered down then, decided to survive, do what she had to do. She had land, good farmland. She had shelter—a strong, stable house that had withstood years of storms. She was isolated, which meant she was out of harm’s way. Her only shortfall had been labor and she would find a solution. She would survive.

The cards went around. Deborah played cautiously, getting the feel of the cards, the players. She always thought you could tell a lot about a person by the way they played cards, and she wondered about the two strangers. And she wondered about the woman in the corner, a state-registered contract. Puzzling.

Not that she had anything against contracts. Contracts were just a means of survival. Based on the old indentured servant labor system, one person promised to provide shelter, food, clothing and care in exchange for so many years of labor by the other. The idea seemed simple in the beginning for business owners who needed the labor but didn’t have the cash. Like anything else, it got complicated. Contracts got sold. Some people thought it smacked of slavery and were opposed on principle. Arguments that it wasn’t the person who was sold, just the piece of paper that held their promise of labor, didn’t sway them. Some people did think of it as just a piece of paper and walked away. So contracts were registered, and although they were a civil matter, the contract terms were enforced by the courts. Walking away or even enticing someone to leave the promised employment was seen as a theft of services, and treated as such. Then it became a crime, and the state got involved. But the state usually didn’t have the time or money to enforce the law. If the runaway was found, they were usually remanded back to the contract holder but even the state could run out of patience. Three strikes and they would sentence the runaway to prison for the duration of the contract term.
"You playing or dreaming," Sid asked with a nudge.

"Hmm." Deborah came back with a start. She had been wandering, wondering what that woman had done to be on a state-registered contract. She checked her cards, grimaced and folded.

A contract could be abused, she admitted. That was why they weren’t popular. Some holders worked the laborers as hard as they could to get as much out of them before the end date. Some laborers were tricked into signing contracts, thinking they were signing for one kind of work and then being sold for another. Once that contract was signed, the laborer had little or no say about what happened. There were no unions, although labor boards were beginning to become established. Women, if they got pregnant, had that time added to their contract, even though they might work right up until delivery. Then there was always the sexual abuse and exploitation that happened.

Other times, contract laborers were treated as valued employees, taken in as family when they were working in a small business. While they might not be paid cash wages, they benefited in other ways. That’s how she treated hers, as family. She couldn’t manage without them and tried to let them know it. Karen managed the land, Sara managed the house, Linda took care of the animals. Sue managed the kitchen. Now Beth was the prize, a nurse practitioner. Rae had started doing pottery this winter and that was turning out well. Peg, ah, Peg was in a class by herself. Sometimes she wished Peg had declined her offer of a contract, but then she would have probably left the area. Having her on contract was not the same as having her as a lover, but at least now, she still had her counsel. She sighed. Sometimes she had hard choices. The others were easy. Brea was a solid stabilizing force, and then Kelly was just a flat-out hard worker. She frowned. Now, Bobbi. Bobbi was a problem. Hadn’t found out what to do with her yet.

“You in this round?”

She nodded. Back to the card game. The afternoon passed, the snow piled up and she focused on the cards. She threw in a few good hands, bluffed a few, won some, lost some. She thought Gentry and his companion had something going, but she couldn’t
quite figure out what. They had suggested another version of
poker, just to make things interesting. The group went along—
stakes were higher. If there was cheating, Deborah wasn’t sure
how it was being done. Finally Gentry was out of cash but he
seemed to think he had a good hand. He started to drag the pot,
pulling the amount of his bet out to one side. If he lost, that was
the amount he would owe. If he won, it wouldn’t matter.

“Can’t do that,” Sid pointed out. “If you lived here, that’s one
thing, but you’re just traveling through.”

Gentry checked his cards again, seemed like it was a hand he
had a lot of confidence in, hated to fold. “Got chits from Bank of
Memphis.”

Brad, the old school-mate, laughed. “Hell, we don’t take chits
three counties away, never mind someplace like Memphis.”

Everyone waited. Gentry checked his cards again. Deborah
sat back in her chair, convinced this was what Gentry had been
building up to all afternoon. She had a good hand, but she wasn’t
sure she was going to stay. It all depended on what Gentry was
up to.

“Tell you what I’m gonna do,” he said like he just seized
on a bright idea. “I’ve got this contract here. I’ll put her up as
collateral.”

Oh, really bad form, Deborah thought as she felt the chill
around the table. He’s really read this group wrong. Contracts
in this area were still respected as people, not pieces of property.
It was one thing to set up a contract between two people as a
promise of support in exchange for labor, quite another to use a
contract as collateral for a loan much less a poker game.

He looked over his shoulder. “Hey, you. Come here.”

Deborah watched the woman slowly unfold from her corner.
She bent over to push her jeans down her legs and got to her feet.
She stood there a minute as if bracing herself then picked up her
jacket and started through the tables and chairs with a long lanky
stride.

Deborah looked down at her cards, not seeing them, reluctant
to watch the woman approach but then she looked up again,
compelled. There was no way anyone else could move the same
way, that long leggy step, the twist of the body as she weaved
through the chairs. The woman stationed herself across the table from Deborah, near enough to be compliant and distant enough to be out of Gentry’s reach. Now that she was closer and her head was up, her fading black eye was visible as well as the jagged cut on her cheekbone and the bruise along her jawline. She didn’t look at anyone as Gentry went on with her list of accomplishments.

“Experienced, cooperative, has the most amazing skills,” and he had that slight leer to his voice until his eyes fell on Deborah. “Good, hard worker, great help around the house, even does work outside, switch hitter so to speak.”

The woman glanced at him, betraying surprise which suggested to Deborah that housework accomplishments weren’t usually cited, then gave a quick glance around the table. She started at the sight of Deborah. Deborah stared back with as much disinterest as she could muster and the woman quickly looked away.

“Now what do I want with a contract?” Sid complained. He had the best hand showing on the table, a possible straight. “And we can sure see she’s a good willing worker.”

“I’ll cover it,” Deborah said blandly, picking her change up and dropping the coins one by one onto a stack. Her words created a bigger chill. She had never before publicly arranged any contracts. Oh, people knew or rather suspected but the contracts had all been privately negotiated and could therefore be tactfully ignored by everyone. She was reasonably sure stories of this poker game would be all over the county by sundown tomorrow night if not sooner, snow storm or not. She wasn’t fond of being the subject of gossip or any public scrutiny. She had survived by no one knowing her business, but this was different. “Whoever wins, I’ll pay the drag and the contract balance.”

No one made any comment in the heavy silence. Deborah just sat there and waited for someone to say something. No one spoke up in protest. The pot had grown large enough that no one wanted to lose. Gentry seemed pretty confident of his hand, but there were some good hands showing. Everyone wanted to win the money except Deborah. She had what she wanted as soon as Gentry tossed the papers into the pot in the middle of the table.

Conversation in the diner died and Deborah felt rather than saw others wander over to watch. From the corner of her eye, she saw Todd take up a position behind her.
The last card went around. Brad drew nothing so he folded. Sid had a possible straight, maybe even a possible flush but Deborah didn’t think so. He checked. Carl and Leon, Gentry’s companion, both folded. Deborah checked. The last guy folded. Gentry had a possible full house, which Deborah speculated, might have made him overly confident.

“Full house.” Gentry turned his cards over. Aces and kings. Sid turned his hand over with a grimace. He had his flush, but not a straight. Too bad. Gentry was already reaching for the pot.

“Not so fast.” Deborah flipped her hole cards of jack and ace to match her ten, queen, king, showing all red, all hearts. “Read ’em and weep.” A collective breath was expelled from around the table.

“Damn Deborah,” Brad burst out with. “I swear to God, things haven’t changed a bit. You can still pull those straights like nobody’s business.”

Deborah permitted herself a small smile. “Inside track with Lady Luck, don’t you know?” She dragged the pot in front of her as Gentry stared at her cards in apparent disbelief. Sid shook his head as he picked up his remaining monies. The game was over as far as everyone was concerned but it was already a topic of discussion.

Deborah picked up the folded contract, read the cover sheet. She glanced at the woman who wouldn’t look at her, then went back to skim through the rest of the pages. She looked up at Gentry. “Ready to sign the transfer?”

Gentry rubbed his chin. “Well, guess you won it fair and square.” Everyone stopped talking and turned to look at him. He looked up at the sudden scrutiny. “Not that I’m implying that there was any cheating going on,” he said quickly.

“Better not be,” Brad warned. “We’ve known each other since grade school. You’re the odd man out.”

Gentry made a show of reaching for his pen from his jacket pocket. “Just wondered if the lady knows what she’s getting into. Contracts can be a dirty business.”

“Oh, I think I can handle it,” Deborah said blandly, halfway expecting someone to say something. There was a silence around the table, a waiting.
“State contracts can be a pain in the a—” He caught himself in time. “There’re a lot of extra rules and regs.”
“I’ll deal with it.” Deborah waited and finally unable to delay anymore, Gentry signed. He handed her the papers.
“And the balance I owe you?”
He named a figure and there was a low whistle from someone, a throat clearing from someone else.
Deborah reached behind her and Todd handed over her jacket. She gave a nod of thanks and pulled out her wallet from the inside pocket. Normally she wouldn’t be carrying that much cash but thanks to the bank unexpectedly closing she hadn’t been able to deposit it. She counted the cash out on the table, then glancing at the small amount in front of him, she deducted the amount he owed the pot. Satisfied, she picked up the cash and held it out to him, her other hand outstretched for the signed contract.
Once Gentry had folded up the money and Deborah had stuffed the contract into her pocket, the tension was broken. “Hey, Luella,” Brad hollered. “You got any ham and eggs in the kitchen?”
“Coming up right away.” She went through the swinging door to the kitchen. “Anyone else?”
Gentry slowly rose from the table and made a move toward the woman. She stood there, uncertain, looking from him to Deborah, cautiously stepping away as if he would stop her.
Deborah wondered about the byplay as she caught the woman’s eye. “You need to come with me,” she said in a firm voice. “We need to get acquainted.”
With an air of relief, the woman moved further out of Gentry’s reach but she didn’t come any closer to Deborah than necessary. Deborah stuffed her wallet back into her jacket wondering how she was going to handle this.
“Thought you had a full house,” Todd interrupted her thoughts in a low voice behind her.
She glanced at him in puzzlement and then realized he wasn’t talking about the cards. “Always room for one more.” She saw the woman stiffen and wondered if she heard or how she took it.
He raised his eyebrows in question as he glanced at the woman and then back at Gentry. “Hope you know what you’re getting into.”
“So do I.” She turned back to the woman and pointed to the other end of the diner. “This way.”

Halfway down, Deborah ducked behind the counter and stuck her head into the kitchen. “Luella, can I use your office?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Deborah pointed to the door marked Private at the end of the counter. “Down there.”