

DIMENSIONS

Chapter One

First and Last

He was jolted suddenly awake, then relaxed. Although he had never been in one, he was pretty sure that right here in Burbank, California, he had just experienced his first earthquake.

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Earlier that day, Jesse Monroe sighed heavily as he examined the room, sat down, and sighed again. One wall was already stacked with boxes, and the sheer volume of things yet to be packed, given away or trashed was still daunting. There were the usual large items – couch, easy chair, TV. No problem. It was everything else, the DVD's and videos, the stuff on the walls, the dishes and silverware, the thousand little pieces of this and that picked up over nearly five years of living in the same apartment that presented the real problem. He couldn't simply throw everything in boxes, he had to look at it, evaluate its worth, reminisce about it (whether it deserved that or not) and only then could it go in a box or trashcan. Of course, this made packing slow, but, he had to finally admit, he actually enjoyed it. This weeding out process always gave him a feeling of a fresh start.

He had done it a lot after he first graduated from college. It turned out that six months was far more than enough time with his first roommate, Mark, a friend who had graduated from college a year before him and moved to Florida. Jesse and a few friends had driven down to Florida for spring break his senior year and stayed with Mark. When he got back to college, he got the bright idea to call Mark and see if he could use a roommate.

"It's only a one bedroom apartment, and you'd have to sleep on the couch, dude, but, yeah, I could use a roommate to split some bills with," Mark said.

Mistake. It turned out that Mark was a great guy to have living down the hall in a dorm, and a great guy to party with for a week, but as someone to depend on for rent and other bills, he was a good deal less than great. Mark was already in hot water with the landlord for consistently past due rent and loud parties. The phone was actually turned off when Jesse arrived. Mark quickly assured him, "The situation is temporary, man, check's already in the mail, just slipped my mind, you know bro?" This was just the first of many half-truths. Mark worked as a short-order cook at various chain restaurants where the schedule afforded him the

ability to party until early in the morning and sleep late. It also allowed him to spend more of his paycheck than he could really afford, which kept him continually behind on nearly everything.

It was a blast, at first. It was like college without the hassle of studying. Jesse had a couple of thousand dollars saved, and he had moved to Florida without a job, so the hours were his to spend as he liked.

After about three weeks, it dawned on Jesse that nearly every one of Mark's stories began, "I was so wasted..." or some variation on this theme. After a couple of months, he began to notice "PAST DUE" letters in the mail for bills that he had given Mark money for. Constant partying started seeming a little hard to justify.

Jesse eventually got a job as a waiter at the restaurant where Mark worked. He already knew most of the people working there since they had been at the apartment many times, with various beverages and other substances. He had to get a job because his savings were running out quickly, and the financial habits of his roommate kicked his responsibility gene into action. In hindsight, a second mistake.

Jesse had never worked a job where he was carrying cash home everyday, and the money he was making stacked up pretty well against his expenses - a little too well, in fact. Carrying most of his income in cash made it ridiculously easy to spend. Buy a few rounds, eat out every day (and night), and his cash disappeared at an astonishing rate. After about six weeks at the restaurant, Jesse sat down to figure his money and was shocked to realize that he would probably need to pick up some shifts just to make rent.

So Jesse cut back on the partying and spending, and started making ATM deposits after his shift instead of carrying cash. He asked Mark not to bring people over to the apartment, which didn't set too well with Mark. The breaking point came three days before rent was due.

Mark walked in the door with a case of beer and a \$20 bag of weed, cracked open a beer, and flopped down on the couch. "Bad news, bro," he managed to say with a straight face, "I probably can't get you the rent until about the 10th. My bad, bro."

"Are you kidding me? You walk in here - obviously able to afford your beer and pot - and then tell me you won't have the rent? You must be out of your fucking mind!"

"Whoa, bro. What's your problem? I'm a little short, that's all. Chill, my man."

Jesse avoided physically assaulting him by leaving the room. When he returned with a cooler head, Jesse agreed to pay the rent upfront, but told Mark that he would be moving out ASAP.

Jesse wasn't really surprised to discover that he might actually be better off living with Mark – financially at least. At least Mark paid *some* of the bills, and apartment prices in the area were higher than what they were paying together. He finally decided to buy a decent trailer in a fairly nice park. The price was low enough to make him overlook the stigma of living in a trailer park. "And besides," he reasoned to himself, "it's almost like owning my own house, even if it *could* disappear in a hurricane." The trailer had two bedrooms, and he briefly considered looking for a roommate. He decided that as long as he could comfortably afford to live there by himself, he didn't need the headache.

Jesse moved three more times in the next two years, but the experience with Mark had motivate him to get himself together and start living with some fiscal responsibility. He sold the trailer for a profit when he got a job at a restaurant across town, and he moved into a small apartment there. Eventually, he settled - nearly four years ago - into the apartment where he now lived.

During those five years, he had gotten serious about his acting career. He got an agent in North Florida where he lived, and started auditioning for local commercials and training films. The first time he saw himself on television, it was a thrill. When someone actually recognized him on the street, he was hooked. He started branching out, eventually getting agents in all the major markets in Florida, and soon found himself on the road and on the set more and more, and waiting tables less and less. Finally, he took a deep breath and quit the restaurant business altogether.

It was almost two years since he had a "regular" job working for someone else. Getting recognized on the street was becoming a fairly regular thing, as he nearly always had at least a couple of commercials running locally, sometimes across the state and even a few nationals. Jesse was careful with the money, and had managed to save a little over \$10,000. After some careful consideration, research, and more than a few conversations with his agent in Orlando, he decided to make the move to Los Angeles. He had gotten to a point in Florida where he was doing about as well as he was ever going to do. He decided that if he truly wanted to pursue a full-time acting career and give himself a chance to succeed, the West Coast was the place.

So here he was, on a Friday afternoon, three days before he was moving permanently across the country, looking with dismay at the packing that still had to be done. He was picking up the truck on Sunday, some friends were coming over to help him load it, and then he would leave on Monday morning. He had been looking forward to this for months, and incredibly, the day was almost here. It was hard to believe.

His cell phone rang.

"Hello."

"Hey. Whatcha doing?" It was Crystal.

He laughed. "I'll give you three guesses.

"Oh. Yeah. I guess I'm in denial." She paused. "I just can't get used to the idea that you're leaving." He felt an unexpected pang at this, but said nothing. "So, you're packing."

"Right first try. You still going out with us tonight?"

She hesitated a little too long. "I... yeah, yeah, I just wish..." She trailed off.

He knew what she wished. He did too, but... "I know, but we agreed, right? This is for the best. I'm going almost 2500 miles away. It just wouldn't work."

"I know, I get all that *Mr. Spock*. You're so irritatingly logical sometimes. I'm talking about how I feel. Just because I understand doesn't mean I have to feel good about it. It's only been in the last few days that I have even let myself believe you're really leaving."

Much to his own surprise, Jesse felt another sharp stab in the pit of his stomach. They had agreed more than a month ago to cool their relationship to "friend" status. It only made sense with him moving and her staying. Her family was here, and her career, at least for now. She had been a journalism major, and wanted someday to anchor a national news desk. She was already writing a twice-weekly column for their local paper, and had even gotten a few looks at syndication.

Jesse had been introduced to Crystal at a party, and while he found her very attractive, the ease with which they communicated immediately is what hooked him. She was intelligent, actually interested in what was going on in the world, and had opinions that she was not afraid to express - a refreshing change from the vacuous party girls he normally found at Mark's parties.

It was a total fluke that they met at all. About six months prior - before he had even decided to move - he gave Mark a call to see how he was doing. As far as Mark was concerned, it was like nothing had ever happened. He told Jesse that he had quit partying for a

few months after Jesse left because he finally realized how good it had been having someone to split the bills with. Mark had gotten his bills straight, and was even saving money, and by the way, would Jesse like to come to a party tomorrow night? Jesse laughed in spite of himself. Some things never change. "Sure," he said, "Tomorrow night would be great."

"Cool! I'm always telling people that I know you when you come on TV, and nobody believes me!"

"So I guess that means I have to act like I know you?" There was a smirk in his voice.

"Yeah, funny, asswipe. I guess you know where I live?"

That was the night he met Crystal. Their relationship developed slowly at first. Jesse got her phone number, but didn't call her for a little over a week - not on purpose, it just ended up being a busy week. An actor in Florida takes it when it comes. He was relieved that she still seemed glad to hear from him. They talked easily, and agreed to go out that Friday. Jesse wasn't exactly sure when he hung up the phone who asked who, but he wasn't disappointed with the result. It was a good time, nothing fancy, just a quiet dinner with a little wine. What was more impressive, he realized later, was that it *was* so easy. He wasn't working to impress her, and she seemed equally at ease. Just as at their first meeting, there was no struggle for words, no awkward "what's your sign?" type questions. It took about 2 months for them to mutually decide not to see other people. Again, he wasn't quite sure who suggested it when it was all said and done.

Ironically, it was probably her influence that made him start thinking about the move to Los Angeles. He started talking to his agents, began buying books about L.A. Crystal made him feel so good, so confident in himself and his abilities that he wanted to jump in the big pond. She helped him enthusiastically at first, then less and less as she realized that he was serious, and what it would mean. Finally she (and he was sure this time) confronted him about where this relationship going, and he had to agree that long distance romance just didn't work.

What he wasn't ready for was how much he missed her. He missed her as soon as she left that day while holding back tears and trying to be logical and strong. He actually felt physical pain. He went to the store, got a case of beer, rented a couple of movies and spent the rest of the day on the couch.

Now, weeks later, he thought that he was over it, but just hearing her voice almost took him right back to the place he was on the day she left. Almost. The hope of the "almost" was what he clung to for reassurance that things would get better. Someday.

He softened. "I know," he said gently, "Sometimes I can't believe I'm really leaving myself. I get terrified that I am just making a huge mistake." He hesitated. She was silent. "You know, I... I... How about you stay after we're done Sunday night? We can grab some dinner, then-"

She cut him off. "No, no, I... I just can't. I want to so bad that I know I can't. Bad idea. Look, I'll... I'll see you tonight," and she was gone. He didn't even have the chance to say anything.

He spent the rest of the afternoon packing. It was funny how fast he could pack while his mind was preoccupied with how much he would miss her and conflicting thoughts of how he was doing the right thing. When his phone rang at a little after 7:00, he was fairly amazed to discover how little was left to pack. He checked the ID on the cell, and then checked his watch again. It was 7:10.

"Hey. You guys are a little early, aren't you?" It was Jeff, and Orlando would be with him.

"Oh, I'm hurt. When we get there, would you mind pulling your knife out of my back? I'm sure you'll need it for your new 'friends' in California."

"Alright, drama queen. I'm just saying I thought you weren't coming until 8:00."

"Fine, I get it, you don't want to spend any more time with us than you have scheduled. Hate to have to adjust the Palm Pilot." Jesse rolled his eyes and sighed. "Okay, okay, so we had nothing better to do, and thought that we might as well spend the time with our soon-to-be-gone buddy. By the way, you hungry? We got extra *Taco Bell*."

Jesse chuckled. "Sounds great. I was just thinking how it's been awhile since I had diarrhea. Just come on in when you get here. The door's open. I'm still packing."

"Oh, geez, I just remembered, we gotta stop somewhere first. It may be awhile."

"Yeah, like I'd really let you put your dirty mitts all over my stuff. Don't even worry about that, loser," Jesse retorted.

"Okay, okay, we'll be there in a few. Later."

"Later." Jesse flipped the phone shut and laid it on the coffee table. Coffee table - did he really want to keep that? It *was* kind of unique; dark wood, closed compartments, carved designs. It may have been handmade for all he knew. He had picked it up at a thrift store during one of his moves, and it just kind of stuck with him. He had moved it a few times, and it was really starting to show some wear, but... he was kind of attached to it, he realized with an

amused snort. To a piece of furniture? Maybe he *should* leave it, sort of a personal symbol of leaving the past behind. Well, no need to make that decision right now, he thought to himself - even as he realized how ridiculous it was that he couldn't.

There was a perfunctory knock on the door, which burst open to admit two guys carrying *Taco Bell* bags. Jeff, the taller of the two by an inch or so, was dressed upscale casual, black slacks and shoes, royal-blue button-down shirt untucked, open collar, sleeves artfully rolled up just twice. The blonde hair flopped loosely in a carefully unarranged style. Jeff was every inch the Florida poster boy.

Orlando, on the other hand, was a bit less so. Faded, torn jeans were complemented by an ancient heavy metal t-shirt that was so worn it seemed to be held together only by some process not yet known to science. His close-cropped brown hair was only slightly longer than the scruff on his face.

"*Taco Bell's here, dahhhling,*" Jeff sang out in a trilling falsetto as he came through the door. "You need a good solid base before we go out. By the way, you are not paying for anything tonight. We are clear on that, yes?" Orlando grinned but said nothing.

"Yeah, great, refried beans and ground horse meat. If I'm not paying for anything, I sure hope the choices get better," Jesse grinned, as he extended a fist and got a knocked fist back in greeting from Jeff first, then Orlando. "What's up, Lando Calrissian?" They had sort mutually decided a long time ago that a guy named Orlando living in Florida was just a little too cute. They had shortened it (most of the time) to Lando, and sometimes just Do.

"Cool," was all Orlando said. Technically not a grammatically correct response, but it conveyed the point. From the kitchen, Jeff called, "Ok, we got *Bud Light* or *Blue Moon Belgian Ale*. Who wants what?"

They ate mostly in silence as Lando flipped through the channels of sitcom reruns and game shows. He finally landed on an old movie that none of them recognized. When the food was finished, they still just sat watching and hanging out. Only the sudden bleat of Jesse's cell phone raised them all from their reverie.

"Hey."

"So I'm here already. What time are you guys getting here?" Crystal asked

Jesse checked his watch. "Well, they weren't supposed to get here until 8, but they came a little early and brought me some *Taco Bell*."

"Wow, *Taco Bell*. Are they going to buy you all the *Busch Light* you want, too?"

"I know, right? They could've at least brought me a steak."

"There's cow parts in there," Jeff grouched, slinging a tortilla chip at Jesse's head. "Besides, *it's free*, you ungrateful bastard."

"Yeah, yeah. Listen, I'll get these guys moving and we'll be there soon, ok? Like 15 minutes tops."

"Yeah, we'll see. I'm here, and I've got a table. Look for me."

"Will do. See you soon." He bit his tongue to cut off the automatic "sweetie" that he wanted to put there. He snapped the phone shut. "So what say you two slugs get off your dead asses and let's get out of here."

Jeff's grin was so wide it threatened to split his face. "Soooo... I see how it is. You're 'broken up', right?" – air quotes included – "but as soon as she says jump, you're out the door. 'Broken up' my ass."

Jesse's glare wiped a good deal of the smile off Jeff's face. "Look, we broke up because I'm leaving, that's all. And that's all you better concern yourself with."

"Ok, ok, I'm just messing with you bro." Jeff looked slightly uncomfortable, a look that he wasn't accustomed to and didn't wear well. "I... " Words failed.

Jesse relented. "Yeah, I'm sorry, I know, it's just a tender spot right now."

Orlando was looking uncertainly back and forth between the two of them. At this pronouncement of forgiveness, he said, "Yeah." For Lando, even speaking at a tense moment like this was an exclamation. They all exchanged a knock and turned to the door.

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They were meeting at their usual karaoke hangout, a little local joint called *Monkey's Uncle*. *Monkey's* had karaoke 3 or 4 times a week, and the four of them were there more often than not. Jesse agreed this was the only place for a going away party. When they got there, Crystal already had a table, a pitcher with 4 cold mugs and 4 shots of tequila. "Alright boys, I set 'em up, let's knock 'em down." She raised her shot glass. "To the 'California boy', here. May he never forget... where *we* come from!" She laughed. "Cheers."

"Cheers," they echoed and slammed all four shots in unison, then grabbed the beer to wash it down. Jeff shook his head and shivered. "Brrraaahh! That's some powerful stuff." Orlando smiled. They all knew that within about a half hour, Lando would be up onstage doing a killer rendition of *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*. Anyone who had never seen him at karaoke

would not have believed that it was the same person. People who had *only* seen him at karaoke never even recognized him on the street.

They all talked and laughed like any other time, but with a definite undercurrent of denial that this might be the last time all of them would ever do this. True to form, Lando did his *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* (Guns n' Roses, not Dylan) to much applause. Jeff sang *He's My Brother*, mostly on key, to mostly indifferent response. Jesse brought down the house with *Hotel California* without any thought to the irony. He thought about asking Crystal to do *All My Life* with him, a duet that they had often done together. The thought was followed quickly by a sharp realization in his stomach. Not tonight, he thought. Or probably ever again.

As the evening wore on and pitchers were emptied, refilled, and emptied again, things got schmaltzy. Toasts were raised to all things Jesse, until the lights came up and they heard, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here."

"Let's all juss go back to my place," Jesse suggested as they stumbled from the bar. "I don't fink... I don't think any of us need to be driving... at least not very far." Jesse's apartment was only about five minutes away on mostly deserted back streets, and they all more or less agreed. They elected Jeff to drive (mainly because they were taking his car), and everyone clumsily piled in.

They got back to the apartment, parked mostly in a parking spot, and climbed the three flights to the apartment, which strangely seemed much longer now than when they had left. They crashed in pretty much the same places they had been a few hours before. Jeff grabbed everyone a beer from the fridge that they didn't really want and certainly didn't need, but they were at that point where it was just the thing to do.

Orlando flipped on the television and started to surf randomly. Jeff was the first one out, then Lando. Crystal was starting to nod off when Jesse stood up from where he was sitting on the couch beside her. He slipped the remote out of Lando's hand and turned the volume down. Tossing the remote on the couch, he gently took Crystal's hand.

"Come on. Let's go to bed." The comment wasn't suggestive or seductive. He simply wanted to be near her. Alcohol had erased all pretense of their logical, forced distance. Crystal got up without a word, and followed him into the bedroom. Once there, they both just kicked off their shoes and lay down together, bodies entwined, not speaking, and fell almost immediately asleep.

A few hours later, the early morning sun shining through the windows, Jesse was jolted suddenly awake. Although he had never been in one, he was pretty sure that right here, in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, he had just experienced his first earthquake.

Chapter Two

Moving Experiences

"What the hell...?" Jeff's confused voice floated into the bedroom. Crystal lay awake beside him, eyes foggy and alarmed.

"Stay here a minute. Let me see what's going on," Jesse whispered to her. He slipped out of bed and went into the living room.

Jeff and Lando were both standing there looking dazed, trying to wrap their minds around what had just happened. "Am I crazy, still drunk, or was that just an *earthquake* that shook this place?" Jeff asked incredulously.

"I think so, yeah, " Lando replied with an unusual burst of verbosity.

"Yeah... Is that even possible? Aren't we on the wrong coast? I just... " The words failed Jesse as he looked around the room. With most everything already boxed up in here, the room didn't look a whole lot different. The boxes, which had been neatly stacked against the wall, had shifted somewhat, and one box *had* actually fallen. "I never even heard of an earthquake in Florida."

Jeff snorted. "I don't think anyone has. Hurricanes, heat and humidity aren't bad enough? Now earthquakes? I think I'm coming to California with you. At least there it's *only* earthquakes!"

"Yeah..." Jesse said, only half-listening. He went into the kitchen, passing through what would have been a small dining room, but that he used as an office. It was mostly dismantled, with only a laptop and printer left on the desk. They were slightly askew, but still intact.

The kitchen appeared no different at first glance, but most everything on the counters was already packed. Jesse opened a cabinet. The few dishes and glasses still left there were moved around, with a few glasses over on their sides. One was actually broken. He opened the fridge. Its meager contents were well shaken. A bottle of beer had actually fallen and smashed, leaving a puddle of beer and dark glass at the bottom of the refrigerator.

"Well, great." Jesse sighed. "I guess if this is the worst of it, that's not too bad." He turned to Jeff and Lando. "You guys are ok, right?"

Lando grinned through sleepy eyes and nodded. For him, this was exciting. Jeff yawned and nodded lazily. "Yeah, yeah, what say we assess the damage in a few hours when I wake up on my own, not with some seismic alarm clock."

"Good idea," Jesse said, "I'll see you in a few hours."

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He got up and looked around, but everything seemed okay. It didn't feel like a very big one, at least not from everything he had heard about earthquakes, and this was California, after all. Buildings here were built with earthquakes in mind. He went back to bed and fell quickly back asleep.

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When Jesse awoke again a few hours later, the sun was well up in the sky, and a glance at the bedside clock told him it was after 11 am. His pounding head and dry mouth reminded him that last night had been a night of excess, to say the least. His hand reached out to the other side of the bed and found only a wad of sheets. He rolled over to find that he was alone in the bed. With a groan, he sat up and was rewarded with immediate regret for his decision. The room and his stomach spun in opposite directions, and a cold, greasy sweat broke out on his forehead. "I'm never drinking again," he growled to himself, and stumbled out of the bedroom.

In the living room, Jeff and Lando were eating scrambled eggs and bacon. Crystal appeared around the corner from the kitchen. "There you are sleepyhead! Want some eggs? You didn't really have much in your fridge – well, except for the nifty beer pond – so I ran over to the Kwickie Mart."

"Yeah," Jesse croaked, testing the current limits of his vocals, " Give me anything as long as it comes with aspirin and *Pepto-Bismol*."

Jeff and Lando snickered while Crystal looked at him sympathetically. "Sit down, sweetie. I'll fix you up." She disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Check this out." Lando gestured to the television.

"Yeah, dude, it *was* an earthquake. In fact, there was another earthquake in Iowa at about the same time! There was one in California, too, but isn't there always?"

Jesse turned to the TV, noticing it for the first time. FOX News Channel was on, a split screen with the studio anchor talking to a reporter in the field. Jesse collapsed into the recliner, grateful to be off his feet again. Crystal reappeared with a tray carrying a glass of water, 2 aspirin, a medicine cup of *Pepto*, and a cup of coffee. "This should get you started." She

gestured to the couch. "Don't let them kid you. I had to bring these two back from the dead just the same. Oh, eggs and bacon'll be ready in just a sec."

"Thanks, " he crackled again, his voice still struggling for normalcy and failing. Once the *Pepto* and aspirin were washed down, he picked up the coffee and turned his attention to the television.

"... not sure at this point what caused these strange seismic events, but the good news, according to a FEMA spokesman, is that initial reports show very little damage, which ironically is a source of concern for scientists who fear that these may have only been a first sign of a more serious event. Reporting live from Florida,...."

"No kidding," Jesse mused out loud, "It wasn't just a dream. We really had an earthquake. Weird..." He was about to say something else when Crystal appeared with another tray.

"Breakfast!" she announced, expertly grabbing a TV tray in one hand on her way in, neatly setting it up with one hand and distributing breakfast with the other.

"Nice work. If you ever decide to stop writing your column you can get a job waiting tables."

"Gee. Thanks." Crystal rolled her eyes. "I'll keep that in mind. Now why don't you take a bite and keep your mouth busy with something useful." She ended with a "take that" smirk, and turned with a snap back to the kitchen.

Jesse smiled and dove into the plate with gusto. Lando was flipping again and all the networks and news channels were on the same story. The California earthquake barely caused a stir until the stories broke about the earthquakes in Iowa and Florida, and when times were compared, they were as close to simultaneous as could be confirmed. Different scientists and "experts" were consulted, and they all had different theories as to how and why these earthquakes had occurred in these typically earthquake-free zones. It turned out that both Florida and Iowa had experienced earthquakes in the past, but decades ago, and never anything that had really even registered like this. They sat flipping and watching different reports for about 45 minutes before other stories started coming in, and the earthquake story became just another headline.

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"Well... I guess we better get out of here," Jeff yawned. "It's not that I have anything to do, but you have to... Well, I mean, if you really *need* help... "

Jesse smiled sideways at him and threw him a lifeline. "No, no, I've got to finish packing, and there really isn't anything you can do to help me with that. Just show up tomorrow, when I have to carry all of this down those three flights of stairs and pack the truck. *That's* when I could really use your 'help'." He grinned. "Besides, you guys have to give Crystal a ride back to Monkey's to get her car." The look that Crystal shot him told him he wasn't fooling anybody. Sober now, he was trying to avoid being alone with her, trying to avoid doing something they would both regret.

Crystal quickly recovered, but too late. "Yeah, you guys better take me back there. Don't strand me with this one." It was said with a smile, but Jesse felt the acid churning in his stomach again. He *was* doing the right thing, right?

"Alright, then we'll catch you tomorrow, about noon, right? Lando, you about done in there? Geez." Jeff's call to the restroom was only responded to by a loud flush and the sound of water running in the sink.

"Yeah, about noon is great. I'm going to pick up the truck at 10, so that gives me time for any problems and so on," Jesse replied as Lando emerged from the restroom, slightly red-faced. "Everything ok in there?"

"*Taco Bell* and beer," Lando said by way of explanation, which was plenty.

"Uh huh. Hope you lit a match. Ok. Well, see you all tomorrow."

Jeff and Lando were out the door, when Crystal turned back to Jesse. "I love you, you know?" and she turned and was gone before Jesse could even take a breath. Well, great. That was all he needed. Hung-over, with packing to do and last-minute details to check, the last thing he needed was that painful throb of... of what? Fear that he was making a mistake? Regret that he might be leaving the only woman who would ever love him like that... and that *he* would ever love like that? He sighed, sighed deeply, painfully, and as he let it out, the tears that he had been crushing inside broke loose. They came rushing out like storm waters over the New Orleans levy, and he sat down and sobbed. He cried for everything that he would miss, Crystal, his friends, his apartment, his favorite hangouts and all the thousands of little things that made his life good here. He sobbed for everything that would never be the same again.

Jesse didn't know exactly how long it had been when he finally cried himself out; he only knew that it had been long enough. He felt cleansed down to his very soul, as though he

had gone through a box of *emotional* junk. He cleaned out what needed to go, and kept what needed to stay.

He went to the bathroom to clean himself up, and grimaced at the red, bloodshot eyes that stared back at him. Well, he *felt* better, anyway. He splashed some cold water on his face, washed his hands, brushed his teeth, and decided to take a shower. The hot water beating down started to relax muscles that he hadn't even realized were tense, and toweling off, he felt human again. He dressed, and started packing a couple of suitcases that needed to last him until he was in California, putting the rest of the clothes in boxes.

The rest of the packing went quickly. Jesse set himself up as though he was staying in a hotel, with about 10 days of clothes, toiletries and so on in suitcases. Everything else was in a box or otherwise ready to go. He decided to leave his bed for one more night, and pack the sheets and blankets tomorrow.

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He woke up early, around 8 a.m. He wasn't quite sure why he woke up so early, but he couldn't fall back asleep, so he got up and made some coffee. While the coffee was brewing, he got on his laptop to see if there was any news about the earthquake. He didn't really expect to find any, because from everything he had been told, they were just a part of life here.

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Jesse dropped an old razor from under his bathroom sink in the trash and sighed. As far as he could tell, that was the last thing that he could deal with today. He walked back through the apartment one more time, opening closet doors and cabinets, looking in drawers and under furniture. He gathered up the rest of the trash and took it down to the dumpster.

He passed the mailbox on his way, and it occurred to him that today was the last day that he would be getting mail here. He didn't have an address in California yet, so he was having his mail held at a local post office until he had the forwarding address. On the way back from the dumpster, he fished out his key and checked his mail. Nothing too interesting, mostly junk mail, coupons and flyers, and what looked like maybe a bill or two. He took the stack up to the apartment.

Once there, he grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and took it into the living room. He flopped down on the couch and set the bottle on the coffee table (which he decided right then to take with him). The coupons he tossed on the ground right away. There was a

circular for an electronics store that he set aside to drool over. There were two "pre-approved" credit card offers that went directly on top of the coupon stack. A magazine subscription renewal followed those to top the stack. The last envelope was plain, pre-sorted bulk, impossible to tell what was inside from the envelope. He took a long gulp of water, then slid his fingernail along one end of the envelope, blew in it to open the envelope, and slid the contents out onto the coffee table.

There was a letter congratulating him on his "free gift" - pre-printed address labels - and asking for his help with some charitable cause. There was the usual "BUSINESS REPLY" envelope. He tossed the two envelopes and the letter on the stack, and was about to do the same with the address labels... when he stopped.

He stared at the sheet of adhesive labels for a long minute. He turned the sheet over and back over. Still the same. He snatched up the envelope that it had come in and scrutinized it, trying to find some indication of where it was from. He picked the letter back up off the stack, and read it again - word for word, start to finish. Nothing unusual. He grabbed the sheet of labels and stared at it again, not comprehending. Finally, he dropped the sheet of address labels back to the coffee table with a slightly shaky hand.

The envelope was addressed to him, here in Florida, and every address label had his name... and a California address.