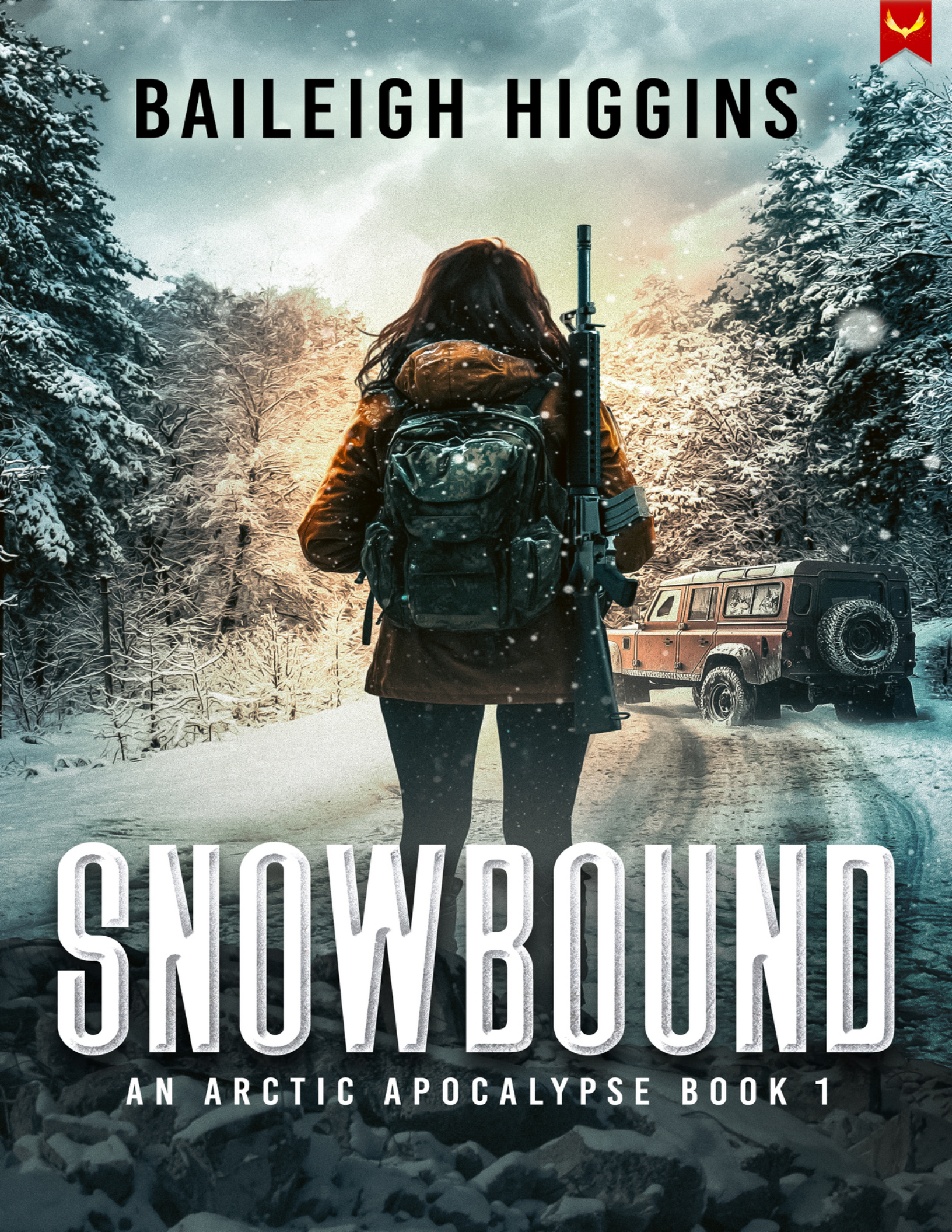
BAILEIGH HIGGINS



SNOWBOUND

AN ARCTIC APOCALYPSE BOOK 1

BAILEIGH HIGGINS

SNOWBOUND

AN ARCTIC APOCALYPSE BOOK 1



aethonbooks.com

OceanofPDF.com

SNOWBOUND
©2026 BAILEIGH HIGGINS

This book is protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. Any reproduction or unauthorized use of the material or artwork contained herein is prohibited without the express written permission of the authors.

Aethon Books supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact editor@aethonbooks.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Aethon Books
www.aethonbooks.com

Print and eBook design, layout, and formatting by Josh Hayes.

Artwork provided by Christian Bentulan.

Published by Aethon Books LLC.

Aethon Books is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead is coincidental.

All rights reserved.

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY BAILEIGH HIGGINS

ARTIC APOCALYPSE

Snowbound

Icebound

Be the first to discover groundbreaking new releases, incredible deals, and thrilling giveaways by subscribing to our exclusive Thriller Newsletter.

https://aethonbooks.com/thriller-newsletter/

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

Preface
Acknowledgments

Prologue I
Prologue II
Prologue III
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34

Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Thank you for reading Snowbound

About the Author

OceanofPDF.com

PREFACE

This series takes place in South Africa, mainly in the Western Cape and surrounding areas. Some details have been altered in the spirit of fiction, and not everything is based on real life. Some English words and terms are also unique to the culture and might seem unfamiliar or strange. Thank you for understanding.

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you to everyone who made this book possible: Aethon Publishers, fellow author Derek Shupert, Christian Bentulan, my cover designer, and Rob Salerno, my editor. I couldn’t have done this without you!

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE I

Dr. Andrew Becket, Climatologist or Crackpot, depending on who one asked, glanced at the sky, the vast blue expanse empty except for the sun that pulsed with heat. The ocean, usually a roiling beast, lay lethargic and still under the oppressive sky. Waves slapped against the boat's hull, a small fishing craft he'd turned into a research vessel. After he lost his funding and credibility, it also became his home.

The boat bobbed up and down with the currents, and he glanced at the console's monitor, pushing a few buttons. The GPS flashed to life, confirming his position several miles off the coast of the British mainland. Although it was supposed to be winter, the weather was unseasonably warm, and a bead of sweat ran down his temple. Not a single cloud offered a bit of shade, and the usually cool sea breeze was notably absent.

He tugged at his collar, the layers of clothing itching his skin. Feeling hemmed in, he quickly removed his jacket, scarf, and jersey, and the relief was instantaneous.

Eager to get on with his research, he dragged his laptop closer. The Gulf Stream's data flickered on the screen, providing a steady flow of information. Rows upon rows of temperatures, depths, times, and date stamps filled the space. While most people would consider it gibberish, his agile brain easily picked through the wealth of statistics.

What he found worried him. Despite the heat wave that held the world hostage, the Gulf Stream's temperatures were dropping, lowered by the cold water dumped into the oceans by the melting ice caps. The hotter it got, the more ice melted, and the worse the situation became. It was an evil cycle, one he was powerless to prevent.

The memory of his recent attempt to warn the government forced its way to the forefront of his mind. His surroundings faded, replaced by the gloom of an assembly hall filled with the dour faces of politicians. He'd tried his best to convince them, presenting data, graphs, and models all pointing to one chilling conclusion: An ice age loomed.

Andrew sucked in a deep breath, the humiliation of that day still fresh and raw. Instead of believing him, they'd mocked him for his conspiracy theories. Even his own kind, other scientists, thought he was crazy.

A beeping from the monitor drew his attention, and his mind returned to the present. He scanned the screen, a deep frown furrowing his brow. The numbers showed a sudden drop in temperature, so rapid that he thought it was a mistake. Working fast, he reset the program and its parameters. When that failed, he rebooted the entire system, convinced there had to be a glitch somewhere. Except it wasn't a mistake. The event he'd feared the most had come to pass. "But… it's too soon. This was supposed to take years, not weeks!"

Jumping up, Andrew went to the cabin below deck, his laptop tucked underneath one arm. Making sense of the latest data required caffeine. Lots of it. He opened the fridge and pulled out an energy drink. The cold liquid fizzed down his throat, carrying a stream of sugary bubbles ready to fuel him through a marathon research session.

Andrew spent the next few hours hunched over his computer, his eyes glued to the screen as he analyzed the alarming data. He ran every simulation he could think of, but they all pointed to the same grim conclusion: A flash freeze was imminent, and there was nothing he or anyone else could do to stop it.

"I can't stop it, but I can warn people," he muttered. With shaking hands, he picked up the satellite phone and dialed the number of his old colleague at Columbia University. "Pick up, pick up."

Finally, a groggy voice answered. "Hello? Who is this?"

"Tom, it's Andrew. Listen to me. It's happening. The Gulf Stream is shutting down. We have days, maybe a week or two, before the effects set in."

There was a long pause on the other end. "Are you sure? Your models predicted we had years…"

"I was wrong. It's accelerating faster than I ever imagined. You have to warn them, Tom. The government, the media… anyone who will listen. People must be warned, or they won't survive what's coming."

"Warn them against what exactly?"

"An ice age, Tom," Andrew said, his voice cracking. "A new ice age."

"That's impossible," Tom exploded.

“You know it’s not. We’ve run the data before. We’ve crunched the numbers. The science is there,” Andrew said, desperate to make his friend and colleague see the truth.

“Yes, but it was theoretical,” Tom said, a note of hysteria creeping into his voice.

“Not anymore. This is as real as it gets.”

“What exactly are we looking at?”

“A storm will form in the north, moving south until it covers the entire globe,” Andrew explained. “We’re talking gale force winds, sub-zero temperatures, and heavy snowfall.”

“Sub-zero temperatures? In the south?”

“That’s right. My model predicts lows of up to minus sixty degrees Celsius. Combined with the wind and snow… it’s a killer, Tom. A killer storm.”

“That’s crazy! You’re talking about thousands… even millions of deaths overnight,” Tom cried.

“That’s why we need to warn everyone,” Andrew replied, his resolve growing by the second. It didn’t matter if no one believed him. He had to try.

“My God,” Tom breathed. There was a long silence filled with static before he asked, “What happens after the storm?”

“The temperatures will rise until they reach a new state of equilibrium, ushering in a new ice age,” Andrew said.

“Is this the end, Andrew?” Tom asked.

“For some of us, yes,” Andrew replied. “But if enough people survive the storm, humanity stands a chance. I’m counting on you to get the word out.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Tom said. “But what about you? Where will you go?”

Andrew glanced out the small porthole at the vast expanse of the ocean surrounding him. “It’s too late for me. I’ll never make it back to shore in time. Promise me you’ll get the word out.”

“I will. I’m so sorry, Andrew. Godspeed, my friend.”

The line went dead, and Andrew slumped back in his chair, overcome by despair. He’d dedicated his life to his research, trying to prevent this catastrophe, but he’d failed. All he could do now was try to warn as many as possible while preserving the data for future generations.

The hours crawled by as he sent out dozens of emails and made call after call, desperately trying to sound the alarm. Most of his former colleagues thought he'd lost his mind. A few listened and promised to spread the warning.

While he worked, the cabin grew colder and colder. He piled on every piece of clothing he had and layered newspaper on the floor. With the gas stove on low, he kept going despite the icy chill that seeped into the air.

On the dawn of the second day, he ventured out onto the deck, driven by morbid curiosity. The sight that met his eyes stole the breath from his lungs. The once lively waters were still and glassy. Thousands of dead fish floated in the icy slush, their eyes bulging from their sockets.

Andrew staggered back inside, bile rising in his throat. His body ached, and his fingers were numb as he punched the keys on his laptop. The thermometer read -18 degrees Celsius, and it was still dropping. Huddled inside a cocoon of blankets, he could do nothing but watch the end of humanity unfold.

Satellite imagery showed a relentless wave of ice and snow sweeping across the Northern Hemisphere, burying entire cities. News reports displayed horrific images of people frozen in their tracks, cars entombed in ice, and riots breaking out across the globe. Airports were shut down, stranding thousands of travelers, and highways were blocked, preventing any chance of evacuation. The world was in chaos, and it was all his fault. *I should've tried harder.*

Despite the guilt that gnawed at his conscience, he recorded everything —every piece of data, every image, every chilling report—and saved it to the cloud. He knew the data might hold vital clues for future generations who would have to adapt to the new world order.

His fingers trembled on his keyboard as he finished compiling his final report, and he sank back into his chair as exhaustion gripped him. Hunger gnawed at his belly, but he didn't bother to eat. The food in his fridge was frozen solid, and his energy drinks had turned into sugary blocks of ice.

Without enough calories to burn, his body stood no chance against the cold. Already, his fingers and toes showed signs of severe frostbite, the tissues turning dark and gangrenous. At least it didn't hurt.

Draping more blankets over himself, he kept his gaze fixed on his laptop until his eyelids grew heavy and slid shut. Suddenly, a loud crack

reverberated through the hull, causing him to jump. He peered out the frost-covered porthole and gasped. A massive chunk of ice loomed over the boat.

In a final desperate act, Andrew lunged for the radio transmitter. “Mayday, mayday! This is Dr. Andrew Becker. The ice age is here. Tell the world—”

His words were cut short as the towering ice cleaved his boat in two with a sickening crunch of wood and metal. Frigid water rushed in, knocking him off his feet. He scrabbled for purchase, but it was useless against the surging current.

As the icy deluge swallowed him whole, Andrew caught one last glimpse of the gray sky through the gaping wound in his ship. Then, the cold squeezed the remaining breath from his lungs, and everything went black.

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE II

In the heart of Times Square, time had coalesced into a solid block. Taxi driver Ahmed was jammed within it, trapped in his yellow cab like a fly in amber. He drummed his fingers on his steering wheel, praying to Allah for a miracle. His latest fare, a stressed businessman named Jerry McMann, clutched his briefcase as if it held the Holy Grail, sweating and fidgeting in the backseat.

“I’ve got an important meeting,” McMann announced as if that would somehow part the sea of cars.

It didn’t.

Feeling the tension heighten within the cab, Ahmed turned up the heat. The blast of warm air was a reprieve from the chill that cloaked New York, and he watched as flurries of snow transformed Times Square into a frosty wonderland. Usually, he’d admire the view, but today, it worked on his nerves.

Nothing seemed right anymore. First, they experienced a global heatwave in the middle of winter. The perfect example of freak weather if he’d ever seen it. Now, it was too cold. Colder than any New York winter he’d seen before. It was the kind of cold that seeped into your bones and sucked the life from your marrow, leaving you a hollow shell.

Rubbing his hands together, Ahmed tried to distract himself with thoughts of his family. His shift was almost over. Then he could go home to his wife and their two boys. He pictured it in his mind: A tiny two-bedroom apartment barely big enough to house the four of them, but it was warm and comfortable, filled with love.

His wife, Nadira, always waited up for him, ready to greet him after a long day at work. He’d take a hot shower, put on his worn robe and slippers, and kiss the boys goodnight. Afterward, he’d eat at the table while Nadira told him about her day, and they’d retire to the sitting room for an hour of television before bed. It was a simple existence, and they didn’t have much, but he was grateful for what he had.

Suddenly, McMann jolted upright, pulling Ahmed from his pleasant thoughts. “How much longer is this going to take?”

Ahmed blinked. “I’m not sure, sir. The traffic is terrible today.”

“Excuses, excuses,” McMann yelled, his face turning puce. He yanked his wallet from his pocket and pulled out a couple of bills, shoving them into Ahmed’s hand. “Here. Take this.”

“Sir?” Ahmed said, caught off guard.

Throwing the door open, McMann stepped onto the freezing asphalt. A gust of wind nearly bowled him over, but he kept his balance.

“Sir!” Ahmed called after him in alarm, but McMann ignored him and slammed the door shut. Without looking back, he strode into the storm.

“Idiot,” Ahmed muttered, shivering with cold. He huddled closer to the air vents and checked the money in his hand. Satisfied that it covered his fare, he shoved the money into his pocket and focused on the traffic ahead.

It soon became apparent that something was wrong, however. The snow came down faster, and the wind picked up speed until it howled around the corners, pushing pedestrians off their feet. The temperature dropped several degrees, eventually reaching well below freezing.

“This weather is crazy,” he muttered, rubbing his hands together in front of the vents. The warm air didn’t seem enough, and he reached for the jacket, gloves, and beanie on the passenger seat next to him.

He’d just pulled it on and settled back into his seat when the rear door flew open. A man and woman tumbled in, bringing a flurry of snowflakes with them. They were prepared for the cold weather, wearing thick coats, gloves, and scarves, and each carried a laptop.

“UN Summit of the Future, please,” the man said, his British accent clipped and urgent. “As quickly as you can manage.”

“Yes, sir, but this might take a while,” Ahmed replied.

The taxi inched forward, a prisoner of the bumper-to-bumper traffic that had the roads in its grip. They were all prisoner, and there wasn’t anything they could do about it. Muffling a groan of frustration, he settled down for the long haul.

Behind him, the pair had fallen into a deep, hushed conversation. Their tones sounded urgent, and without meaning to, he listened closer.

“This weather is unprecedented, Claire,” the man said. “It’s happening faster than we predicted. Too fast.”

The woman pushed her thick glasses up her nose, her hair falling across her face. “I know, Tom, but the UN needs to hear about it before it’s too late.”

“Do you think they’ll listen this time? They’ve never listened before. Hell, look what they did to Andrew. He’s a laughing stock today.”

Claire’s voice was firm. “We have to try. Tom. Millions, maybe billions, of lives are at stake. People simply aren’t prepared.”

“Of course not. How could they be prepared for the next ice age?”

Ahmed’s ears perked up at that. Millions of lives? ice age? He glanced in the rearview mirror, studying his passengers intently. Both wore badges identifying them as scientists attending the summit, and they seemed to know what they were talking about.

Tom Pringle ran a hand through his hair, sighing heavily. “I just hope we’re not too late. The models show the temperature drop is accelerating. If we don’t act now, it won’t matter anymore.”

As the taxi crept through the traffic, Ahmed couldn’t shake the feeling that the two scientists in his backseat held the fate of the world in their hands. They were somehow tied up in whatever was happening, and he sped up, determined to get them to the UN as quickly as possible.

“The data from the Arctic stations is alarming,” Claire said, her fingers flying over her tablet. “The methane releases are off the charts. It’s triggering a feedback loop we never anticipated.”

“And the Gulf Stream? Any more updates from Andrew?”

“It’s slowing faster than we thought possible. The models show it could collapse entirely within weeks, maybe even days.”

Ahmed couldn’t help but interrupt. “Excuse me, but what does all this mean? Are we really heading into an ice age?”

The scientists exchanged a tense look, as if debating how much to reveal.

“Please, tell me,” Ahmed pleaded. “I need to know. I have a family.”

Claire cleared her throat. “It’s complicated, but yes. The Earth’s climate systems are far more delicate than we realized, and we’ve pushed them past the tipping point.”

“But how?” Ahmed asked, struggling to comprehend. “It was so hot a few days ago and in the middle of winter too.”

Tom sighed. “That’s part of the problem. The heat was melting permafrost, releasing trapped greenhouse gases. With the Gulf Stream

disrupted, we're seeing rapid cooling in the Northern Hemisphere. It's the perfect storm."

Suddenly, a deafening crack split the air. Ahmed slammed on the brakes as a massive icicle crashed onto the street mere feet in front of them. More ice rained down from the skyscrapers above, the shards whistling through the air like missiles. People screamed and ran in all directions, seeking shelter from the storm.

Ahmed's heart raced as he surveyed the chaos unfolding around him. Ice pelted the roof of his taxi like hailstones, and the windshield was already starting to crack. Panic gripped him as he realized they were sitting ducks in the gridlocked traffic.

"We need to get out of here!" he shouted, his eyes darting frantically for an escape route.

Then he spotted it. A multi-story parking garage half a block away. Its concrete walls and roof offered protection from the falling ice, but the relentless traffic blocked the way. Without a second thought, Ahmed yanked the wheel hard to the right, mounting the curb with a jolt that sent his passengers sprawling.

"Hold on!" he yelled as he floored the accelerator. The taxi lurched forward, tires screeching as they fought for traction on the icy pavement. Pedestrians scattered in terror, diving out of the way as Ahmed barreled down the sidewalk.

"Are you insane?" Tom shouted from the backseat, but Ahmed ignored him, laser-focused on their destination.

He swerved to avoid a fallen streetlight and sideswiped an abandoned hot dog cart. Pretzels and sodas went flying as the cart toppled over. Ahmed winced at the sound of crunching metal but didn't slow down.

They were almost there. The entrance to the parking garage loomed ahead, a dark maw offering sanctuary from the storm. He aimed straight for it, pushing the taxi to its limits. With a final burst of speed, they shot through the entrance as another volley of icicles rained down from above.

Ahmed slammed on the brakes, and the taxi skidded to a stop inside the relative quiet of the garage. For a moment, no one spoke. The only sound was their ragged breathing and the muffled howling of the wind outside. His hands shook as he pried them free from the wheel, his fingers aching. "We made it. I can't believe we made it."

Claire laughed, a nervous sound that echoed through the cab. “That was quite the ride.”

Tom nodded, straightening his rumpled coat. “Indeed. Thank you for your quick thinking, Ahmed. You may have saved our lives.”

Ahmed took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. “You’re not safe yet. We need to get you to the UN.”

“He’s right,” Claire agreed. “Every minute counts now.”

“Can you still get us there?” Tom asked.

“I can try,” Ahmed said, shifting into gear. He drove through the parking garage until they reached the opposite side, noting with relief that it was a lot quieter. Merging into the traffic, he sent up a quick prayer.

The next twenty-seven minutes felt like an eternity, but they finally reached the UN headquarters in one piece. Despite everything, he’d delivered his charges safely. Now, it was up to them.

Tom and Claire gathered their belongings and turned to Ahmed.

“We can’t thank you enough,” Claire said, pressing a wad of bills into his hand. “But now you need to get home to your family.”

Tom leaned forward, his expression grave. “Prepare for a kind of cold you’ve never experienced before. A sudden deep freeze is expected to hit the city. We’re talking minus sixty, and after that, a new ice age will dawn. It will be everyone for themselves.”

Ahmed’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Isn’t there something you can do?”

Tom shook his head. “We’ll do what we can, but it might be too late. Good luck, my friend.”

Ahmed watched them disappear into the UN headquarters, feeling as if the weight of the world had settled onto his shoulders. With trembling hands, he put the taxi in gear and headed home, praying to Allah that he’d see his family again.

OceanofPDF.com

PROLOGUE III

Rebecca sat in the meager shade of her home in the Mfuleni Township in Cape Town, South Africa. The sun shone high in the sky, a ball of fire that radiated heat onto the earth below, wringing the last drop of moisture from everything it touched. The air was as dry as dust, and not a speck of green showed in the vicinity.

An old radio sat beside her on the ground, with tinny voices discussing the unprecedented heat wave that held the world in its iron grip. The presenter mentioned something about a scientist named Dr. Andrew Becker, but the words meant little to her. She knew nothing about air streams, ocean currents, or melting ice caps. All she knew was the changing seasons and the passing of years, each harder than the last.

A shriek of laughter drew her gaze to her grandchildren playing in the yard, a boy of twelve and a girl of seven. They amused themselves with toy cars made from twisted wire, their young faces bright with joy.

“Gogo,” the girl cried, running over. “I’m thirsty.”

“Yes, Gogo. Water!” the boy said, abandoning his make-believe Porsche in the dust.

“Say please, Mandla,” Rebecca said, wagging a finger.

“Please, Gogo,” Mandla said, dropping his gaze.

Rebecca reached for the plastic bottle beside her feet; a few sips of water were all that remained. Her heart sank as the children drank it all. Her parched lips ached for a single drop of the precious liquid, but she didn’t have the heart to stop them.

“More, Gogo. Please,” the girl, Sarah, pleaded.

“It’s empty,” Rebecca replied. “We must fetch more water from the well.”

Mandla and Sarah smiled, excited to leave the barren yard with its dusty sand and thorny brush. A walk to the well held far more promise of adventure, and they hurried her to her feet despite her protests.

Rebecca stepped inside her kitchen and collected four empty water bottles, dreading the long trek. Due to the current water shortage, most of the taps had run dry, and the inhabitants of Mfuleni had to rely on a handful of wells and boreholes scattered throughout the community. “Come, children. Let’s go.”

“Yes, Gogo,” they replied, each carrying an empty bottle.

Rebecca navigated the labyrinth of huts, every step a battle against the oppressive air. Mfuleni’s heat was relentless, clawing at their throats and sapping their strength. Tin roofs glinted under the sun’s assault, a sea of shimmering waves in a desert of despair. Heat radiated from the parched ground, cooking the soles of her sandals.

She watched the children like a hawk the entire time. It was hard work, especially at her age, but her daughter, Anitha, was a single parent and couldn’t afford daycare. She didn’t mind, however. They kept her young at heart, if not in body.

Finally, they reached their destination. The communal pump stood like an oasis, a smattering of green at its base the only color for miles.

Rebecca pumped the handle once and twice, the squeak piercing the simmering silence. Cool water splashed over her hands, a fleeting caress of relief. She filled the first bottle and then the second, her muscles aching with the effort.

A line of people formed behind her, their impatient eyes burning into her back. She ignored them, refilling the last two bottles to the brim. Afterward, she splashed her face and drank her fill from the trough below the pump, designed to catch the overflow. She made the children do the same, watching as their bellies bulged. Satisfied, she turned away, granting the following people in line their turn.

“Come, children. Be quick,” Rebecca urged, her voice low.

Setting a grueling pace, she hurried home, aware that danger lurked everywhere. An old woman and two youngsters were easy targets for the unscrupulous, especially in times like these.

The trek back was a blur of dull browns and grays, the world narrowing to the slosh of water in the bottles and the heat on her skin. When her house loomed into view, she heaved a sigh of relief. It wasn’t much, but it was home.

Hustling the children inside, Rebecca locked the door and poured each of them a glass of water. She drank hers slowly, savoring each drop.

“More?” Mandla asked, finishing his glass in seconds.

“Later,” Rebecca promised, brushing the damp hair from his forehead. “How about some food?”

Mandla smiled. “Yes, please, Gogo.”

“Why don’t you practice your sums while I cook? You can help your sister with hers.”

“Alright,” Mandla said, skipping toward the bedroom he shared with his sibling. Seconds later, he emerged with books and pencils, placing the items on the kitchen table.

The children practiced their mathematics with their heads bowed over their books. Rebecca’s heart swelled with pride. Her greatest wish was to see them graduate from school and find respectable jobs. She did not want them to travel the same road of hardship and poverty that she had.

Turning away, she focused on dinner. When she got home, her daughter Anathi would be hungry, and a satisfying meal would cheer them all up.

She filled a battered pot with water and placed it on the gas stove. Next, she added maize meal and salt, stirring the mixture with a wooden spoon as it slowly thickened. Each stir was agony, her joints swollen and stiff with arthritis.

“Slow and steady,” she murmured, coaxing the wooden spoon through the mixture. It was hard work. The process could not be rushed, or the pap would burn.

Finally, it was done, and she moved on to the next portion of the meal: A stew made from cabbage, onions, potatoes, and meaty bones.

“Mm, that smells good, Gogo,” Mandla said, stopping to smell the air.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Rebecca said, flashing him a fond smile.

He nodded and carried on with his sums while she finished. Afterward, she tidied the kitchen and prepared a pot of tea.

As she worked, dusk crept across the land. The sun dropped toward the horizon before disappearing in a brilliant flash of orange and crimson, leaving darkness in its wake. An unexpected chill followed the setting sun, creeping through the walls of her government-issued house.

Confused by the sudden change, Rebecca rushed to close the windows and curtains. She lit a paraffin heater and placed it in the kitchen. It warded off the worst of the chill, and she dished up three plates of food, storing the leftovers in the fridge. “Mandla, Sarah. Put away your books. Supper is ready.”

“Yes, Gogo!” they cried in unison, rushing to pack away their things.

They fell onto their food like starving wolves, and she wagged a finger. “Now, now. Remember your manners.”

“Sorry, Gogo,” they replied, ducking their heads.

She did not mind, though. Children were children, and they needed the energy to fuel their growing bodies. Besides, the food was warm and hearty, perfect for the sudden cold that appeared out of nowhere.

After dinner, Rebecca cleared the dirty plates and poured herself a cup of tea, liberally sweetened with sugar, and two glasses of water for the children.

The hot brew warmed her bones, and she relaxed in her chair while Sarah and Mandla played and bickered at the table.

She soon realized the tea wouldn’t be enough. The temperature was growing colder by the second, and the room quickly became an icebox. The heat they’d suffered over the past few weeks had completely reversed, leaving her feeling off-balance. Something was wrong. She felt it in her heart.

Shaking her head, Rebecca made a decision. She didn’t know when her daughter would return from work, but they needed to stay warm. She went to the children’s shared bedroom and pulled out their warmest pajamas.

“Come, put these on,” she instructed, helping Sarah with hers while Mandla managed his own.

Next, she led them to the bathroom, where they washed up and brushed their teeth using some of their bottled water.

Once they were finished, Rebecca nudged them towards her bedroom. She pulled back the covers on her bed, revealing a thick mattress and soft pillows. It was her one indulgence, a concession to her advanced age. “In you go, my dears.”

“Are we sleeping with you tonight, Gogo?” Mandla asked with a frown.

“Yes, it’ll be warmer.”

“Why is it so cold?” Sarah asked, her eyes wide with worry. “And where’s Mama?”

“Your mother will be home soon, don’t worry.”

As the children climbed into the bed, Rebecca moved the paraffin heater closer, ensuring it was placed away from anything flammable. The heat radiated outwards, warming the small space.

She fetched extra blankets from the cupboard and draped them over the bed. Satisfied that they were as warm as possible given the circumstances, Rebecca joined the children under the covers.

“Tell us a story, Gogo,” Sarah pleaded, staring up at Rebecca with her big brown eyes.

“Yes, Gogo!” Mandla cried, excited by the prospect. “Tell us a story!”

“Alright, settle down,” Rebecca said, hoping the story would take their minds off the weather. “Have you heard the one where Fox outwits Lion and Baboon?”

Mandla shook his head, his eyes wide.

“Tell us, Gogo,” Sarah urged.

“Listen close,” Rebecca said, taking a deep breath. “A long time ago, Fox and Lion were friends. While walking one day, Lion spotted Baboon sitting in a Marula tree. He nudged Fox and said, ‘Let’s see if we can convince Baboon to give us some of the fruit.’”

As Rebecca spoke, the temperature continued to drop, and a deathly chill seeped into the room. Worry for her daughter filled her mind, but she dared not voice her fears. It would only scare the children. Instead, she pulled them closer and continued with the story of Fox, Lion, and Baboon.

“Give us some of your Marula fruit, Baboon,” Lion said, his nose raised high.

“Why should I?” Baboon asked.

“Because I’m your King.”

“So? You do not feed me. Why must I feed you?”

“Because I command you.”

Baboon snorted and turned his back on Lion and Fox.

Before Lion could reply, Fox interrupted. “I bet you have terrible aim.”

“I do not!” Baboon cried.

“Prove it,” Fox taunted.

“How?” Baboon asked, frowning.

“Throw each of us with a Marula fruit. If you miss, you lose and must share your bounty with us.”

“Deal,” Baboon said. Plucking the nearest Marula from a branch, he hurled it at Fox and Lion, followed by several more.

“You keep him busy,” Fox cried, dodging a fruit.

“Why?” Lion cried.

“Just do it,” Fox said, jumping behind a clump of bushes.

“What happened then, Gogo?” Sarah asked, her eyes wide.

“Then Fox snuck up on Baboon and knocked him over the head with a stone. Once he was out cold, Lion and Fox had all the fruit for themselves.”

“But… that’s not very nice of Fox,” Sarah said.

“No, it’s not,” Rebecca agreed. “But this teaches you not to trust people like Fox. They will deceive you around every turn and take everything you have.”

Sarah nodded, but her eyes were droopy. By the time Rebecca had finished the story, both children were fast asleep, their soft snores filling the room. Nestled inside their warm cocoon, they were unaware of the growing danger outside their home.

Rebecca could not ignore it so easily and quickly extricated herself from the bed. Pulling on her warmest nightgown and slippers, she padded toward the frost-kissed window.

Her heart hammered as she parted the curtains to peer outside. The sight that met her eyes was utterly alien. An undulating blanket of white covered everything. Their once familiar yard was now an otherworldly landscape shimmering under a pale, indifferent moon.

Snow.

Rebecca shook her head in silent protest. She’d never thought to see snow in her lifetime. Especially not so much of it. To her, it resembled death. Even worse, her daughter was out somewhere, lost in the alien landscape, and she whispered a quick plea. *Please, Anathi. Come home. Your children need you.*

As she closed the curtains, she noticed her chattering teeth and shaking limbs. Her breath puffed out in clouds of white, and the windows were icing over at an alarming rate. The house was not meant to deal with such cold, its walls and ceilings thin and lacking insulation, with a tiled floor instead of carpets underfoot. The zinc roof creaked under the pressure of the wind and snow, and she hoped it didn’t collapse.

Realizing they could freeze to death, she fetched the last few blankets from the cupboard and piled them onto the bed. She added every article of warm clothing they possessed and covered the curtains with sheets. After refilling the paraffin heater, she closed the bedroom door and crawled back into bed.

Mandla and Sarah’s body heat soon warmed her, and she stopped shaking. But the advancing cold was undeniable. In the corner, the paraffin

heater sputtered as it emptied, the precious liquid drying up fast. The flame died, and its life-giving warmth disappeared, but she didn’t bother to get up. Her stores were finished, and there was no more paraffin to be had. They’d have to survive on their own.

When the children complained, she urged them to go back to sleep, pulling them into her arms. “Shh… sleep, my babies. Sleep and dream of the sun.”

Rebecca tried to follow her own advice, picturing the sun at its highest, but the cold seeped into her core, whispering promises of eternal rest. She fought it, but her head drooped, and numbness stole over her limbs. She was so tired. So very tired.

Morning never came for Rebecca or her grandchildren. The sun rose weak and watery, but the three bodies in the bed lay still and unmoving, a family locked in an endless slumber. Outside, the snow blanketed Mfuleni, and the settlement lay quiet, a graveyard entombed in ice. The apocalypse had begun.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ONE

Quinn sank deeper into her chair, one hand raised to ward off the piercing rays of light that poured through the lecture hall's blinds like heat-seeking missiles. The other hand clutched her notebook, and she fanned her face in a desperate bid to cool down. Sweat poured down her skin, drenching her hair and pooling underneath her armpits.

"Man, it's hot," Jonathan, the student behind her, said. Tall, thin, and lanky, his knees almost touched his ears, and he looked like an oversized grasshopper.

"Uh-huh," she replied, tugging at the collar of her shirt. Her mind drifted over the past few weeks, cataloging the record-high temperatures recorded around the globe. It worried her, and she knew the vineyards back home were suffering. She could hear it in her father's voice whenever she spoke to him, the unspoken tension and worry surrounding their latest grape harvest.

Jonathan continued talking, droning on about some scientist who'd warned of an impending ice age. "He said this heat is just the start of it. A catalyst."

"An ice age?" Quinn said, snorting. "Yeah, right."

"I don't know, man, but he sounded like he knew what he was talking about."

"I'm sure he did, but an ice age? Come on, Jon," Quinn said, shaking her head. "This is South Africa. It doesn't get much hotter than this."

"He made it sound so real," Jonathan argued. "It's all got to do with the Gulf Stream—"

"Forget it. He's just another crazy scientist predicting the end of the world."

"Nah. I'm telling you. There's something to his theory. See for yourself. I've got the video saved on my cell," Jonathan said, shoving his phone in her face.

"Not now, Jonathan."

“It won’t take long.”

“I said, not now. And stop breathing all over me. It’s hot enough as it is,” Quinn said, losing her patience.

“Sorry,” Jonathan muttered. He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms with a huff.

Quinn sighed, realizing she’d hurt his feelings. “Look, I’m sorry. It’s this infernal heat that’s driving me crazy. I didn’t mean it like that.”

The sound of a throat being cleared made her pause, and she blushed when she realized all eyes were on her.

“Do we have a problem, Miss Le Roux?” the lecturer said, drawing her attention back to the front.

“Er, no, Professor,” Quinn replied, forcing a polite smile to her lips despite the warm blood suffusing her cheeks.

“Or am I boring you?” he continued.

“No, Professor,” Quinn said, squirming in her seat while the other students laughed and tittered behind her back.

“Then pay attention in my class,” the lecturer said.

“Yes, Professor,” Quinn said, sagging lower in her seat. She hated being the center of attention.

A soft touch on her shoulder caused her to look around, and she caught Jonathan shooting her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry,” he mouthed, and she nodded. All was forgiven.

Turning her attention back to the front, she tried to focus on the remainder of the lesson but found it impossible. Although she usually found Grapevine and Wine Science fascinating, the oppressive heat had turned the room into a pressure cooker, and the students were wilting like paper-mache flowers.

They were all used to hot summers, but this was unheard of, and tempers ran short. Already, there was talk of crop failures and water shortages, especially in the drier parts of the country.

Born and raised on a vineyard in the Hex River Valley, Quinn knew all about the effect of weather on crops and harvests. Mother Nature was fickle, and one never knew what she might do next. *I should phone Mom and Dad tonight. Ask them how it’s going.*

Her mind wandered back to her home and the crystal clear stream that ran through their farm. She’d spent many a summer afternoon swimming in its waters and lying on the grassy banks under the willow trees. She’d trail

her fingers in the current, watching as dragonflies zipped across the surface, their wings flashing like jewels in the sun. It seemed like a distant dream now, and a touch of homesickness filled her heart.

But as much as she missed it, she also loved the University. The Stellenbosch Campus was filled with young energy and opportunity, the opposite of the quiet country life she was used to, and she enjoyed it to the fullest, most of the time.

With a sigh, she tried to focus on the lecturer's low drone, but his words went in one ear and out the other, a monotonous array of meaningless syllables. When he finally announced, "That's it for today. Class dismissed," a collective sigh of relief filled the room as students rushed to escape.

Quinn was in the lead, and she burst through the exit, hoping for a breath of fresh air. Instead, she was met by a wall of shimmering heat that threatened to melt the flesh from her bones. "God, it's hot out here."

Students swarmed around her, a sea of bodies that flooded the university grounds. They spread outward, some heading toward their next classes and others to their dorms.

"Where are you off to?" Jonathan asked, popping up next to her.

"I'm done for the day. Heading to my room. You?"

"Same here. I'll walk with you."

"Thanks."

Jonathan headed out, and Quinn followed, shouldering past a group of students that blocked her path. Her bag bounced against her hip as they walked, and she clutched the strap with both hands.

Bouncing down a flight of steps, she crossed the walkway and climbed the curb that edged one of the many parks on campus. Gnarled oak trees cast deep shadows on the springy green grass, granting welcome relief from the sun.

A faint breeze stirred the leaves overhead, and she lifted her head to make the most of it. Her gaze fell upon the outline of the university buildings, their white-washed walls and deep-red tiled roofs standing proud against the backdrop of the Cape Fold mountain range. As ever, the sight took her breath away.

"I'll never get over how beautiful it is here," Jonathan said, noticing the direction of her gaze.

"Me neither," Quinn replied, "but it still doesn't measure up to home."

“I know. I know,” Jonathan said, rolling his eyes. “Nothing can compare to the majestic mountain peaks and valleys of Hex River. You’ve told me so at length.”

Quinn grinned. “And I’ll say it again. I’ll shout it from the rooftops if I have to.”

“Lucky duck,” Jonathan muttered. “I grew up in Johannesburg.”

Quinn shuddered, imagining a skyline filled with smog and pollution, the clouds blotted out by ugly skyscrapers. “Not for me, thanks.”

“Me neither. As soon as I graduate, I am out of there,” Jonathan said. “I don’t want to be part of the rat race. It’s the reason I chose this place.”

“Well, it’s not long now. Another year and we’re out.”

Jonathan nodded. “Can’t wait.”

It didn’t take them long to reach her dorm, an all-female student residence called Minerva. She liked it there, preferring the relative neatness and quiet over the co-ed dorms. She shared it with a group of other girls, but the number varied as they came and went. Currently, they were operating at low capacity, with a couple of students off sick or visiting family. The rest often visited friends in town or stayed over at their boyfriends’ flats, especially on the weekends.

“Are you going to Keith’s party tonight?” Jonathan asked once they reached the entrance.

“Keith’s having another party?” The student in question popped to mind, and she grimaced. Tall, dark, and handsome, Keith created the mold when it came to the stereotypical jock. All brawn and no brains.

“You know Keith. He’s always having a party. So, are you coming or not?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m swamped with assignments and tests,” she replied.

“Oh, come on. It’s Friday, and there’s a swimming pool,” Jonathan said, his eyes twinkling.

Quinn rolled her eyes. “You just want to see babes in bikinis.”

“True, but cooling off couldn’t hurt either.”

Quinn hesitated. While she didn’t mind a good party, her grades came first. She couldn’t afford to flunk, not with her parents’ finances stretched to the limit.

“Just come for a little while,” Jonathan coaxed. “I mean, what would I do without my wingman?”

“Woman.”

“Whatever.”

“You’d crash and burn. That’s what you’d do without me.”

“See? So, what do you say?”

“Fine, I’ll think about it, but I’m not making any promises.”

“Sweet. I’ll send you the details,” Jonathan said before loping off into the distance.

Quinn watched him leave, amused as ever by the way his pants didn’t quite reach his ankles, making him look geeky and awkward. But she didn’t mind. He was her friend, and she liked him just the way he was.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWO

NOLAN

Nolan wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand and grimaced as he hauled the last fifty-kilogram bag of compost onto the back of his truck. The rough burlap scratched his palms as he heaved it into place, stacking it neatly alongside the others. His muscles burned from the exertion, but years of farm work had made him strong.

“Damn heat,” he muttered, squinting up at the merciless sun that hung like a molten coin in the cloudless sky.

The temperature in De Doorns had to be pushing forty degrees Celsius, and the air sucked the moisture from his skin with every breath. His khaki work shirt clung to his back, soaked through with sweat. Even his jeans felt uncomfortably tight in the punishing heat.

He secured the load with tie-downs, then moved to the cab of his truck where he’d stashed the other supplies: five-liter containers of weed killer, rolls of fencing wire, a box of nails, and various other odds and ends his father had requested from town. The old Ford truck groaned under the weight, its suspension sagging.

Nolan checked his watch. It was just past one in the afternoon. The drive back to the farm would be torture in this heat, especially with the truck’s air conditioning on the fritz again. He glanced across the street at the Hex River Pub, its weathered sign swinging in the faint breeze.

“One cold beer won’t hurt,” he decided, locking the truck and pocketing the keys.

He crossed the dusty street, boots crunching on the grit-covered tarmac. The heat radiated from the ground in visible waves, distorting the air. By the time he reached the pub’s entrance, his throat felt like sandpaper.

Nolan pushed open the heavy wooden door, the hinges groaning in protest. The contrast was immediate and blissful. Dark, cool air enveloped him, raising goosebumps on his sweat-slicked arms. The air conditioner hummed away in the corner, its mechanical drone constant.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The pub was a throwback to another era, with its dark wood paneling, brass fixtures, and the perpetual smell of beer and decades of cigarette smoke permeating the air. A handful of regulars occupied their usual spots—farmers and pensioners with nowhere better to be on a weekday afternoon.

Old Pete sat hunched at the bar, nursing what was likely his third lager of the day. William and Fred played a lazy game of pool at a corner table, the click of the balls punctuating their occasional muttered comments.

In another corner, the television mounted over the bar flickered with breaking news, its volume turned low. Nolan nodded to the barman, a heavyset man with forearms like tree trunks. “Afternoon, Andre.”

“Nolan,” the barman acknowledged. “The usual?”

“A Castle, thanks.”

Andre reached into the fridge and produced a frosty bottle, condensation beading its surface. He popped the cap and slid it across the counter.

“Does your father know you’re in here instead of working on the farm?” Andre asked with a knowing smirk.

Nolan took a long pull from the bottle, the cold beer heaven to his parched throat. “What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“Fair enough,” Andre chuckled. “Though I reckon he’d understand in this heat. Never seen anything like it, not in all my years.”

“It’s bad,” Nolan agreed, leaning against the bar. “Dad’s worried about the vineyards. The vines are stressed, even with the irrigation going full blast.”

“Everyone’s worried. Heard the dam levels are dropping faster than they can be replenished.”

Nolan nodded. Water was life in the valley. Without it, the farms would wither and die, taking their livelihoods. That’s why he chose to study agriculture instead of viticulture. He already knew everything about growing grapes and making wine, absorbing the information at his father’s side. He wanted to expand into other crops, most notably citrus trees.

“How’s your sister doing up in Joburg?” Andre asked, changing the subject.

“Giselle’s doing well. She’s thriving at some fancy architecture firm. Says she doesn’t miss the farm life one bit.”

Nolan shook his head. He didn’t understand his twin’s decision to join the rat race. He loved the farm. Sweet Meadow Valley meant everything to

him, and he couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.

“What about that pretty neighbor of yours? Quinn, right? Is she still at university?”

“Stellenbosch,” Nolan confirmed, his expression softening. “Final year of her viticulture degree.”

“Smart girl,” Andre nodded approvingly. “You two ever going to sort yourselves out? The whole valley’s been waiting for it to happen.”

Nolan felt heat rise to his face. “It’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always?” Andre laughed, moving away to serve Old Pete another beer.

Nolan’s attention drifted to the television. The news showed footage of what appeared to be a blizzard somewhere in Europe. The contrast to the scorching heat outside was jarring. The ticker at the bottom of the screen scrolled with words like “unprecedented,” “climate emergency,” and “evacuations.” He was about to ask Andre to turn up the volume when he noticed the stranger in the corner.

Nolan eyed the man, wondering who he was and what he was doing in their small town. He didn’t look like a typical tourist. Tall, dark, and wearing a neat gray suit, the man sat alone at a small table. A laptop glowed in front of him, and he stared at the screen with such intensity that he seemed to have forgotten the world around him. His Coke sat untouched, the ice long melted.

But though curious, it was none of his business, and Nolan turned away. He sipped his beer and let the familiar voices of the locals wash over him.

“I tell you, it’s this global warming nonsense,” Old Pete grumbled from his barstool. “Never had heat like this when I was a boy.”

“That’s just new age rubbish,” William countered, pausing with his pool cue mid-stroke. “The weather’s always changing. It’s got nothing to do with us.”

Fred shook his head. “I agree. Global warming is a fad. Some conspiracy theory these youngsters came up with to blame their parents for the state of the planet. Makes them feel better about their own failures.”

“You’re all wrong,” a quiet voice cut through the debate.

The pub fell silent as all eyes turned to the stranger in the corner. He closed his laptop and looked up, his expression grave.

“This heat wave will pass,” he continued. “But what comes after that will make you wish it didn’t. We’re heading for an ice age.”

Old Pete snorted. “Listen to this fella. An ice age? In Africa? Who the hell do you think you are?”

The stranger straightened in his chair. “My name is Samuel Ndlovu. I’m a climatologist with the South African Weather Service and on my way to an urgent meeting in Cape Town.”

“If it’s so urgent,” Andre challenged from behind the bar, “why are you sitting here?”

Samuel’s jaw tightened. “Because my car broke down, and I can’t get it fixed in time. Now, I’m stuck in the middle of nowhere, forced to watch the end of the world unfold on my laptop screen while you argue about crops. In a few weeks, none of that will matter.”

Ndlovu’s speech drew laughter from most of the men. Only Nolan remained silent, studying the stranger’s face. There was something in his eyes. A haunted look that didn’t match the ridicule in the room.

“End of the world,” Fred mocked. “Hear that, boys? Better drink up before the apocalypse!”

Ndlovu shook his head, his patience visibly thinning. “Switch to any international news channel, and see for yourself. This isn’t a joke.”

Andre reached for the remote and turned up the volume on the TV. The reporter’s voice filled the pub, her tone grave.

“—Unprecedented snowfall has paralyzed much of Northern Europe. Emergency services are overwhelmed, and authorities are urging people to stay indoors.”

The footage showed abandoned cars buried under drifts, people struggling through whiteout conditions, and what appeared to be military vehicles evacuating residents.

“In New York City,” the reporter continued, “the death toll has risen to over three hundred as temperatures plummeted to minus forty overnight. Similar conditions are being reported across the Northern Hemisphere, with meteorologists calling it the most severe and sudden climate shift in recorded history.”

The pub fell silent, and Nolan felt a chill run down his spine despite the heat outside.

“That can’t be right,” Old Pete muttered, his earlier bravado gone.

Samuel opened his laptop again. “The Gulf Stream has collapsed. The heat we’re experiencing is just the precursor. Hot air rises, creating a vacuum that pulls cold air from the poles. Soon, that cold air will reach us.”

“That’s impossible,” Andre protested, but his voice lacked conviction. “This is Africa. We don’t get that kind of cold.”

“The last ice age covered much of Europe in ice sheets two kilometers thick,” Samuel replied. “This one won’t be quite that bad, but make no mistake—it will be devastating. Especially for unprepared countries like ours.”

Nolan’s mind raced to his family’s farm, the vineyards that stretched across the valley, and his father, who would be waiting for the supplies. “What should we do?”

“Prepare,” Samuel said. “Stock up on food, water, warm clothing, and fuel. Insulate your homes as best you can. And pray.”

The room erupted into chaotic discussion, but Nolan was already reaching for his wallet. He slapped a few bills on the counter, not bothering to wait for change.

“Heading out already?” Andre called after him.

“I need to get these supplies back,” Nolan replied, not stopping. Samuel’s eyes met his briefly as he pushed through the door, a look of solemn understanding passing between them.

After the air-conditioned pub, the heat outside hit him like a physical blow. The contrast between the scorching reality around him and the icy images on the news screen created a cognitive dissonance that left him unsettled.

The truck’s door handle burned his palm as he yanked it open. The interior was an oven, and the steering wheel so hot he had to grip it with his fingertips. The engine roared to life, and he pulled away from the curb, dust billowing behind him.

The road stretched before him, a ribbon of black cutting through the sun-bleached landscape. Vineyards lined either side, the vines looking withered and desperate despite the constant irrigation. In the distance, the Hex River mountains shimmered in the heat haze, their familiar contours offering no comfort today.

His mind replayed the stranger’s words. A new ice age. It seemed absurd in this heat. How could ice and snow possibly reach them here?

Yet the images on the television had been real. Snow burying New York. People freezing to death in their homes. And the look in Samuel’s eyes… that wasn’t the look of a madman or a conspiracy theorist. That was the look of someone who knew what was coming and was terrified.

“Just in case,” Nolan muttered to himself, making a decision.

He performed a quick U-turn and headed back to De Doorns, stopping at the local hardware store. His father would disapprove of this detour, but something told him it was necessary.

The hardware store was a sprawling corrugated iron building with a faded sign. Nolan parked and hurried inside, grateful for the shade if not the temperature. He moved through the aisles with a cart, grabbing items and stacking them inside: candles, matches, a first aid kit, extra blankets, three gas heaters, and extra gas canisters. After hesitation, he added a heavy-duty torch, several packs of batteries, bags of charcoal, and packets of firelighters.

Old man Pretorius, the owner, raised an eyebrow as Nolan dumped everything on the counter. “Planning a camping trip?”

“Something like that,” Nolan replied, not wanting to explain. “Mind adding a few jerry cans of paraffin as well?”

Pretorius shrugged and hobbled to the back, returning with three red containers. “Is this heat getting to you, boy? Gas heaters in forty-degree weather?”

“Just stocking up,” Nolan said, pulling out his wallet.

The total on the register made him wince, and he wondered if he was being a complete idiot as he handed over his credit card. As Pretorius rang up the purchases, Nolan glanced at the television behind the counter. It was tuned to a local station showing cricket highlights, and he paused. “Do you mind switching to the news?”

Pretorius grunted but obliged, changing to an international news channel. The screen was filled with chaotic scenes from London, with streets buried under snow, people huddled in emergency shelters, and military vehicles plowing through drifts.

Nolan stared at the screen, feeling slightly less foolish for believing a complete stranger about a possible ice age. There it was, unfolding in full color.

“What in God’s name?” Pretorius muttered, transfixed.

Nolan told him what the stranger, Ndlovu, had told him, wincing inwardly at how ridiculous he sounded. But he persevered. Even if Pretorius didn’t believe him, he had to try. “It’s coming our way. You might want to stock up yourself.”

He left the stunned shopkeeper staring at the screen and loaded his purchases into the truck. The drive back to Sweet Meadow Valley was tense, his mind racing with possibilities. The farm wasn't equipped for freezing temperatures, and the workers' cottages were simple structures with thin walls and corrugated iron roofs. *But the house might work if we made some changes.*

While it wasn't perfect, the main house boasted brick walls, a tiled roof, and wooden ceilings. Plush carpets covered most of the floors, and thick curtains were draped across the windows. His mother believed in quality over quantity and chose her fabrics and furnishings with care. Both the house and its interior were meant to last.

Electricity would probably be the first thing to go during the blizzard. It happened often enough, even in typical stormy weather. Luckily, his dad had made provision for that. A generator was hooked up directly to the house, augmenting a solar system installed on the roof. The generator and solar batteries were housed in a separate room built onto the house for that purpose. It had its own ventilation and minimized the noise from the generator. There was also a fireplace in the living room, several gas heaters, plenty of blankets and bedding, and a water tank connected to the plumbing. *We'll just have to make it work.*

Nolan pressed harder on the accelerator, causing the truck to lurch forward. The weight of the compost bags and supplies made the old Ford labor up the winding road that led to Sweet Meadow Valley.

As he crested the final hill, the farm spread out below him like a painting. Despite his worry, the sight still stirred something in his chest. Rows of grapevines stretched in geometric precision across the valley floor, their leaves a deep green against the parched earth. The farmhouse stood in the center, its whitewashed walls gleaming in the sunlight, and the red-tiled roof was vibrant against the backdrop of the Hex mountains. It was home, and he needed to protect it.

He pulled up to the farmhouse, tires crunching on the gravel driveway. His father, Johan Van Wyk, emerged from the shade of the patio before he cut the engine, wiping his hands on a rag.

"About time," Johan called, his weathered face creased with impatience. "What took you so long?"

Nolan jumped out. "Dad, we need to talk."

“Talk? The irrigation system in the north field is failing, and you want to talk?” His father’s eyes narrowed as he spotted the extra purchases in the truck bed. “What’s all this?”

“Come inside first,” Nolan insisted, heading toward the house. “Trust me.”

Johan followed reluctantly, muttering about wasted time and dying vines.

Inside, the farmhouse was marginally cooler, the ceiling fans spinning lazily overhead. Nolan grabbed the remote and switched on the television in the living room, flipping to an international news channel. “Look.”

His father stared at the images of snow-buried cities and ice-encrusted landscapes. The news anchor’s voice filled the room, describing mass evacuations and plummeting temperatures moving southward.”

“What am I looking at?” Johan asked.

“It’s happening all over the Northern Hemisphere,” Nolan explained. “I met a climatologist in town. He says it’s coming here, too. A flash freeze, followed by a new ice age.”

His father scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. This is Africa.”

“The man knew what he was talking about, Dad. The Gulf Stream has collapsed. The heat we’re feeling now is just the beginning of the shift.”

Johan argued for several more minutes, refusing to believe the evidence before him, but finally, he said, “How long do we have?”

“Days. A week at most,” Nolan replied. “We need to prepare.”

His father nodded slowly, the farmer in him taking over, pragmatic, adaptable, and focused on survival. “Alright. What’s your plan?”

“We need to insulate the house as best we can. Stock up on food, fuel, and warm clothing,” Nolan said, pacing the room. “The workers’ cottages are my biggest concern. They won’t hold up against extreme cold.”

Johan rubbed his jaw, the stubble scratching against his calloused palm. “You’re right. We’ll have to move everyone into the house.”

“We can weather the worst of the storm in the living room. The fireplace will be a big help.”

“Alright. I’ll call a meeting with the workers,” John said, the decision made.

“Where’s Mom?”

“In the rose garden,” Johan replied. “I’ll stop there on the way and fill her in. She can check the pantry and make a shopping list.”

Nolan nodded. “We’ll need enough food to last at least a month, if not more. The town roads might not be passable for a long time.”

Johan winced. “That’s going to cost a pretty penny.”

“I know. I wish the news were different,” Nolan said.

“You’d better hope this doesn’t turn out to be some hoax or scam,” Johan said. “Because if it is, you owe me a year’s wages.”

Nolan didn’t answer, but he felt the weight of responsibility settling on his shoulders. He had chosen to listen to Samuel Ndlovu, and it would be his fault if it turned out to be a false alarm. Either way, he was determined to see it through. *What’s the worst that can happen? Everyone laughs at me? Or the shit hits the fan, and we stand a chance?*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THREE

Once Jonathan left, Quinn made a beeline for her room. The dorm was quiet, the living room and kitchen bare of any souls. Dust motes glittered in the rays of light streaming through the curtains, and a fan churned on the ceiling.

Pop music pulsed through a crack underneath one of the bedroom doors, and she guessed it was Zenelia. The girl had a fondness for the latest hits, unlike Stella, who preferred death metal.

Smiling at the thought, Quinn entered her bedroom and dumped her bag on her desk. Her room was small and bare. She didn't like clutter and kept her stuff down to the minimum: A single bed, desk and chair, clothes cupboard, and a bean bag in the corner. She'd mounted a mirror and a couple of floating shelves for books on the walls, but that was it.

Grabbing a towel, she headed toward the bathroom and jumped into a shower. The cold water cascaded down her body, washing away the sweat and grime of the day. The cool spray brought instant relief, and she luxuriated in the sensation for several minutes.

Afterward, she dried herself and put on a tank top and shorts, savoring the coolness. But within seconds, the oppressive heat returned, enveloping her in its damp, sticky embrace.

"Damn this heat," she muttered, wiping the condensation from the mirror.

Her reflection stared back at her, her grass-green eyes bright against her sun-kissed skin. She looked out of place in the cramped bathroom and longed for the lush fields and vineyards of home, edged in the distance by the Hex River mountains.

She turned to her desk, where notes and textbooks were scattered haphazardly. Settling into her chair, Quinn pulled her dark hair into a messy ponytail and settled down to work.

The minutes ticked by slowly as she tried to concentrate, but distractions were everywhere. The fan on her desk creaked with age, the

plastic blades churning the humid air with sullen protest. Her skin prickled from the heat, and sweat beaded on her forehead, dripping onto the pages.

Feeling frustrated, Quinn shoved the book aside and fell onto her back. “This is useless.”

Her gaze drifted to the window. Beyond the glass, heat shimmered off the pavement. The ordinarily vibrant campus grounds looked pale and sickly, and the sun was an orange ball of fire, raining hellfire down on the parched earth. How much longer could this go on?

Quinn shook her head, banishing the dark thoughts. One day at a time. That’s how they’d survived on the farm whenever drought struck and how she’d survive here.

Forcing her attention back to her studies, she tried to focus but gave up after a while. “What I wouldn’t give for a cold beer right now.”

That reminded her of Keith’s party, and she decided to go on the spot. The prospect of a swim was too inviting to turn down, and she reached for her phone.

After a brief chat with Jonathan, Quinn arranged to meet him later that night and headed to the kitchen for a quick meal. She hadn’t eaten since that morning, and her stomach was making its displeasure known.

She found Zenelia sitting at the breakfast counter, slumped over a bowl of cereal. Her blond ponytail was damp with sweat, and her trademark pink lipstick was smeared. “Hey, Zee. What’s up?”

“Nothing much,” Zenelia said. “Trying not to melt, I suppose.”

“You and me both, sister,” Quinn replied, pouring herself a bowl of cereal and milk. It was too hot to cook, and she didn’t think she could stomach anything rich. “Are you going to Keith’s party?”

Zenelia shrugged. “Not sure. I’ve got a lot of work to do, but in this heat…” She trailed off, drooping even lower.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Maybe a swim and a laugh will do us good. See you there?”

“Maybe,” Zenelia said with a shrug before sliding off her chair. She rinsed her bowl in the sink before heading back to her room.

Quinn waved at Zee with her spoon before diving in for another mouthful. The sugary cereal silenced her growling stomach and granted her a brief burst of energy—enough for her to squeeze in a quick study session and get started on her Science project.

It alleviated some of her anxiety, and she was able to look forward to the party. Studying on a scholarship was the enemy of fun, and she'd had to turn down many a social event in the past, spending her days in her room or the library instead. But at that point, she looked forward to a break from her usual routine.

After another cold shower, she pulled on a halterneck swimsuit that showed off her athletic shoulders and long legs. Over that, she wore a light summer dress and strappy sandals. Dressed and ready to go, she grabbed her bag containing the essentials and headed out.

Along the way, Quinn knocked on Zenelia's door. "Hey, Zee. See you at the party?"

"Yeah, I'll see you there," came the muffled reply. "Just getting dressed."

"What party?" Stella asked, emerging from her room next door.

"Keith's pool party," Quinn replied.

Stella's eyes narrowed. "A pool party? Normally, I'd give that a skip, but in this heat, I might consider it."

"Why not?" Quinn said, though she wondered how Stella's eyeliner and spiky black hair would hold up in the water. "It couldn't hurt, right?"

"I'll think about it," Stella said, shutting her door.

After grabbing cold bottled water from the fridge, Quinn headed outside but paused when the heat nearly blasted her off her feet. Even with the sun down, it was almost unbearable, and she struggled to catch her breath in the thick atmosphere.

"This isn't normal. It can't be," she muttered as she headed toward Keith's place. "Something must be wrong."

In a flash, Jonathan's words about some scientist predicting an imminent ice age flashed to the forefront of her mind, and she frowned. Could it be true? She was familiar with some of the theories surrounding the Gulf Stream and its effect on the weather, but the thought of an actual ice age was just too far-fetched.

Dismissing the thought, Quinn set a grueling pace, sticking to the cooler shadows whenever possible. After a few minutes, a hint of a breeze provided some relief, and she crossed the campus grounds with long strides.

She couldn't help but notice how quiet it was, however. Most of the students had retreated indoors, and the University seemed to exist in that eerie space between night and day, with the sun winking out on the horizon

while the stars glittered above. Crickets sang in the background, bats swooped through the air, and an owl heralded the coming darkness with a mournful hoot.

Quinn could almost imagine some terrifying creature stalking her in the bushes, its yellow eyes following her every move. A shiver ran down her spine, and she quickened her pace, only to stop abruptly when a dark figure jumped out at her.

A shrill shriek escaped her lips, and she pulled her arm back, ready to throw a punch.

“Steady on, Miss,” an answering voice cried, raising both arms to fend off her attack. “I’m Campus Security.”

“Security?” Quinn said, squinting at his uniform. She could make out the glint of his metal name tag and badge.

“Yes, Miss,” he replied, lowering his arms. “Name’s Ruben. Got a call about a strange noise in the area and was checking it out.”

Quinn’s pulse slowed as she registered the man’s words. “Strange noise?” she echoed, glancing around at the deserted campus.

Ruben nodded, pulling a flashlight from his belt and flicking its beam over the surrounding shrubbery. “Yes, but it’s probably just an animal or the wind.”

“Or maybe it’s an ice monster,” Quinn muttered.

“I’m sorry?” Ruben turned his attention back to her.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, offering an apologetic smile. “Just a joke.”

Ruben returned his flashlight to its holder. “Right. Can I ask where you’re going? It’s not safe after dark.”

“I’m heading to a pool party,” Quinn replied.

“A pool party?” Ruben said with a touch of envy. “Sounds like heaven.”

“Uh-huh. I’m not missing it for the world,” Quinn said.

“Well, have fun and stay safe,” Ruben said, throwing her a casual salute.

“Will do,” Quinn replied.

With that, the security guard turned and walked away, his footsteps crunching on the gravel path that wound through the university grounds.

Quinn watched him go before continuing on her way. She exited the campus grounds at the main gate, flashing her student ID to the security guards on duty.

“Are you sure you want to walk, Miss?” one of them asked after listening to her explanation about a pool party. “Shouldn’t you call a taxi?”

Quinn shrugged and pointed up the street. “It’s so close, I wouldn’t bother. Look.”

The guard craned his neck and spotted what she was pointing at: The faint flashing of lights against the sky, accompanied by the distant pulse of music.

“Alright, but be careful, Miss,” the guard cautioned.

“Thanks,” Quinn replied, adjusting her bag on her shoulder.

She set out once more, instantly dismissing the guard’s warning. While she wasn’t oblivious to the dangers in the world, she possessed the same belief as most young people. The belief that they were untouchable, somehow bulletproof, and that bad stuff only happened to other people.

Sticking to the curb, she set out again, eager to reach her destination. She could almost feel the touch of the cold water on her skin, and her feet quickened of their own volition. *Anything to get out of this damned heat.*

Keith’s place was an assault on the senses. The air vibrated with music and energy, and bright lights lit the night sky. The party was in full swing, with people lounging on beach chairs, splashing in the pool, and playing beer pong in the games room.

“Quinn, over here,” a voice called, and she spotted Jonathan waving at her from the barbecue area.

She joined him, and he handed her a cold beer.

She cracked the tab and took a deep sip, relishing the ice-cold liquid that streamed down her throat.

“Hungry?” he asked, waving a pair of braai tongs around.

“No thanks,” Quinn said. “I already ate.”

Nodding towards the pool, Jonathan said, “Jump in. You’re all gross and sweaty.”

“Funny,” Quinn replied, her voice dry.

“Just kidding, but go ahead. I’ll join you in a couple of minutes.”

Quinn gazed at the pool with longing, the shimmering blue water singing a siren’s song. Without wasting another second, she stripped off her dress and sandals, stuffing both into her bag. Leaving it with Jonathan, she dived into the pool with a splash.

The cold water enveloped her like a cocoon, and she stayed under until her lungs screamed for air. Surfacing with a gasp, she pushed back the wet hair from her face and looked around.

Jonathan threw her a thumbs-up. “How does it feel?”

“Magical. You should join me,” Quinn replied.

“Soon.”

Meanwhile, Zenelia had made it to the party, and it seemed like the entire campus was there. A girl drifted past on a pink flamingo, and another squealed when her boyfriend dunked her underwater.

Grabbing a nearby boogie board, Quinn looped her arms around it and floated lazily in the pool. For the first time that day, she wasn’t sweating like a pig or feeling like her head would explode, and she relished the feeling. *If only I could stay here forever.*

“Cannonball,” Jonathan yelled, breaking into her reverie. He jumped into the water, sending her skittering across the surface.

She sputtered when a wave of water slapped her in the face and looked for the culprit, her cheeks red with anger. “I’m gonna kill you, Jon!”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” he yelled, splashing more water in her face.

Quinn gave chase, but it was a half-hearted effort at best. Her energy soon petered out, and she contented herself with lounging in the shallow end.

“Giving up already?” Jonathan teased.

“Uh-huh. It’s too hot to exercise,” Quinn said, leaning back in the water.

Jonathan joined her, and for the next hour, they bobbed on the surface like two otters while chatting up a storm. The party continued to rage around them until a distant rumble announced the arrival of dark clouds. They blocked out the moon, and lightning played around the edges, sending a chill down Quinn’s spine. “I think that’s my cue.”

“Mine too,” Jonathan said, splashing toward the side of the pool.

A sense of foreboding filled her mind as she looked at the rapidly changing sky. Something felt wrong. This wasn’t just any storm. She could feel it in her bones. Her gaze met Jonathan’s, and judging by his expression, he thought it too.

“I think it’s time to leave,” Quinn said.

“Let’s go,” Jonathan agreed, and they exited the water hastily.

After grabbing their stuff, they hurried to the exit but paused when they spotted Zenelia and Keith huddled underneath the carport.

“Leaving so soon?” Keith asked, his Hawaiian shirt suddenly out of place in the dark and threatening atmosphere.

“Yeah, this storm doesn’t look good,” Jonathan said.

“Do you want to walk with us, Zee?” Quinn asked.

“I’ll drop her off in my Jeep,” Keith said, looping one arm around her waist.

“Okay, see you later,” Quinn said, waving at the couple.

“Let’s go,” Jonathan said, and they hurried back to the campus.

As they walked, chased by sudden gusts of wind that nipped at their heels with icy teeth. It cut through her flimsy sundress like a knife, raising goosebumps on her skin.

“How’s this even possible?” Quinn asked, yelling to make herself heard above the ensuing storm. “First it’s hot, now it’s cold?”

“It’s the ice age, man. I told you earlier, but you wouldn’t believe me.”

“I still don’t believe you,” Quinn said, but she began to wonder as she looked at the roiling clouds above her head filled with silver veins that crackled with ozone. Maybe Jonathan was right. Perhaps it was the end of the world, after all?

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOUR

The campus lay ahead, its twinkling lights promising safety amid the storm's growing chaos. Quinn and Jonathan sprinted toward it, their feet pounding the asphalt. The storm seemed to gather strength and ferocity with every step they took, the wind fast turning into a howling beast. The trees on either side of the street groaned under the assault, and jagged lightning zigzagged across the skies.

"Faster, Quinn!" Jonathan cried. His long legs churned like a mini locomotive, and he soon outpaced her.

"I'm trying," Quinn yelled back, but the wind whipped the words from her lips.

Within seconds, Jonathan was gone, swallowed up by the darkness. A spurt of fear rushed through her veins, but she pushed it aside and kept going. Now was not the time to act the damsel in distress.

Forcing her body to its limits, Quinn tried to catch up, but it was impossible. Neither her dress nor flimsy sandals were meant for running, and she wasn't as fit as she used to be on the farm. Three years at Uni had softened her, and she vowed on the spot to start exercising again if she made it through the night.

A searing stitch in her side caused her to stumble, and she almost fell to the ground, but a steadying hand on her arm saved her.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan asked.

"You came back for me?" she replied.

"Of course," Jonathan said, almost like it was nothing. "Here. Let me help you."

"Thanks," Quinn said, gratitude swelling her heart.

"Over there," Jonathan said, pointing at an orange glow ahead. "It's the gate."

With their heads bowed against the storm, they forged ahead, greeted by two stunned security guards. One rushed to open the gate while the other scolded them. "What are you kids doing out on a night like this? Shouldn't

you be in your beds studying?" the guard, a stout middle-aged woman, asked. She glared at them with an eyebrow raised, the spitting image of matronly concern.

"We were at a party," Jonathan admitted.

"Well, of all the foolish nonsense I've heard tonight, that sure takes the cake, doesn't it?" she asked the other security guard.

"Sure does," the younger version of the first one replied, shutting the gate.

"Are there more of you coming?"

"Uh-huh," Quinn said, remembering Zenelia.

"Well, I'll look out for them. Get back to your dorms and out of this nasty weather."

"Yes, Ma'am," Jonathan replied, hurrying past with Quinn clinging to his arm.

Once inside the campus grounds, Quinn turned to Jonathan. "I'll be okay from here. You go ahead."

"No, I'll see you to your door. Besides, this storm is getting worse, and your place is the closest."

"Okay," Quinn said.

They ran down the gravel path toward her dorm, guided by the faint glow of the lanterns.

Suddenly, a fork of lightning split the sky, striking a nearby tree. It exploded in a burst of flame, sparks raining down in every direction. Hot pitch bubbled from the shattered trunk, running down the sides in thick globs.

Quinn screamed when the lightning struck, breaking into a headlong sprint. She didn't care about anything anymore. She just wanted to get to the safety of her room. There, she could relax and pretend everything was alright, even if it was just an illusion.

But the storm wasn't done with her yet. The heavens opened up, and sheets of frozen sleet poured down, soaking her to the bone. The earlier heat was replaced by a mind-numbing cold.

By the time she reached her dorm, Quinn couldn't feel her arms or legs anymore. Her teeth chattered, and her body shook, spasms running down her spine with every breath.

She felt for the keys in her bag, frustrated by the lack of feeling in her fingertips. Finally, she felt their metallic touch and whipped them out, only

to struggle with the lock. “Oh, for heaven’s… sake… why… can’t… I…”

“Here, let me,” Jonathan said, grabbing the keys. Shaking slightly less than her, he unlocked the door, and they stumbled inside.

A gush of warm air greeted them, and the storm outside faded to a distant rumble. It tugged at the walls and rattled the windows, but inside, it was still, warm, and safe.

Safe.

For the first time, Quinn realized what the word truly meant. She hadn’t been that scared since she was a kid and believed that monsters lived in the closet.

“Wow, I don’t know what the hell that was,” Jonathan said, drawing her attention away from her own fears.

She looked at him, and an involuntary smile tugged at her lips. His curly brown hair was covered in ice, the frozen locks flashing in the light like diamonds. His lips were blue, and his eyes looked startled, like a rabbit caught in headlights.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, stamping her feet to coax some life back into them.

“Quinn? Is that you?” a familiar voice asked.

Quinn looked up and spotted another of her dorm mates, a short, curvy girl with reddish-brown hair, hazel eyes, and a dimpled smile. “Hey, Gwen.”

“You’re puddling all over the floor,” Gwen pointed out.

Quinn looked down, noting the water pooling around their feet. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. One heck of a storm,” Gwen said, reaching for the mop. “I’ll clean up and put on the kettle.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said. “Come on, Jon. Let’s get dried off.”

She led the way to her room, noting that someone had put the space heater on in the living room. It explained the cozy atmosphere, and she was grateful for the warmth. With every passing second, the storm seemed less threatening, its howling winds and rumbling thunder locked out by brick and mortar.

“What’s going on out there?” Stella asked, her door opening as they passed.

“I don’t know. That storm came out of nowhere,” Quinn replied.

“I keep telling you. It’s the ice age, man,” Jonathan said.

“Oh, God. Another nutter. As if there aren’t enough of you already,” Stella said, rolling her eyes.

Before Quinn could ask what she meant, the girl slammed her door shut, the distorted strains of death metal rattling through the wood.

With a shrug, she pushed the thought aside and led Jonathan to her room. “Wait here.”

“I’ll make myself comfy,” Jonathan said with a grin.

“And stay out of my underwear,” Quinn warned, wagging one finger at him.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Cross my heart and hope to die,” he replied, tracing a cross over his chest with exaggerated solemnity.

“Oh, you’ll die, alright.” Quinn shot him a final warning glare before fetching a couple of towels from the closet.

“I’m jumping into the shower first, but you can go after me.”

“Okay, but hurry,” he said, bobbing his head. “Technically, I’m not allowed to be here.”

“I know. I’ll be quick,” Quinn said, selecting a pair of winter pajamas complete with socks, slippers, and a gown.

She made her way to the bathroom and peeled off her clothes. They dropped to the floor with a wet splat, and she quickly wrung them out in the basin. After hanging them up to dry, she stepped into the shower. The warm water soaked into her flesh, erasing any memory of the cold.

Afterward, she dried off and put on her pajamas. Encased in flannel and wool, she exited the steamy room feeling like a new person.

Quinn found Jonathan sprawled on her unmade bed, flipping through an old National Geographic. His eyes twinkled as he looked up, and water droplets clung to his hair.

“Better?” he asked, setting down the magazine.

“Much,” Quinn agreed, ruffling the towel through her damp hair. She jerked her head toward the bathroom. “Your turn. I’ll see if I can find something to fit you.”

She rummaged through her closet, emerging with an old men’s t-shirt and a pair of boxers. “It’s not much, but it’ll have to do.”

“Thanks,” Jonathan said, eyeing the clothes with a dubious frown. “Dare I ask where you got these?”

“Nope. It’s none of your business.”

“Fair enough,” Jonathan said, ducking out.

Suddenly, the lights flickered, drawing her attention to the storm raging outside. The windows trembled in their frames as the thunder rumbled, and lightning cracked across the heavens, the brilliant flashes visible through her dark curtains.

A feeling of unease crept up her spine, and she wondered again what Stella had meant earlier about there being enough nutters already.

Quinn sat down at her desk and switched on her laptop. While she waited for the system to boot, Jonathan returned wearing the shirt and boxers she'd given him. "Um, this is great, but I can't go to my dorm like this."

"I don't think you're going anywhere, anyway," Quinn replied, waving a hand around. "Not in this weather."

A terrific crash of thunder followed by a crack of lightning sounded at that moment, almost as if to prove her point.

Jonathan shuddered. "Agreed."

"You can sleep on the couch, and we'll explain in the morning."

Jonathan sat down on the foot of her bed. "What are you doing?"

"Checking the news and media sites," Quinn replied. "I want to know what's going on."

Quinn's fingers flew over the keys as she scrolled through her favorite news sites, all telling the same horrific tale. A series of isolated blizzards in the North had suddenly and inexplicably intensified, their icy fury merging into a colossal tempest that raged unabated across the globe.

A chill that had nothing to do with the storm outside ran through her spine as she skimmed through the news reports. "The Big Freeze," one read, alongside an image of New York City cloaked in a thick shroud of white. Another site displayed an interactive map, a mass of blue marking the spread of sub-zero temperatures across the continents. It was like something from a Sci-Fi movie, and her mind struggled to catch up.

"It's happening," Jonathan said, his voice tinged with awe.

"What's happening?" Quinn said, blinking at him.

"The ice age I told you about. It's here."

"The Ice Age? I thought you were joking," Quinn cried, horrified.

"So was I, but it's happening. Look."

"Show me that video," Quinn demanded.

Jonathan complied, fetching his phone from his bag. He showed her the clip, a short reel from a much longer video. It featured a scientist named

Andrew Becket, a man convinced that an ice age loomed on the horizon.

Quinn blinked at the screen with disbelief, the words Gulf Stream and ocean currents swimming through her brain. “He can’t be serious.”

“Um, it sure seems like it,” Jonathan said, jerking his head toward the storm outside.

Suddenly, Quinn noticed the growing cold. Despite her warm pajamas, she was shivering, and her skin was pebbled with goosebumps. “This isn’t possible.”

Her fingers flew across the keyboard as she searched for an alternate explanation that didn’t involve the next ice age, but she found nothing to dispute Dr. Andrew Becket’s theory. Everything she read seemed to confirm it.

Another headline caught her eye, and her hands froze mid-air. “It hit Cape Town a few hours ago, and now it’s here.”

“Cape Town?”

Quinn’s eyes flew over the hastily written article. Disjointed video footage and thousands of media posts streaming in from beleaguered citizens confirmed it. They all told the same story. Thousands were stranded in their cars, the engines refusing to start. Snow covered parts of the city, and Table Mountain was covered in ice. Those who didn’t have adequate shelter were freezing to death, and the infrastructure was rapidly failing, unable to cope with the severe weather.

“Is this the end?” Jonathan asked, straightening up.

Quinn swallowed hard. “I don’t know.”

A grim silence fell, punctuated by the flickering lights and rumbling thunder.

“I need to call my parents,” Quinn announced, launching herself from her chair. She grabbed her phone and called her mother, but instead of ringing, a robotic voice taunted her with the message, “The number you have dialed is not available at the moment.”

Quinn stared at the screen, her hands shaking with a mixture of cold and fear. No signal.

She tried again and again, calling every number she could think of back home. She even tried to reach her childhood best friends, Nolan and Giselle. The twins lived next door to her parents, but she wasn’t surprised when she couldn’t get through. Like her, they’d both gone off to University, and she rarely saw them anymore.

Finally, she gave up, tossing the phone on the bed with a frustrated cry. “Damn this weather!”

“I’m sorry, Quinn,” Jonathan said, his arms loose at his side.

Quinn’s shoulders drooped. “So, what do we do now?”

“Now, we figure out just how bad this is going to get and how we’re going to survive the night,” Jonathan said.

“And then?”

“Then we tell the others.”

Quinn nodded, feeling slightly less hopeless. The thought of having an actual plan lifted her spirits. It took her focus off her own fears and uncertainties and gave her something to strive for. Turning back to her laptop, she took a deep breath. “Alright. Let’s see what we’re working with.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIVE

It only took a few minutes for Quinn to realize that the situation would only get worse—a lot worse. A flash freeze was imminent, and temperatures were plummeting to incredible lows. Anyone caught outside or without adequate shelter would die.

"How low are we talking?" Jonathan asked.

"If Andrew Beckett is correct, we're looking at minus forty and below."

"What?" Jonathan yelled. "We can't survive that!"

"We have to," Quinn said. "We've got no choice."

"But how?"

"We huddle up in the living room, insulate the doors and windows, switch on every available heater we've got, and stick together."

"How long will this super freeze last?" Jonathan asked.

"I'm not sure. It could be hours or even days," Quinn said. "

"And after that?"

"After that, we're looking at a new ice age with the temperature just below zero."

Jonathan was silent for several seconds. "It's really happening, huh? Everything's changing."

"Yes, it is," Quinn said, thinking about the vineyard. It could never survive such temperatures. Her home, the farm, was gone. *And what about my parents? Our neighbors, and the town? Nolan and Giselle?*

"How will we live? What will we eat? Our crops won't grow in zero temperatures. We'll starve," Jonathan exclaimed, a growing note of panic lacing his voice.

"Calm down, Jon. First, we need to make it through the night. After that, we'll worry about the rest."

"Right. Of course," Jonathan said, closing his eyes for a second.

"Let's go tell the others," Quinn said, shutting her laptop. "They need to know what's going on."

Together, they exited the room and searched for Quinn's dorm mates. They found Stella and Gwen in the living room, watching an old movie.

"Hey, guys. We need to talk," Quinn said.

Gwen turned her head. "I'm sorry. I made cocoa, but you took so long that it got cold."

"That's okay. Where's Zenelia? Is she back from the party yet?"

"Nope," Stella said, popping her lips on the p.

"What about Xolani?"

"She went home, remember? Something about her grandmother being sick."

"Right," Quinn said, "and Brenda?"

"I have no idea where she is," Gwen admitted.

"Probably with her boyfriend. Those two are attached at the hip," Stella said, rolling her eyes.

"Anyway," Jonathan cried, growing impatient. "We have a problem."

"What problem?" Stella asked.

"In case you hadn't noticed, the world's ending," Jonathan said.

"Yeah, right," Stella scoffed. "Had too many magic mushrooms, huh?"

"I'm not joking around. Just switch to the news."

"He's right, guys. This is serious," Quinn added, trying to interject a sense of urgency. Despite the space heater warming the room, she could feel the growing cold creeping around the edges. "This is no ordinary storm; we must prepare for the worst."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Gwen said.

"They're talking about some freak weather patterns causing shit in the North," Stella said.

"Not just the North. It's here," Quinn said, waving a hand around.

Stella snorted. "Yeah, right. This is just another thunderstorm. It'll blow over."

"Oh, yeah? Then how do you explain that?" Jonathan said, whipping the curtains aside.

The feeble glow of a nearby lamppost flickered in the darkness, fighting a losing battle against the storm that raged all around. However, it was enough to illuminate the thick sheets of white coming down, revealing a phenomenon never before seen in Stellenbosch: Snow.

Stella and Gwen jumped to their feet, shocked. They'd never bothered to look outside, content to stay tucked away inside the warm safety of their

dorm. The thick snow came as a complete surprise.

“Oh, my God!” Gwen cried. “We’ve got snow?”

“That’s not possible,” Stella added, her eyes wide.

Suddenly, the kitchen door exploded inward, and a freezing gust of wind invaded their sanctuary. Snow whirled through the air, and the sheer cold shocked their senses, freezing them all to the spot.

Quinn was the first to react, rushing forward. She entered the kitchen but stumbled to a halt when she saw two figures sprawled on the floor. “What the hell?”

Hurrying to the door, she stuck her head outside and checked for more people, but the couple behind her seemed to be alone. A truck was parked haphazardly in the driveway, its doors open and the engine still running. Its headlights almost blinded her, and she retreated into the dorm, slamming the kitchen door shut.

Instantly, the howling tempest abated, retreating behind brick and mortar. The swirling snow settled on the ground, melting into tiny puddles, while the worst of the cold abated.

Using the brief reprieve to investigate, Quinn hunkered down next to the unmoving figures on the floor.

“Who is it?” Gwen asked, joining her.

“I’m not sure,” Quinn said, struggling to make out their features through the frost that rimed their skin.

“Keith?” Jonathan cried, hurrying over.

“How do you know?” Quinn asked.

“It’s his shirt,” Jonathan said, pointing at the pattern, a Hawaiian mixture of bright orange and pink flowers on a blue background.

“Then this must be Zenelia,” Quinn said, recognizing the girl’s bright blonde hair. “He said he’d drop her off in his truck.”

“What’s wrong with them?” Stella asked, hovering in the background.

“My guess is hypothermia,” Quinn said, touching Zenelia’s skin and finding it ice-cold.

“But… it’s summer!” Stella cried.

“Have you seen the storm outside?”

“Yeah, but still,” Stella said, stubborn as ever. “It’s not that cold.”

“That’s because we’re in here, and they were out there,” Quinn pointed out.

“And it’s pretty cold in here, too,” Gwen added with a shiver.

Stella shook her head but didn’t argue anymore.

Relieved, Quinn took over. “Help me get them to the living room, Jon. We’ve got to get them warmed up.”

“On it,” Jonathan said, leaning down.

Between the four of them, they carried Zenelia to the living room and parked her on the nearest couch before returning for Keith. Both were out of it, mumbling and shaking with the cold. Meanwhile, Gwen made hot cocoa, and Stella fetched blankets.

“I found these, too,” Stella said, holding a pair of hot water bottles.

“Perfect,” Quinn said, wrapping Keith and Zenelia in the blankets until they resembled Egyptian mummies. She cranked the space heater to its max while Stella filled the hot water bottles with boiling water. Gwen returned seconds later with a tray of hot cocoa, and they coaxed the sweet mixture down the couple’s throats.

“What happened to you two?” Quinn asked once they’d stopped shaking and shivering enough to talk.

“After you guys left, it was okay for a while, and the party continued. Some people left, but most stayed,” Zenelia said after a moment of silence, her voice shaky but audible. “Then, the storm got worse. Like, way worse.”

“Yeah, someone got hit by lightning,” Keith interrupted. “I tried to phone emergency services, but there was no dial tone. I can still smell his flesh burning.”

“Anyway,” Zenelia continued. “Keith loaded the guy into the truck and drove him to the hospital. It was chaos. Cars were getting stuck in the snow, there were a bunch of accidents, and it was just awful.”

“I’m sorry,” Quinn said, reaching out to take Zenelia’s hand when the girl burst into tears.

“The hospital was overrun. The ambulances kept coming in with more victims. People half-frozen to death. They wouldn’t let us stay.”

“We barely made it back here alive,” finished Keith, his expression dazed. “It was so freaking cold out there. I thought we were going to die.”

“Thank goodness, it’s over. We’re safe now,” Zenelia said.

“It’s not over. Not by a long shot,” Quinn said.

“What do you mean?” Keith asked.

“Not that again,” Stella cried, throwing her arms in the air.

“Just watch the bloody news, will you?” Jonathan said, switching the TV on.

News reports flooded the screen, proclaiming one disaster after another: Blizzards, snow, storms, and floods. People were frozen in their tracks, and others were stranded with nowhere to go. Crumbling infrastructure, violent riots, and power outages popped up everywhere. The world was ending right before their eyes, and they could do nothing to stop it.

“We have to get ready, or we won’t make it through the night,” Quinn said once they’d had enough of the grim news.

Silence followed her words before Gwen finally said, “What do we do now?”

“We start by gathering everything we need in one place. Food, water, blankets, heaters, you name it.”

Quinn rose from her seat and began pacing back and forth. “Next, we pick one room and turn it into a haven against the cold. Insulate the windows, doors, and floors.”

“With what?” Zenelia asked.

“Old newspapers, paper, plastic sheeting,” Jonathan replied. “Even black bags will work.”

“I’ve got a stack of old magazines,” Gwen offered. “I can tear them apart and tape the pages over the windows?”

“Perfect, thanks,” Quinn said with an approving nod.

“And we should dress in layers,” Jonathan continued. “We don’t have to look pretty here. We just need to stay alive. Gather every item of clothing you possess and wear them all at once.”

“Well, I’m sending out alerts on social media and letting people know what they can do,” Stella said, raising her phone in the air.

“How?” Jonathan asked. “There’s no signal from any of the networks.”

“No, but the WiFi is on,” Stella said.

“Yeah, until the electricity goes out,” Jonathan pointed out.

“All the more reason to warn people now.”

“Good thinking,” Quinn said, wondering if she’d be able to contact her parents like that, but dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. They weren’t tech-savvy, didn’t know what apps were for, and thought social media was the playground of the devil.

It was a side effect of being born to middle-aged parents. A surprise baby, she’d shown up years after they stopped trying to have kids, only for her mom to fall pregnant at the ripe age of forty-seven. Now they were

pushing seventy, and she hoped she'd get to see them again, even if it was for one last time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIX

Armed with a rough plan of action, the group dispersed, each heading off in their own direction. They decided to stay in the living room, as it was the only space that could accommodate all of them and the most practical.

Without wasting time, Keith and Jonathan gathered all the mattresses and piled them together in the center of the room. The couches formed a ring around the mattresses, making a giant bed.

Gwen fetched the mountain of magazines she had stashed away in her cupboard, tore out the glossy pages, and taped them over the windows. When she ran out, she used plastic bags until every inch of exposed glass was covered. Meanwhile, Zenelia and Stella tore through the rooms, removing all of the blankets, sheets, pillows, and bedding.

Quinn pushed the coffee table into a corner and topped it with all the food and drink she could salvage from the kitchen. She then filled all the empty bottles and containers with water, reckoning that the pipes would burst once the flash freeze hit, leaving them without working plumbing.

“You should leave the taps running a little,” Keith suggested. “It’ll delay the process. Running water doesn’t freeze as quickly.”

“That’s smart,” Quinn said, impressed despite herself. She’d never thought of Keith as very bright, viewing him as the spoiled rich kid whose dad paid for everything.

“What about the other dorms?” Jonathan asked. “We should warn them.”

“Stella and Zenelia are on that,” Quinn said, “but I thought we could use Keith’s truck to take a drive around the campus and see if anyone needs help.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?” Keith asked. “We could freeze to death.”

“Not if we’re prepared,” Quinn said. “Dress as warmly as possible. Lots and lots of layers.”

“Yeah, but Keith and I don’t have any clothes here,” Jonathan said, pointing at his t-shirt and boxers.

“We’ll make a plan,” Quinn said, and she was true to her word. “Ladies! Who has some old clothes they can donate?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Jonathan said.

“Not even a little,” Quinn said, suppressing a grin. “Cheer up. If everything goes well, we’ll swing by your dorm first, and you can pack a bag.”

“Thank God.”

“What about me?” Keith asked. “I can’t go home.”

“I’ll lend you some of my clothes,” Jonathan said.

“Thanks.”

“Now, let’s get this show on the road,” Quinn said, leading the way.

Several minutes later, the three of them were back in the kitchen, dressed in as many layers as they could manage.

Quinn was lucky. Thanks to a skiing trip in the Drakensberg one winter, she possessed cold-weather gear and wore thermal underwear, pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a puffer jacket. Boots, gloves, a beanie, and a scarf rounded out the outfit. The boys weren’t quite so fortunate.

“That pink dress really makes your eyes pop,” Keith joked, surveying Jonathan from head to toe.

“Shut up,” Jonathan replied. “At least I’m not wearing a red silk nightie under my jacket.”

“You were not supposed to see that,” Keith said, tucking the crimson hem back into his pants.

“Come on, guys. Enough joking around,” Quinn said. “We need to get moving. The flash freeze could hit at any moment.”

With that sobering thought, they faced the door and prepared to exit, but Zenelia stopped them. “Are you sure this is a good idea? We’ve already warned everyone we could. Shouldn’t you stay inside where it’s safe?”

“We’ll be careful, Zee. I promise,” Quinn said.

“Yeah, we’ll be right back. I promise,” Keith added, leaning in for a quick kiss.

“Alright, but be careful,” Zenelia said, stepping back.

Squaring her shoulders, Quinn reached for the door. She knew all hell would break loose when she opened it, but she wasn’t expecting the tempest that nearly blasted her off her feet.

“Crap on a cracker,” Quinn yelled, but the wind whipped the words from her lips. Leaning into the storm, she forced herself to take the first

step, her head and shoulders bowed. “Let’s go, guys.”

She set her sights on the waiting truck, its headlights like twin beacons in the night. Jonathan and Keith were right behind her, their presence the only solid thing in a swirling white world. Fighting her way forward, she finally reached the vehicle and slid inside, the leather seats like ice beneath her touch.

Keith and Jonathan followed, sandwiching her between them. They closed the doors, blocking out the violent storm, and Keith immediately cranked up the heat. Warm air flooded the cab. That, coupled with their padded clothes, was enough to block the worst of the cold, and her shivering abated.

“Oh, thank God,” Quinn said, holding her hands up to the vent.

“You can be glad you left the motor running,” Jonathan said. “Or the fuel would’ve frozen by now.”

“That’s true, but I didn’t have a full tank to begin with,” Keith said, frowning at the fuel gauge. “This is going to be one short ride.”

“We’d better get going then,” Quinn said. “Let’s head to Jonathan’s dorm first.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Keith said, shifting the double cab into gear.

He drove along the tarred roads of the campus, mainly navigating by memory and the faint light cast by the lampposts.

Quinn stared at the passing buildings, lights twinkling through the windows. Knowing they weren’t alone was comforting, but she wondered how long that would last. How many would still be standing when the freeze was over? She could only hope that Stella and Zenelia’s efforts to warn them had borne fruit.

“Do you think they’ll be okay?” she asked.

“I hope so,” Jonathan replied, knowing instinctively what she was asking. He placed his arm around her and drew her close, and she allowed the warm comfort to wash over her. Her eyes drifted shut, and she dozed off, pulled into a deep undercurrent of dreams.

It didn’t last very long.

“Wake up. We’re here,” Jonathan said, nudging her awake.

“Huh?” she muttered, blinking at the dark building ahead.

“We’re here,” Jonathan repeated.

“Um, okay,” she said, gathering her scattered thoughts.

“Am I going in alone?”

“No, I’m going with you,” Quinn said.

“Are you sure? We don’t know what’s waiting in there.”

“I’m sure.”

“What about me?” Keith asked.

“Stay with the truck. We might need to leave in a hurry, so keep the engine running.”

“Will do, but be careful,” he said before rummaging in the cubbyhole and handing her a flashlight. “And take this.”

“Thanks.”

With those parting words, Quinn and Jonathan braved the elements once more. The wind tugged at their jackets, but they pressed onward, the ice crunching beneath their boots.

After what felt like hours, they arrived at the dormitory. The building loomed out of the blizzard like a silent monolith, dark and ominous. They pushed through the kitchen door and stepped inside, instantly swallowed up by an eerie silence. Even the storm quieted, pulling back to a safe distance. The air felt empty, bereft of human warmth and comfort.

Jonathan flicked the light switch a couple of times but to no avail. “Power’s out,” he said unnecessarily, his voice echoing in the shadowy space.

“I can see that,” Quinn replied. She took out the flashlight and pointed the beam around the kitchen. “Where is everyone?”

“Good question,” Jonathan said, looking around. “But let me check the breakers first. Maybe one of the plugs tripped.”

He rummaged inside one of the cupboards, flipping switches on the DB Board until the lights flickered on overhead.

“That’s better,” Quinn muttered. The light revealed a kitchen piled high with snow and sleet, with ice glittering on the countertops.

“I’ll check the rooms. You wait here,” Jonathan said.

“Hurry,” Quinn added, feeling weirdly out of place. Where was everyone? And why had they left the place open? It felt like a graveyard, and she wanted out. “Hurry, Jon.”

Shifting from one foot to the other, she waited. The seconds turned into minutes, and her impatience grew. A blast on the horn told her Keith was also getting worried, so she stepped outside and waved at him.

“Jonathan! Where are you?” she called when she went back inside.

Silence.

“Jon?”

When she still didn’t get an answer, she decided to investigate and moved deeper into the dorm. The living room was empty, but the hallway beckoned.

A cold dread pooled in Quinn’s stomach as she nudged open the first bedroom door. It swung inward with a low creak, revealing nothing but a deserted room covered in frost. Not a whisper of life. She moved to the next and the next. Again, nothing but chilling emptiness.

As she approached the fourth door, she hesitated. Finally, she nudged it open with her foot, and it swung wide. A student lay stretched out on his bed, discarded beer cans scattered all over the floor. His blank eyes stared into space, and his lips were tinged with blue.

“Oh, my God,” Quinn gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. She stared at the frozen student with horror. He didn’t seem human anymore, which bothered her more than anything else.

“It’s too late for him. I already checked for a pulse,” Jonathan said, appearing behind her.

Quinn opened her mouth but couldn’t find any words.

“Are you okay?”

Struck dumb, she shook her head.

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“Who was he?”

“His name was Henry,” Jonathan said.

“What happened to him?”

“I’m not sure, but it looks like he was having a party and passed out.”

“Passed out?” Quinn looked from the body to the discarded beer cans. It made sense. What didn’t make sense was the lack of other people in the dorm room. “Where are the others?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they found him like this and went looking for help,” Jonathan reasoned.

“Leaving the place open?”

“Anything’s possible. Especially if you’re in a panic.”

“I can’t believe this is really happening,” Quinn whispered.

“It’s awful, I know,” Jonathan said. “But there’s nothing we can do for him now.”

“Alright,” she said, allowing him to lead her away from the scene. The hallway seemed narrower the second time around, its walls closing in from

every side. She exited the dorm with relief, glad to leave it behind, but the world outside felt different now.

Outside, the world felt alien. The snow whistled around them, keening a lament for the lost. They trudged back to the truck, their feet like lead.

Inside the truck, Quinn shared what they had found with Keith. His face drained of color. “God help us.”

“Let’s head back. The storm’s getting worse, and I got what I needed,” Jonathan said.

“Alright,” Keith said.

The drive back was a blur, and Quinn was glad when they returned. Every time she closed her eyes, the stark image of Henry’s frozen body rose to haunt her.

Keith parked the truck in the driveway, killing the engine this time. “Home, sweet home.”

“Won’t the fuel freeze?” Quinn asked.

“It doesn’t matter. There’s not enough of it left anyway.”

They climbed out of the truck and forged a path through the thickening snow, each step a battle. The icy temperatures leached the warmth from their bones, cutting through the many layers of their clothes like it was nothing.

Quinn had the easiest time with her cold-weather gear, but even she felt the effects. Within seconds, her feet grew numb, and the exposed skin on her face prickled and burned.

She picked up the pace, realizing that their time was up. The freeze was upon them, and they had better get inside before they paid with their lives. “Hurry!”

Together, they ran toward the door and stumbled inside. Gwen waited for them in the kitchen, her expression pinched. “Are you guys okay? Did you see anyone out there?”

Quinn exchanged looks with Keith and Jonathan before shaking her head. “No, we didn’t see anyone.”

“Oh, good. Now come inside. We’ve got everything set up,” Gwen said, leading the way.

Ten minutes later, they huddled together on their makeshift bed, sharing snacks and drinks to keep up their energy. Heaters warmed the space, and candles, gas heaters, and flashlights were on standby in case the power went out.

“Do you think we’ll be okay?” Gwen asked, staring at the TV screen flickering above their heads. Scenes from around the world played on a loop, portraying one disaster after another. Nowhere seemed to be safe.

“We’ve done everything we can,” Quinn assured her. She rechecked her phone on autopilot, but there was still no signal. The screen remained dark, with no messages from her parents. *Mom… Dad… Please be okay. I don’t know what I’d do without you.*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVEN

NOLAN

Once Nolan convinced his father of the situation's urgency, it was all hands on deck. There was a lot to do, and very little time left. The next few hours passed in a blur of activity. While John gathered the farm workers for an emergency meeting, Nolan unloaded the truck, mentally cataloging what else they would need, while his mother emptied the closets of bedding and blankets.

The impromptu meeting with the workers delivered swift results. Only one of them elected to stay: Old Joseph, who'd been there since before Nolan was born and knew no other home. The rest had family and wanted to go home. Nolan was sad to see them go. Many had worked on the farm for years, but he understood their reasons.

After paying their wages, John gave them a lift to town in the truck, waving to Nolan through the window. "I'll be back after picking up a few more things and spreading the word."

"Do you think anyone will believe you?" Nolan asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. But I have to try. These are our friends. We're a community, and we stick together."

"The old Royal Hotel is the best place in town for people to hole up. It's solid, and most of the rooms have fireplaces in them."

"I'll stop there and speak to Nico, the owner. He's a reasonable man, and I'm sure he'd open his doors to those in need," John added.

"Good luck," Nolan said, waving him off.

The Ford groaned and sputtered as it took off, heavily laden with the workers and their belongings.

Once they were gone, Nolan headed into the house to check on his mom. He found her in the kitchen, her back turned to him as she methodically pulled jars and cans from the pantry shelves, arranging them on the counter in neat rows. A notepad beside her was filling with tallies and notations.

“Yes, I know. I can’t believe it either. An ice age?” she said, phone pressed between her ear and shoulder as she worked. “But it’s all over the news, so…” She paused, listening intently. “Exactly. Better safe than sorry.”

She glanced at Nolan and motioned to him to wait. “Have you spoken to Quinn yet? No? You should call her and tell her to stay warm and indoors.” She listened for a few more seconds before nodding. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. It’s the city, after all. The government probably has tons of systems in place for emergencies like this.”

Nolan raised an eyebrow. He did not share his mother’s trust in the powers that be, and seriously doubted they’d get their heads out of their asses long enough to notice what was going on, let alone do anything about it. He did not interrupt, though, leaning against the doorjamb while his mom worked.

At fifty-one, Ella Van Wyk moved with the energy of someone half her age. Bright and smiling, she carried laughter and cheer wherever she went, the opposite of his father. They made a great team. Their differences complemented each other, and the marriage was happy, the kind he hoped to have one day.

When she finally hung up, Nolan cleared his throat. “How are the Le Roux’s doing?”

Ella turned, a smile softening her features. “They’re fine, but finding it hard to believe the news. Can’t blame them, really. I did my best to convince them, though.”

“And Quinn? Any word from her?” Nolan tried to keep his voice casual, but his mother wasn’t fooled. “I don’t know, dear.” She gave him a pointed look. “You could try calling her yourself, you know.”

“I know,” Nolan mumbled, looking down at his boots. “I’ll do it later.”

“Mmm,” Ella hummed, turning back to her inventory. “Such a shame. You two were always so close. I still don’t understand why you never—”

“Mom,” Nolan cut her off, his cheeks warming. “Not now.”

“I’m just saying, a smart, pretty girl like that doesn’t stay single forever.”

“She’s at university, Mom. She’s focused on her studies.”

“And what’s your excuse?” Ella asked, the hint of a smile playing at her lips.

Nolan shook his head, changing the subject. “What can I do to help?”

His mother’s expression grew serious again. “I put all the bedding and blankets I could find in the living room. With the extra blankets you brought, it should be enough, but we’ll need wood for the fireplace.”

“I’ll chop some now,” Nolan said, grateful for the excuse to escape. “Dad’s gone to town to spread the word and pick up more supplies.”

“Good,” Ella nodded. “I’ll finish up here.” As Nolan turned to leave, she added, “And Nolan? You really should call Quinn. If this is as bad as that climatologist says, who knows when you’ll get another chance?”

Nolan nodded, unable to argue with her logic. “I’ll do it as soon as I’ve cut the wood,” he promised.

Outside, the sun continued its relentless assault as Nolan went to the woodshed. The old ax felt familiar in his hands, its wooden handle smooth from years of use. He set up a log on the chopping block and swung, the satisfying crack as the wood split providing a momentary release for his tension.

His thoughts drifted to Quinn as he worked. They’d grown up together, children of neighboring farms, always in each other’s orbit. They’d been inseparable as kids, climbing trees, swimming in the irrigation dam and river, running across the valley, causing all sorts of mischief. But in high school, something changed. Or rather, something grew between them, unspoken but undeniable.

Then came the harvest festival, and everything changed. The memory of their kiss under the string lights, the taste of wine on her lips, the way she’d looked at him with something like wonder in her eyes.

Afterward, he’d asked her to the Matric Farewell, and she’d accepted. They became a couple, and for a brief time, everything was perfect. Then it was over, and he was on his way to college.

“It’s just a couple of years,” she’d said. “We can make it work.”

But he’d pulled back and told her to focus on herself. She had her own dreams and ambitions, and he didn’t want to stand in the way.

By the time he returned, she was studying at Stellenbosch, and he hardly ever got to see her. Now, with the world apparently ending, he wondered if he’d been a fool. His mom certainly thought so.

Shaking his head, Nolan shook off the thought and redoubled his efforts, splitting wood until his arms ached and his back screamed in protest. When he finally stopped, the pile was high enough to last them

several days. He loaded as much as he could onto a wheelbarrow and pushed it toward the house.

Joseph waited for him on the porch with a couple of bags containing his personal belongings, clothes, and bedding.

“Joseph,” Nolan nodded, setting down the wheelbarrow. “So, you decided to stay?”

Joseph nodded. “This is my home. Where else would I go?”

“Well, I’m glad to have you,” Nolan said. “Let’s get this wood inside.”

“Yes, Boss,” Joseph said and got to work. Halfway through, he asked, “Do you really think it will snow?”

Nolan hesitated, then nodded. “According to the scientist I met in town, yes.”

“I’ve never seen snow,” Joseph admitted. “Not in real life.”

“Well,” Nolan said grimly, “it looks like we’re about to see plenty of it.”

After moving and stacking the wood beside the fireplace, they prepped the fireplace and set up heaters throughout the house, both gas and electric. They also charged any solar lights, checked that the solar panels on the roof were securely bolted in place, and covered the water tank and pump with tarpaulin, nailing the edges deep into the ground.

After that, they covered any exposed water pipes with netting, hoping to prevent them from bursting. They used the remaining shade netting to cover the windows from the outside, bolting it into place against the walls.

His mother complained at first, saying that it made the house feel like a cave, but Nolan persisted. It would help keep the heat inside, and that was all that mattered.

Next, they collected shovels, a toolbox, rope, and other odds and ends and placed them on the porch for easy access. Nolan thought it would be better to have the supplies on hand than to try to wade through the snow to get to the barn or storage rooms.

For that same reason, he parked his mom’s car and his dad’s second truck, a much newer model, right in front of the house.

Finally, they built a stand from wooden pallets inside the covered patio off the living room, covered it with newspaper, and placed the chicken coop on top. The pampered birds got their own gas heater, and their cage was covered by a couple of old blankets they found in the barn. They put down a thick layer of straw inside, and Nolan hoped the feathered creatures would survive the storm.

They didn’t have any other animals on the farm. There used to be milk cows, goats, and pigs, but the animals required a lot of upkeep, and over the years, they’d sold them off.

Now, he was grateful for the lack of livestock, trying to envision what they’d have done with all the animals. It was one less thing to worry about, and he wondered how the other farmers in the area were coping. His mom had done a good job of phoning them all, and he hoped they’d listened, no matter how far-fetched the story. *Guess we’ll find out soon enough.*

By the time his father returned from town, they were almost done. Johan thoroughly inspected their handiwork before nodding with approval. “Good work, everyone.”

“Thanks,” Nolan said, grimacing as a sharp pain shot through his lower back. “What did you get in town?”

“More blankets, food, bottled water, another first-aid kit, gas canisters, and fuel for the generator,” Johan said. “I also tried to warn as many folks as I could.”

“Did anyone listen?” Nolan asked.

“Nico did. He said he’d get the hotel sorted out, and anyone’s welcome to ride out the storm there. He said he’ll put out the word.”

“I suppose that’s the best we can ask for,” Nolan said.

“Uh-huh. Let’s finish up. It’s getting late,” Johan said, heading outside.

“Coming,” Nolan called, following.

After they’d unloaded the truck, Nolan joined his mother in the kitchen. She’d stored the extra food and bottled water in the pantry and was busy making a big pot of bean soup. The rich, hearty aroma reminded him how hungry he was, and his mouth watered.

“It’s almost done,” Ella said, slapping his hand.

“Mom,” he groaned. “I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Here, have an apple,” she said, shoving the fruit into his hand.

He sighed, staring at the unappetizing object, but soon forgot about his empty belly when he noticed the pinched look in his mother’s eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m worried about Giselle.”

“Have you tried calling her?”

“Several times,” Ella replied, her voice tight. “The lines are down. I’m sure she’s fine, though. That architectural firm of hers is in one of those modern buildings. They’ll have heating.”

Nolan wasn’t so sure. Buildings in South Africa weren’t designed for extreme cold. However, he kept his doubts to himself, not wanting to add to his mother’s fears. He pulled his phone from his pocket and tried his sister first, but there was no answer. Her work number sounded busy, and her cell phone went straight to voicemail. Next, he tried Quinn and got the same results. “Damn it, Giselle. Quinn. Where are you? Are you okay?”

Suddenly, his phone pinged. He checked the screen and saw a news alert: “CAPE TOWN UNDER EMERGENCY MEASURES AS TEMPERATURES PLUMMET.”

Ice flooded his veins when he realized what it meant. The cold was here, and everything he’d seen on TV, everything Samuel had told him, was true. A new ice age was coming, and there was no stopping it now.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tucked underneath a pile of blankets, Quinn tried to stay awake, but after a few minutes, her eyelids grew heavy. Exhaustion tugged at her mind, and her body melted into the cushions. She drifted off to sleep, the drone of the news on the TV a dull murmur in her ears.

Several hours later, she jerked awake with a start. Something was wrong, but she couldn't figure out what. She looked around, but everything seemed normal. The lights shone, the TV was on, and the storm raged unabated outside their walls.

Then she noticed the bitter cold. Her breath puffed out in a cloud of white, and she couldn't feel her hands or feet. Shivers wracked her spine, and her teeth chattered in her mouth.

"Jonathan," she hissed, shaking him awake.

"What?" he mumbled, blinking at her.

"Something's wrong."

"What do you mean?" he asked, struggling upright.

"The freeze. I think it's here."

"Shit."

Suddenly, the lights went out. The TV shut down, and the glow from the heaters faded into nothingness. Darkness closed around them, its touch cold and hungry.

"Where are the flashlights?" Quinn said, feeling around.

"Over here," Keith said, woken up by the ruckus. He handed her and Jonathan each a light and took one for himself.

"Quinn switched hers on, and the yellow beam cut through the darkness.

"What's with all the yelling?" Stella complained, stirring in her nest.

"Yeah, what's happening?" Gwen asked.

"The power's out."

"What?" Zenelia asked, looking befuddled.

"There's no electricity," Quinn said.

"Are we going to freeze to death?" Gwen asked, shivering.

“No, we’re not.”

“But it’s so cold!”

“We’ll fix it,” Quinn said. “No one’s dying today, I promise.”

“Should we check the breakers?” Keith asked.

“We might as well,” Jonathan agreed.

“I’ll come with you,” Quinn said, handing Stella an extra flashlight.

Together, they went to the kitchen and checked the DB Board, but it was as dead as a doornail. A thin film of frost covered the panel and walls, and a quick look through the windows showed them a campus swallowed whole by the night.

“It’s useless, guys,” Quinn said.

“Time to switch to gas,” Jonathan said.

“I guess so,” Quinn replied, returning to the living room.

“No luck?” Stella asked.

“Sorry,” Quinn replied, reaching for the nearest gas heater. She switched it on and lit the bars. Flames burst forth, and she increased the volume until it burned at a steady rate.

The others followed her example, and soon, a circle of fire burned around the room. The relief was instantaneous, and the cold retreated to the far corners.

But Quinn knew it was only temporary. The gas would run out eventually, and with it, the heat. She could only hope it would last long enough for them to get through the night. “Okay, let’s huddle up for body warmth. I have a feeling we’re going to need it.”

They crammed onto the bed, squeezing into the small space like sardines in a can. Drawing strength from each other, they braced themselves for the long night ahead. Outside, the storm grew stronger, swallowing everything in its path with insatiable hunger. The building groaned, protesting the abuse while the snow fell in droves.

Quinn watched with horror as frost crept along the walls, floors, and ceiling, spidery lines of white crawling across the surfaces.

“Jeez,” Gwen said, her lips tinged blue.

“It’s just a storm,” Zenelia murmured repeatedly as if to convince herself.

Stella didn’t say anything at all. She rocked back and forth on the spot, staring at her nails.

Quinn felt sorry for them, but there was nothing she could do about it. Leaning closer, she said, “I hate this. I feel so helpless, and I keep seeing… I keep seeing Henry.”

Jonathan nodded. “Me too.”

“What if we end up like that?”

“We won’t,” Jonathan said, though he didn’t sound convinced.

“But—”

“Try to get some sleep,” Jonathan said.

“I can’t.”

“Just try.”

Swallowing a sigh, Quinn lay down, almost buried underneath a pile of blankets. Closing her eyes, she waited for something to happen. For the gas to run out or the freeze to get worse. For the frost to reach them or for the storm to rip off the roof. It seemed like every time she let her guard down, the shit hit the fan.

This time, however, it didn’t. As the minutes ticked by, the beleaguered gas heaters slowly won the battle, keeping the frost at bay. Their combined body heat pooled together, creating a warm and toasty bed.

We might actually make it through this, Quinn realized with surprise. Immediately, she thought about her parents and wondered if they were still alive. But the thought that they might not be alright was too much to bear. Of course, they were okay. They had to be. Reassured, she drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep, mercifully devoid of Henry’s lifeless gaze and blue lips.

While she slept, the storm outside continued to rage, pelting the dorm with snow and ice. Lightning cracked overhead, brilliant flashes forking across the sky while thunder rumbled through the atmosphere. The wind screamed across the campus grounds, flattening the trees and plucking roof tiles off the buildings.

Quinn listened to it all while drifting in and out of sleep, her head tucked into the hollow of Jonathan’s chest, finding comfort in the steady beat of his heart.

Finally, dawn came, and with it, a cessation of hostilities. The storm broke, the howling winds and thunderous clouds giving way to a weak and watery sun. The cold abated, and rising temperatures indicated that the worst was over. The sound of water dripping from the eaves and gutters

replaced the previous creaking and groaning, and the walls grew damp from the melting frost.

It took Quinn a while to realize it was over, and when she did, she almost couldn't believe it. Disentangling herself from Jonathan on the one side and Gwen on the other, she eased out from underneath the blankets and padded toward the bathroom. Her bladder was screaming for relief and could be ignored no longer.

Along the way, she checked their rooms, surprised to find everything intact. She'd almost expected half of the dorm to be missing, blown away during the night. But it wasn't, and the sight of her room, looking like it always did except for the stripped bed, felt alien and out of place.

I've changed, Quinn realized, shocked by how quickly it happened. In one night, she'd gone from a carefree student to a survivor facing the end of the world as she knew it. *It's all gone now*. *The vineyards*, *the farm*, *my future*. *All gone*.

Shutting the bathroom door behind her, she used the toilet. Afterward, she tried to flush, but no water came out. As expected, the pipes had frozen over and burst during the night, leaving them without working plumbing.

Thankfully, she'd filled the bath to the brim, anticipating the emergency. Breaking the film of ice on top, she dipped the bucket into the water and used it to flush. Next, she filled the washbasin, using it to wash up and brush her teeth. Still dressed in her cold-weather gear, she headed back to the kitchen. "Right, let's see what the damage is."

Along the way, she stopped by the living room but found everyone still fast asleep. She briefly considered waking Jonathan and Keith, but decided against it. They needed their sleep, and she wasn't going far.

Quinn walked up to the kitchen door and tried to turn the handle. Her blood froze when it wouldn't budge. She tried repeatedly, but nothing happened, and panic set in. Bracing one foot against the doorjamb, she pulled with all her might. The door, swollen with icy sleet, gave way with a sudden jerk, and she found herself face-to-face with a wall of snow.

"Holy shit," she muttered, eyeing the solid block that filled the opening from top to bottom. "We're snowed in!"

Raising one hand, she hit it with her fist and got zero results. It was as good as beating a chunk of concrete with a wet sock.

"Oh, no," Quinn said, casting around for a solution. She wasn't spending one second longer than she had to inside the stuffy dorm. She

wanted out, and she wanted out now.

Looking around, she spotted a cast-iron pan resting on the stovetop and snatched it up along with a roasting fork from the bottom drawer. It used to belong to her mom, and she silently apologized for the utensil's destruction. She attacked the barrier with the fork in one hand and the pan in the other. Chunks of ice and snow flew in all directions, but she kept digging until the first ray of sunlight broke through the top. "Yes!"

Quinn swung the pan again, enlarging the hole. A cold breeze whipped through the opening, but she didn't care. It smelled fresh and clean, unlike the stuffy air inside the dorm. It spoke of nature and wide-open spaces, precisely what she needed after the storm.

The instant the hole was big enough for her to fit, she tossed aside the bent fork and battered pan. Then, she threw her body into the opening and forced her way to the top. Finally, she burst into the open, emerging into a world devoid of all familiarity.

Everywhere she looked, she saw nothing but white. Every surface was covered in a thick layer of snow—the cars, trees, buildings, park benches, and lamp posts. Nothing had escaped the icy touch of the blizzard.

To Quinn's relief, though, it wasn't quite as deep as she'd feared. The wind had blown the snow up against the dorm until it blocked the door, but judging by the rest of the campus, it was only about two or three feet thick.

Sucking in a deep breath, she decided to explore. Maybe she could find a security guard or a professor—anyone who could tell them what to do now that the storm was over. Surely the government had to have a plan. The entire civilized world couldn't be gone.

Spurred onward by hope, she launched forward but soon realized she was not equipped for the new terrain. It felt like she was moving through quicksand, each step harder than the last. The fine, powdery snow clung to her limbs and hampered her movements. Soon, she was exhausted and out of breath, her heart hammered in her chest. "Holy crap, this is hard work."

Finally, Quinn admitted defeat and turned back to the dorm. She'd have to come up with a different plan of action. One that didn't involve suicide. "There has to be a way."

Stomping through the snow, she'd almost made it back when her foot hit something hard. She stopped and leaned forward, trying to get a closer look. Something was buried in the snow, but she couldn't quite make out

what it was. Brushing one hand across the surface, she squinted at the object. “What is that?”

Quinn brushed away another layer of frost, her gloved hand skimming across the surface of…

“Oh, my God!” Quinn cried, jerking her hand away. She stumbled backward and fell, sinking deep into the snow. Trapped, she fought to free herself from her prison of ice but only succeeded in making it worse. “Let me out. Let me out!”

“Quinn?” Jonathan yelled, drowning out her cries. “What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

“Jon? Is that you?” Quinn asked.

“Yes, it’s me. Why are you screaming?”

“Screaming?” Quinn asked, puzzled.

“Like a banshee. Didn’t you notice?”

“No, not really,” Quinn said, dashing away sudden tears.

“Hold on. I’m coming to you,” Jonathan said, climbing through the tunnel she’d made earlier.

“Be careful,” Quinn said, pointing at the object that triggered her meltdown.

Jonathan frowned and moved closer. He squatted down to examine the object, then jumped up and backed away. “Oh, man! Is that a security guard?”

Quinn nodded, unable to voice the words. Her eyes remained fixed on the man’s face, his expression one of frozen terror. She wondered what his last moments were like, then decided she didn’t want to know.

“Come on. Let me help you up,” Jonathan said at last, reaching out with one hand.

Quinn pulled herself up and out of the snow, grateful for the assistance. After dusting herself off, she looked at the dead security guard, suppressing a shudder. “What do we do about him?”

“I don’t know. There’s not much we can do,” Jonathan said. “It’s not like we can bury him.”

“But he’s right there by the entrance,” Quinn protested. Somehow, the idea that a corpse lay buried next to their kitchen door freaked her out.

“Keith and I will move him, okay?” Jonathan said.

“Okay,” Quinn said, giving the guard a wide berth.

After a brief scramble and a short slide, she was back inside the dorm. She peeled off her wet clothes and wondered what awaited them outside Minerva’s walls. While it had been a safe haven until now, she had a feeling that things were about to change.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINE

Quinn walked into the living room, still shaken by her discovery outside, but there was little time to dwell on it. The scene inside was one of dejection, with everyone sitting and staring at their phones' blank screens.

The only one who showed any signs of life was Gwen. She poured water into a camping kettle and heated the water with a gas heater. It wasn't efficient, but judging by the steam rising from the kettle, it did the job.

"Quinn," Gwen called out the instant she entered. "Where have you been? We were worried sick!"

All eyes turned to her with a mixture of relief and curiosity.

"I went outside," Quinn said, reluctant to tell them what she'd seen. It would only spoil the mood further.

"Outside?" Keith asked, straightening up. "Why would you do that?"

"I wanted to see what it was like after the storm," Quinn replied.

"And?" Stella prompted, a hint of her usual impatience breaking through her apathy.

"It's bad. Everything's covered in snow, and…" Quinn hesitated, swallowing hard.

"What's wrong?" Gwen asked.

"I found a security guard, or… his body."

The room fell silent.

"Where?" Keith asked.

"Right outside our door."

"Jeez, do you think he was checking up on us?" Gwen cried. "That would mean it's our fault he died."

"That's awful," Zenelia said, her cheeks turning pale.

"It's not our fault," Jonathan said. "We couldn't have known he was out there. Did anyone hear him knock?"

"Well, no, but—" Gwen said.

"No buts. It's going to be hard enough to survive without claiming the blame for every death we come across," Jonathan said, his tone brooking no

argument.

“He’s right,” Quinn added, realizing the value in his argument. “No use in feeling guilty for something we didn’t do.”

“If you say so,” Zenelia said, looking slightly relieved.

“I guess,” Gwen added, though she didn’t sound too certain.

“The real question is, what do we do now?” Stella said, looking around the group. Her eyes came to rest on Quinn, her manner expectant.

Quinn looked around, realizing that everyone was looking at her, and it caught her off guard. While she’d taken the lead a few times, she didn’t consider herself their leader. *Why me? Why not Jonathan?*

The silence stretched on, and she understood that they’d chosen her, whether she liked it or not, and she’d better step up to the plate. “Um, what do we do now?”

“Uh-huh,” Stella said, one foot tapping on the floor.

“Now, we sit down, drink the coffee Gwen was kind enough to make, and come up with a plan of action,” Quinn said.

Murmurs of assent went around the room, and Gwen jumped into action, handing out mugs of the steaming hot brew. Zenelia passed around the milk and sugar, and Stella dug out a box of buttermilk rusks.

Once everyone had settled down, Quinn cleared her throat. “Has anyone been able to contact their families?”

Keith shook his head. “I tried, but couldn’t get through.”

“Same here,” Gwen said.

“My mom sent me an email. She’s been working nonstop since this all began,” Stella said. “She says it’s a crazy town out there. The government is trying to set up community centers for the homeless, while the rest are advised to stay indoors and ride it out.”

“Ride it out?” Quinn said with a snort. “This is not going to blow over.”

“I told her as much,” Stella said, looking glum.

“Does she know anything else?” Quinn asked.

“No, she doesn’t. She just told me to stay inside where it’s safe and keep warm.”

“Crap,” Quinn muttered. “Zenelia?”

“I got through earlier, but nothing since. They’re safe, for now,” Zenelia said. “They went to my dad’s country lodge, hoping to ride it out.”

“I can’t get hold of my folks, either,” Quinn said, feeling despondent. She shoved the feeling aside and focused on the present. “What we need is

information. Right now, we're flying blind, and that's no good at all."

"Yeah, but without power, that's going to be hard," Jonathan said. "No TV. No Internet. No cell service."

"I've got a generator back at my place," Keith said.

"You do?" Quinn said.

"My dad had it installed to combat the load-shedding. There's a solar panel system too. Enough to keep the fridges and freezers running for a while."

"So you've got food?" Gwen asked. "Like real food? Not just cereal and rusks?"

"Of course," Keith said. "Lots of booze, too."

Stella rolled her eyes. "Go figure."

"Water?" Jonathan asked.

"There's plenty of the bottled stuff," Keith said with a shrug. "The geyser and stove run on gas, if that helps."

"It does," Quinn said.

"What about camping stuff? And cold weather gear?" Quinn asked.

"Err, nothing like that. I'm not much of a camper," Keith said. "More of a lover," he added, bumping his shoulder against Zenelia's.

"Oh, my God. Get a room," Stella said with a snort.

"Jealous, Stella?" Zenelia said, but her tone was good-natured.

"Not over him," Stella replied, a smile tugging at her lips. "Too pretty with nothing going on upstairs."

"Hey," Keith exclaimed. "I'm not just a pretty face."

"We know, Keith. You throw a good party, too," Quinn said, laughing despite the anxiety that churned in her stomach.

"See? She knows what I'm talking about," Keith said with a broad smile.

"Well, it sounds like your place is our best bet for now," Quinn said once the laughter died down.

"I just don't know how we're getting there," Keith said. "My truck's empty, and it'll be a bitch to start anyway. The engine's probably all frozen up."

"We'll have to walk," Quinn said.

"Walk? Are you crazy?" Zenelia cried.

"We could always stay here. Look for other students. Wait for someone to come save us."

“Wouldn’t that be safer?” Gwen asked. “I mean, someone is bound to come. We can’t be the only students trapped here.”

“Maybe, but think about it, guys,” Quinn said. “It could be days or even weeks before anyone comes. Thousands are dead, trapped, or stranded. There’s no electricity or running water, and the roads are snowed shut.”

“That means no deliveries,” Jonathan said.

“Deliveries?” Gwen asked.

“Food, fuel, medicine. Everything we’re used to buying in shops,” Jonathan replied.

“And once people realize there’s nothing to eat, all hell will break loose,” Quinn said.

“It’ll be safer at my place. At least it has walls and security gates,” Keith said, looking around.

Zenelia sighed. “Fine. You make a good point, but walking?”

“We’ll need snowshoes,” Quinn said. “Does anyone here play tennis?”

“Not tennis, but I used to play squash,” Stella said.

“Do you have two rackets?”

“You’re in luck. They’re on top of my cupboard.”

“Good. We can use them to fashion a pair of snow shoes.”

“Only one pair?” Gwen asked.

“The person in the lead can break the trail for the rest of us,” Quinn explained. “It’ll be hard work, but we can take turns.”

“You really think we can make it?” Zenelia asked.

“Yes, but we should leave soon. If we hurry, we can make it before nightfall.”

“Yeah, I do not want to get caught out there at night,” Jonathan said with an exaggerated shiver.

“So, are we all agreed? We head to Keith’s house and work things out from there?” Quinn asked.

“I’m in. Beats sitting around here,” Stella said.

“Me too,” Gwen said.

“I’m sticking with Keith,” Zenelia said.

“Great, it’s decided,” Quinn said. “Now, it’s not that cold outside anymore, but we’re still talking below-zero temperatures. Wear something warm and practical.” Quinn paused and shot a meaningful look at Zenelia. “I’m talking to you, Zee. No high heels. Okay?”

“Okay, fine,” Zenelia grumbled, folding her arms.

“Everyone, pack a bag and meet back here in ten minutes,” Quinn said. “The sooner we leave, the better.”

“What about weapons?” Keith asked.

“Weapons?” Quinn echoed, staring at him.

“Yeah, we don’t know what’s out there. It could be dangerous,” Keith said.

“Dangerous? Are you expecting wolves or bears?” Stella asked, her eyebrows raised.

“Haha, you are so funny,” Keith replied, pulling a face. “I mean people. Rioters. Robbers. That kind of thing.”

“Do you really think there are people like that out there?” Zenelia asked, grabbing his hand.

“I don’t know, but it’s better to be safe than sorry,” Keith said, drawing her closer. “I just want to be prepared, that’s all. Keep you safe.”

Zenelia smiled. “That’s so sweet of you.”

“Ugh, my hero,” Stella said, rolling her eyes.

“Shut up, Stella,” Zenelia said, shooting her a hostile glare.

Stella opened her mouth to reply, but thought better of it. “Sorry.”

Zenelia nodded and turned back to Keith.

Thinking fast, Quinn interjected, “Weapons, huh? I’ve got a hockey stick.”

“I play golf,” Gwen offered.

“You do?” Stella asked, sounding shocked.

Gwen raised her chin. “Yes, and I’m quite good at it too. Who wants a golf club?”

“I’ll take one,” Keith said.

“Me too,” Zee added.

“I wouldn’t say no,” Stella replied.

“I’ll take the tire iron from Keith’s truck,” Jonathan said.

“Help yourself,” Keith said, tossing him the keys.

Once the decision was made, everyone got to work. Taking turns in the bathroom, they washed up and got dressed for the hike. Jonathan and Keith excused themselves, ducking outside to remove the security guard’s corpse and enlarge the opening in the snow.

Finally, there was nothing left to do, and they gathered up in the kitchen. Quinn handed out snacks and bottled water for the road before shouldering her bag and looking around. “Is everyone ready to go?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Gwen said, her cheeks pale.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Zenelia said, forcing a bright smile that looked as fake as her nails.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Stella said, arms folded across her chest.

“I’ll take the first shift,” Keith said, showing off the squash rackets tied to his boots. He’d sawn off the handles and looked pretty ridiculous.

“I just hope those snowshoe thingies actually work,” Gwen said.

Quinn didn’t answer but silently agreed. The rackets were her idea, just like it was her idea to go to Keith’s place, and she was feeling the pressures of leadership. Everyone looked to her, and she could only pray she hadn’t made a big mistake, one that could cost them all their lives.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TEN

Keith opened the door, and a blast of arctic air whistled through the kitchen. It stole the breath from their lips, leaving them numb and silent. They bowed their heads and squinted into the light, mentally preparing themselves for the world outside.

Quinn surveyed the group, hoping they'd accounted for everything. In addition to their warm clothes, each wore a raincoat to keep dry. They'd also wrapped plastic around the tops of their shoes to keep the snow out of their socks. They wore sunglasses to protect themselves against the sun's glare, and each carried a bag with bottled water and snacks.

They weren't as fortunate as her, however. Their outfits weren't as warm, and they didn't have the correct footwear, mostly wearing sneakers, but she hoped to remedy that soon. There had to be a camping shop or other outdoorsy place nearby. They just had to find it.

Hefting the hockey stick in her hands, Quinn fell in behind Keith. Zenelia was next, followed by Gwen and Stella, while Jonathan took the rear.

"Come on, guys. Let's go," Keith said. Leaning forward, he forged a path through the snow drift, using his bulk to widen the opening.

Quinn stuck close to his heels, her eyes swiveling around. She knew they'd removed the security guard's body but still tensed when she reached the spot where he'd died. When she closed her eyes, she could see his face, a statue carved in ice. It reminded her of the dead student in Jonathan's dorm, Henry, and she wished she could erase both images from her mind. *One day. It's been one day, and already I've witnessed two deaths. Where will it end?*

Shaking her head, Quinn dismissed the memories and focused on the path ahead. She couldn't afford to dwell on such things if she wanted to make it through the day.

Placing one foot in front of the other, she doggedly followed Keith and soon emerged in the open. Huddled together, the group took in their

surroundings, shocked at the changes that occurred overnight.

The campus stretched out before them, a desolate winter wasteland. Snow blanketed everything, transforming familiar buildings into alien structures. The silence was oppressive, broken only by the crunch of their boots and their labored breathing.

“It’s so quiet,” Zenelia whispered, her voice barely audible.

Quinn nodded, unable to shake the eerie feeling. “Let’s keep moving.”

They passed the library, its windows dark and lifeless. Quinn’s heart ached, remembering the countless hours she’d spent there, lost in books and dreams of the future. Now, those dreams had been shattered.

“Look,” Jonathan hissed, pointing to a window in one of the lecture halls. A curtain twitched, then stilled.

“Someone’s in there,” Gwen said, her voice hopeful. “We should check it out.”

Keith shook his head. “We can’t stop. Besides, we don’t know if they’re friendly or not.”

“Seriously? This isn’t the dark ages, dude,” Stella said. “Those are fellow students.”

“If they were friendly, they’d have shown their faces,” Keith reasoned.

“Maybe they’re scared,” Zenelia suggested.

“Shouldn’t we take a look, at least?” Gwen pleaded. “They might need help.”

“We don’t have the time or the supplies to waste,” Keith said.

“But—”

“He’s right, Gwen. We must keep moving,” Quinn said, ending the budding argument.

“Okay,” Gwen said, though she didn’t look happy.

They pressed on and reached the exit, finding the gates abandoned. Not a soul stirred inside the security booth, its interior dark and gloomy.

As they left the campus behind, Quinn couldn’t help but wonder how many others had survived. There had to be a few. Dozens, if not hundreds. So, why was it so quiet? Why was everyone so distrusting?

Then, she glanced at the hockey stick in her hands and blushed. The other students weren’t the only ones with trust issues, and it amazed her how quickly life had changed. Now, it was everyone for himself, and strangers were the enemy.

“Oh God,” Stella gasped, stopping in her tracks.

Quinn followed her gaze to a nearby car and blanched. Through the frosted windows, she could make out two figures sitting frozen in their seats.

“Don’t look,” Quinn said, gently nudging Stella past the scene. She knew how the girl felt—the shock, horror, and disbelief. Death was usually a distant specter. Now, he was an everyday companion.

The group moved on in grim silence, the gravity of their situation weighing heavily on them. They walked for what felt like hours, briefly stopping to rest and grab a quick drink or snack.

“How much further?” Gwen asked during one such break, her teeth chattering.

Keith looked around. “We’re about halfway there.”

“Only halfway?” Zenelia said, looking close to tears.

“It feels further because we’re moving so slowly,” Keith said, squeezing Zee’s hand. “I’m sorry, babe. Just stick it out, okay?”

Zenelia sniffed, tears leaving streaks on her cheeks. “I’ll try.”

“Can’t we rest a bit longer?” Gwen asked. “My feet hurt.”

“Sorry, but we can’t stop for too long. If we do, we risk developing hypothermia,” Quinn said.

“I don’t care anymore,” Gwen yelled, throwing her hands in the air. Plonking down on a nearby bench, she folded her arms across her chest and stuck her bottom lip out.

Taken aback, Quinn blinked at Gwen, wondering what to do. It wasn’t like the girl to throw tantrums, and she could only guess at the cause. The dead bodies? The cold? The fear and uncertainty? Or all of it?

Thankfully, Jonathan rose to the occasion. He joined Gwen on the bench, his voice soft but firm. “Hey, I know this sucks. We’re all tired and scared, but we can’t stop now. We have to keep going.”

Gwen’s lip quivered. “I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” Jonathan said. “You’re stronger than you think. We all are.”

Quinn watched the exchange, her chest tight with unshed emotion. She wanted to help, but words failed her—a side effect of being raised as an only child. Instead, she rummaged in her pack and pulled out a chocolate bar.

“Here,” she said, offering it to Gwen. “The sugar will help. Eat this, and we’ll go a bit slower, okay?”

Gwen looked up, her eyes red-rimmed. After a moment's hesitation, she took the chocolate. "Thanks."

Keith shifted from one foot to the other. "We need to move. Now."

Quinn shot him a warning look. "Give her a minute."

While Gwen ate, the rest kept watch, each lost in their own thoughts.

"I don't like how quiet it is," Stella muttered, her choppy, black hair sticking out from underneath her hood.

Quinn scanned their surroundings, the eerie stillness setting her nerves on edge. "Me neither."

"Just keep an eye out for trouble," Jonathan said, gripping his tire iron.

They set off again, their pace slow but steady. The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows across the snow-covered streets. Quinn's muscles burned, and her breath came in ragged gasps. Walking through knee-deep snow was tough, and she felt sorry for Gwen. The poor girl had the shortest legs out of the group.

Keith was the worst off, though. Cutting the trail was no joke. He had to work twice as hard to forge a path through the snow, and his movements were strained, his expression pinched.

"Are you okay? Do you need a break?" Quinn asked in a low voice.

"I'm fine," he said with a grunt.

Jonathan heard and moved closer. "Let me take over for a bit."

"No, I'd rather one of us be fresh in case of trouble," Keith said, gritting his teeth.

"Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh. We're almost there anyway. My house is right around the corner."

"Really?" Gwen said, perking up.

"Yup, it's not far now."

"Thank God," Quinn said, glancing over her shoulder. The encroaching darkness was working on her nerves. She had no idea what was going on in the town, but news reports of violent riots lingered in the back of her mind. Anything was possible in this new world.

As they turned onto Keith's street, they collectively sighed with relief. The house loomed ahead, its green lawn now sparkly white. Precon walls surrounded the property, and a solid wooden gate stood sentinel in the driveway.

But relief soon turned to horror when distant gunshots reached their ears. Lights flashed in the distance, followed by moving figures, and Quinn realized that reaching Keith's house was the least of their problems. "Oh, crap. We've got trouble coming our way."

"Shit," Keith muttered, fumbling in his pocket for the keys. He found them and pushed the remote button. With a creaky groan, the wooden gate slid open. "Get inside. Now."

Quinn waved at everyone. "You heard the man. Move."

The group rushed inside, and Keith pushed the button again, closing the gate.

"I thought the power was out," Quinn asked with a frown.

"The gate motor runs on batteries," Keith explained, dropping his golf club and backpack. Pointing to the wires strung across the top of the fence and gate, he added, "So does the electric fence. We should be good for a while."

After removing his makeshift snowshoes, he locked the tracks in place, preventing the gates from opening or closing. Then he ran to the house. "Come on, you two. Let's go!"

Quinn ran after him with Jonathan close on her heels. Gwen, Zenelia, and Stella awaited them in the foyer, their eyes wide with fear.

"Lock all the doors and windows," Keith ordered. "Close the curtains, and don't let anyone see you."

Quinn followed, helping to secure each entry point. Her heart raced as shouts echoed from the street outside.

"What's happening out there?" Zenelia asked.

"I don't know," Quinn replied, peering through a gap in the curtains. "But it doesn't sound good."

Shadowy figures darted past, their forms barely visible in the fading light. More gunshots rang out, closer this time.

"Get away from the windows," Keith hissed, pulling Quinn back.

They huddled together in the center of the room, listening to the chaos unfold outside. Minutes stretched into an eternity as they waited, hardly daring to breathe. The group outside seemed to move without any real plan or foresight, breaking car windows, jumping over fences, and breaking into homes at random.

Quinn clutched her hockey stick between sweaty palms and stared at the fragile wood, aware that it was no match for a bullet. A car alarm went off

next door, and she swallowed hard, sure they were next.

She leaned closer to Jonathan, drawing on his quiet strength. While he might not look like a typical hero, he had plenty of courage, and she knew she could count on him. He met her gaze and smiled, silently telling her everything would be alright.

Suddenly, a crackling noise followed by a pained yelp filled her ears. A second and a third cry sounded, and she said, “What on earth was that?”

Keith grinned for the first time that day. “The electric fence. Someone got zapped.”

“Now, that is good news,” Quinn said, returning his smile.

“I bet they didn’t expect it to be on,” Jonathan said, crawling toward the window. He carefully peeked through a corner, and they all waited impatiently.

“Well?” Quinn prompted.

“It seems like they’re moving on,” Jonathan whispered. “They’re not very organized. Just a bunch of troublemakers with a lot of booze under the belt.”

“Aren’t they scared of the cold?” Gwen asked.

“Seems not. They’re dressed pretty warmly. Probably raided an outdoor shop,” Jonathan said, carefully moving away from the window.

Quinn absorbed the information, praying he was right. Hopefully, they’d move on rather than try to find a way around the fence, especially with night falling.

Finally, the noise faded, and she loosened her grip on the hockey stick. Flexing her cramped fingers, she said, “That was close.”

“Too close,” Jonathan agreed.

“I think they’re gone,” Gwen whispered.

“Maybe, but we need to be prepared. They might come back.”

“What for?” Zenelia asked. “They can go anywhere.”

“I’m not sure, but my best guess is that they’re looters,” Keith said, “and this is a wealthy neighborhood.”

“Looters? In this weather?”

“You’ll find opportunists everywhere,” Keith said. “This is their chance. No police. No law. No consequences.”

“Do you really believe that?” Gwen asked. “I mean, the government will fix things, won’t they? It can’t all be gone?”

“Can’t it?” Keith asked. “I may not be very smart, but I saw enough on the TV to know that this is the biggest disaster the modern world has ever seen, and it happened so quickly that no one saw it coming.”

“Even if the government does manage to rally, it’ll take months, if not years, to repair all the damage to our infrastructure,” Quinn added, her voice low. “And what about all the people who died in the freeze? Thousands, maybe millions, gone overnight.”

“So, it is the end of the world,” Gwen said.

“Maybe not the world, but it might be for us,” Jonathan said, his words ominous in the gathering darkness.

Silence fell as the group mulled over his words. It was hard to accept that the world had changed so much in such a short time, but it had. Suddenly, it was filled with dangers and obstacles, and the slightest mistake could be their last.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Once Quinn was sure the would-be looters were gone, she walked to the window and gazed at the world outside. Everything was quiet, covered in a pristine blanket of snow and ice. Not a soul stirred, and no dogs barked at the rising moon. If she didn't know better, she'd think the world had fallen into a deep, enchanted sleep.

"Are they gone?" Zenelia asked, hanging onto Keith like he was her lifeline.

"Looks like it, but they might come back," Quinn said. "We need to stay alert and keep watch."

"That's a start, but our biggest problem is guns. They're armed, and we're not," Jonathan pointed out.

"My dad has a gun safe in the basement," Keith said.

"Do you have the keys?"

"Of course," Keith said, looking around. "Who knows how to use a gun?"

"I can," Stella said. "My mom's a cop."

"A cop?" Zenelia said, eyebrows raised. "That explains it."

"Explains what?" Stella asked.

"The attitude. You're rebelling against authority."

"Oh, shut up. You don't know anything about me."

"Whose fault is that? You're pricklier than a cactus," Zenelia said, raising her chin.

"At least I'm not some blonde bimbo."

Zenelia's jaw dropped. "You did not just say that. Take it back!"

"If the shoe fits," Stella said, pursing her lips.

"As if you'd know anything about shoes," Zenelia scoffed. "Or fashion."

"I don't need to look like a Barbie doll to get validation."

"Okay. Calm down, everyone," Quinn said. "I know we're all scared and tired, but we don't have time for this."

“Fine. As long as she keeps her quasi-psychology shit to herself,” Stella said.

“Whatever,” Zenelia said.

Quinn smothered a sigh. Sometimes, keeping the peace felt like herding cats. Impossible.

Thankfully, Jonathan stepped in. “I can use a gun. My dad used to take me hunting. Gwen?”

“Sorry,” Gwen said, shaking her head.

“What about you, Quinn?”

“I can handle a gun.”

“Of course you can. Farm girl,” Keith said.

“Really?” Quinn said, shooting him a look. “I grew up on a vineyard. We grow grapes and make wine.”

“Whoops. My bad,” Keith said. “So, who taught you to shoot?”

“My uncle. He was career army.”

“Cool,” Keith said.

“What about you, Zee?” Jonathan asked.

“I’ve never touched a gun in my life,” Zenelia said with an exaggerated shudder.

“Don’t worry, babe. I can teach you,” Keith said, winking at Zenelia.

“If you think it’s best,” she said, giggling.

“What about you, Gwen? Would you like to learn?” Quinn asked.

“Sure, why not?”

“I’ll go check the safe,” Keith said.

“I’ll come with you,” Jonathan said, jumping up.

“What about us?” Gwen asked, rubbing her arms with her hands. “This house is like a freezer.”

Quinn looked around, realizing it was true. The house had stood open most of the night, and the blizzard had done its job. Frost and snow covered half of the surfaces, along with the mess left behind by the partygoers.

“Okay, let’s split up,” Quinn said. “Stella, you and Gwen clear out the snow and ice. Zenelia and I will clear out the party stuff.”

The girls nodded and got to work. Quinn and Zenelia gathered the empty bottles and cups, shoving the debris into trash bags. They tossed out paper plates, napkins, and half-eaten pizza, picked up streamers, balloons, cigarette butts, and empty vapes, amazed at the sheer amount of crap that littered the house.

“Seriously?” Zenelia said, picking up a lime green bikini top.

“She must’ve left in a hurry,” Quinn said, grinning.

“Uh-huh,” Zenelia replied, tossing the offending garment into the trash.

Stella and Gwen removed the snow and ice, wiped down the surfaces, mopped the floors, and dried the wet carpets. Afterward, they joined Quinn and Zenelia, arming themselves with industrial cleaners, plastic gloves, and masks.

“Ugh, this is disgusting,” Stella complained, washing the sticky kitchen counters.

“Try cleaning the toilets,” Zenelia muttered, looking green around the gills.

“This is insane,” Gwen muttered. “Yesterday, we were partying, and now we’re fighting for survival.”

“Welcome to the apocalypse,” Stella said dryly.

Keith and Jonathan returned, arms full of weapons cases and ammunition boxes.

“We’ve got a shotgun, two hunting rifles, and four handguns,” Keith announced. “Plus, plenty of shells and bullets.”

“That’s great,” Quinn said. “But we can get to that once we’re done cleaning. Grab a rubbish bag. This place is nasty.”

“Sorry about that. Normally, I’d have a maid service come in and clean up the place the day after a party,” Keith said, placing the guns and ammo on the kitchen counter.

“A maid service? Really?” Quinn said.

“What’s wrong with that?” Keith said, looking genuinely confused, and Quinn could only shake her head.

“What do your parents think about all of your parties?” Jonathan asked.

“They couldn’t care less,” Keith said with a shrug.

“Really?” Quinn said, surprised by the hurt in his voice.

“Yeah, they’re not even here half the time.”

“Where are they right now?”

“Somewhere in Europe, I think,” Keith said.

“You think?”

“They don’t keep me posted,” Keith said, not meeting her eyes.

“I see,” Quinn said, feeling a sudden pang of sympathy for the guy. She’d always thought he had it all. Good looks, money, influence, and charm. However, a different picture was emerging, and she suddenly longed

for her family, however ordinary they might be. *I miss you, Mom. Dad. Be safe, okay? I'll see you soon.*

Silence fell over the group as they continued their work, each lost in their own thoughts. There was still much to do, and the temperature was dropping fast.

Once they were finished inside the house, the group headed outside to clean the pool area, deck, and driveway. Keith and Jonathan stored the outdoor furniture inside the garage and inspected the solar panels.

Meanwhile, the girls cleared away the last party debris, tossed the full rubbish bags into the dumpsters outside, and locked the house for the night. Afterward, they gathered around the kitchen table and discussed their next steps.

"We've got a few hours of electricity stored in the solar batteries. Enough to run the lights and the fridges," Keith said. "After that, we'll have to switch to the generator."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Quinn said. "Not with looters running around the streets. They'll be able to see our lights for miles, and the generator is far too noisy."

Keith frowned. "Damn. I hadn't thought of that."

"So, we must sit here in the cold and darkness?" Zenelia said, sounding panicked. "I thought the whole point of coming here was that it'd be more comfortable!"

"I know, but things have changed, and there's no point crying about it. We'll have to make do with what we've got," Quinn said, growing impatient with Zenelia's theatrics.

"Why don't we pick a room, cover the windows, and sleep there using gas heaters and candles?" Jonathan suggested. "Just like we did back at the dorm."

"It's the only way we'll stay warm," Quinn agreed. "You've got gas heaters, don't you, Keith?"

"Yeah, we've got a couple stored away," Keith said.

"How about gas?"

"There's plenty. The geyser and stove run on gas, so my dad has a few extra bottles in storage. Just in case."

"What about clothes?" Stella asked. "We didn't pack much."

"You girls can check my mom's cupboard. She's got an entire walk-in closet filled with stuff," Keith said. Suddenly, his face brightened. "Wait a

minute. Right before they left, my parents hosted a winter charity drive. The donations are stored in the basement. The church was supposed to collect it next week, and I bet there's a lot we can use."

"Excellent. We should check it out," Quinn said, excited by the prospect.

Armed with flashlights, the group made their way to the basement with Keith leading the way. The stairs creaked under their feet, and the air grew colder with each step they took into the darkness.

"We'd better hurry, or we'll freeze down here," Quinn said, her breath frosting the air.

"Over there," Keith said, shining his light on several boxes and wooden pallets stacked against the wall.

They quickly opened the boxes and sorted through the contents. To their relief, they found an assortment of warm clothing, blankets, and non-perishable food items.

"This is perfect," Quinn said, holding up a thick woolen sweater. "We can layer up with these."

"It's even got the tags on," Zenelia said, marveling over a brand-new scarf, and she was right. Most of the stuff in the boxes was new. Very little was second-hand.

Once again, Quinn was amazed by how different the world looked when one had almost unlimited funds, but she was also starting to realize that money didn't always buy happiness. Not when she glimpsed the hurt and rejection Keith hid behind his uncaring facade.

"Look at this," Gwen exclaimed, pulling out a sleeping bag. "There's a whole stack of them."

"Now, that will come in useful," Quinn said, sending a silent prayer of thanks to the heavens. "And so will this," she added, counting several cases of canned spaghetti in tomato sauce. "It's not my favorite, but beggars can't be choosers."

"Speak for yourself," Jonathan said. "I love the stuff."

"That's because you never grew up."

"I'm just young at heart," Jonathan said, his lips quirking. "Unlike a certain someone who grew old way before her time."

"I did not," Quinn said, bumping him with her shoulder.

Zenelia chuckled. "He's kind of right. Sometimes, you do act like a grandma."

“Really?” Quinn said, a little hurt but also mystified. “I thought I was fun.”

“Fun? No. Serious and overly responsible? Sure,” Stella said.

Quinn was left with her jaw hanging open until Gwen came to her defense. “Cut her some slack, guys. She’s studying on a scholarship, just like me. We don’t have parents paying for us, so we can’t afford to be fun.”

“Thanks… I guess,” Quinn said, unsure if it was a compliment or an insult.

As they continued to sort through the boxes, Stella suddenly stiffened. “Did you hear that?”

Everyone froze, straining their ears. A faint rattling sound came from upstairs, followed by a dull thud.

“Someone’s trying to get in,” Quinn whispered, her heart racing. She immediately doused her flashlight, and the rest followed suit, plunging them into darkness. “Everyone, stay quiet.”

They huddled together in the cold basement, listening intently. The noises continued, followed by more thumping and banging.

“We need to get to the guns,” Jonathan whispered urgently.

“They’re upstairs on the kitchen table,” Keith replied.

Quinn’s mind raced. “Okay, here’s what we’ll do. Gwen, you and Zenelia stay here. Close the door and keep quiet. The rest of us will grab the guns and face whoever is out there.”

“We can help,” Gwen insisted.

“Not this time. You’ll get in the way,” Quinn said. “Stay put and keep quiet.”

“All right. Fine,” Gwen said, sinking back onto her heels.

Before anyone could argue further, Quinn eased the basement door open and peered out. The hallway was dark and empty. She motioned for the others to follow and crept towards the kitchen, sticking close to the wall.

“On three,” Quinn whispered, her heart in her throat. “One, two, three!”

She burst into the kitchen, followed by the rest. Keith lunged for the guns on the table while the others spread out, scanning the room.

“There!” Stella cried, pointing at the back door.

A dark figure stood in the opening, his face covered by a balaclava. At the sound of their entrance, the figure whirled around and sprinted across the backyard toward the wall.

“After him!” Quinn yelled, grabbing the shotgun and racing outside.

The four friends chased the figure through the snow-covered yard, but he was too fast. In a flash, the intruder vaulted over the wall, disappearing into the night.

“Damn it,” Keith panted, bending over. “He got away.”

“At least we scared him off,” Stella said.

“For now,” Quinn replied grimly. “But he might come back with friends.”

“How did he get over the electric fence?” Stella asked.

“He clipped the wires,” Keith said, pointing at the broken lines.

“We’d better get inside,” Quinn said, a deep shiver wracking her frame. It was as cold as death outside, the temperature well below freezing.

Together, they returned to the kitchen to inspect the broken security gate and back door.

“He used a crowbar,” Keith said, pointing to the discarded object.

The bent bars on the security gate and the smashed window on the back door silently testified to the crude tool’s efficacy, and they filed inside feeling glum and miserable.

“I’d better go fetch the girls,” Keith said, heading toward the basement. “They’ll be worried.”

“I’ll see what I can do about this door,” Jonathan replied.

“I’ll make some coffee. I think we all use a cup,” Stella added.

Keith trudged out of the room, his shoulders bowed, while Stella switched on the gas stove and rummaged in the cupboards for an old-fashioned kettle.

Quinn decided to help Jonathan with the door. A quick search of the garage yielded a chain and padlock, and they used that to lock the security gate. Next, they shut the back door and covered the broken window with plastic. A heavy wooden chest from the living room served as a barricade, and they stood back to admire their handiwork.

“Not bad,” Keith said, returning with Zenelia and Gwen.

“Yeah, it’s not perfect, but it’ll have to do,” Jonathan replied.

“Not perfect?” Zenelia said. “That’s the understatement of the year.”

“It’s the best we can do for now,” Jonathan said, a defensive note creeping into his voice.

“Why bother? Nothing stopped them before. What makes you think a chest will stand in their way?” Zenelia cried, her voice becoming shrill.

“Zee, it’s okay. We’re fine now,” Keith said, reaching out to draw her close.

She slapped his hands away. “No, we’re not. This is the furthest from okay I’ve ever been. First the blizzard, now this?”

“Zee, please. Calm down,” Keith tried again.

“Don’t tell me to calm down. In case you haven’t noticed, it’s the end of the freaking world, and we’re all going to die!”

Quinn watched the exchange with growing frustration. Her jaw clenched as Zenelia’s voice rose higher and higher, grating on her already frayed nerves. She couldn’t believe the girl was having a meltdown now, of all times. They didn’t have the time for hysterics. As Zenelia’s voice climbed higher, Quinn’s patience snapped. She stepped forward, her eyes blazing.

“Enough!” Quinn shouted, silencing the room. She fixed Zenelia with a hard stare. “You want the truth? Fine. Here it is. This is the end of the world as we know it. No one is coming to save us. Not the police, not the army, not our parents. If we want to survive, it’s up to us.”

Zenelia gaped at her, shocked into silence.

“It’s fight or die time. We can sit here and cry about how unfair it is or get our act together and do something about it. So make up your mind right now. Are you in, or are you out?”

The room remained silent, everyone staring at Quinn with wide eyes. She looked at each of them in turn, her gaze challenging. “Well? What’s it going to be?”

Stella was the first to speak up. “I’m in.”

“Me too,” Jonathan added.

“Count me in,” Gwen said quietly but with conviction.

Keith nodded, his usual carefree demeanor replaced by a serious expression. “I’m with you guys.”

All eyes turned to Zenelia. She stood frozen, tears streaming down her face.

Keith reached out and took her hand. “What do you say, Zee?”

Zenelia took a shaky breath. “I’m scared, but I don’t want to die. So, I’m in, too.”

Quinn felt a wave of relief wash over her. She wasn’t proud of her outburst, but it’d been necessary. It was like ripping off a Band-Aid. It hurt,

but now they could finally face the truth. The world they knew was gone, and it wasn’t coming back. The sooner they realized that, the better.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWELVE

Once they realized their situation, the grumbling and complaining stopped. Everyone pitched in, working hard to ensure their comfort and survival throughout the night and the coming days. No one was coming to save them; they were on their own.

Zenelia, Gwen, and Quinn returned to the basement and carted the donated supplies upstairs, stacking them in the hallway. Next, they raided the bedrooms and cupboards for more blankets and warm clothes. They also collected a first aid kit, candles, lanterns, gas heaters, hot water bottles, and toiletries.

Stella remained in the kitchen, watching the damaged back door while preparing a quick supper of grilled cheese sandwiches, tomato soup, and coffee.

Meanwhile, Jonathan and Keith each took a gun and a flashlight and patrolled the yard, ensuring no more intruders lurked around. They also patched up the damaged electric fence and switched it back on.

Quinn had just settled down with a bowl of hot soup and a sandwich when they returned to the kitchen, red-faced and shivering. They stamped the snow from their boots and took off their heavy jackets, leaving a trail of frost in their wake.

“Holy crap, it’s cold out there,” Jonathan exclaimed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

“Uh-huh,” Keith agreed, rubbing his cheeks. “I can’t feel my face anymore.”

“You’re messing all over the place,” Gwen scolded, grabbing a mop. She dried the floor, shaking her head with every sweep.

“Sorry,” Jonathan said.

Keith didn’t bother. He was too busy inspecting his face in the oven’s reflection. “How long before my nose turns black and falls off?”

“Not that quickly,” Quinn said. “I think you should look for white spots. Not sure.”

“White spots? What then?”

“I don’t know. Rub them to restore the circulation, I suppose,” Quinn said with a shrug.

“We don’t know much about surviving in cold weather, do we?” Jonathan said.

“No, we don’t, and that’s a mistake that could cost us our lives,” Quinn said, feeling a little sheepish for not thinking about it sooner. What did they know about life in sub-zero temperatures? They were used to sunshine and heat. *It’s not called sunny South Africa for nothing.*

“So, what do we do?” Gwen said, replacing the mop. She took her seat and picked up her sandwich, taking a big bite. As she pulled away, a string of melted cheese stretched between her and the bread, resulting in an awkward battle between woman and cheese. The cheese won, falling into Gwen’s soup with a splat. Red tomato juice splashed into the front of her jersey, staining the fabric.

“Ah, damn it,” Gwen cried, rubbing at the marks. That only succeeded in smearing it further, making the situation worse. The entire group burst out laughing, and she blushed, her cheeks turning the same color as the soup. “Guys! Stop it!”

By the time everyone stopped laughing, Quinn’s ribs ached, and tears ran down her cheeks. It felt good to know that they still had the capacity for humor. *Maybe one day, we can go back to what we were. Young and carefree.*

Once the laughter died down, they settled down to the serious task of eating. After a long day spent slogging through the snow and cleaning the house on nothing but sugary snacks and stale chips, the warm food tasted extra good.

Afterward, Quinn shoved her empty plate and bowl aside, one hand resting on her full stomach. A comfortable heat radiated outward to her limbs, and she wanted nothing more than to curl up in a warm bed and go to sleep. But there was still much that needed to be done, and she pushed her exhaustion aside.

“What room would be the best for us to set up camp in?” she asked, directing her question to Keith. “It should be big enough for all of us but small enough to keep warm.”

“The entertainment lounge,” Keith suggested. “There’s enough space for all of us, but it’s not too big. Not a lot of windows, either.”

“Sounds good,” Quinn replied. “Is there another way out in case we need to leave in a hurry?”

“There’s a door that opens into the backyard. It’s surrounded by a low wall, trees, and a hedge, so it’s not clearly visible. We can use that to slip out of the garden gate at the back of the property.”

“It’s also got an en-suite bathroom and a bar area with a fridge, freezer, and wash basin. It has its own gas geyser, solar panels, and batteries.”

“Is there a TV and WiFi?” Jonathan asked. “We desperately need more information on our current situation, and that’s where the Internet comes in.”

“Yes, there is,” Keith confirmed.

“What about water?” Quinn asked. “A gas geyser is useless without running water.”

“My dad had a couple of Jojo tanks installed last year when the water restrictions began. The entertainment lounge has its own tank connected to the plumbing, and the pipes are insulated.”

“It almost seems too good to be true,” Quinn said, unable to believe their luck.

“It’s the reason I brought you all here. My dad spared no expense rigging this place out,” Keith said.

“Better than the dorm,” Jonathan agreed.

“For now,” Quinn muttered, wondering when the looters would return. Not that they had a choice. They weren’t going anywhere in the middle of the night.

Motivated by exhaustion, the group relocated all their supplies to the entertainment lounge, or Den, as Keith called it. Stella and Gwen papered the windows with newspaper, and Keith hung sheets over the curtains.

Jonathan set up the gas heaters and lanterns, keeping the candles aside for an emergency. Zenelia packed away all the food, and Quinn spread mattresses on the floor, allocating a sleeping bag to each person.

Straightening up, Quinn surveyed their new home. It was warm and cozy, lit by the golden light of the lanterns, and their beds were piled high with extra blankets and pillows. “I think this is as good as it gets, guys.”

“Yeah, there’s not much more we can do tonight,” Jonathan said, stretching his long arms above his head.

“Thank God. I’m so tired I can hardly keep my eyes open,” Zenelia said with a big yawn. “I think I’m going to call it a night.”

“One more thing,” Quinn said, holding up one hand.

“What now?” Zenelia said with a groan.

“We need to set up a watch rotation,” Quinn said.

“A what?” Zenelia asked.

“A watch rotation. Someone has to keep watch for intruders. We can’t all sleep at the same time,” Quinn explained.

“Really?” Zenelia asked. “I can’t go to sleep yet?”

The sheer horror in her voice caused Quinn to chuckle. “Okay, look. Get some sleep, Zee. You, too, Gwen. Neither of you can handle a gun anyway. The rest of us will take turns keeping watch during the night, starting with me.”

“That’s not fair,” Gwen protested. “We can’t sleep while you four do all the work.”

“You can make breakfast in the morning and tidy up,” Quinn said. “How does that sound?”

“Alright,” Gwen said. “But I’d like to learn how to shoot. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

“You’re not a burden, Gwen,” Quinn said.

“And we’ll teach you how to use a gun, don’t worry,” Keith said. “You, too, Zee.”

“Okay, fine,” Zenelia said, rolling her eyes. “Can I go to bed now?”

“Yes, go to sleep,” Quinn said, resigning herself to taking the first watch.

Zenelia and Gwen went to bed while the rest of them sorted out the weapons. Keith and Jonathan opted for the rifles, a .270 Winchester and a .223 Remington R15.

Stella preferred to work with a handgun, so she picked a Glock 17 with a shoulder holster. After checking the load, she tucked an extra magazine into her pocket and sought out her bed.

“See you in a few hours,” she said.

“See you,” Quinn acknowledged.

Eyeing the remaining selection of guns, she chose the Vektor Z88 and slid the holster onto her belt. She also nabbed the shotgun, liking its extra firepower. With spare shells in one pocket and a full magazine in the other, she was ready for duty.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” Jonathan asked. “I can join you?”

“No, thanks. I’ll be fine. Promise.”

“Goodnight, then,” Jonathan said, seeming reluctant.

“Night, Jon.”

“Shout if you need us,” Keith added.

“Will do.”

The group fell asleep one by one, and a soft symphony of snores filled the space.

Left to her own devices, Quinn patrolled the room. She kept it up for the entire shift, not allowing herself to sit for fear she’d fall asleep. Instead, she moved from window to window, lifting the newspaper to peer outside.

It was the same wherever she looked: Dark and quiet. There were no lights, no cars, no people, no noise. Just an empty blackness that seemed poised to spring and swallow them whole.

Shivering, Quinn took her cell phone out of her pocket and checked for missed calls or messages. There was nothing. *Still no signal.*

She briefly considered waking Keith up and asking him for the WiFi password, but dismissed the thought. He needed his sleep. Besides, her parents didn’t have WiFi or social media. They relied on old-fashioned calls, and without a working cellphone network, they were out of reach.

Sighing, she flicked through the photos stored on her phone. Her eyes lingered on an image of her parents standing in front of their farmhouse, their arms wrapped around each other. A lump formed in her throat. Were they okay? Did they make it through the storm? She had no way of knowing.

Then, she remembered something her dad told her years before. It was the night after a freak wave of black frost destroyed their entire harvest, and they stood to lose everything—their home, their farm, their way of life.

“We’re Le Roux’s, Quinn. Giving up isn’t an option,” he’d said, and he hadn’t given up. Neither had her mother. Instead, they worked day and night to save the vineyard, planting a fresh crop of grapes, salvaging what was left, and producing a limited-edition wine that year that outsold all the rest.

Quinn had never been prouder of her parents, and that memory fortified her now. Her father was right. She was a Le Roux, and she couldn’t give up. Ever.

Suddenly, her phone pinged, and she switched off the alarm with a sigh of relief. Her turn was over. The exhaustion she’d been fighting all day

washed over her like a tidal wave, and she couldn't wait to crawl into her bed.

As she turned away, a tiny movement at the far edge of the property caught her eye. With her heart pounding in her chest, she moved closer, peering through the small opening she'd made in the newspaper.

Quinn held her breath, her eyes straining in the darkness. Her breath fogged up the glass, and she wiped it clear with her sleeve, squinting into the gloom.

Nothing moved.

Still, she waited, both hands gripping the shotgun. The seconds ticked by, stretching into long minutes, the silence broken only by the soft snores of her sleeping companions.

Still nothing.

Finally, Quinn stepped back, shaking her head. "Get it together. You're seeing things."

With one last glance at the window, she walked over to Stella and gently shook the girl's shoulder. "Stella?"

"Huh?" Stella stirred, not fully awake.

Quinn shook her a little harder. "Wake up. It's your turn."

Stella emerged from her blankets, blinking like a mole. "Already?"

Quinn nodded. "Sorry."

"Okay, fine." Sitting upright, Stella yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Anything I should know?"

Quinn hesitated, thinking about the fleeting shadow, then shook her head. There was no point in raising ghosts where there were none. "All clear. Just… keep an eye out."

"Okay," Stella said, reaching for her gun in its shoulder holster.

Barely able to keep her eyes open, Quinn kicked off her boots, took off her jacket and belt, and crawled into her sleeping bag. With her shotgun and Z88 lying close at hand, she snuggled deep into her blankets, asleep before her head hit the pillow.

A hundred yards away, a dark figure crouched below a snow-laden tree. An icy wind whipped around him, but his stolen parka and boots kept the worst

of the chill at bay. He took a long drag from a cigarette, the ember flaring bright in the darkness. Smoke curled from his lips, and his eyes never left the house.

Light leaked from cracks in the papered windows, and he'd counted six people inside. Young, probably students, but armed, which complicated things. They'd surprised him earlier when he tried to break in, thinking the house was empty.

Anger stirred in his chest. He wanted what was inside the house. It was a rich man's playground. Not only would he find everything he needed to survive the cold, but plenty of other stuff too. Money. Guns. Jewelry. While the world might have changed, people were still greedy, and he'd make a tidy profit.

For a moment, he was tempted to make his move, but caution stayed his hand. He'd learned the hard way that rash action led to disaster. No, he needed more information first. How many guns did they have? How alert were they? Did they realize what they were up against?

To him, the end of the world meant nothing. Just more freedom to do what he wanted without the threat of the law hanging over his head. His entire life had been one long struggle for survival. What did a little snow mean in the scheme of things?

The cigarette burned down to the filter, and he crushed it under his boot. It was time to move before the cold set into his bones. For now, he'd watch and wait. When the time was right, he'd strike, and they'd never see him coming.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

NOLAN

With all their preparations made, there was nothing left to do but wait. Never known for his patience, Nolan decided to take a shower before supper. After the long, hot day spent laboring in the sun, he felt sticky, and one sniff at his armpits was enough to get him moving.

Grabbing a towel and clean clothes, he headed toward the bathroom. He passed Joseph, who had a similar idea, and pointed him to the guest facilities. “You’ll find everything you need in there, Joseph.”

Bobbing his head, Joseph hurried away, no doubt as eager as Nolan to wash away the day’s remains.

Closing the bathroom door, Nolan waited until the water was hot before stepping into the cubicle. The steaming spray cascaded over tired muscles, washing away the grime and sweat of the day.

He stood there for what felt like an eternity, letting the water pound away the day’s tension. Steam filled the room, fogging the mirror and creating a private cocoon of warmth. He lathered up with a bar of soap, using it on his hair as well. He’d never been one for fancy toiletries. Afterward, he rinsed, knowing he shouldn’t linger, or there wouldn’t be any hot water left for his parents.

“Just a few more minutes,” Nolan muttered, turning his face directly into the spray.

Finally, with a sigh of resignation, he twisted the knob and the water stuttered to a stop. The sudden absence of its comforting patter left the bathroom eerily quiet. He stepped onto the bath mat and wrapped a towel around his waist.

After drying off, he pulled on a worn t-shirt and shorts. Despite all the warnings, the air remained stubbornly hot and dry. No hint of the promised cold front had materialized, and a small part of him wondered if they’d overreacted. Maybe Samuel was wrong. Maybe the climatologist had misinterpreted the data.

Back in his bedroom, he picked up his phone again, scrolling through more news alerts. The images coming from Cape Town were apocalyptic: cars abandoned in snowdrifts, people huddled in emergency shelters, and streets that looked more like the Arctic than Africa.

“Holy hell,” he whispered, his thumb hovering over Quinn’s number.

He tried again, listening to the automated voice that informed him that all circuits were busy. Switching to Giselle’s number yielded the same result.

A knock at his door interrupted his third attempt.

“Nolan? Dinner’s ready,” his mother called.

“Coming,” he replied, putting the phone on charge.

The kitchen was warm and bright, a stark contrast to the growing darkness outside. Ella had set the table with their everyday dishes, and the pot of soup sat steaming in the center. Joseph sat awkwardly at one end, clearly unused to eating with the family.

“Smells amazing, Mom,” Nolan said, taking his usual seat.

Johan entered from the living room, his expression grim. “The weather report says Cape Town’s been hit hard by the extreme cold.”

“I saw that,” Nolan replied.

“What about Johannesburg?” Ella asked. “I’m worried about Giselle.”

“Not a lot. They haven’t been hit yet, but there’s talk of looting and rioting. Some of the sub-stations were damaged, and there are widespread blackouts.”

“That might explain why we can’t get through to her,” Nolan said with a frown.

“Oh, dear. What if she’s hurt? What if she got caught in the riots?” Ella cried, one hand on her chest.

“Don’t worry about Giselle. She’s tough, and she can handle herself. Nolan and I made sure of that,” Johan said. “Besides, I’ll drive up and fetch her once this storm passes.”

“You would?” Ella asked, her expression hopeful.

“Of course I would. She’s my daughter.”

“Oh, Johan,” Ella breathed, clearly relieved.

“What about Stellenbosch? Did you hear anything about the university?” Nolan asked.

“Nothing, except that the storm is expected to reach them tonight. It’s probably already there.”

Nolan’s heart sank. “Are you sure?”

“That’s what they’re saying on the news,” Johan confirmed, ladling soup into his bowl. “The cold front is moving faster than anyone predicted.”

Ella placed a basket of fresh bread on the table, her hands trembling slightly. “Quinn will be alright, won’t she? The university must have emergency protocols.”

“I’m sure they do,” Johan said, though his tone lacked conviction.

They ate in tense silence, the only sounds the clink of spoons against bowls and the occasional creak of the house settling around them. Outside, the wind had picked up, whistling through the vineyard and rattling the windows.

Nolan barely tasted his food, his mind filled with images of Quinn trapped in her dormitory as the temperatures plummeted. He should have tried harder to reach her.

“I’m going to call Quinn again,” he announced, pushing back from the table.

His father nodded. “Use the landline. The cell towers might be overloaded.”

Nolan strode to the old rotary phone mounted on the kitchen wall. It was a relic from another era, but his father had insisted on keeping it, claiming it was more reliable than modern technology. Now, Nolan was grateful for his father’s stubbornness.

He dialed Quinn’s cell number from memory, his fingers slipping on the rotary dial. The line connected, but all he heard was static.

“Damn it,” he muttered, hanging up.

“No luck?” Ella asked, her expression falling.

Nolan shook his head. “I’m going to try the university’s main line.”

He dialed again, triggering an automated message: “Due to the current weather emergency, Stellenbosch University is operating with limited staff. Please try again later.”

Nolan slammed the receiver into place, the plastic cracking under the force of his frustration. “Useless,” he muttered through clenched teeth.

“Calm down, son,” Johan called from the table. “Breaking our only working landline won’t help anyone.”

Nolan turned, his eyes flashing. “We should be doing something. Quinn’s out there, Giselle’s out there, and we’re just sitting here eating soup!”

Johan set his spoon down carefully. “And what exactly do you propose we do? Drive into a blizzard? That’s suicide, and you know it.”

Nolan opened his mouth to argue, but caught the worried look in his mother’s eyes. With an effort, he reined in his temper. “I’ll help with the dishes,” he muttered.

“Thank you,” Ella said softly, gathering the empty bowls.

Joseph excused himself with a mumbled “Thank you for the meal,” and retreated to the living room. Through the doorway, Nolan could see him sitting on the edge of the sofa, his eyes fixed on the television where images of snow-covered streets flashed across the screen.

Nolan filled the sink with hot water and began scrubbing the dishes with more force than necessary while his mother dried. Each plate and spoon became a focus of his helpless anger.

“She’ll be alright,” Ella said, gently touching his shoulder. “Quinn’s a smart girl. She knows how to take care of herself.”

Nolan nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Johan appeared in the doorway. “I’m going to take a hot bath.” He fixed Nolan with a stern look. “And keep it together, son. Falling apart won’t help anyone, least of all Quinn.”

“I know,” Nolan said, though his mind barely registered his father’s words. “I’ll be fine.”

After storing the leftovers and finishing the dishes, Nolan retreated to his bedroom. The space felt too small, too confining for the storm of emotions raging inside him. He paced the room’s length, cell phone in hand, alternating between Quinn’s number and Giselle’s.

Call failed. Network busy. No service available.

With each failed attempt, he grew more agitated. He tossed the phone onto his bed and ran both hands through his hair, gripping the strands until his scalp stung.

Outside, the wind had risen to a mournful howl, as if nature echoed his distress. The windows rattled in their frames, and the house creaked and groaned under the onslaught.

Nolan moved to the window, pulling back the curtain to peer into the darkness. Seeing anything beyond the shade netting was difficult, and he gave up after a few moments.

He stretched out on the bed, still fully clothed, and stared at the ceiling. The day’s events played through his mind like a movie reel: Samuel in town

with his warnings, the mad dash to prepare, and the desperate attempts to reach Quinn and Giselle. His eyelids grew heavy despite his determination to stay awake, to keep trying their numbers. The stress and physical labor had taken their toll, and he drifted off, his phone still clutched in one hand.

A sound woke him, a sharp crack like a gunshot that echoed through the house. Nolan bolted upright, momentarily disoriented. The room was pitch black, and the air felt different, colder. The wind was a raging beast, much stronger than before, adding to his confusion.

“What the hell?” he muttered, fumbling for his phone. The screen lit up, showing it was after two in the morning. He’d been asleep for hours.

Another crack, followed by a splintering sound got him to his feet, and he fumbled for the flashlight on his bedside table. Finally, he found it, and the bright beam lit up the room.

His father called from somewhere in the house. “Nolan! Where are you?”

“Dad?” Nolan replied, heading into the hallway. It was dark, lit only by the beam of his flashlight bobbing up and down as he walked. “I’m coming, Dad.”

“We’re in the living room,” Johan replied, his voice thick with tension.

Nolan made his way through the house, the air cold against his skin. By the time he reached his parents, he was shivering, and the sight of a fire crackling in the fireplace beckoned to him.

Joseph and his father stood beside the fire, feeding it more wood until the flames blazed high. His mother sat on the couch, huddled inside a thick blanket.

“What’s happening?” Nolan asked, his voice catching as the frigid air hit his lungs.

“It’s here,” Johan said, gesturing toward the window. “The storm is here.”

Nolan moved to the window, peering through a small gap where the shade netting had come loose. His breath caught in his throat. The familiar landscape had vanished, replaced by a howling white void. Snow lashed the house in horizontal sheets, driven by winds from every direction.

“Holy shit,” he whispered, his breath forming a cloud in front of his face.

“The electricity went out about twenty minutes ago,” Johan said, pulling on a thick sweater and jacket. “I was about to start the generator.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No, I want you to check on the chickens and make sure they’re okay. Joseph can keep the fire going while we’re gone,” Johan said.

“I’ll make tea,” Ella said.

“Okay,” Nolan said. Scraping together his courage, he dashed toward the enclosed patio. Although it was part of the porch outside, his father had enclosed it for winter braais. Still, it was colder than the rest of the house, and he wasn’t exactly dressed for the occasion. *Two minutes. That’s all I’m giving them.*

The chickens were huddled together in a fluffy mass, their feathers puffed up against the cold. Their beady eyes watched him warily as he approached, but they didn’t seem distressed. The thick layer of straw appeared to be working as insulation, and the blankets draped over the top of the cage had kept the worst chill at bay.

“Hey there, ladies,” Nolan murmured, crouching to inspect their water. A thin film of ice had begun to form on the surface. He broke it and refilled the container with water from a jug he’d left nearby.

Satisfied they weren’t in immediate danger, he turned on the gas heater, adjusting its position carefully. Close enough to provide warmth, but far enough away that it wouldn’t set the straw or blankets alight. The last thing they needed was a fire on top of everything else.

“That should keep you comfortable,” he said, watching as the chickens settled, content with the new arrangement. “I’ll check on you again soon.”

Nolan hurried back into the house, his thin clothing offering little protection against the biting cold. He burst through the door to find his mother pacing the kitchen, the old rotary phone clutched in her white-knuckled grip.

“Nolan!” Ella cried, thrusting the receiver toward him. “It’s Anja. Something’s happened to Dawid.”

Nolan grabbed the phone, his heart sinking. “Mrs. Le Roux? What’s going on?”

“Nolan?” Anja’s voice was shrill with panic. “Dawid went to check on the animals in the barn over an hour ago. He hasn’t come back.”

“Have you tried—”

“I’ve tried everything. Shining a light, calling from the porch,” she interrupted, hysteria edging into her voice. “I think he got lost in the storm. I need to go look for him.”

“No!” Nolan said sharply. “Don’t leave the house, Mrs. Le Roux. That’s the worst thing you could do right now.”

“But Dawid—”

“I’ll go,” Nolan said, making the decision instantly. “I’ll find him and bring him back. Just stay inside where it’s safe.”

There was a pause on the line, filled only by Anja’s ragged breathing. “You’d do that?” she finally asked, her voice small.

“Of course. We’re neighbors. Just give me time to prepare, and I’ll head over.”

“Thank you, Nolan. Please hurry.”

He returned the phone to his mother, who was already shaking her head. “Nolan, you can’t go out there. It’s suicide.”

“I have to, Mom. Dawid could freeze to death.”

“And so could you!” Ella protested, but Nolan was already moving toward his room.

“Nolan!” Ella called after him, her voice breaking. “Please don’t do this!”

He ignored her pleas, his mind already focused on the task ahead. In his room, he quickly shed his thin clothes and pulled on thermal underwear, two pairs of thick socks, jeans, and a flannel shirt. Over that went a sweater, then his heaviest jacket. He yanked a woolen beanie over his head and wrapped a scarf around his neck, tucking the ends into his jacket.

By the time he returned to the living room, his father had returned, and the electricity was back on. “What’s all this commotion about?”

“Dawid Le Roux is missing,” Nolan said, pulling on his work gloves. “He went to check on their animals and never came back. I’m going to find him.”

Johan’s expression hardened. “The hell you are. No one’s going anywhere in this storm.”

“Dad, he’ll die out there.”

“And I’m not losing you too,” Johan shouted, his voice echoing in the suddenly silent room.

Nolan stared at his father, shocked by the outburst. Johan Van Wyk was not a man given to displays of emotion.

“I have to try,” Nolan said, lifting his chin. “You know I do.”

Johan held his gaze for a long moment before his shoulders slumped. “You’re as stubborn as your mother,” he muttered. “Fine. But we do this

right.”

He moved to the coat rack and began pulling on additional layers. “I’m coming with you.”

“Johan, no!” Ella protested.

“Two have a better chance than one,” Johan said firmly. “Joseph, you stay here with Ella. Keep the fire going and watch the generator. If we’re not back in two hours, call emergency services.”

Joseph nodded, his expression solemn. “Yes, boss.”

Johan turned to Nolan. “We’ll take the truck. The Le Roux place is only a couple of kilometers away, but it might as well be a hundred in this weather.”

“The old Ford won’t start in this cold,” Nolan pointed out.

“Mine will,” Johan replied with a hint of pride. “I’ve kept her in top condition and filled the tank yesterday. Besides, I’ve got some tricks up my sleeve.”

Within minutes, they were bundled up and ready to go. Ella hugged them both fiercely, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

“Come back to me,” she whispered. “Both of you.”

“We will,” Johan promised, kissing her forehead.

Nolan hesitated at the door, looking back at his mother’s worried face. “I’ll find Dawid, Mom. And I’ll bring Dad back safe. That’s a promise.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A single beam of sunshine shone through a chink in the newspaper that covered the windows, the bright morning ray piercing her brain with laser-point accuracy. Quinn stirred and raised one hand to ward it off. “Who left the lights on? Asshole.”

She rolled over and covered her head, unwilling to get up. Her bed was too warm and comfortable, an insulating layer between her and the rest of the world. While she lay inside its cocoon, nothing bad could happen.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” a voice cried, bursting her bubble with rude familiarity.

“Eff off, Jon,” Quinn replied, instantly irritated.

“I thought you might say that,” Jonathan said, moving closer. “So, I brought coffee.”

“Coffee?” Quinn said, peeking out of her sleeping bag.

“That’s right,” Jonathan said, waving the cup underneath her nose.

The smell of caffeine, bolstered by cream and sugar, hit her nose, and she sat upright. “Gimme that.”

“Nuh-uh,” Jonathan said, staying just out of reach. “We’re having breakfast on the patio. Your coffee awaits you there.”

“Ugh, I hate you,” Quinn said.

“I know, but if you hurry, you can grab the last hot water in the geyser,” Jonathan added.

The thought of a hot shower was enough to get Quinn moving, and she crawled out of her sleeping bag with haste. She grabbed her things and hurried to the bathroom. After a quick wash, she brushed her teeth, pulled her hair into a smooth ponytail, and applied a thick layer of moisturizer to combat the harsh weather.

Quinn emerged feeling refreshed and invigorated, dressed warmly but simply in woolen leggings, a matching long-sleeved shirt, a flannel jacket with a collar, a puffer vest, gloves, boots, and a beanie.

She was not about to go anywhere without her guns, however, and took a minute to arm herself. Attaching a sling to the shotgun, she slung it across her back and tucked a handful of spare shells into her jacket pocket. The Z88 went onto her belt in its holster next to a spare magazine. “There. That should do it,” she muttered, feeling reassured. Having a means of self-defense went a long way toward alleviating her fears, and she felt a lot more confident in her ability to survive.

Even so, Quinn knew she had much to learn and resolved to remedy the problem as soon as possible. But first, she had a more pressing need to address: Hunger.

When the first whiff of bacon hit her nostrils, her stomach cramped, reminding her that it wanted food and wanted it now. “Okay, okay. I’m going!”

She headed toward the patio, where the others had gathered around a gas barbecue. Keith wielded a spatula, flipping burger patties on the grill while Gwen fried eggs, bacon, and hash browns on the flat top. Zenelia sat at a nearby table, buttering bread and chopping fresh fruit.

The door to the garden stood open, and they’d removed the newspaper covering the windows, allowing fresh air and sunlight into the room. It was such an ordinary scene that her breath hitched in her throat. *How many more chances like this will we have? Carefree mornings filled with laughter and friendship?*

Still, it bothered her that they were being so careless. Only Stella was armed, and no one was keeping a lookout for danger. Shaking her head, she stepped onto the patio and said, “Good morning, everyone.”

“Finally,” Jonathan said. “We were about to send a search party.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “Very funny.” She looked around. “Nice party you’re having here. Aren’t you worried about being surprised by bad guys? Where are your guns?”

“Mine’s next to my sleeping bag,” Jonathan began, his cheeks red.

“Fat lot of good it’ll do you there,” she pointed out. “Same goes for you, Keith.”

“Um…” Keith said, looking sheepish.

“She’s got a point, guys,” Stella said.

“I’ll fetch our rifles,” Jonathan said, disappearing into the Den. He returned later with the two rifles and handed one to Keith.

“That’s better,” Quinn said with an approving nod.

“Here, drink your coffee before you think of something else to complain about,” Jonathan said, handing her a mug. “Cream with two sugars, right?”

“Thanks,” Quinn replied, wrapping her hands around the warm ceramic cup. She inhaled deeply, savoring the rich aroma before taking the first sip. “Mm. That sure hits the spot.”

“Gwen makes good coffee,” Jonathan said.

“She sure does,” Quinn said, taking another sip, but privately, she wondered how long it would last. *How long before there’s no more coffee, sugar, or cream?*

It was a depressing thought, and she longed for her home. At least, her mom had an herb garden for tea, and her father kept a couple of milk cows in the barn. *If they’re still alive.*

That thought was even worse, and she pushed it aside. Worrying about it wouldn’t change anything, and she needed to focus on the present if she wished to survive. She turned toward Keith who was flipping burger patties on the grill. “That smells so good.”

“Yeah, but I prefer a real braai,” Keith said. “Meat just tastes better on an open fire.”

“Maybe, but I’m too hungry to care right now,” Quinn said.

“Me too,” Zenelia said, surprising them all. “I could eat a horse, hooves and all.”

“Not on a diet anymore?” Quinn said, referring to the girl’s strict, gluten-free, macro-oriented eating plan.

“Who cares about that stuff anymore?” Zenelia said. “It’s the end of the world. If I’m going to die, I might as well die happy.”

A solemn silence fell at her words. Though she’d said it in a lighthearted manner, no one wanted to be reminded of their mortality.

“Uh, has anyone had any weird dreams lately?” Jonathan asked, changing the subject.

“Er, no. But it sounds like you did,” Keith said, going along with it.

“Last night a giant snowball chased me down the street.”

“A giant snowball? As if we don’t have enough snow already,” Stella said.

“What happened?” Keith asked.

“I got squashed,” Jonathan said,

“By the giant snowball?”

“That’s right.”

“There’s something seriously wrong with you, Jon,” Quinn said.

“I know,” Jonathan said

“Someone, hand me a plate. The patties are done,” Keith said, waving his spatula in the air.

“Here,” Gwen said, handing him an empty platter.

“Thanks.”

Keith served the burger patties while Gwen fried the tomatoes, onions, and hash browns. Stella prepared a fresh pot of coffee, Jonathan set the table, and Zenelia finished the fruit and bread platter.

“The food’s ready,” Gwen announced.

“It looks delicious,” Quinn said, taking a seat. “You’ve outdone yourselves.”

“It’s the least we could do after you four stood watch all night,” Zenelia said.

The group gathered around, passing platters and piling their plates high. For a while, the only sounds were the clink of cutlery on glass, and a companionable silence settled over the room.

As they were finishing up, Zenelia set down her fork and asked, “So, what’s next?”

Quinn swallowed her last bite of bacon and egg before answering. “We need more information. We can’t make any decisions until we know what we’re dealing with.”

The others nodded in agreement. After breakfast, they cleared the table, tidied the space, and settled in the Den with a fresh round of coffee.

Quinn grabbed the remote and switched on the TV. A haggard-looking news anchor appeared on the screen. Purple shadows underlined his eyes, and he sported an old coffee stain on his shirt.

“In the latest update from Stockholm, Swedish authorities have announced the complete closure of their borders. This follows similar actions taken by Norway, Finland, and Russia in the past forty-eight hours.”

“They’re shutting everyone out,” Keith said.

Quinn shook her head. “Can’t blame them. They’re probably the only ones equipped to handle this kind of weather long-term.”

The anchor continued, his tone grave. “The damage to infrastructure is estimated to be in the trillions of dollars. Power grids across the globe are failing, leading to widespread blackouts. Water treatment plants are shutting down, causing severe shortages and health concerns.”

The screen flashed through images of dark cities, broken power lines sagging under the weight of snow, and people lining up with buckets at makeshift water distribution points.

“Service delivery has ground to a halt in most areas. The extreme cold has destroyed crops and livestock, and experts warn of an impending global famine unlike anything seen in modern history.”

“Factories stand empty, their workers unable to reach them or forced to stay home. Air travel has ceased entirely, with planes grounded at airports worldwide. Public transportation systems have shut down in most major cities, and schools remain closed indefinitely.”

The camera panned across abandoned industrial zones, snow-covered runways, and empty subway stations.

“Perhaps most alarmingly, law enforcement agencies are overwhelmed, leading to a breakdown of order in many areas.”

Images flashed of riot police facing off against angry crowds, interspersed with scenes of looting and burning buildings.

The broadcast cut back to the studio, and Anchor gazed wearily at the screen, almost as if he could see them sitting there, hanging on his every word.

“To our viewers at home, the situation is dire. Despite what some officials might say, help is not coming, and we urge you to do whatever you can to survive. This is Richard Morris signing off… probably for the last time.”

The broadcast cut to static, then went black, and a heavy silence fell over the room.

Quinn switched off the TV and turned to the group. “Well, that settles it. We can’t stay here.”

“What do you mean?” Gwen asked, her eyes wide with fear.

“Think about it,” Quinn replied. “We’re in the suburbs. Once supplies run out in the city, desperate people will start moving outward. We’ll be sitting ducks.”

Jonathan looked from one to the other. “She’s right. We need to get somewhere more isolated and easy to defend.”

“But where?” Zenelia asked.

“And how do we get there without transport?” Gwen added.

“What happens when we run out of food and water? Where do we get more?” Stella said.

“We can go to my home. It’s on a farm, it’s isolated, and there’s a river on the property,” Quinn said. “As for food, there’s plenty in storage. Enough to last us until we can grow our own.”

“Grow our own? In this weather?” Stella said.

“There have to be plants we can cultivate in the cold,” Quinn reasoned. “You can’t tell me nothing grew during the last ice age. What did the animals eat?”

“Grass?” Stella said.

“I’m not eating grass,” Zenelia said with a sniff.

“Oh, my God,” Quinn said, throwing her hands in the air. “You guys are impossible.”

“How far is it?” Keith asked.

“Not that far. Roughly a hundred and twenty kilometers,” Quinn replied.

“That’s a long way in these conditions.”

“Maybe, but it’s our best shot,” Quinn insisted, looking from one to the other.

Keith shook his head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. We’re safer here, where we have shelter and supplies.”

“I agree,” Stella chimed in. “Going out there is too risky. We don’t know what we might run into.”

Gwen nodded vigorously. “I don’t even know how to use a gun yet.”

“And we could freeze to death,” Zenelia said.

Quinn sighed, her frustration boiling over. “Don’t you see? The longer we stay, the worse it will get. What happens when our supplies run out?”

“Then, we look for more,” Keith said.

“Where? With no deliveries, the shops will run empty in no time, and what about looters?”

“Quinn’s right,” Jonathan said, backing her up. “We need to think long-term. The vineyard is our best bet.”

“That’s assuming we even make it there,” Keith argued. “A hundred kilometers in this weather? We could die.”

“But—” Quinn started.

“And what about our families?” Gwen said, cutting in. “We can’t just abandon them. I vote we stay, at least until we know more.”

“Me too,” Zenelia agreed.

“Same here,” Stella said.

Keith looked at Quinn and Jonathan. “I’m sorry, guys, but that’s four against two. We’re staying.”

Quinn looked around the room, seeing the fear in their eyes. Pushing them harder would only worsen the situation, and she resigned herself to staying. “Alright, but we need to make some changes.”

“Like what?” Keith asked.

“For starters, we’ll have to ration our food, water, and gas. Secondly, we have to educate ourselves.”

“Educate?”

“Yes, we must learn everything about surviving in this kind of weather. Living off the land, growing our own food, defending ourselves, first aid, you name it.”

“Yeah, as long as we have the WIFI, we might as well use it,” Jonathan said.

Keith thought it over. “That makes sense.”

“What about fortifying the house?” Stella suggested.

“We can board up the windows and doors,” Keith said. “There are stacks of wood left in the garage from my dad’s latest project.”

“Good idea,” Quinn said, her mind running at the speed of light. While she wasn’t thrilled about staying, making the place more secure made sense. “How about booby traps? Nothing lethal. Just enough to give us an early warning.”

Keith and Jonathan exchanged long looks, followed by excited grins. “We can think of something.”

“Okay, you and Jonathan get started on the booby traps and fortifications,” Quinn said. “I’ll join you as soon as I’ve taught Zee and Gwen the basics of gun safety.”

“What about me?” Stella asked.

“I need you to sort through our supplies and set up a rationing system. That includes the gas and showers.”

“Alright, I’m on it,” Stella said.

“And from now on, no one goes anywhere alone or unarmed,” Quinn said, her expression stern. “We can’t afford any mistakes.” Murmurs of assent followed her words, and Jonathan, Keith, and Stella headed out. That left Gwen and Zenelia looking at her with a mixture of expectation and dread.

“Let’s get this over with,” Gwen said, her voice shaky.

“Uh-huh,” Zenelia added, her smile overly bright.

“Oh, relax, you two,” Quinn scoffed. “Guns don’t bite. As long as you handle them right, it’s perfectly safe.”

“Really?” Gwen asked.

“Yeah, think of it like a big dog. If you love and treat it right, it’ll look after you forever.”

“I see,” Zenelia said, eyeing the two handguns on the table. “Can I give mine a name? Like Butch or something?”

“Zee,” Quinn said, picking up the Beretta and ejecting the magazine and the bullet in the chamber. “You can name it anything you damn well please as long as you don’t shoot one of us in the butt and you don’t miss the bad guys. Got it?”

“Got it,” Zenelia said, looking more and more confident by the second.

“Right. Let’s get started.” As Quinn went through the motions, she remembered her first lesson with her dad. The memory formed a lump in her throat, and she had to blink away sudden tears. It was hard not knowing if they were alive or not, but there was nothing she could do about it. Nothing but hope.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next few days passed in a whirlwind of activity. Working around the clock, the former students fortified Keith's home, boarding up the doors and windows with planks bolted into place. They also placed booby traps around the property, simple gadgets designed to make a noise or trip up an intruder: A deadfall hidden in a drift of snow. Empty cans filled with pebbles and strung on a wire. Holes dug in the ground and hidden from sight. Nothing that could maim or kill.

Quinn and Stella invaded the attic, cellar, and guest rooms, ferreting out anything of use and squirreling it away in the Den. Afterward, they systematically locked all the doors behind them, making it impossible for intruders to move through the house.

That left only the Den with its en-suite bathroom and patio at the back of the house, hidden from the street. They took special care in fortifying its doors and windows and set it up for maximum comfort.

But as cozy as their new home was, Quinn knew that no matter what they did, there would come a day when they had to leave in a hurry. With that thought in mind, she packed six bug-out bags and stashed them in the far corner of the garden under an old piece of plywood covered in snow. She felt more secure knowing they were there, an ace up her sleeve in case things went south.

When they weren't working in the house or yard, Quinn, Stella, Jonathan, and Keith took turns teaching Gwen and Zenelia how to handle the guns. Since they couldn't afford to fire live bullets, they focused on safety, aim, and posture, practicing repeatedly. Hopefully, familiarity and muscle memory would take over when the time came to use their new skill.

The group also tried to prepare them for the mental side of things, teaching them the same stuff they'd learned from their parents.

"Never fire a gun if you're not sure who you're shooting at. Friendly fire has killed more people than enemy fire," Keith said.

“And never aim a gun if you don’t plan on using it,” Quinn added. “It can only save your life if you’re prepared to pull the trigger.”

“But… what if I kill someone?” Zenelia asked, her eyes wide.

“That’s kind of the point,” Stella said.

“It’s either you or them, Zee,” Quinn added.

“I know, but… I’m not sure I can do it,” Zee said.

Quinn didn’t reply. As much as she tried to put on a brave face, she didn’t know if she could pull the trigger either. Shooting at a target was very different from killing an actual person. *I guess only time will tell.*

When they weren’t practicing with their guns, Gwen and Zenelia spent their time doing research. They downloaded and stored anything of interest on external hard drives. The group studied this material every night after dinner, absorbing as much information as possible.

They kept trying to contact their friends and family, sending emails, messages, and calls. Sometimes, they got lucky and received a reply, but most of the time, there was radio silence. The news channels died one by one until only the emergency broadcast remained, leaving them isolated except for the increasingly spotty WiFi signal.

The weather remained unpredictable. On some days, the temperatures plummeted, and they had to stay indoors to stay warm. On other days, the watery sun shone long enough for them to spend precious time in the fresh air, checking the perimeter and traps.

Frostbite was an ever-present threat, and they had to check themselves whenever they went outside. The first signs were pins and needles, numbness, and skin discoloration. They didn’t dare let it progress further. No one wanted to lose a toe or finger.

Realizing that their supplies wouldn’t last, they set up a strict rationing system, but the day came when Stella made a grim announcement. “We only have enough food and water left for three, maybe four days.”

“So soon?” Zenelia cried. “We were so strict!”

Stella shrugged. “We knew this day was coming. Nothing lasts forever.”

“The Jojo tank is empty?” Keith asked.

“Almost,” Stella replied. “I’ve been melting snow for washing up, but the bathroom uses a lot of water, even with the rationing.”

“Damn it,” Keith swore.

“But isn’t there a second Jojo tank?” Jonathan asked. “A bigger one?”

“Yes, but it’s not connected. The Den runs on its own plumbing and electrical system. My dad had it built like that.”

“Why?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe he wanted to rent it out. Who knows?” Keith said.

“Can’t we connect it with a pipe?” Zenelia asked.

“It’s not that easy,” Keith said. “I’d need a pipe that’s long enough to connect both tanks with the correct connections.”

“And… you don’t have any of that?” Quinn guessed.

“Nope.”

“What about the neighbors? We could get supplies that way,” Stella suggested.

“Maybe, but it’s risky,” Keith said.

“Well, unless you guys are willing to leave this place, going on a scavenging run is your only option,” Quinn said, hoping they’d finally see sense. While the past few days had been uneventful, she still couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. Call it instinct, but she was inclined to trust her gut.

“I say we check the neighbors,” Zenelia said. “Who knows what we might find?”

“The one to the left of us has a Jojo tank. We could check its pipes and figure something out,” Stella said.

“Alright, it’s worth a shot,” Keith said.

“Idiots,” Quinn mumbled beneath her breath, but not loudly enough for the group to hear. They weren’t ready to leave, and she wasn’t about to abandon them. She could either help them in their mission or hinder them. *Help, it is.*

“We need to decide who’s going,” Keith said, looking around the room. “This is my neighborhood, so I’m in.”

“Me too,” Jonathan volunteered. “I’m familiar with plumbing systems.”

“You? Plumbing?’ Keith asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Just one of my many hidden talents,” Jonathan said with a smug smile.

“Aren’t you just full of surprises,” Keith said, laughing.

“That seals the deal,” Quinn said. “I have to go now. Someone needs to keep you two out of trouble.”

“I shall have you know that we are perfectly capable of accomplishing this mission on our own, Madame,” Jonathan said, affecting a haughty air.

“Yeah, right,” Quinn said with a snort. “You wouldn’t last two seconds without me.”

“She’s right. You need her,” Stella said. “Gwen, Zee, and I will hold down the fort here.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” Zenelia asked, worry etched on her face. She reached out to grab Keith’s hand.

“We’ll be fine. It’s just a quick scavenging run,” he said, pulling her in for a tight hug.

“Okay,” Zee said, burying her face in Keith’s shoulder. “But you’d better hurry right back.”

They spent the rest of the evening preparing their gear and reviewing the plan. It was simple: They’d hit each house that abutted their property and look for food, water, medicine, and parts for the Jojo tank. Each carried a gun with spare ammunition, a flashlight, a backpack, and extra bags. Jonathan also had a crowbar meant for breaking into homes.

Once they finished packing, Keith called it a night. “We should get some rest. We have a long day ahead of us.”

“Agreed,” Jonathan said.

Stifling a yawn, Quinn sought out her bedroll. Curling up inside, she wondered what the following day would bring.

“Something wrong?” Jonathan whispered, sensing her mood.

“I still think we should leave,” Quinn admitted. Try as she might, she couldn’t drown out the sense of impending doom that nagged at the back of her mind. It never left. She ignored it most of the time, but now she wondered if that wasn’t a mistake.

“I know, and I agree, but we haven’t wasted our time, Quinn,” Jonathan replied.

“No?”

“Think about it. Neither Gwen nor Zee could use a gun. Now, they at least know the basics. Also, we’ve had time to get used to things: The situation. The weather. We’ve changed, and we’re a lot tougher now.”

Quinn mulled it over, and she was forced to admit he was right. They’d learned a lot during their time at Keith’s home. Maybe it would be enough to get them home safely when the time came.

“Sleep tight, Quinn. Whatever happens tomorrow, we’ll face it together,” Jonathan whispered.

“Goodnight, Jon,” Quinn replied, comforted.

The following day, she woke to a gentle touch on her shoulder. “Wakey, wakey.”

“Mm. Jonathan?”

“It’s time to get up.”

“So soon?” she groaned, burying her head under the covers.

“That’s right. We’ve got work to do.”

“Ugh, fine,” she said, crawling out of her nest. “What’s the weather like?”

“It looks to be a fine day,” Stella said. “The skies are clear, with no sign of snow or blizzards.”

“Well, that’s a surprise,” Quinn said, pulling on her boots.

“Maybe it’s a good sign,” Jonathan said.

Quinn snorted. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Clear weather just means we can see danger coming from farther away.”

“When did you become such a pessimist?”

“Since the world ended,” Quinn replied.

“You’ll feel better after a good breakfast,” Jonathan said, nudging her with his shoulder. “Now, get moving.”

“Fine, I’m going. I’m going,” Quinn said, dragging herself to the bathroom.

After a quick wash, she dressed, checked her gear, and wolfed down a hearty breakfast of fried beans, corned beef, and onions. If she was going to die, it wouldn’t be on an empty stomach. Washing it all down with a hot cup of coffee, she mustered a smile and said, “I’m ready.”

“Me too,” Jonathan said, pushing his empty plate aside.

“Me three,” Keith said.

“Be careful out there,” Stella said.

Quinn nodded, adjusting her backpack. “We will. You three stay alert. Just because it’s quiet doesn’t mean it’s safe.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Stella said. “We’ll be fine.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Quinn said,

With a final wave, she, Jonathan, and Keith exited the Den and crossed the yard toward the gate. Their boots crunched across the snow, and their breath frosted on their lips, but otherwise, it was a clear and sunny day.

Once they reached the gate, Keith raised one hand and said, “Let me switch the motor to manual.”

Quinn watched as he performed the procedure, filing it away for future reference. Who knew when she might need to do it herself? The batteries on the gate and the electric fence had run out days ago, and the only way to operate the gate was by hand.

In her eyes, this was just another reason to leave. Who had the time to fiddle with gate motors in an emergency? But now was not the time to discuss it, and she pushed the thought aside.

Finally, Keith opened it, and they stepped outside. For Quinn, it was a telling point in their lives. She hadn't set foot outside the property in days and felt open and exposed. Her skin crawled as she looked around, but there wasn't a single hint of life.

"Ready for this?" Jonathan asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Quinn replied.

"Ladies first?" Keith asked with a mocking grin.

"Not a chance," Quinn replied.

"Age before beauty," Jonathan quipped, waving Keith forward.

"Whatever," Keith said, still smiling.

Chuckling, they set off for the neighbors, and Quinn fell into step behind them. Despite her doubts, she was determined to stand by her friends, regardless of the danger.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They waded through the snow, their boots crunching with each laborious step. Quinn scanned the surrounding houses, searching for movement behind the glazed windows, but saw nothing. Not even a curtain twitched. “Stay alert. We don’t know what’s out here.”

Jonathan looked around. “It’s so quiet. Where is everyone?”

“Let’s hope they all left before the freeze,” Keith muttered.

Quinn silently agreed, but deep down, she knew it was unlikely. Some neighbors might have seen the warnings on the news and decided to flee inland where it was supposed to be warmer, but she guessed that most of them hunkered down inside their homes. Which meant…

Quinn shook her head. She didn’t want to think about it. It reminded her too much of the dead student and security guard she’d seen. Gut-wrenching and traumatic.

Blowing out a deep breath, she watched it condense into an icy cloud before evaporating on the wind. Her jacket brushed against a tree, its once-green leaves frozen on the branches above like emerald-colored icicles. The tremor dislodged a patch of snow that fell onto her head. She shook it off, only to notice something solid in the frost, and she frowned. “What is that?”

“What’s what?” Jonathan asked, moving closer.

“I don’t know, it’s… oh, shit!” Quinn yelled, jumping back. “It’s a bird.”

“Is it dead?” Keith asked.

“Of course, it’s dead. Frozen stiff,” Jonathan said, nudging it with his boot.

“Poor thing,” Quinn said, feeling silly for screaming. She looked up into the tree and gasped. More birds sat on the branches, frozen in place by the deep freeze. There, they remained. Locked in winter’s icy embrace.

“Now, we know why it’s so quiet,” Jonathan said.

Swallowing hard, Quinn looked away and forced herself to continue. Already, their adventure was off to a bad start, and she wondered what else

awaited them.

They reached the gate, a sturdy iron barrier blocking their path. Keith vaulted over it, landing with a soft thud in the snow on the other side. He located the gate motor, switched it to manual mode, and pushed it open with a metallic groan.

They walked up the driveway in single file to the front door. Jonathan pulled the crowbar from his backpack and wedged it into the door frame. With a grunt, he applied pressure, and the lock gave way with a sharp crack. The door swung open, revealing a dark and silent interior. Cold air rushed out to meet them, carrying a musty odor of abandonment.

Quinn pulled out her flashlight and swept the beam across the entrance hall. A layer of frost covered every surface, glittering in the light. “Hello? Anyone here?”

Silence.

They stepped inside, closing the door behind them with a dull thud.

“Alright,” Quinn said, her voice low. “Let’s find what we need and get out of here. I don’t like this place. It gives me the creeps.”

Keith nodded. “Let’s check the kitchen first.”

They crept down the hallway, their flashlights dancing across twin rows of family photos. Seconds later, they reached the kitchen, a spacious room with granite countertops and stainless steel appliances. Everything was covered in a layer of dusty ice, giving the room an eerie, abandoned feel. Dirty dishes lingered in the sink, and a half-eaten sandwich sat on the counter.

Quinn’s flashlight swept the space, highlighting the empty cabinets and open refrigerator door. Her shoulders drooped, and she sighed. “Looks like they left in a hurry.”

Jonathan groaned. “Great. Now what?”

“Check if there’s anything left,” Quinn said, and they spread out, opening cabinets and drawers. The sound of their rummaging echoed throughout the silent house.

“Hey, I found some canned soup,” Jonathan called out, holding up a few tins.

“Great, throw them in your bag,” Quinn replied.

Keith checked the fridge. “Most of this stuff is still frozen solid. Think it’s safe to eat?”

Quinn shrugged. “Probably. The cold would have preserved it. Grab what you can carry.”

As they continued their search, a sudden noise from upstairs caused them to freeze in their tracks.

“Did you hear that?” Jonathan whispered, his eyes wide.

Quinn nodded, her heart racing. “Maybe it’s just the house settling?”

Another thump, louder this time.

“That’s not the house,” Keith said, his voice tense.

They exchanged worried glances, unsure of what to do next.

“We should check it out,” Quinn said finally, though she wasn’t sure it was the smart thing to do.

Jonathan shook his head vigorously. “Are you crazy? We should get out of here. Now.”

“What if it’s someone who needs help?” Quinn argued.

Keith sighed. “Quinn’s right. We can’t just leave.”

“Fine, but if it’s a zombie or something, I’m out of here.”

Quinn took the lead, creeping up the stairs like a ghost. The wooden steps creaked underneath her weight, each sound seeming impossibly loud in the abandoned house. Keith and Jonathan were right behind her, their breathing harsh in the silence.

As they reached the top, the noise came again, clearer now. It was coming from the last room at the end of the hall, and Quinn pointed at it with her flashlight. “It’s coming from over there.” The door was closed, and she slowly moved toward it. “Hello?”

Silence.

“Great. Now we have to go into the scary room,” Jonathan said, his voice dry.

“You can go first,” Keith said.

“No way, dude.”

“Why not?” Keith said. “I bet it’s nothing.”

“Then, why don’t you go first?” Jonathan said.

“Ugh. Cowards,” Quinn muttered, reaching for the doorknob. She didn’t feel quite so confident on the inside, however, and her hand shook as she shoved open the door.

Suddenly, a black figure leaped out, hissing as it streaked past her feet. She yelped and stumbled backward, colliding with Keith. He grabbed her by the waist and steadied her when she nearly fell. “Careful!”

Quinn clung to him, her heart in her throat. “What the hell was that?”

“A cat,” Jonathan said, his flashlight following the feline as it darted down the hallway. “It’s just a cat.”

Quinn sagged with relief. “Holy crap, that thing scared me half to death.”

Keith chuckled. “Me too. I thought we were goners.”

Quinn suddenly noticed his hands on her waist, her skin tingling where he touched. The scent of his deodorant teased her nostrils, and a blush crept up her cheeks. Clearing her throat, she said, “Right, er… Where were we?”

“You nearly had a heart attack because of a little kitty cat,” Jonathan joked.

“And I swooped in and saved the day,” Keith added.

“My hero,” Quinn said, rolling her eyes.

Trying to act unbothered, she pulled free from Keith’s grip, uncomfortably aware of Jonathan’s keen gaze. There was something in his eyes that made her wonder. Jealousy, perhaps? *Can’t be. We’re just friends. Nothing more.*

Pushing the thought away, Quinn focused on the present. She swept her flashlight across the space, looking for clues to the mystery feline. It looked like a guest bedroom, sparsely furnished and without any character. The only strange note was the open cupboard, its contents rumpled into a makeshift nest.

Keith picked out a tuft of fur. “It looks like our feline friend made itself at home in the linen closet.”

Quinn noticed a half-open window and moved closer to investigate. “Here’s how it got in and out,” she said, pointing to a nearby tree branch. “An easy way up and down.”

Jonathan pointed at a bunch of bloodied feathers on the floor. “Now we know what it’s been eating.”

“A frozen buffet,” Quinn said.

Suddenly, the window slammed shut, prompted by the icy breeze, before it drifted open again with a slow creak.

“And that’s the noise we heard,” Jonathan said.

“Mystery solved,” Keith said. “Should we head back downstairs and finish what we started?”

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” Quinn agreed. “This place still gives me the creeps.”

Jonathan shuddered. “Yeah, there’s something about this place.”

As they resumed their scavenging, Quinn couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. She glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see the cat perched on a counter, but there was nothing.

Shivering, she stuffed a packet of pasta into her backpack. There wasn’t much else to take. Whoever lived there before took most of the food with them.

“Got everything?” Keith asked, zipping up his backpack.

“I’m done,” Jonathan said.

“Me too,” Quinn replied.

As they left, she cast one last look over her shoulder. A shiver wormed its way up her spine, and she quickened her pace. *I can’t put my finger on it, but something’s wrong with that house.*

As the trio left the house, a dark figure watched from one of the second-story windows. He’d been studying them for days, learning their ways and habits. It merely confirmed his suspicions that they were young but not stupid. They kept out of sight, made minimal noise, and were always on the lookout for danger. Not exactly the soft targets he’d hoped for.

Not that it mattered. He’d already called in the troops, and the plan was set in motion. As the students disappeared from view, the figure melted back into the shadows, gone as quickly as he came.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As they were about to leave, Quinn paused. “Wait, we should check the garage and yard. There might be something useful out here, and what about the Jojo tank?”

Keith nodded. “Good thinking. I almost forgot about that.”

They trudged through the snow-covered lawn, their eyes scanning the area for anything of value. They found the Jojo tank right at the back, hooked up to the plumbing.

Keith dropped to his knees beside the tank, inspecting the pipes connecting it to the building. Looking up at Jonathan, he asked, “See anything we can use?”

“Not really,” Jonathan said, shaking his head. “These fittings are so old and brittle, they’ll break into a gazillion pieces if we try to remove them.”

Keith slumped. “That’s too bad.”

“Maybe the owner had spare parts,” Quinn suggested.

“It’s possible,” Jonathan conceded. “Let’s check the garage.”

They headed toward the low, squat building equipped with automatic doors. Without electricity, they weren’t about to budge. Luckily, there was a side door.

“Allow me,” Jonathan said, producing the crowbar. With a loud crack, he broke the lock, the polished wood protesting the abuse. The door swung wide, revealing the dim interior.

Quinn switched on her flashlight and stepped inside. The yellow beam panned across the space, finding it cluttered but organized. The shelves were stacked with old boxes, each sealed with tape and organized according to its contents.

“Jackpot,” Jonathan said, pointing to a box that read ‘Jojo Tank.’ He opened the box and grinned. “This is exactly what we need.” Opening his backpack, he transferred the contents of the box.

Quinn watched for a while, but her attention was soon drawn to a large object in the center of the garage, covered by a tarp. “What’s that?”

“Let’s have a look,” Keith said, walking over.

They pulled off the cover together, revealing a Toyota Land Cruiser parked underneath. The truck was a beauty and fully equipped for camping with a tent, kitchen unit, shower, gas stove, fridge/freezer, water tank, and two solar panels. The bull bar sported an electrical winch, and the all-terrain tires were brand new.

Keith whistled. “Now, that’s what I call a sweet ride.”

“Uh-huh,” Jonathan said, joining them. “It looks like something out of a National Geographic Magazine.”

Quinn rolled her eyes, not quite as enamored with the truck as they were, but she could see the use in such a vehicle. “Why is it stored under a tarp?”

“Because this baby is not meant for driving around town,” Keith said, patting the side. “This is a workhorse. It’s made for rugged terrain and off-roading.”

“Yeah, the owner probably used it for camping and stuff,” Jonathan added.

“Do you think it runs?” Quinn asked.

“That depends,” Keith said.

“On what?”

“The fuel and the battery,” he said, opening the hood. Whatever he saw caused him to smile. “The battery’s been disconnected.”

Jonathan found a battery tester and hooked it up. “It’s fully charged.”

“That’s one less thing to worry about,” Keith said. “As for the fuel, the truck’s been locked inside and covered with a tarp. If we’re lucky, it didn’t freeze.”

“And if it did?” Quinn asked.

Keith shrugged. “Then, it’s not going anywhere.”

“It might be worth checking out,” Quinn suggested.

“Maybe,” Keith said, kicking a tire. “But these aren’t meant for snow. We’ll end up slipping and sliding all over the place.”

“Not if we go slow,” Jonathan said. “We’d just need to get to the nearest fitment center.”

“Wait here. I’ll be right back,” Quinn said, dashing toward the door.

“Quinn, wait!” Jonathan cried.

“I’ll be fine,” Quinn yelled, not slowing down.

She rushed toward the house, one hand on her sidearm. She'd seen a board with a row of keys inside the foyer and guessed she'd find the Land Rover's keys among them.

Her instincts proved correct when she spotted a bunch with a corresponding badge and yanked them from the wall. Tucking them into her pocket, she hurried back to her friends, her nerves on edge the entire time.

"Where were you?" Jonathan cried when she returned, clearly not pleased with her sudden departure.

"I went looking for these," Quinn said, flashing the keys.

Jonathan's eyes widened. "You found them."

"You bet your ass I did," Quinn said, unlocking the Land Rover's doors with a click of a button. "Will someone connect the battery, please?"

"Hold on," Jonathan said, opening the hood. After fiddling around a bit, he gave her the thumbs up. "Give it a shot."

Quinn turned the key in the ignition, and to everyone's surprise, the engine roared to life. It chugged and shuddered before settling into a smooth purr, the vibrations traveling through her body.

"Holy shit," Jonathan exclaimed, slamming the hood shut. "It worked!"

"This is awesome," Quinn said, her mind dashing from one possibility to another. She filed it away for future reference and was determined to revisit the issue later. While the truck might not be perfect, it could be their ticket out if things got bad.

Finally, she shut off the engine and climbed out. Tucking the keys into her pocket, she panned her flashlight around the garage. "Let's see what else we can find."

They searched the shelves, gathering anything useful: Duct tape, cords, rope, extensions, and plugs. Twenty minutes later, they were done, and it was time to move on.

Quinn zipped up her backpack. "I think that's everything worth taking. What about you, guys?"

"Same here," Jonathan said.

Keith nodded, glancing around one last time. "Alright, let's move on."

They filed out of the garage, pulling the door shut behind them. The splintered wood groaned but stayed in place, and they crossed the yard toward the gate.

"Which one next?" Quinn asked, looking around.

Keith pointed to a two-story colonial across the street. “That one looks promising. It’s a big place and should have more supplies.”

As they approached the house, Quinn couldn’t shake the unease she’d felt earlier. Her skin crawled, and she was sure they were being watched. “I don’t like it. We’re too exposed out here.”

“Agreed,” Jonathan said, hefting his crowbar. “We need to speed things up.”

The second house was open at the front and lacked a boundary fence, so they hurried up the steps toward the front entrance. This time, the door proved much more challenging to open, resisting Jonathan and Keith’s efforts with the crowbar.

Then Quinn spotted an open window protected by burglar bars. “I might be able to squeeze through that if you can pry off the bars.”

“Let’s give it a shot,” Keith said.

Jonathan and Keith approached the window, examining the burglar bars. Jonathan wedged the crowbar between the bars and the frame, grunting as he applied pressure. The metal creaked but held firm.

“Here, let me help,” Keith said. Together, they gripped the crowbar and threw their combined weight behind it. With a loud crack, one side of the bars broke free of the wall.

“Nice work,” Keith said. “One more should do it.”

“Let’s do this,” Jonathan agreed. After a few attempts, the second side gave way, and the bars sprang free with a rusty screech. They put it aside and examined the window, a narrow pane of glass that latched at the bottom.

“Are you sure you want to go in alone?” Jonathan asked, eyeing the dark interior.

Quinn nodded. “I’ll be fine.” She handed over her shotgun and peeled off her jacket, not at all sure she wanted to proceed. But there was no one else who could fit through the narrow opening, and she scraped together her courage. “Can one of you give me a boost?”

“Of course,” Keith said, locking his hands together.

Quinn placed one foot on his hands, and he hoisted her into the air while Jonathan steadied her from the side. Grabbing the windowsill, she wiggled headfirst through the gap. The metal frame cut into her ribs, and her face turned purple with the effort, but she managed to slide all the way through. Suddenly, there was nothing before her but open space. “Oh, crap!”

She tumbled to the floor and landed with a thump, sending a puff of dust into the air. Coughing, she groaned and rolled onto her side. “Ow.”

“Are you alright?” Jonathan called through the window.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Quinn replied, climbing to her feet. She scanned the room, finding herself in what appeared to be a study. It was empty, with no danger in sight, so she relaxed for a bit. “Meet me at the front door.”

“Okay, but be careful!”

“I’m always careful,” Quinn said, rubbing her bruised shoulder and ribs.

On silent feet, she made her way through the dark house, her flashlight cutting through the gloom. The air was stale and musty, and dust covered every surface. It didn’t look like anyone had been there for a while, and she hoped they’d find what they needed to survive the coming weeks.

In the hallway, she spotted a board with various keys on the wall and grabbed the whole lot. It took a while to figure out which key did what, but she finally sorted it out. The door swung open, revealing Keith and Jonathan waiting on the steps, their expressions worried.

“Any trouble?” Jonathan asked.

“Nope. It looks abandoned.”

“That’s a relief,” he said, stepping inside.

Together, they explored the house until they found the kitchen. To their delight, it was fully stocked, with a pantry, fridge, and freezer full to the brim.

Quinn opened the fridge and checked the contents. Due to the low temperatures, everything was frozen, and not all of it could be used. Most of the eggs had burst, and the tomatoes, lettuce, and cucumber were a bust. However, the cheese, yogurt, milk, and berries were salvageable.

“Now, we’re talking,” Keith said, removing a pack of rib-eye steaks from the freezer, followed by lamb chops, beef sausages, and pork-belly ribs. “Guess what we’re doing tonight?”

“Having a braai?” Quinn said, shaking her head.

“You betcha!” Keith said, his eyes shining as he stuffed his backpack with as much meat as he could fit.

Once Quinn finished with the fridge, she moved to the pantry, emptying the shelves into her backpack. It was quick and easy work, but something nagged at the back of her mind. Something… bad. Then it hit her. “Um, guys. If all this stuff is still here, so is the family.”

Jonathan froze mid-movement. “You mean, they never left?”

“What?” Keith said, looking confused. Then his eyes widened. “Oh, shit.”

Quinn swallowed hard, her appetite for scavenging suddenly gone. “They’re probably upstairs.”

“Should we take a look?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t want to, but I think we should,” Quinn said.

“Yeah, it’s better to face this head-on,” Keith said.

“Alright, let’s go,” Jonathan said, zipping up his backpack. “I think we’ve got enough supplies for now anyway.”

They headed to the second story in single file, taking the stairs. Along the way, Quinn’s flashlight caught a series of framed photographs on the wall. She paused, unable to look away. The largest photo showed a family: A father, a mother, and three children, all girls of varying ages. They seemed so happy that it made her heart ache.

“Quinn?” Jonathan said, pausing next to her.

She tore her gaze away from the picture. “They look so happy.”

“Everyone looks happy in their family photos. It’s the reason I don’t trust cameras. It’s all a big sham,” Jonathan replied.

“On social media, perhaps. But real photography is an art capturing the subject’s very essence,” Keith replied, surprising both Quinn and Jonathan.

“Didn’t know you were such a photography buff, Keith,” Quinn said, raising an eyebrow.

Keith shrugged. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“Clearly,” Quinn said, intrigued despite herself. The more she learned about Keith, the more there was to know.

They stepped onto the landing and headed toward the first bedroom. It was a little girl’s room decorated with an inordinate amount of soft toys and fluffy pillows.

To Quinn’s immense relief, it was empty, and she prayed the same applied to the rest of the house. *Maybe they got out in time. Maybe they’re still alive.*

The next room belonged to a teen. Posters of horses and ponies covered the walls, and a shelf lined with ribbons and trophies dominated one corner. A pair of well-worn horse-riding boots lay on the floor, discarded as if their owner had just returned from the stables.

This room was also empty, and the faint hope within Quinn’s chest blossomed. “Maybe they left before the freeze, after all.”

“Or maybe they just weren’t at home when it happened,” Keith said with a slight shrug.

Quinn blinked, her hopes that the happy family might’ve escaped death dashed to pieces. The thought of them getting stuck out in the open during the freeze was painful, and her breath hitched in her throat.

“Shut up, Keith,” Jonathan said, shaking his head, and Quinn never felt more grateful for his support.

The third bedroom was up next, and they approached on cautious feet. The space was sparsely furnished, the main feature an acoustic guitar propped in the corner. A series of photos adorned the walls, showing a young woman posing next to various European landmarks, and she concluded it had to be the oldest daughter’s room.

“Backpacking through Europe,” Jonathan said with a touch of envy. “Must be nice to have rich parents.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be, trust me,” Keith said, his expression somber. “Besides, now’s not a good time to be trapped in Europe, thousands of miles away from home.”

Quinn studied him through her lashes, aware of the hurt in his voice. He missed his parents but was too proud to say it, preferring to keep up the facade of casual indifference he’d worked so hard to create. “I’m sure your parents are okay, Keith. You’ll see them again one day.”

Keith flashed her a grateful look. “I wouldn’t bet on it, but thanks anyway.”

Quinn nodded, and they filed into the hallway in silence. As they approached the last room, her unease returned in full force. Her hand trembled as she reached for the doorknob, and her fingers shied away from its cold touch.

“It’s okay, Quinn. We’re right here with you,” Jonathan said, his touch on her shoulder reassuring.

“Thanks,” she whispered, twisting the knob.

The door swung open, and the hope within her chest shattered into a million pieces. On the King-sized bed lay four figures buried under a mound of blankets. They were stiff and unmoving, their faces frozen as if deep asleep, but Quinn knew better. “Oh, God.”

“I’m sorry, Quinn,” Jonathan said, stepping forward.

“Yeah, me too,” Keith added. “This isn’t what any of us wanted.”

“No, it’s not,” Quinn said, staring at the family on the bed. She’d desperately wanted them to still be alive. Safe and warm in some mythical place where the sun always shone, and nothing bad happened. Then she noticed something. “She’s not here. The oldest daughter. She must still be overseas.”

“Poor girl,” Keith said, his expression stark.

“Maybe… maybe she’s still alive,” Quinn added, unwilling to let the last shred of hope die.

“Maybe,” Jonathan agreed.

“I’m sure she is,” Keith added.

“Thanks, guys. For everything,” Quinn said, allowing them to lead her away.

Once outside, Quinn took a deep breath of the frigid air, trying to clear her head. The peaceful neighborhood suddenly felt oppressive, each house a potential minefield of tragedy. “Can we go home, please? I’ve had enough for one day.”

“Alright, let’s head back,” Keith said, striking a course for home.

Quinn took one last look at the house. Its dark windows seemed to stare at her, and a shudder ran down her spine. It wasn’t a home anymore; it was a tomb, forever guarding a terrible secret.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Together, the three of them crossed the street, their backpacks filled with supplies. Despite that bounty, there was not a single smile among them. They walked in silence, bowed down by the horror of what they'd seen.

Quinn walked on autopilot, hardly noticing her surroundings. She couldn't shake the image of that family, frozen in time, or the missing daughter who might still be out there somewhere. It was a stark reminder of how quickly everything had changed and how fragile their situation was.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan asked, joining her.

"No," Quinn said, staring at her feet.

"It'll get better."

"Will it?"

"Yeah, I hate to say it, but we'll see much more of this kind of thing in the future," Jonathan said. "Every house we raid, every car we see could have dead people in it."

"So, you're saying we'll get used to it?"

"Probably."

"That's even worse."

Jonathan sighed. "Tell me what you want me to say."

"It's just… that could've been us in there."

"I know, but it's not," Jonathan said. "Thanks to you."

"Me?" Quinn asked, surprised.

"Yes, you. You're the one who came up with the plan that got us through the freeze. We'd all be dead today if it weren't for you."

Quinn stared at him for a few seconds, taken aback. "You really think so?"

"Yes, I do," Jonathan said, bumping his shoulder against hers. "Now stop moping around. It doesn't suit you."

"I'll try."

"Promise?"

"Promise," Quinn said, flashing him a smile.

“Glad to hear it,” Jonathan said, and they crossed the road feeling more like their usual selves. Once they reached the entrance to Keith’s home, he opened the gate and headed toward the motor.

“Wait, Keith. Can I try? I want to learn.”

“Yeah, sure. Go ahead,” Keith said, waving at the motor.

Quinn knelt in the snow, her gloved hands working the mechanism. With a soft click, she locked the gate in place on the tracks. “There,” she said, brushing the snow from her knees. “That should do it.”

Keith tested the gate and nodded with approval when it didn’t budge. “Good job. You’re learning fast.”

Quinn grinned, feeling absurdly pleased with herself. The more she knew, the better her chances at survival, and she planned on stacking the deck. With renewed determination, she marched toward the back of the yard. “Come on, guys. I’m ready to call it a day.”

“Yeah, me too,” Jonathan agreed.

“I’m hungry,” Keith added.

“You’re always hungry,” Quinn said, but the thought of food also set her off. Images of a juicy burger with golden fries and a strawberry milkshake rose to taunt her. When would they ever have the chance to eat something like that again? And what about pizza? Waffles? Or sushi?

It was a depressing thought, and she pushed it aside, focusing on her footing instead. Each step was an effort, and her backpack dug deep grooves into her shoulders. Luckily, it wasn’t far, and they soon reached their home.

The instant they walked into the open, Zenelia and Gwen spilled out of the Den, running toward them like they’d been gone forever. Stella followed at a more sedate pace, her dark eyes watchful.

“Thank goodness you’re back,” Zenelia cried, throwing herself into Keith’s embrace with a happy squeal. “We were starting to worry.”

“No need to worry. We’re fine,” Keith replied.

“You didn’t have any trouble?” Stella asked, her gaze shrewd.

“Nope. Nothing,” Keith said, evading her question.

“I see,” she said, clearly not convinced.

“Did you find anything useful?” Gwen asked, eyeing their bulging packs.

Keith grinned. “We found plenty. Wait till you see what’s for dinner tonight.”

“Let’s get inside and show them,” Jonathan suggested, stamping his feet to shake off the snow. “It’s freezing out here.”

“I hope you made coffee,” Quinn said.

“Even better. Hot chocolate,” Gwen said.

“Oh, my God. I love you,” Quinn said.

As they filed into the warmth of the Den, she felt a surge of gratitude for the people around her. They were more than her friends. They were family, and she’d do anything for them. Anything at all.

Stomping her feet, she shook off the excess snow and stepped inside. The warm atmosphere embraced her, and the exposed skin on her face tingled as the circulation returned. With a groan of relief, she shrugged off her gun and backpack and sagged into the nearest chair. “Oh, that feels good.”

“Tired?” Gwen asked.

“Exhausted,” Quinn said, realizing this was the truth. Every muscle in her body ached, and it felt good to get off her feet.

“Hot chocolate?” Gwen said, offering her a steaming cup.

“Oh, you’re a star,” Quinn said, cradling the cup in her palms.

“Let me take that,” Gwen said, picking up the full backpack by her feet and unpacking the contents. She stacked it on the counter while Stella updated their inventory.

“Look at this,” Gwen exclaimed, holding up the pack of rib-eye steaks. “Plus, there’s lamb chops, sausages, pork ribs, you name it.”

“Lamb? I love lamb,” Zenelia said.

“Good, because tonight, we’re having a braai,” Keith announced, waving the tongs. “And not some sissy gas barbecue either. A real braai.”

“How?” Jonathan asked, caught up in the logistics. “There’s a grill next to the swimming pool, but what about wood?”

“There’s a stack by the fireplace in the lounge. We can bring it here, no problem.”

Gwen’s eyes widened. “Oh my God, a real braai. It’s been so long, it feels like forever.”

Zenelia clapped her hands together. “Let’s make a party of it. We could all use some fun, right?”

“A party?” Quinn echoed with reluctance.

But the idea quickly caught on, and everyone pitched in with the preparations. Keith cleaned the grill while Jonathan swept and dusted the

patio, Gwen prepared a curry noodle salad, Zenelia made snacks, and Stella was responsible for the drinks.

Watching it all from afar, Quinn wasn't sure how she felt about it. Part of her wanted to join in the excitement, but another part thought it was silly given their circumstances. Silly and dangerous.

Noticing her hesitation, Jonathan said, "Come on, Quinn. Even you have to relax sometimes. It can't be all work and no play."

"What if something happens while we're busy partying?"

"Like what? You mean looters?"

"Exactly."

"We'll set up a Watch Roster like we always do."

"That won't do us any good if we're drunk," Quinn said, wiping down the coffee table.

"I don't plan on drinking much. Maybe one or two beers."

"And what about the others?" Quinn asked. "You can't stop them from doing what they want."

"You're overthinking this," Jonathan said. "It'll be fine, I promise."

"If you say so," Quinn murmured, watching him leave.

Disappointed by his lack of understanding, she returned to cleaning the Den. After dusting the couches and fluffing the gazillion pillows, she swept and mopped the floor. Next, she checked that the dark curtains covering the windows were intact and made everyone's beds.

While Quinn worked, she tried to think of a solution but came up empty. If Jonathan couldn't understand why the party was a bad idea, none of them would. They were too eager and too starved for fun to listen. The best she could do was stay sober and keep a lookout for danger. *I guess it's up to me tonight.*

With that thought in mind, she spent the afternoon preparing for a long, sleepless night on patrol. After tidying the Den, she took a quick shower and dressed, not forgetting her snow pants and boots.

The Z88 rode in its customary place on her hip while Quinn kept her parka, gloves, beanie, scarf, flashlight, and rifle nearby, ready to go immediately. Finally, she tucked a couple of energy drinks and bars into her pockets, fuel for the long night.

Satisfied, Quinn headed toward the Den, ducking inside the entrance. There, she paused, amazed by the transformation. The previously bare

room, mostly concrete, glass, and brick, looked warm and inviting, in stark contrast to the world of snow and ice outside.

Lanterns hung from the rafters, casting a golden glow over the space. A fire flickered inside the Weber Grill, and music played from a rechargeable radio in the corner. A checkered cloth and a colorful array of snacks and drinks decorated the wooden table, adding to the atmosphere.

“Hey, look who finally made it,” Jonathan said when he spotted her.

“Oh, shut up,” Quinn said, joining him next to the fire. “I wasn’t that long.”

“You took forever,” Jonathan said, sagging exaggeratedly. “Did you get distracted?”

“Distracted by what?” Quinn said, smacking him on the shoulder.

“I dunno. Your pretty face in the mirror?”

“What pretty face?” Quinn said, rolling her eyes.

“You do have a pretty face,” Keith agreed.

“With these chapped lips? You’ve got to be joking,” Quinn said, not missing the look Zenelia shot her way. The girl was known for her jealousy, which Quinn found rather tiresome, but she didn’t want trouble and changed the subject.

“Is that food, I see? I’m starving,” Quinn said, pointing to the snack platter on the table.

“Yeah, I made snacks. Help yourself,” Zenelia said, her smile a little brighter.

“Thanks,” Quinn said, hurrying away. She sat down at the table and helped herself to crackers topped with smoked mussels and cheese. The tasty treats proved to be an excellent distraction, and she relaxed a little.

“Beer?” Stella asked, sitting down opposite her.

Quinn stared at the bottle. “Maybe later.”

“Are you sure? You look like you could use one.”

“I’m sure,” Quinn replied. “Besides, I need to watch my weight. All this sitting around and eating my head off is not doing me any favors.”

Stella snorted. “Who cares? Do whatever you want.”

“What I want is no longer on the cards,” Quinn said, feeling nostalgic. “I’ll never get to finish my degree, inherit the vineyard, or make my own wine.”

“Wow, that sucks. Not getting to make wine?” Stella joked, her expression woefully tragic.

“Ha ha, laugh if you want, but it was the life I wanted,” Quinn said. “What about you?”

“I wanted to be a cop like my mom.”

“A cop? Noble endeavor,” Quinn said, striving to keep a straight face.

“What’s wrong with being a cop?” Stella asked, picking up on her disbelief. “I get to arrest people and shoot stuff. What’s not to love?”

“When you put it like that,” Quinn said. “Wait a minute. If you wanted to be a cop, what were you doing at university?”

“Let’s just say my mom and I disagreed on my career choice. She wanted me to be a lawyer.”

“A lawyer?” Quinn said, choking on a cracker.

“Laugh all you want,” Stella said, her nose in the air. “But I think I’d make a great lawyer.”

“I’m sure you would,” Quinn said, struggling to envision Stella in a business suit and high heels.

Suddenly, Zenelia’s high-pitched voice cut through the air. “I’m telling you, the marinade needs more garlic, Gwen.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does.”

“If you add too much garlic, it’ll overpower the rosemary,” Gwen argued.

“No, it won’t!”

As the argument grew more intense, Stella groaned and got up. “Excuse me. I’ve got some lamb chops to rescue.”

“Have fun,” Quinn said, torn between amusement and concern. “Such a fuss over marinade,” Jonathan said, joining her by the table.

“Did you make your escape?” Quinn joked.

“You betcha. I don’t want to be dragged into that fight.”

Jonathan sat down next to Quinn, his body angled toward her. An awkward silence, thick with unspoken tension, fell between them.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, trying to break the stalemate.

Jonathan cleared his throat. “I… um… I need to ask you something.”

“Sure, go ahead,” Quinn said, though she had a sinking feeling that something was about to go wrong.

“Do you have feelings for Keith?” he blurted out.

Quinn’s eyes widened. “What? No! Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“I saw the way you looked at him earlier, and I had to know.”

“That’s ridiculous. There’s nothing between Keith and me. I swear it,” Quinn said, though a tiny voice at the back of her mind disagreed.

“Okay,” Jonathan said slowly. “And what about us?”

“Us?” Quinn asked, confusion setting in. “We’re friends, aren’t we? Have been since the first day we met on campus.”

“That’s all? Just friends?”

“I… isn’t that enough?” Quinn asked, her stomach churning.

“I don’t know,” Jonathan said, his eyes searching her face. “It’s just… these past few days, things have changed, and I kind of hoped you felt the same.”

Quinn swallowed hard, trying to form the right words. She wanted to say yes, but couldn’t. The words just wouldn’t leave her lips.

Jonathan’s face fell. “I see.”

“Jonathan, please,” Quinn started, reaching out to touch his arm, but he pulled away.

“It’s fine,” he said, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I should go help Keith with the steaks. He probably needs a hand.”

Before Quinn could say anything else, Jonathan stood up and walked away, leaving her alone with her turbulent thoughts. Unable to sit still, she jumped up and grabbed her gear, leaving the Den and its occupants behind. She needed time to think. Lots and lots of time.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Quinn stomped through the snow, ignoring the biting wind and frozen sleet. She was angry, though she didn't know why. Angry at Jonathan for springing his feelings on her? Or angry at herself for not seeing it coming? Or both? "Stupid, stupid. Why didn't I see the signs?"

It was an excellent question, and as usual, she didn't have the answer. The only option she had was to take her frustration out on the snow. Stomp. Stomp.

Finally, Quinn stopped and took a moment to breathe. The silence enveloped her like a cloak, broken only by the sounds of the night. An owl hooted in the distance, and she saw a couple of bats flit through the air. Crickets sang in the background, and she was filled with awe. While millions of people died in the freeze overnight, nature found a way to survive.

Lifting her face to the heavens, Quinn admired the night sky. It looked like a sable cloth studded with diamonds, and the moon hung full and fat above her head, its silver light coating the earth like silver paint. It was a harsh but beautiful world filled with contrasts and sharp edges.

But tonight, all she could think about was Jonathan and the hurt in his eyes. He'd caught her off guard, asking the one question she'd never expected. *I thought he was happy being friends. Only friends.*

Now, she didn't know what to think. Her world had been turned upside down in an instant, and her mind was in turmoil. Did she have feelings for him? Or did she secretly have the hots for Keith?

Suddenly, a twig snapped in the distance, and she froze, her hands gripping the shotgun. Peering into the gloom, she searched for the source of the noise. "Jonathan?"

Footsteps from behind sounded, and she whirled around. "Jon—"

A dark figure appeared out of nowhere, moving so fast that Quinn barely had time to register. Pain exploded throughout her skull, and her

knees buckled, hitting the ground. Stunned, she toppled over, falling face-first into the snow.

Her attacker loomed over her, a shadowy, faceless menace. She blinked at it, her vision skewed. As the darkness closed in, she had time for a single, coherent thought. “Why?”

Time lost all meaning as Quinn drifted in and out of awareness. The cold seeped into her bones until it became her entire world, a numbing sensation that pushed all other thoughts from her brain. She floated in this icy limbo, tethered to life by the slenderest of threads.

The crack of gunshots shattered the silence, jolting her back to consciousness. Panic surged through her veins like acid, burning away the fog. Who fired that shot? Were her friends in danger? Were they hurt? Or worse?

With a pained groan, Quinn forced herself upright, determined to help her friends. But her skull felt like it’d been cracked open, and her stomach revolted. Bile surged to her lips, and she vomited into the snow, each wretched spasm causing her head to throb.

When the sickness finally subsided, she dragged one shaky hand across her lips and fumbled for her fallen flashlight and shotgun. Locating both, she struggled to her feet and ran toward the Den.

“Please,” she whispered, her lungs burning with the effort. “Please let me make it in time.”

As Quinn approached the ring of trees and brush surrounding the patio, she slowed. Caution replaced haste, and she advanced with the shotgun ready to shoot. Weaving through the foliage, she kept her eyes peeled.

The wind whistled through the branches overhead, and the bushes rustled, each tiny sound causing her to jump. The crunch of her boots sounded deafening to her ears, and she imagined the attackers could hear every step. *Not so loud. Not so loud!*

Suddenly, her boot slipped on a patch of dark liquid, and she almost fell. Pointing her flashlight at the mystery stain, she sucked in a horrified breath.

Blood.

Swallowing hard, Quinn followed the trail, each droplet like a tiny clue to a puzzle she needed to solve. It led into a clump of bushes where she found a body dressed in black and wearing a ski mask. She nudged the man with her boot before checking for a pulse, but there was nothing. Nothing but rapidly cooling skin. Sitting back on her heels, she stared at the corpse,

not sure what she was supposed to feel. Happy? Sad? Guilty? It didn't matter. He was the enemy.

Without wasting another second, Quinn charged toward the patio and barged inside. There, she paused and looked around, the room faintly lit by the coals from the fire. "Jonathan! Keith! Anyone?"

A faint groan sounded from the furthest corner. "Q… Quinn?"

"Jonathan?"

Quinn rushed over, finding her friend propped up against the wall, his face pale. She dropped to her knees beside him, her hands trembling as they hovered over his body. "Are you okay? Where are the others? What happened?"

He shook his head, his eyes struggling to focus. "We were attacked. I don't know where… where the others are. I'm sorry, Quinn. You were right. We should've been more careful."

"It's okay," Quinn said. "We'll figure this out. We'll—"

"No," Jonathan interrupted, his voice barely above a whisper. "Forget about me. It's too late. Save the others."

"Don't be silly," Quinn insisted, but her flashlight drifted down to his stomach, and her heart plummeted. Rich, red blood soaked his clothing and spread across the floor, pooling on the rough tiles.

"Oh, God. This is bad." She pressed both hands to his middle, feeling the warm, sticky blood seep through her fingers.

Jonathan cried out, his face contorting in pain.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice cracking.

"Forget about me. Go help the others," he said, breaking into a rattling cough.

"I can't do that. I'm not leaving—"

The sharp crack of gunfire cut through the air, followed by a piercing scream that made her blood run cold.

"Go," Jonathan urged. "They need you."

With a strangled sob, Quinn squeezed his hand one last time before forcing herself to her feet. She wiped her bloody hands on her coat, gripped the shotgun with both hands, and plunged into the Den, leaving the flashlight behind.

Her eyes struggled to adjust to the gloom as she moved through the space, guided by a single flickering lamp. As she rounded the kitchen counter, she stumbled across a familiar figure. "Keith!"

Quinn rushed to his side, her fingers trembling as she pressed them against his neck. A pulse thrummed beneath her touch, weak but steady. A large, bloody lump on his forehead explained his unconscious state, and she slumped with relief. “Thank God.”

A sudden squeak of rubber on tile caused her to spin around, her heart leaping into her throat. She found herself face-to-face with another intruder, his gun raised to fire.

Quinn threw herself to the side, and the bullet whizzed past her ear. In the same fluid motion, she brought up her shotgun and squeezed the trigger. The blast was deafening in the confined space, and her head rang like a bell.

The force of the buckshot tore through the man’s midriff, lifting him off his feet and slamming him against the wall. He slid to the floor, leaving a crimson smear in his wake.

Before she could process what happened, a cry echoed from the bathroom, and her blood ran cold. *Zenelia.*

Without hesitation, she sprinted towards the sound, her boots sliding on the slippery floor. As she neared the bathroom, another scream pierced the air, this one filled with terror. “Let me go. Let me go!”

Quinn skidded to a halt as the bathroom door swung open, revealing Zenelia and Gwen, their faces streaked with terror. They stumbled through the doorway, clinging to each other. A man followed, his gun pointed at their backs. He glanced at Quinn, his voice muffled by his mask. “Drop your weapon.”

Quinn shook her head. “Let them go.”

The intruder growled. “You’re in no position to make demands. Drop the gun, or I’ll kill them both.”

Quinn’s eyes darted around, searching for help, but found none. Jonathan lay bleeding in the other room, Keith was unconscious, and Stella was nowhere to be seen. She was alone.

“You and your friends put up quite a fight,” the man said with a hint of admiration.

“Yeah?” Quinn said, playing for time. “How so?”

“We weren’t expecting such a determined defense. At least, my partners weren’t.”

“Partners?”

The intruder shrugged. “They’re dead, but it’s over now. Give up, and I’ll let you live.”

“You’d let us go? All of us?” Quinn asked, suspicion underlining each word.

“All of you,” the man agreed. “I want this house and the stuff inside. Not you.”

Quinn’s jaw clenched. She knew it was a lie. Even if he did let them go, they’d never survive a night out in the cold. Time seemed to slow as she weighed up her options.

“You’d better hurry. I don’t have all night.” The man’s finger tightened on the trigger, and Zenelia whimpered.

Quinn’s mind raced, knowing that whatever she decided next would determine whether they lived or died.

A gunshot rang out, shocking everyone into silence. The intruder stiffened, his mouth working soundlessly. He fell to his knees and coughed. Blood exploded from his lips as he toppled over.

Behind him stood Stella, a smoking gun in her hand. “Sorry, I’m late.”

“You’re not late. You’re just in time,” Quinn said, weak with relief. The adrenaline that had been coursing through her veins began to ebb. Then she remembered Keith and Jonathan. With a herculean effort, she scraped together the remainder of her strength. “Zenelia, Gwen. Help Keith. He’s in the kitchen, unconscious but alive. Stella, we need the first aid box. Jonathan’s been shot.”

The urgency in Quinn’s voice jolted everyone into action. Zenelia and Gwen rushed towards the kitchen while Stella sprinted for the medical supplies.

Quinn hurried back to the patio, worry suffusing her mind. Jonathan lay where she’d left him, his skin as pale as wax. She dropped to her knees beside him, tapping her fingers against his cheek. “Wake up, Jon. It’s me, Quinn.”

“Q… Quinn?”

“Yes, Jon. I’m here. Right here.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice barely audible.

“It’s okay,” Quinn said, but Jonathan shook his head.

“Go home, Quinn,” he said, his eyes growing distant. “You belong there.”

“Not without you,” Quinn insisted, but even as the words left her mouth, she felt his grip loosen. His head dropped to his chest, and his eyes glazed over.

“Jonathan?” Quinn cried, shaking him. When he didn’t respond, she shook harder. “Jonathan, please. Wake up!” But nothing happened, and she was forced to accept the truth. “Jonathan.”

“Is he… is he gone?”

Quinn looked up to see Stella clutching the first aid box to her chest. They stared at each other for a moment, united in their anguish.

Then, the smell of smoke reached her nostrils, and she frowned. “Is that smoke?”

“Smoke?” Stella repeated.

Suddenly, Gwen burst into the patio, her expression wild. “Guys, we have a problem.”

Quinn stared at her. “What? What is it?”

“The house is on fire.”

Those simple words were enough to make Quinn’s world implode. Everything seemed to blur around her, fading to a distant hum. She knew everyone was looking to her for answers, but she couldn’t move or think, paralyzed by the weight of their expectations.

Her gaze drifted down to her hands, still sticky with Jonathan’s blood. The sight made her stomach churn. All she wanted was to curl up in a corner and cry until no tears were left. To let the grief and fear wash over her until she drowned in it.

“Quinn. What do we do?” Gwen’s panicked voice penetrated the fog, sharp and urgent.

The world suddenly shifted into focus, and she stared at the people gathered before her—a tiny knot of shivering humanity: Gwen, wide-eyed and trembling, Stella, determined despite the fear in her eyes, and Zenelia, supporting a groggy Keith. They were all looking at her, waiting for her to lead them.

The realization hit her like a punch to the gut. She was all they had, and she needed to step up now if they hoped to survive the night. There would be time to mourn later. Right now, her friends needed her.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY

Quinn took one last look at Jonathan before she climbed to her feet, ready to face the world again. “Okay, listen up. We don’t have much time. Grab a duffel bag and load it with all our guns and ammunition. Don’t forget the intruders’ weapons.”

Stella nodded. “I’m on it.”

“Gwen, gather as many blankets as you can.”

Gwen didn’t hesitate, rushing to obey.

Quinn turned to Zenelia, who was still supporting a dazed Keith. “Grab his gear and the first aid kit, and get him away from the fire. He’s your responsibility.”

Zenelia nodded, guiding Keith towards the exit.

As her friends scrambled to follow her orders, Quinn dashed inside, racing to the Den. A broken lantern lay on the floor, and the flames engulfed the curtains. Smoke filled the room, and she covered her mouth with her scarf.

Hurrying to her corner, she snatched up her bag and the keys to the neighbor’s Land Rover. Next, she headed toward the kitchen and grabbed another bag, shoving in whatever food and water she could find.

By the time she finished, the fire had spread. Flames licked up the walls and spread across the ceiling, the heat so intense it singed her eyelashes. Sweat poured down her face, and the acrid smoke filled her lungs. Struggling to breathe, she yelled, “Everyone out! Now!”

Staggering toward the exit, she found her friends huddled outside, their faces smeared with soot. The night air felt bitterly cold after the inferno inside, and she knew they couldn’t linger for long.

“Is everyone here?” Quinn asked, doing a quick headcount. “Good. Let’s move. We need to get as far away from here as possible.”

As they gathered their stuff, Quinn allowed herself one last glance at the burning house. The flames reached high into the night sky, consuming everything they’d called home for the past few weeks. She thought of

Jonathan, still inside, and felt a pang of guilt and sorrow. But there was no time for grief, and she turned away from the blaze, leading her friends into the darkness.

With hurried footsteps, they headed toward the neighbor's house, their breathing labored. The gate loomed ahead, a formidable barrier in the moonlight, but Quinn didn't hesitate. She dropped to her haunches next to the motor and quickly switched it to manual. With a grunt, she shoved the heavy gate open and ushered her friends through the gap. "Come on, guys. Just a little bit farther."

Keith mumbled something incoherent, his head hanging low on his chest. She watched him for a few seconds, more worried than she was willing to admit. His injury was worse than hers. Her thick hood had provided some protection from her attacker's blows, and she'd gotten off lightly.

"This way," she whispered, guiding them toward the neighbor's garage. The broken side door hung ajar, creaking ominously in the wind. They slipped inside and huddled together, seeking comfort in each other's presence.

They looked like a ragtag bunch of orphans, and she marveled at how quickly their fortunes had changed. One minute, they were having a party, and the next, they were down one member and tossed out into the cold.

Stella's voice cut through the darkness. "Quinn, what are we doing here?"

"I've got a way out," Quinn said, pointing to the tarp-covered truck in the corner. "Give me a hand, please."

Together, they pulled off the cover, revealing the Land Rover underneath. "Get Keith into the backseat and keep him warm and hydrated. We'll have a look at his injuries as soon as possible."

"Shouldn't we take him to a hospital?" Zenelia asked, her voice shrill.

"Zee," Quinn said, feeling helpless. "I don't think you'll find any that are still open."

"But…" Zenelia began, then realized what she was asking. With millions dead, the infrastructure crumbling under zero temperatures, no communications, and no electricity, the country was crippled. The government was nowhere to be seen, and it was every man, woman, or child for themselves.

Quinn handed them the bag filled with food and bottled water, the first aid kit, and the blankets. “Just do what you can for now.” Then, she turned to Stella. “I need your help. We’ve got to open the garage doors and connect the battery.”

“Of course,” Stella said, bobbing her head. She followed Quinn to the garage doors, where they located the manual release. With an ungodly screech, the doors slid open, and they turned their attention to the Land Rover.

“Sorry, but I don’t know how the batteries work,” Stella said.

“That’s okay. I do,” Quinn said. “Farm girl, remember.”

“You’re much more than that, Quinn,” Stella said, her expression somber.

“Thanks,” Quinn said, acknowledging the statement with an equally sober look. “Can you pop the hood for me?”

“Sure,” Stella said, jumping into the cab.

She pushed the switch, and Quinn propped it open. After connecting the terminals, she closed the hood and slid behind the wheel, twisting the key in the ignition. The engine chugged, sputtering and wheezing, but it refused to start. Her heart raced as she tried repeatedly, each attempt more desperate than the last.

“Come on. Come on,” Quinn muttered, her knuckles white on the steering wheel.

“What’s wrong?” Stella asked.

“It won’t start,” Quinn said, fighting to keep the panic from her voice. “Wait, I have an idea.”

She reached down and pulled out the choke, flooding the engine with gasoline. With trembling fingers, she turned the key once more. The engine coughed, then rumbled to life, the sound choppy and uneven.

Quinn held her breath, willing it to keep running. Slowly, the sputtering evened out into a steady purr as the engine warmed up, and she slumped onto the steering wheel. “Thank God.”

She allowed herself to feel the weight of everything that had happened, but she knew they couldn’t afford to linger.

Sitting upright, Quinn took a deep, fortifying breath and gripped the wheel with both hands. She glanced at her friends, each looking at her like she was their savior. *Am I?*

In the end, it didn’t matter. Hero or not, they needed a leader. Someone to shoulder the responsibility and take the blame when things went wrong. It was human nature, and they would never be more human than at that time. “Alright, guys. Let’s get out of here, but first, I need to make a pit stop.”

She shifted into gear and eased the Land Rover out of the garage and onto the street, her hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. Once they were out in the open, she parked in front of Keith’s home, leaving the engine running.

“Where are you going?” Stella asked, her expression alarmed.

“I stashed some bug-out bags nearby in case of emergency. We’ll need them on the road ahead.”

“Let me help,” Stella offered.

“I’d rather you keep watch,” Quinn said, waving a hand at the darkness, now illuminated by the raging inferno that used to be their home. “Who knows what trouble this fire might bring?”

“If you’re sure,” Stella said, one hand resting on her Glock.

“I’m sure, and don’t wait for me. If the shit hits the fan, go,” Quinn said, sliding out of her seat.

“Wait,” Gwen cried. “Let me help.”

Quinn hesitated, but Gwen was already out of the truck and moving. “Where are those bags?”

“Over there,” Quinn said, pointing the way to a large oak tree, its bare branches stretching into the night sky. They dropped to their knees, digging through the snow until their fingers brushed against canvas.

“Gotcha,” Quinn said, pulling out six backpacks, one for each of them. She faltered when she realized Jonathan would never get to use his and gazed at the burning building that had become his tomb.

“Quinn?” Gwen said, reaching out with one hesitant hand. Her soft touch reminded Quinn of her duty, and she looked away from the flames.

Hauling herself to her feet, she lugged three bags toward the Rover and tossed them into the back. Gwen followed suit, and within minutes, they were back inside the truck and ready to go.

“Bug-out bags, huh?” Stella asked, chuckling. “I should’ve known you’d think of something like that.”

Quinn shrugged. “I’m paranoid, I guess.”

“Not paranoid. Smart. Because of you, we stand a fighting chance,” Stella said.

“Maybe,” Quinn said, glancing at the dashboard’s display. Her eyes fell on the fuel gauge. The needle hovered just below half, not what she’d hoped.

“So, where to now?” Stella asked, trying to put on a brave face.

“Now, we find the nearest tire shop. We need proper snow tires, or we’re not going far. After that, it’s the gas station. We only have half a tank of fuel.”

“Sound good, but after that?”

Quinn didn’t know what to say for a second, then Jonathan’s last words echoed in her mind. “Go home, Quinn. You belong there.”

“We’re going home. My home,” Quinn said, looking at each of her friends in turn.

When no one objected, she shifted into gear and cranked up the heat. Easing her foot onto the accelerator, she pulled away, careful not to go too fast in the icy conditions.

She knew the road ahead was long and treacherous, filled with unknown dangers and obstacles. But she was done hiding in fear and living from hand to mouth. For better or worse, this was their new reality, and the sooner they came to terms with it, the better. *Mom. Dad. I’m coming home.*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

NOLAN

They stepped out into a world gone mad. The wind drove the snow horizontally, slicing across their faces like tiny razors. Nolan gasped as the cold air filled his lungs, momentarily stealing his breath away. His father gripped his arm, steadying him.

“Keep your head down!” Johan shouted over the howling storm. “And stay close!”

They struggled across the porch and down the steps, leaning into the wind like sailors on a tilting deck. The vehicles loomed ahead, parked where Nolan put them mere hours before, and he thanked the heavens that he’d thought of doing it. Walking to the garage would’ve been almost impossible.

Once they reached Johan’s truck, the new Toyota he’d bought a year before, they wasted no time. Johan slid behind the wheel and inserted the key. The engine cranked once, twice, but didn’t catch.

“Come on, old girl,” Johan muttered, pumping the gas pedal.

On the third try, the engine roared to life, and Johan smiled. “Told you she’d start.”

Nolan clambered into the passenger seat, stamping his feet to restore circulation. His father revved the engine, waiting for it to warm up, and they cranked up the heat. Warm air flooded the cab, granting blessed relief from the frigid cold.

“Ready?” Johan asked, gripping the steering wheel with gloved hands.

Nolan nodded, his jaw clenched against the cold. “Let’s go.”

Johan left the parking area, turned the wheel, and headed toward the gate. It was a short drive, the wheels crunching on the snow-covered gravel with the windswept trees looming on either side.

The headlights cut through the darkness, illuminating the exit with the arched sign reading “Sweet Meadow Valley.”

“Sorry, son, but this was your idea,” Johan said, pointing at the gate.

“I know,” Nolan said, nerving himself for the ordeal. He opened the door and dashed toward the gate, running as fast as possible. He was almost there when his foot slipped on a patch of ice, and he went down hard, landing on his ass. Feeling like a fool, he got back to his feet, unlocking and opening the gate with his keys.

Johan drove through, and Nolan closed the gate behind him before returning to the truck, only to find his father chuckling at his earlier misfortune. “You went down like a ton of bricks, son.”

“Haha, very funny,” Nolan said, shifting around on the seat. His pants were wet where he’d fallen in the snow, an uncomfortable feeling.

A turn to the left put them on the road and headed toward the neighboring farm belonging to the Le Roux’s. It wasn’t far, but the tires slipped on the icy asphalt, and it was slow going. They crept forward at a snail’s pace, the headlights barely penetrating the wall of white before them.

“Can you see anything?” Nolan asked, straining to identify landmarks in the transformed landscape.

“Barely,” Johan admitted. “I’m following the fence line.”

The truck lurched as a gust of wind slammed into its side. Johan corrected, his knuckles white around the steering wheel. “This is worse than I thought.”

Nolan didn’t respond. His eyes scanned the roadside, looking for the gates announcing the Le Roux’s farm, the Berry and Cork Estate.

Minutes stretched into what felt like hours as they crawled along the road. The windshield wipers fought a losing battle against the accumulating snow, and the defroster worked overtime to keep the glass clear.

“There!” Nolan suddenly shouted, pointing to a dark mass. “I think I see something!”

“What is it?” Johan asked, slowing until they almost weren’t moving at all.

“It’s the turn-off,” Nolan said, pointing to the sign above the gate. “There.”

“Thank God,” Johan sighed, easing the truck onto the gravel road.

Nolan leapt from the truck again, the snow biting his exposed skin. The gate loomed before him, covered by a thick coating of ice and snow. He reached for the latch, already knowing what he would find.

“It’s locked!” he yelled, but his voice was lost in the howling wind.

Once he reached the truck, he repeated his sentence, and Johan said, “There are bolt cutters behind the seat.”

Nolan fumbled around until his gloved hands closed on metal. The bolt cutters were heavy, designed for farm work, and he gripped them tightly as he made his way back to the gate.

The lock was a simple padlock, standard issue for most farms in the area. Usually, it would be no challenge at all, but with his hands already growing numb and the wind threatening to knock him off his feet, it took three attempts before the jaws of the bolt cutters snapped through the metal.

The chain fell away, and Nolan pushed the gate open, holding it steady as his father drove through. He secured it again with the loose chain—no sense in letting it swing free in the wind—and hurried back to the truck.

“You okay?” Johan asked as Nolan climbed back in, bringing a swirl of snow and ice with him.

“Fine,” Nolan replied through chattering teeth. “Freezing my ass off, but fine.”

They continued down the driveway, the headlights reflecting off the snow-laden trees that lined the path. The Le Roux farmhouse appeared in the distance, a dark silhouette against the white landscape. A single light burned in what Nolan knew to be the kitchen window.

“She’s waiting for us,” he murmured.

As they drew closer, Nolan felt a tightness in his chest that had nothing to do with the cold. This place held many memories: summer afternoons spent with Quinn, helping with the harvest, and sharing meals with her family.

Now it looked both achingly familiar and utterly alien, transformed by the storm into something out of a nightmare.

They parked the truck as close to the farmhouse as possible, the headlights illuminating the snow-covered porch and front door.

“I’ll check inside,” Nolan said, pulling his scarf over his face.

Johan nodded. “I’m right behind you.”

They trudged through knee-deep snow to the front door. Nolan knocked hard, then tried the handle. It turned easily in his grip, and the door swung open.

“Mrs. Le Roux?” Nolan called, stepping into the house. “Anja? Are you here?”

Silence greeted them. The house was empty, though signs of hasty departure were everywhere: a coffee mug half-full on the kitchen table, a chair knocked over, and boots missing from the rack by the door.

“She’s gone,” Johan said grimly, surveying the scene.

Nolan felt a twist of dread in his stomach. “She went after him herself.”

“Looks that way.”

The kitchen was warm, and the generator hummed on the back porch, its mechanical drone emphasizing the absence of human voices.

“The coffee’s still warm,” Johan noted, placing his hand against the pot. “She hasn’t been gone long.”

Nolan moved to the living room window, wiping away the condensation to peer into the white void outside. “The barn’s about a hundred meters from the house. That’s where Dawid would have gone to check on the animals.”

“And that’s where Anja would have headed,” Johan concluded. “We need to move fast.”

They found a stack of blankets on the couch, likely prepared by Anja for her husband’s return. Each grabbed one, wrapping it around their already bundled frames for an extra layer of protection.

“Ready?” Johan asked, his expression grim but determined.

Nolan nodded, steeling himself for the onslaught of cold that awaited them. “Let’s go.”

They stepped back into the storm, the wind hitting them like a physical blow. The porch light cast a weak glow that barely penetrated the swirling snow, and they switched on their flashlights, the beams creating tunnels of visibility in the white darkness.

“This way,” Nolan shouted, pointing toward where he knew the barn stood. In summer, it was an easy walk across a well-trodden path. Now, it might as well have been on the moon.

They moved forward, leaning into the wind, their boots sinking deep with each step. The snow had accumulated fast, already reaching mid-thigh in some parts. Nolan’s legs burned with the effort of pushing through, and his breath came in ragged gasps that frosted instantly in the frigid air.

“Keep going!” Johan cried, his voice hoarse.

The wind howled around them, a living beast that clawed at their clothes and tried to force them off their feet.

Halfway to the barn, Nolan’s light caught something dark against the white landscape. “Dad! Look!”

A figure lay crumpled in the snow, partially covered by snow. For one terrible moment, Nolan thought they’d found Dawid’s body, but as they drew closer, he recognized the figure as Anja’s.

“Mrs. Le Roux!” he cried, rushing forward as fast as the snow would allow.

She stirred at his voice, her face pale and her lips blue. “Nolan? Is that you?”

“We’re here, Anja,” Johan said, kneeling beside her. “Where’s Dawid?”

“The barn,” she managed, her teeth chattering violently. “He… he called out. I heard him, but then I fell… I couldn’t get up.”

Johan looked from the house to the barn, seemingly coming to a decision. “Nolan, get her back to the house. I’ll head to the barn.”

“No,” Nolan argued. “We stick together. We’ll all go back, then we’ll look for Dawid.”

“There’s no time!” Johan snapped. “Every minute counts in this cold. Take her back, start a fire, and I’ll bring Dawid.”

Nolan hesitated, torn between obeying his father and his instinct to stay together. “Dad—”

“That’s an order, son,” Johan said, his tone brooking no argument. He helped lift Anja to her feet and wrapped his blanket around her shoulders. “Go. Now.”

With a sinking feeling, Nolan nodded. He placed his arm around Anja’s waist, supporting most of her weight. “Lean on me, Mrs. Le Roux. We’re going back to the house.”

She sagged against him, barely conscious. “Dawid,” she murmured. “Please find Dawid.”

“Dad will find him,” Nolan promised, though doubt gnawed at his heart. He watched his father’s figure disappear into the swirling white, the beam of his flashlight growing fainter until it vanished altogether.

The journey back to the house seemed twice as long, with Anja stumbling and falling despite Nolan’s support. By the time they reached the porch, she was barely responsive, her eyes glazed and unfocused.

Inside, he helped her to the couch and wrapped her in blankets. Her skin was deathly pale, and her breathing shallow, a troubling sign.

The house had cooled in their absence, and he worked quickly, building up the fire until it roared in the grate. He found a hot water bottle in the kitchen cupboard and filled it, placing it against her chest. Next, he heated water for tea, adding honey and a splash of brandy from the cabinet.

“Drink this,” he said, holding the mug to her lips. “Small sips.”

She obeyed mechanically, color returning to her cheeks as the warm liquid spread through her system. “Dawid,” she whispered again. “And Johan?”

“They’ll be here soon,” Nolan assured her, though his eyes strayed to the window. How long had it been? Ten minutes? Twenty? Time seemed to stretch and distort in the storm.

He paced the living room, alternating between checking on Anja and peering into the storm. The clock on the mantel ticked relentlessly, marking the passage of time with mechanical precision.

Thirty minutes passed. Then forty.

Nolan’s anxiety grew with each passing second. His father should have returned by now. The barn wasn’t that far, even in these conditions.

“I have to go after them,” he said, startling Anja from her half-doze.

“No,” she protested weakly. “Too dangerous.”

“I can’t just sit here,” Nolan replied, pulling his gloves back on. “Dad might need help.”

“Please,” Anja begged, her eyes filling with tears. “Be careful.”

“I’ll be careful,” he promised. “And I’ll bring them back.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Quinn guided the Land Rover through the streets of Stellenbosch, her knuckles white on the steering wheel. It was the first time she'd ventured into the city since the apocalypse, and she wasn't sure what to expect. The silence was oppressive, weighing down on them like a physical presence, and she couldn't shake the feeling that they were driving through a graveyard.

As they passed through the suburbs, the houses loomed on either side, their windows like lifeless eyes staring out at the frozen world. Once symbols of leisure and luxury, the swimming pools were now blocks of ice. Cars sat abandoned in driveways, covered in a thick layer of frost and snow.

Quinn's breath caught in her throat as she spotted a dog house, a motionless lump lying nearby in the snow. She quickly looked away, blinking back tears.

"These poor people," Gwen whispered from the back seat. "Do you think they're all dead?"

"I don't know. I hope not," Quinn said.

"How did this happen?" Zenelia burst out. "Why didn't anyone see this coming? Why didn't they warn people in time to save themselves? Why?"

Quinn shook her head, not trusting her voice. It was the same questions they'd asked in the beginning, and they still didn't have the answers, except… Dr. Andrew Beckett saw it coming and tried to warn everyone, but nobody listened. Why? Was it hubris? Pride? The unshakable belief that humanity was untouchable?

She didn't know.

"It'll be alright, Zee," Stella said when Quinn failed to answer. "How's Keith doing?"

"We stopped the bleeding, but I think he's got a concussion," Zenelia said, her worry for Keith overriding her fears.

"Don't let him fall asleep," Stella replied. "Keep him awake and talking until we can check him out properly."

“I’ll try,” Zenelia said, fussing over Keith.

Quinn watched the couple in the rearview mirror briefly before focusing on the road ahead. It was tough going. The tires had little grip on the icy road, and she dreaded losing control of the vehicle. Therefore, she drove as slowly as possible and took each turn with excruciating care.

Turning toward the city center, she was surprised to find the roads clear. Most people had been caught unawares, she realized, probably asleep in their beds when the freeze hit. Only a few had tried to escape.

Occasionally, they had to maneuver around snow-covered mounds that Quinn knew were cars, their occupants entombed within. She tried not to think about the people that might be inside, focusing on the road instead.

The industrial area was a ghost town of shuttered businesses and empty parking lots. The Land Rover’s headlights cut through the darkness, its twin beams lighting up the billboards and signage on either side, and she looked for anything that might have to do with cars.

Finally, she spotted what she was looking for, a tire fitment center, and she pulled up in front of the building. They sat in silence for a moment, studying the place. The large bay doors looked impenetrable, the windows dark and uninviting.

“How do we get in?” Gwen asked.

Stella leaned forward, her eyes narrowed as she examined the building. “We could try breaking in through the office,” she suggested, pointing to a smaller door on the side of the structure. “It might be easier to force than those big garage doors.”

Impressed by Stella’s quick thinking, Quinn twisted in her seat. “Zee, you stay here with Keith and stay on the lookout for danger. If you see something, press the horn.”

Zenelia nodded, though she looked a little scared. “Um. Okay.”

“You’ll be fine, Zee. I promise. You’re stronger than you know, and you’ve got a gun. Use it.”

“Thanks, Quinn,” Zenelia said, firming her lips. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know,” Quinn replied quickly before turning to Gwen and Stella. “You two come with me.”

They climbed out one by one and huddled together on the pavement. The wind tugged at their clothes with cruel indifference, and after the warmth of the cab, it was bitterly cold.

Shivering, Quinn eyed the building. “Remember, we don’t know what we might find in there. We need to stay alert and stick together. Understood?”

“Got it,” Stella said.

“I’m right behind you,” Gwen assured her.

With her friends as backup, Quinn fetched the crowbar from the back of the truck and headed toward the office entrance.

It proved to be a slog. The uncleared snow came up to her hips, having accumulated over the past few weeks. The bottom layer consisted of ice, as slippery as hell, and the easiest way to break a leg. The middle had compacted into a thick wall that resisted all efforts to push through, sapping one’s strength with every step, while the top layer was fine and powdery. It clung to her clothes and clogged her eyelashes. Each step was a battle, and her legs burned with the effort.

She was exhausted when they reached the steps leading to the door and clung to the railing as if it were a lifeline. “I hate this weather.”

“Uh-huh,” Stella agreed with a thunderous frown. “If I never see snow again, it’ll be too soon.”

“I always thought it looked so magical on TV, especially Christmas, but it’s seriously overrated,” Gwen complained, her breath coming in gasps.

Quinn stood still for several seconds, catching her breath and rubbing her aching back until she was ready to continue. “Crowbar, please.”

Stella handed it over, and Quinn tested the door. Locked. “Well, here goes nothing.”

Mimicking Jonathan and Keith from earlier, she threw her whole weight into the maneuver, and the wood splintered around the lock with a deafening crack. The door broke free from its prison and swung wide, revealing a pitch-black interior.

Quinn reached for her flashlight and switched it on, its beam cutting through the darkness like a laser beam. Dust motes danced in the light, and she looked around for anything interesting. When her inspection revealed nothing more than a bland reception filled with the usual accessories, she decided to move on. “I’m going to check out the garage.”

“Right behind you,” Gwen said, rifling through drawers and cabinets.

“Keep an eye out for danger,” Quinn warned, her eyes darting to the exit.

Gwen nodded, but her attention was elsewhere when she discovered the receptionist's private stash of snacks. "Look what I found!" she cried, waving candy bars and chocolate in the air.

Quinn rolled her eyes, well aware of Gwen's obsession with sugar. "Come on, Stella. Looks like it's just you and me."

Stella smirked and pointed at the door on the opposite wall. "I think it's through there."

"Only one way to find out," Quinn said, testing the handle. Thankfully, the door was unlocked, and it swung open to reveal a cavernous space filled with car lifts, equipment, stacks of old tires, and racks filled with brand-new tires. The smell of rubber and oil hung in the air, a reminder of busier times.

"Where do we even start?" Stella whispered, her voice echoing throughout the workshop.

"I don't know," Quinn admitted. She'd never seen a snow tire before and had no idea what to look for. "Just… look for clues or something."

"Okay," Stella said, walking toward the nearest display.

Quinn went in the opposite direction, running her flashlight over the shiny rubber tires on display, many accompanied by billboards and posters bragging about the latest technology. When her light fell on a large advert that showed a 4×4 plowing through snowy terrain, she froze. Excitement bubbled up her throat, and she waved at Stella. "Over here!"

Stella rushed over, admiring the heavy-duty snow tires. "These should do the trick."

"They're the right size," Quinn said. "I checked."

"So what now?"

"Now we load them up and get the hell out of here," Quinn said.

"Shouldn't we fit them on now?"

"It's too cold and exposed out there. We'll freeze to death," Quinn said.

"How many? Four?"

"Four plus two spares," Quinn said.

Stella stared at her. "You want us to load six of these into the back of the Land Rover?"

"Uh-huh," Quinn said, determined. "We'll just have to make room."

"This is crazy," Stella mumbled. "You're crazy."

"I know," Quinn admitted, tucking her flashlight under one arm. With a grunt of effort, she dragged one of the tires of the rack and rolled it toward

the reception. Stella followed her example, and Gwen watched them with a doubtful frown.

“Whose bright idea was this?” Gwen asked.

“Mine,” Quinn said, already regretting her decision.

“Do I have to help?” Gwen said. “Can’t I just watch and give constructive criticism?”

“If you don’t want me to kill you in your sleep later,” Stella said, pausing mid-roll.

“Okay, okay,” Gwen said, throwing her hands in the air. “I’m in.”

Together, the three of them pushed their tires through the heavy snow, huffing and puffing the entire way. It proved to be a lot more complicated than they anticipated, but loading the tires into the back of the truck was nearly impossible.

“There’s no space,” Stella complained.

Quinn eyed the crowded interior, and her mood fell into her boots. “Let me see what I can do.”

“Okay, but hurry up,” Stella grumbled.

“Yeah, it’s freezing out here,” Gwen said. “I can’t feel my toes anymore.”

“Doing my best, guys,” Quinn said, hauling herself into the back. She grabbed the nearest bug-out bag and shifted it around. Once they were all stacked in the corner, she held out her arms. “Pass me the tires, guys.”

Gwen heaved her wheel into the air, her cheeks purple with the effort. Quinn grabbed it and stacked it next to her feet, ready for the next one. Stella hauled it up while Gwen ran back for another, and they managed to load all six tires that way.

Finally, the job was done, and Quinn sighed with relief. “Thank God, we did it.”

“Yes, we did, and I’m so over it,” Stella said.

“Yeah, that was the most work I’ve done in ages,” Gwen agreed.

“Agreed,” Quinn said, wiping the sweat from her brow. “Let’s pack it up and get a move on.”

“Where to now?” Gwen asked, slow to move.

“We’ll talk about it inside the car,” Quinn said, waving her on. She was well aware of the dangers of exposure. While they didn’t feel the cold so much because of their exertions, it wouldn’t take long for the icy conditions

to lower their core body temperature and freeze the layer of sweat next to their skin. If that happened, they'd be in big trouble.

Once Stella and Gwen were inside the vehicle, Quinn slid behind the wheel. She locked the door and revved the motor, the heater still running full blast. However, their fuel was getting low, and she knew there was no time to waste.

"Alright, guys," she said, easing the Rover back onto the road. "Our next stop is a gas station."

"Which one?" Stella asked.

"I've got one in mind. It's off the beaten track, so I hope it pans out," Quinn said.

"I'm sure it will be fine," Stella replied.

"It's just… I don't want to make another mistake tonight," Quinn said, voicing an unspoken fear.

"Tonight wasn't your mistake. It was ours," Stella said. "I'm sure this place of yours will be fine."

"We'll be okay, Quinn. I know it," Gwen added.

"Stop worrying, Quinn," Keith said, shaking his head. He immediately realized his mistake and winced. "Ow."

"Don't do that," Zenelia scolded, fussing over his head.

With their encouragement spurring her on, Quinn realized once more how lucky she was to have such good friends. Shifting into gear, she drove into an uncertain future filled with danger, but at least she wasn't alone.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Focusing on the road ahead, Quinn headed toward the outskirts of town. She wanted to get away from the narrow streets and packed buildings. It smacked of being trapped, and she didn't like feeling hemmed in. It was the reason she chose the place she had in mind. It was out of town, in the open, and on the way home.

That thought alone was enough to make hope blossom in her chest. Ever since the world changed, she'd had to make do with temporary havens. First, the dorm, then Keith's place, but that was all coming to an end. She was on her way home, and that was enough to keep her going.

As they drove, the signs of civilization became fewer and farther between. Quinn turned onto a winding road that climbed uphill, offering glimpses of the frozen valley below. The vineyards that had once been the pride of Stellenbosch were now a stark, monochromatic landscape, the neat rows of vines barely visible beneath the snow.

The Land Rover's engine hummed steadily as she navigated the path, its headlights cutting through the darkness. As they crested the low rise, Quinn spotted what she'd been looking for: A gas station at the bottom of the hill. There was a cluster of other buildings besides the petrol pumps and the convenience store. Public restrooms, a bus stop, and a park filled with snow-covered picnic benches. To the side stood a fenced area that had once been a petting zoo for weary travelers' children. But it was the restaurant that caught her attention. Memories of homemade bread and wood-fired pizzas flooded her mind, a bittersweet reminder of simpler times.

Without hesitation, Quinn steered the Land Rover behind the restaurant. She parked the truck in the owner's spot, a covered carport that offered shelter from the wind and snow. Leaving the engine running, she turned to her companions. "Wait here, guys. I'm going to check it out."

"Do you want backup?" Stella asked.

"No, I'm good," Quinn said.

Grabbing the crowbar, she approached the kitchen door. The lock gave way under her determined assault, and a brass bell rang above her head when she slipped inside.

“A bell?” she murmured, shining her flashlight upward. “That’s old school.”

The yellow beam of her flashlight cut through the black, illuminating the brass pots and pans hanging from the walls. A row of gas burners and fryers lined one side, and countertops lined the other. Everything shone, polished to a high shine, and the faint smell of bleach hung in the air. Her boots squeaked on the linoleum floor, the only sound in the echoing room.

“It’s like a time capsule,” Quinn said, her voice rough from the cold. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine the staff cleaning up after the last order went out, readying the place for business the next day. Only that business never came. The world ended, and with it, the restaurant.

“I’m sorry,” Quinn whispered to no one in particular. While it might not mean much in the grand scheme of things, she felt compelled to say it.

After a while, she pushed onward, aware that her friends were still waiting in the car. A quick look revealed that the walk-in freezer and storage rooms were fully stocked, a delicate film of frost covering each surface.

While she was happy with the abundance of food and drink, it was the stack of firewood that caused her to sag with relief. There was enough to burn for several days, ensuring their survival. “Oh, thank God. We’re going to be okay.”

Buoyed by that knowledge, Quinn hurried back to the Land Rover and rapped on the window, startling its occupants awake. They’d all dozed off, exhausted by the night’s events, and lulled to sleep by the heat from the vents. “Come on, guys. Get your asses inside.”

“What?” Stella asked, looking a little out of it.

“Chop, chop,” Quinn repeated, not liking the darkening skies overhead. It looked like a storm was brewing, and she wanted them inside before it hit. “Grab your stuff and head inside. There’s a storm coming.”

“Okay, okay. We’re going,” Zenelia grumbled, ushering Keith out of the truck and supporting his weight with her own.

Gwen and Stella followed, carrying the bags and blankets they’d grabbed from their previous home. It represented the sum total of their possessions, and they trooped toward the restaurant in single file.

Quinn watched them leave before turning her attention back to the truck. She had a few tasks to complete before going inside and wasted no time.

Climbing into the cab, she switched off the engine, dunking the interior into a sudden silence. The steady rush of warm air from the vents stopped abruptly, and the cold swooped in like a vulture, ready to feast on her bones.

Shivering, Quinn checked the backseat for leftover bags, med kits, or blankets but found nothing. That left only the back of the Rover, filled with bug-out bags, tires, tools, and other camping gear.

Jumping out, she locked the doors and headed toward the back, grabbing an insulation blanket, a tarpaulin cover, and some rope.

“Need help?” Stella asked, startling her. She whirled around, the shotgun rising in the air, and Stella yelped, ducking to the ground. “Whoa, it’s just me!”

“Jeez, don’t do that,” Quinn cried, her heart in her throat. “You scared the crap out of me!”

Stella slowly got to her feet, both hands raised in the air. “Don’t shoot.”

“I’m sorry,” Quinn said, dropping the gun. “I guess I’m a little jumpy.”

“A little?”

“Okay. A lot.”

“You’re not the only one,” Stella said. “But after the day we’ve had, it’s no surprise.”

“No, it’s not,” Quinn said, her shoulders drooping. “I’m so tired; I’m dead on my feet.”

“It’s been a long night. Let’s get inside,” Stella said, waving one hand at the restaurant.

“Can you help me with the truck first? We need to keep the fuel from freezing.”

Stella nodded, grabbing one end of the insulation blanket. Together, they draped it over the Land Rover, tucking the edges under the wheel wells and securing it with rope. The tarp went on top, providing an extra layer of protection.

While they worked, it began to snow. Thick flakes of sleet rained down, and the wind picked up, turning into a howling beast. The temperature dropped, and the cold seared their exposed skin like acid.

“Do you think it’ll do the trick?” Stella asked once they finished, shouting to be heard above the growing storm.

Quinn shook her head, worried despite their efforts. “I hope so. We can’t afford to lose our only means of transportation.”

“Come on,” Stella said. “Let’s get inside before we turn into popsicles.”

“Lead the way,” Quinn said, falling in behind her.

They ran through the snow and barged into the restaurant, shutting the door with a bang. But the wind pushed it open again, the lock broken by Quinn’s earlier efforts.

“We need to shut this door,” Quinn yelled, pushing against it with all her might. The wind fought her every step of the way, and her boots slipped on the floor.

“Here, use this,” Stella cried, handing her a piece of leftover rope.

Quinn grabbed the rope and wound it around the two handles before securing it with a knot. That kept the door from flying open, but the wind pushed it inward and whistled through the cracks.

“What about this?” Stella asked, pointing to a heavy metal rack filled with cooking and baking paraphernalia. It looked solid enough to block the wind and deter intruders.

“Good thinking,” Quinn said, grabbing one end. Stella took the other, and they shoved it across the floor with a screech of metal on tiles. Once it settled in place, they stood back and surveyed their handiwork.

“That should do it,” Quinn said with a pained grimace, rubbing her lower back.

“Let’s hope so,” Stella said.

Gwen and Zenelia appeared from the dining area as if on cue, their flashlights bobbing in the darkness.

“We heard you come in,” Gwen said. “What can we do to help?”

Quinn gestured toward the storeroom. “We need to get a fire going in the pizza oven, or we’ll freeze to death with this storm outside.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty cold tonight,” Gwen agreed, her teeth chattering.

“There’s wood and kindling in the storeroom. We need enough to last through the night.”

“We’re on it,” Gwen said, and the two women set off.

“Let’s check out the oven,” Quinn said, heading toward the front counter.

The rest of the restaurant was as dark and quiet as the kitchen. Keith sat in a nearby booth, bundled up in several blankets until only his eyes stuck

out. A paraffin lantern burned on the checkered tablecloth, part of the rustic decor.

“You okay, big guy?” Quinn asked.

“I’m cool. What are you girls up to?”

“Making a fire.”

“Do you know how?”

“Yeah, I’ve done it before,” Quinn said, studying the pizza oven. It was massive. A dome-shaped structure made of brick with a chimney that shot up to the roof. It had seen many years of use, and its interior was blackened with soot.

“I’ve never used one of these before,” Stella admitted, peering inside.

Quinn grinned. “It’s not that different from a regular fireplace.”

“Yeah? How do you know?”

“I spent a summer working in a pizza joint back home. Burned my fingers too many times to count.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Maybe not fun, but I sure picked up a lot of weight that December holiday,” Quinn said with a laugh.

Looking around, she located a stand filled with newspapers and magazines. She tore a stack of newspapers apart and stuffed them underneath a tepee of kindling. Stella handed her a box of matches, and they soon had a small blaze going.

As the fire grew, Quinn added larger pieces of wood, coaxing the flames higher and higher. The oven’s brick interior began to glow, radiating much-needed warmth. The crackle and pop of burning wood filled the air, a comforting sound in the eerie quiet.

“Oh, that feels so good,” Gwen said, stacking an armful of wood on the floor.

Zenelia dropped off her final load of firewood, and they turned toward Quinn with expectant faces. “What’s next?”

“I don’t know about you guys, but I’m exhausted. Let’s make a bed and get some sleep.” She looked around. “Right here behind the counter should do. Close to the oven, but not close enough to set ourselves on fire.”

“We can use the cushions from the booths,” Gwen suggested.

“Good idea. It’ll keep us off the floor,” Quinn agreed.

Gwen and Zenelia dragged over the booth cushions, arranging them into a makeshift mattress while Stella and Quinn unrolled the bedrolls and

blankets they'd salvaged from Keith's house.

Afterward, they covered the windows and blinds with tablecloths and closed the gaps beneath the doors. The thick white fabric muffled the storm's fury, creating a cocoon of peace within the restaurant.

As they worked, the temperature inside slowly rose. The pizza oven's heat spread throughout the space, chasing away the chill that filled the room, but it wasn't enough.

While Quinn's outer gear was waterproof, that didn't apply to the others, and they were all wet and shivering despite the heat from the pizza oven. "We need to get out of these wet clothes."

"Uh-huh," Zenelia said, her teeth chattering. "I need to pee, too. Do you think there's running water?"

"Probably not, but you can check," Quinn suggested. "Take a couple of these paraffin lanterns with you."

Gwen and Zenelia went to the restroom, each with a flashlight. Minutes later, they returned, ready to report their findings.

"There's no running water," Gwen said, "but the geyser's still full. We can use that for a quick wash."

Zenelia nodded. "And the toilet cisterns are full too. We've got one flush each, at least."

"We should share," Gwen suggested. "You know the old saying. If it's yellow, let it mellow. We can pack toilet paper on top to keep the smell down."

"Ugh, that's so gross," Zenelia said with a shudder.

"Better than overflowing toilets," Gwen added.

"Yeah, I know," Zenelia said, still unhappy about the situation.

"That Jojo tank spoiled the shit out of us," Stella said.

Quinn was forced to agree. "Uh-huh. The coming days might not be so kind to us."

"Let's just get this over with," Zenelia said.

"Okay, let's take turns. Use the ablutions, wash up, and change into dry clothes. We'll all feel better for it," Quinn said.

"I'll go first," Zenelia said.

"What about Keith?" Gwen asked.

"I'll help him," Zenelia said, fetching their bags from the corner.

Quinn watched while the others took turns in the bathroom, staring into the storm. The wind swept the parking lot, whipping the snow into a frenzy.

It would've been beautiful if it weren't so terrifying, but she knew even a few seconds out in the open was enough to guarantee death.

Still, the wild weather had its perks. If they couldn't go outside, neither could anyone else. It was simply too cold. That meant they were safe from intruders and could sleep without standing watch. *A whole night's sleep. What a treat.*

Minutes later, Stella returned from the bathroom looking jaunty. She jerked a thumb at Quinn and said, "Your turn."

"Thanks," Quinn said, grabbing her backpack. She headed toward the restrooms, eager to wash and change into more comfortable clothes.

The restroom smelled like lavender and herbs, a definite relief, so she quickly used the toilet. Next, she washed her hair in the sink using a washcloth, soap, and shampoo. After towel-drying it, she tied it up in a knot. It was a messy affair, and most of the water ended up on the floor, but she persisted and emerged feeling clean and refreshed.

Afterward, Quinn pulled on a fresh outfit: Thermal underwear, sweat pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a thick jersey. She also added fingerless gloves, her favorite because they allowed her to use the shotgun without any problems, and a warm scarf.

Satisfied, she joined the others. They were already snuggled up in bed, the blankets pulled up to their noses. Keith sported a fresh bandage around his head, and his eyes looked clear and alert for the first time all night. "How do you feel, big guy?"

"Like someone cracked open my skull and made an omelet with my brain," he replied.

"Nice to see you still have a sense of humor," Quinn said with a chuckle.

"You can thank Stella for that. She patched me up and gave me some gnarly painkillers," Keith replied with a broad grin.

"Now it's your turn," Stella said, waving her over.

"I'm fine."

"I'm not asking," Stella said, her tone brooking no argument, and Quinn obeyed.

Stella's gentle hands probed Quinn's scalp, checking for injuries. "You've got a nasty bump and a deep cut, but I don't think it needs stitches. Just a band-aid." She disinfected and bandaged the wound. "Any dizziness or nausea?"

“A little bit earlier, but it’s better now,” Quinn said, shaking her head.

“Take these,” Stella said, pressing two pills into Quinn’s palm. “They’ll help with the pain and inflammation.”

“Thanks.”

“Get some rest now,” Stella said, patting her shoulder. “Doctor’s orders.”

“That sounds like the best idea you’ve had all day,” Quinn said, wearily climbing to her feet. After banking the fire for the night, she crawled into bed, positioning herself between the others and the door.

The warmth of the fire and the glow from the lanterns combined to form an atmosphere of comfort and safety that felt surreal after the chaos of the past few hours. It pushed the storm to the edges of consciousness, a howling entity with no power over them.

With the shotgun and Z88 lying next to her for security, Quinn allowed herself to drift off into a deep, dreamless sleep, her battered body finally getting the chance to rest.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Quinn woke with a start, her head pounding like a jackhammer. Her throat was dry, and her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. With a groan, she reached for her water bottle and drained it in one desperate gulp. The cold water refreshed her senses and relieved her thirst, but she still felt like she'd been run over by a train. Every muscle in her body ached, and her joints were stiff.

"Jeez, I feel like an old woman," she complained, reaching for her sneakers. She pulled them on one by one before smoothing her tangled hair into a rough ponytail.

Outside, the storm raged unabated, and Quinn knew they weren't going anywhere that day. Maybe not for several days. Disappointment settled over her like a cloud, but she ignored it. Fighting Mother Nature was pointless. All they could do was go along with her moods and survive her tantrums.

Careful not to disturb the rest of the group, Quinn eased out of bed. Her full bladder was the first thing that demanded her attention, so she made a beeline for the bathroom. It was cold inside and dimly lit. The only light came from the small windows set high up in the wall, which were dim and dark due to the blizzard.

Quinn used the toilet and flushed it, emptying the cistern. It was past the point of mellowing anyway, and she realized they'd have to find another way to manage the bathrooms. *Melt snow, maybe?*

It was a thought, and she mulled it over while she washed her hands and splashed water on her face.

As she brushed her teeth, Quinn studied her reflection in the mirror. Dark shadows underlined her eyes, stark against her pale skin, and a deep purple bruise bloomed across her forehead and temple. She probed the cut on her scalp cautiously, alarmed to find it swollen and painful to the touch. *Is it infected?*

With a sigh, she turned away from her battered reflection and returned to the main room. The others were still asleep, and she tiptoed around them,

trying not to wake them. They all needed their rest after the previous day's ordeal.

Heading to the storeroom, Quinn collected more wood and carried it to the front. The fire had died down to a bed of coals, and she stirred them to life with the pizza shovel, adding more wood and kindling to coax it back to life.

Once she had a proper blaze going, she searched the kitchen for coffee, sugar, creamer, and an old kettle. She lugged it all to the front and prepared a big pot of coffee. A box of rusks from one of the bug-out bags rounded out the selection, and she placed everything on a tray, along with some mugs, plates, and spoons.

"There you go. Breakfast is served." It wasn't much, but it would do the trick, and her stomach growled in anticipation. "Hold your horses, dude. I'll feed you in a minute." It growled again, louder this time, and she rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine. Whatever."

Grabbing the biggest mug she could find, Quinn poured herself some coffee. Cradling the cup between her hands, she grabbed a rusk and moved to the nearest window.

The world had changed, transformed into a white blur of nothingness that erased all sense of time and space. But inside the restaurant, it was calm and peaceful. The crackle and pop of the fire and the soft breathing of her sleeping companions were the only sounds, and she basked in the solitude.

Her growling stomach intruded on her thoughts, and Quinn turned her attention to the rusk in her hand. She dipped it into her coffee, allowing it to soak up the warm liquid before taking a bite. Three rusks later, she was ready to face the day and grabbed a chair near the oven, basking in its comforting heat.

She'd found a notebook and pen earlier and flipped it open, jotting down a list of everything that needed to be done: Melt snow for the cisterns and geysers; clear a path to the truck; fit the Land Rover with snow tires and top up the gas; take inventory of their supplies and scavenge for more; load the truck; find a map; and plan the trip to her home, accounting for alternate routes and detours.

Afterward, Quinn stared at the list. It was a lot, but writing it down was half the battle, and she felt more organized. She'd always liked lists and missed the feel of paper and pen between her fingers.

A sudden noise made Quinn whirl around, the pen raised like a sword. She relaxed when she saw it was only Stella, fresh out of bed. The other woman looked like hell, bleary-eyed and wild-haired, her face creased from sleep.

“Good morning,” Quinn said.

“Morning,” Stella mumbled, rubbing her eyes. “That coffee smells amazing.”

“I’m on it,” Quinn said, standing up. She refilled her cup and poured another. “Sugar?”

“Lots of sugar,” Stella said, falling onto the chair beside her.

Quinn smiled and handed over the mug. “Enjoy.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Stella said, taking a deep sip. She groaned and tipped her head back. “Oh man, I really needed that.”

“Couldn’t sleep?”

“Nightmares,” Stella said. “I kept dreaming of fire and gunshots. Blood, too. Lots of blood. What about you?”

Quinn shook her head. “I didn’t dream of anything.”

“Must be nice.”

“Not really,” Quinn said, thinking of Jonathan. Seeing his face again, even in a nightmare, would’ve been nice. *I miss you, Jon. It’s only been one day, and it already feels like forever.*

Stella studied her face. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Quinn said, pushing the image of Jonathan’s face from her mind.

“Okay, but I’m here for you,” Stella said. “Remember that.”

“I’ll remember.”

“How’s your head?” Stella asked, changing the subject. “It looks pretty bruised.”

“It feels like I got run over by a truck,” Quinn admitted. “Everything hurts, and I think the cut might be infected.”

“I’ll take a look after breakfast,” Stella said.

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Treat wounds. That kind of thing.”

“I took a first aid course back in the day and learned the basics. I didn’t want to, but my mom insisted, and now I’m glad she did.”

“Have you heard from her since the last time you talked?”

Stella shook her head. “No, and it doesn’t look like the signal’s coming back anytime soon.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Quinn said. They’d all noticed that their phones were dead, no matter what network they were on, and she guessed it was gone for good. The world had fallen into darkness, and all communications were gone, the modern kind, at least.

“Anyway, there’s no point in moping around about it,” Stella said, pointing at the list. “What’s that?”

“Just a few things that need to be done,” Quinn said. “Seeing as we’re stuck here for the next few days.”

“Stuck?”

“Uh-huh. The blizzard’s here to stay, it seems.”

“Ah, shit. That’s just perfect,” Stella said with a grimace.

“Yup,” Quinn said.

While Quinn and Stella discussed the weather, basking in the heat of the pizza oven, the rest began to stir. Keith was the first to awaken, stumbling toward them with a groan. “Morning, ladies.”

Quinn poured him a cup of coffee and handed it over. “How’s the head?”

“Still attached,” Keith replied, testing his theory with probing fingers. “I think…”

“Good to know,” Quinn said, smothering a smile.

Next came Zenelia, her hair looking like a bird used it for its nest. “Ugh, what time is it?”

“Way past the time to get up,” Stella said, eyeing her with amusement.

Zenelia dropped into the nearest chair and slumped over the counter, not saying a word.

The last to rise was Gwen, looking bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. “Good morning, everyone,” she chirped. That earned her a round of grunts, and she whistled. “Well, aren’t you a sorry bunch of losers, hunched over your coffee like it’s the end of the world.”

Four sets of eyes turned her way, none seeming to find her remark funny.

“What? Too soon?” Gwen said, raising her arms in the air.

“Too soon,” Keith confirmed.

“Have some coffee,” Quinn offered. “I’m on my third cup.”

“Thanks,” Gwen said, leaning against the counter. A companionable silence fell over them as they passed around the box of rusks, sharing the simple meal.

Once everyone had eaten, Stella turned her attention to Keith’s head injury. “Let’s see how your head’s doing.”

“Now?” he said, pulling a face.

“Now,” Stella confirmed, her voice stern.

She took him aside and examined the wound on his head, announcing it was healing well. “But you still need to take it easy. No heavy lifting or sudden movements.”

“You can keep the fire burning and tidy up the sleeping area,” Quinn suggested. “That shouldn’t strain you too much.”

“I won’t say no to that,” Keith agreed with a grin.

“Okay, then,” Stella said, turning to Quinn. “Let’s take a look at your head.”

“Sure thing,” Quinn agreed, allowing Stella to examine the cut on her scalp.

“Mm,” Stella murmured, her brow furrowed. “It’s definitely infected.”

She rummaged through the med kit, pulling out disinfectant and antibiotic ointment. With practiced hands, she cleaned the wound, causing Quinn to hiss in pain. “Ow.”

“Sorry,” Stella said. “But I have to do this properly.”

She then applied a generous amount of ointment and covered the wound with a fresh band-aid, leaning back to examine her handiwork. “That should do the trick, but let me know if it gets any worse or you develop a fever.”

“Thanks, Stella.”

“No problem,” Stella replied, packing up her things. “So, what’s next?”

Quinn glanced at her list, then back at the group. “We’ve got some work to do, folks. Stella, you and I will head outside to gather snow and clear the kitchen entrance.”

Stella nodded, already moving to grab her coat. “Got it.”

“Gwen, Zenelia, you two will be in charge of melting the snow we bring in and filling up the toilet cisterns and geyser,” Quinn continued.

“On it,” Gwen said while Zenelia gave a thumbs-up.

“Keith, keep that fire going and tidy up the sleeping area. Remember, no heavy lifting.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Keith replied with a mock salute.

Quinn closed the notebook and capped her pen, grateful for their support. Shrugging on her heavy-duty pants, jacket, and boots, she grabbed a shovel and bucket, facing the storm outside with trepidation. “Ready for this?”

“No,” Stella replied. “You?”

“Oh, hell no,” Quinn said.

Stella gripped one end of the rack that served as a barricade while Quinn gripped the other. Together, they pushed it aside, untied the rope holding the door shut, and plunged outside. Whether they liked it or not, it had to be done, and that was all there was to it.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Quinn stepped out into the storm, and instantly, the world around her vanished. The wind howled, pelting her face with icy needles, and she could barely see her hand in front of her face, let alone Stella beside her.

“Stella,” Quinn shouted over the roar of the blizzard. “Stay close to me. We can’t get lost out here!”

She felt more than heard Stella’s acknowledgment. They huddled together, mere feet away from the door. Quinn plunged her shovel into the snow and heaved it into the bucket. Her muscles screamed in protest, still stiff and sore from the day before, but she pushed through the pain. Beside her, Stella matched her frantic pace.

After what felt like an eternity, their buckets were full, and they stumbled back to the entrance. Zenelia was there, waiting. They passed off the full buckets and snatched the empty ones she held out before plunging back into the white void.

They repeated the process, moving as fast as humanly possible. By the third round, Quinn couldn’t feel her hands or feet. Her face burned from the biting cold, and every breath was agony to her lungs.

As they filled their buckets again, Quinn realized a horrifying truth: They were risking their lives out here. One wrong step, one moment of disorientation, and they could wander off into the storm, never to be seen again.

“That’s it!” Quinn shouted, grabbing Stella. “We’re going in!”

She dragged her friend back towards the faint glow of the entrance, clutching their precious cargo of snow. They tumbled through the doorway, gasping and shivering violently.

“Break time,” Quinn panted, exhausted beyond belief.

“C… cold,” Stella stuttered, unable to muster the energy to do more than fall inside.

“Oh, my God. Look at you two,” Gwen cried, ushering them toward the fire. “Sit down while I pour you some coffee.”

“… thanks,” Quinn managed, her voice a broken whisper.

Gwen handed them each a hot cup of coffee and a hot water bottle while Zenelia draped blankets over their shoulders.

Quinn looked at the others once they warmed up enough. “This isn’t working. It’s too dangerous.”

“We almost died out there,” Stella said.

Quinn looked at Gwen. “How much water do we have?”

“Not as much as we hoped,” Gwen said, “but I agree. It’s far too dangerous. We’ll have to find another way.”

Quinn nodded, but her brain was sluggish. “Bottled water?”

“We don’t have a lot of that,” Gwen said, shaking her head. “I’d rather keep it for drinking purposes and cooking.”

“I tried opening a window and scooping the snow through there, but it didn’t turn out so well,” Zenelia said.

“Yeah, she got a cup of water and sucked all the heat out of the restaurant,” Gwen said.

“Not my finest hour,” Zenelia said.

“Why don’t we stick to the entrance?” Stella said. “That way, we can’t get lost and can come inside whenever it gets too much for us out there.”

As much as she loathed the idea of going back out there again, Quinn agreed. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

“Are you sure?” Gwen asked, her brow furrowed.

“No, but I really want to be able to use the toilet and wash up when I feel like it,” Quinn said. “Doing some laundry would be great, too.”

“Okay, but come inside any time you need. I’ll be waiting with more hot water bottles and blankets,” Gwen said.

“Me too,” Zenelia added.

Grateful for their help. Quinn dragged herself to her feet. “Come on, Stella. Let’s get this over with.”

“Woohoo,” Stella said, attempting a fist bump that looked as fake as it sounded.

They tried again, shoveling snow right outside the kitchen door. Zenelia held it shut, preventing the storm from entering the building. This time, the walls and awning overhead provided some protection from the wind, and the snow wasn’t quite as deep as before, allowing more freedom of movement.

They worked steadily, filling bucket after bucket while taking short breaks. Gwen and Zenelia took turns bringing more empty containers and hauling away the full ones.

After an hour, Quinn's arms felt like lead. She paused, flexing her stiff fingers. Everything hurt, and her chest felt like it was filled with broken glass.

"You okay?" Stella asked.

"Just tired. How are you holding up?"

"About the same."

"Small mercies, right?"

"Right."

Suddenly, the door opened, and Gwen appeared with a smile. "You can come inside now. We've got enough."

"Really?" Quinn asked, almost too scared to hope.

"Yes. You've done more than enough. It's time to rest now."

Quinn sagged with relief, leaning on her shovel. "Thank God."

"The best news I've had all day," Stella agreed.

They trooped back inside, leaving Zenelia and Gwen to close and barricade the doors behind them. With the storm shut out, a blissful peace fell over the restaurant, and the oven's heat permeated their frozen tissues.

Quin peeled off her coat, pants, and boots, shaking the snow from her clothes. After hanging her gear up to dry, she huddled in front of the fire, grateful for the chance to rest.

"That was pure hell," Stella muttered, joining her.

"Uh-huh. I still can't feel my nose," Quinn said, rubbing her face with both hands.

"I can't feel anything anymore," Stella said, jumping up and down like a Jack in the Box.

"Hot chocolate, coming right up," Gwen announced, bringing out a tray filled with two mugs of steaming chocolatey goodness.

"You're my hero," Quinn said, grabbing a mug.

"Will you marry me?" Stella asked.

"Sorry, but you're not my type," Gwen quipped, her cheeks dimpling.

"That's too bad," Stella said, taking a big sip from her mug.

"What about me?" Keith asked from his spot on the mass bed. "I made lunch."

"You did?" Stella asked with more than a hint of disbelief.

“Yeah, it’s over there,” Keith said, pointing to a platter stacked with toasted sandwiches.

Stella picked one up and examined it before taking a careful bite. She chewed and swallowed. “Is that… cheese, garlic, and onion I taste?”

“Yup,” Keith said. “And a touch of black pepper.”

“It’s pretty good,” Stella said, looking impressed. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to marry you, though.”

“Ah, damn it,” Keith swore. “What about you, Quinn?”

Quinn snorted. “Dream on.”

“Typical women,” Keith said, lying down on the bed with a magazine in his hands. “Can’t recognize a good man when they see one.”

Quinn laughed but stopped when she noticed Zenelia’s expression. The underlying hostility surprised her, and she could only chalk it up to jealousy.

The moment stretched on until Stella interrupted. “Sandwich?”

“Hell, yeah,” Quinn said. She grabbed a plate and stacked it high with sandwiches, wolfing them down.

Meanwhile, Zenelia and Gwen surveyed their inventory, packing several bags in case of an emergency. With the food from the restaurant, they were in good shape, enough to last a week or two if they were careful.

It was one less thing to worry about, and Quinn was happy to hear the news. Once the snow let up, they could raid the convenience store and add more food and drink to their stash.

Quinn swallowed the last bite of her sandwich, savoring the garlicky flavor. She brushed the crumbs from her hands and stood up. “I’m going to wash some clothes. Anyone want to join me?”

“Might as well,” Stella said, grabbing her dirty laundry.

Soon, everyone was sorting through their clothes, filling buckets with water and soap. They scrubbed and rinsed, hanging wet garments wherever they could find space. The restaurant began to resemble a laundromat, with clothes draped over chairs, tables, and makeshift clotheslines.

“This place looks ridiculous,” Keith commented, hanging up a pair of socks.

“At least we’ll have clean underwear,” Gwen replied.

With the laundry done, they tried to keep themselves occupied. Keith flipped through a car magazine while Stella napped on the mass bed. Gwen and Zenelia played cards at one of the tables while Quinn attempted to read

but found herself unable to focus. Finally, she tossed the magazine aside. “I’m so bored.”

“Join the club,” Stella mumbled, her voice muffled by a pillow.

“We could play a game,” Gwen suggested.

“Like what? I Spy?” Keith asked sarcastically. “I spy something white. Oh wait…”

“Maybe we could tell stories,” Zenelia said.

Quinn perked up. “That’s not a bad idea. Does anyone know any good ones?”

They looked at each other expectantly, but no one volunteered anything, and Quinn sighed. “Great. We’re not just bored; we’re boring.” Then it hit her, and she stood up to face the room. “Let’s have a pizza party!”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Quinn's suggestion was met with dumbfounded silence. The rest of the group stared at her blankly, as if she'd just proposed they build a rocket ship and fly to the moon.

"Pizza?" Gwen repeated, her eyes wide. "Like… real pizza?"

"Yes, real pizza, made from scratch and baked in a wood-fired oven exactly like this one," Quinn said, waving a hand behind her.

"Do you know how?" Stella asked, her voice laced with skepticism.

"I worked at a pizzeria one summer. I know how to make the dough and sauce from scratch. Plus, I know my way around a peel."

Her joke was met with confused stares, and Quinn repeated herself. "You know, a peel?"

"A what?" Zenelia asked.

Quinn sighed and picked up the long-handled pizza shovel. "This. It's called a pizza peel. You use it to slide the pizza in and out of the oven."

Understanding dawned on the group's faces, but they still looked unconvinced about the so-called pizza party.

"Come on, guys," Quinn said, her voice taking on a dreamy quality. "Think about it. Hot, cheesy pizza with all of your favorite toppings. We can each make our own."

Keith shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know. Remember what happened the last time we had a party?"

"Who's going to crash it this time?" Quinn countered. "No one in their right mind would be out in this weather. Besides, there won't be any booze involved."

Silence fell over the group, each person mulling the idea over in their head. The sound of hot, freshly made pizza was almost too much to resist, and Quinn could see the idea taking hold. "Well? What do you guys think?"

"I guess it could be fun," Stella admitted.

"And it would give us something to do," Gwen added.

Even Keith started to nod. “Alright, I’m in. But if anything goes wrong, I’m blaming you.”

Quinn grinned, clapping her hands together. “Great. Let’s get started. First, we need to check the pantry for ingredients.”

The atmosphere in the restaurant shifted, and the boredom that weighed upon them lifted like magic, replaced by a sense of purpose and anticipation. They had something to look forward to, even if it was a simple pizza party.

Keith rummaged through his backpack, pulling out his phone and a portable speaker. “I’ve got the perfect playlist for this.”

“How do you still have a battery?” Zenelia asked, peering jealously at his phone.

Keith held up the device. “Solar charger. I never leave home without it.”

The jaunty strains of Italian music filled the kitchen, making you want to sway your hips and sing along, even if you didn’t know the words.

Quinn clapped her hands together. “Alright, pizza-making 101. Gather around, everyone.” She measured flour, yeast, and warm water in a large bowl. “Now, watch closely. This is how you make dough.”

She demonstrated how to mix the ingredients, explaining each step. Soon, everyone was elbow-deep in flour, kneading their little dough balls.

“This is kind of fun,” Gwen admitted, flour dusting her nose.

“Just wait until we get to the sauce,” Quinn said, setting the dough aside to rise. She moved to the stove, where a pot of crushed tomatoes simmered. “Who wants to help with the herbs?”

The kitchen filled with a mouthwatering aroma as they chopped basil and oregano. Even Keith, initially skeptical, was drawn in by the smell.

“Mm,” he said, inhaling deeply. “That smells so good.”

Quinn beamed. “See? I told you a pizza party was a good idea.”

Their eyes met over the saucepan, lingering a moment too long. A blush crept up her throat, and she quickly looked away, pretending nothing happened.

A jumbled mixture of thoughts and emotions rose inside her mind, demanding her attention, but she wasn’t ready to face them. Just like she wasn’t ready to mourn Jonathan or resolve her feelings for him. Instead, she shoved her feelings into the deepest, darkest corner of her brain and shut the door.

Quinn shook it off and turned back to the group. “Okay, everyone, it’s time to make your pizzas. Grab your dough, and let’s get creative!”

She rolled hers out, stretching the ball of dough into a rough circle, keeping it thin for a crispy base. The rest followed her example, some with more success than others. While the girls ended up with fairly pizzas, Keith’s looked like a pretzel.

“Want some help?” Quinn offered.

“No, thanks,” Keith said, looking at his dough with a satisfied grin. “This is perfect.”

“It is?” Gwen asked, eyebrows raised.

Keith affected a haughty look. “Not everyone understands art these days.”

“And not everyone can cook, either,” Stella said.

Zenelia chuckled. “She’s got you there.”

“Peasants,” Keith said with a sniff. “I can see that my sophistication is lost on the likes of you.”

Everyone burst out laughing, and Quinn basked in the camaraderie. It felt good to smile and relax. To forget about all their troubles.

“So, what will it be, Gwen?” Quinn asked when the time for toppings arrived.

Gwen spread a thin layer of sauce on her base. “I’m keeping it simple. Ham and mushroom, you can’t go wrong with that.”

“That’s a good combo,” Quinn agreed.

“Mexican for me,” Stella said, piling on the Jalapeno peppers. “The hotter, the better.”

Zenelia hesitated before reaching for a can of pineapple chunks. “Don’t judge me, but I love pineapple on pizza.”

“You heathen!” Keith exclaimed in mock horror.

“At least mine doesn’t look like a heart attack on a plate,” Zenelia said with a pointed look.

“What?” Keith said, piling his pizza high with every type of meat he could find. “I’m a growing man. I need protein.”

On the other hand, Keith piled his pizza high with every type of meat he could find. “Bacon, ham, salami, ribs, pepperoni, pulled pork, and steak. Now that’s what I call a pizza!”

“You’re all amateurs. Watch and learn,” Quinn said, adding snails, artichokes, capers, olives, garlic, and feta to her pizza.

“Snails?” Gwen wrinkled her nose. “On pizza?”

Quinn shrugged. “Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.”

“Ugh, rather you than me,” Zenelia said with a shiver.

Quinn shrugged. “Each to his own. Now, who wants cheese?”

“Me!” everyone yelled.

They finished off their creations with generous helpings of mozzarella before sliding them into the hot oven. The aroma of baking pizza filled the air, the cheese bubbling in the heat while the crust crisped and browned along the edges.

“Man, that looks good,” Keith said, rubbing his stomach.

“Uh-huh,” Quinn agreed, saliva flooding her mouth. “It sure does.”

While they waited, Zenelia readied the booth closest to the pizza oven, replacing its cushions. Stella lit a couple of paraffin lanterns for extra light, Keith performed a quick patrol, checking all the doors and windows, and Gwen prepared drinks.

She opened a window and quickly scooped snow into a bucket, filling it with cans of Coke from the fridge behind the counter. Condensation formed on the cans, and a thin layer of frost c

By the time the pizzas were done, everything was ready. Quinn removed the pizzas from the oven, careful not to burn herself on the hot bricks. She dumped each onto a plate and cut them into slices, rolling the blade with old expertise. “Here you go, guys. Enjoy.”

They gathered around the table, the glow of the paraffin lanterns casting a warm light over their feast. Satisfied groans echoed around the table as they bit into their first slices.

“Sorry, Quinn,” Keith said between bites. “I take it all back. This was a great idea.”

“Best idea ever,” Stella agreed.

“The best,” Gwen mumbled through a mouthful.

Quinn bit into her slice, savoring the crispy crust topped with melted cheese. A fine dusting of flour and soot coated her fingers. She could taste the fire in the food, that smoky flavor unique to the flames. Though odd, the combination of toppings she’d chosen worked together in a perfect symphony of bitter, salty, sweet, and sour.

Afterward, she licked the oily remnants from her fingers and fished a can of Coke from the bucket. She took a deep swig, the sugary liquid burning her throat.

For a moment, she could almost pretend everything was normal. It was just another Friday night, and she was back in her dorm, watching movies and pigging out.

But she had to stop thinking like that. Everything was not alright and never would be again. Jonathan was gone, and he was not coming back, just like the millions of other people who died overnight.

“Jonathan would’ve enjoyed this pizza,” Quinn blurted out before she could stop herself. “It was his favorite junk food.”

“Pepperoni and anchovies, right?” Keith said.

“That’s right.”

“His taste was just as weird as yours.”

“Thanks,” Quinn said, rolling her eyes.

“He was kind,” Gwen added, her voice low. “He never had a mean thing to say about anybody.”

“He was funny, too. He always knew how to make me laugh,” Zenelia said.

“I never liked him much,” Stella said, brutally honest as ever.

“The feeling was mutual,” Quinn said, her tone dry.

“He was a good guy, though,” Stella added.

Quinn raised her can. “To Jonathan.”

The rest followed her example. “To Jonathan.”

Quinn stared at the can in her hands, Jonathan’s face drifting before her eyes. The memory of their last fight rose in her mind, and sorrow gripped her heart. Why did their last conversation have to be a fight? Why did he have to ruin everything by declaring his feelings? They were best friends, but he spoiled it at the end by forcing her into an impossible position.

Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion crashed over her, and her body sagged to the floor. She got to her feet. “Sorry, guys, but it’s time for me to turn in.”

“Go ahead,” Keith said. “We’ll clean up here.”

“Thanks, guys,” Quinn said, dragging herself toward their shared bed. Kicking off her sneakers and jacket, she crawled underneath the blankets, pulling them over her head. Breathing out, she relaxed, her muscles melting into the pillows.

The last thing she remembered was Jonathan telling her to go home. She fell asleep, dreaming of vineyards and grapes, blackening and rotting under the weight of eternal snow.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

NOLAN

Nolan braced himself against the cold as he stepped back into the raging storm. The wind's howl seemed even louder now, a banshee's wail that threatened to swallow him whole. He pulled his scarf tighter around his face and switched on his flashlight, its beam barely penetrating the swirling white void. "Dad!"

His father's footprints had already vanished, filled by the falling snow. Nolan relied on memory and instinct, keeping the beam of his flashlight trained on the ground ahead. Each step was a battle against nature itself, the snow now reaching his waist in places.

"Dad!" he called, his voice swallowed by the howling wind. "Dawid!"

No answer came. Only the endless shriek of the storm surrounded him, pressing in from all sides. Panic threatened to overtake him, but he pushed it down. Panic meant death in these conditions. He needed to stay focused.

The barn materialized suddenly out of the white void, a dark shape looming against the snow. Relief surged through Nolan, giving him a burst of energy.

The door hung open, creaking on its hinges as the wind battered it back and forth. Nolan stumbled inside, grateful for the temporary shelter from the storm. The interior was dark and cold, but still warmer than outside.

"Dad?" he called, sweeping his flashlight around the cavernous space. "Dawid? Are you in here?"

The beam caught movement in the far corner. Animals shifted in their stalls: goats huddled together for warmth, and a few cows watched him with placid eyes. They seemed unharmed, protected from the worst of the storm by the sturdy walls, but there was no sign of his father or Dawid.

"Dad!" he shouted again, louder this time.

A faint groan answered him from behind a stack of hay bales. Nolan rushed forward, and his flashlight revealed his father kneeling beside Dawid's prone form.

“Thank God,” Nolan breathed, dropping to his knees beside them. “I thought—”

“I found him like this,” Johan interrupted. “He’s alive, but barely. Help me get him up.”

Dawid Le Roux was a big man, tall and solidly built despite his sixty-plus years. His weathered face was ashen, his lips blue with cold. A nasty gash ran across his forehead, crusted with blood.

“What happened to him?” Nolan asked, gripping Dawid under one arm while his father took the other.

“It looks like he slipped and hit his head,” Johan replied. “He’s been out here too long. We need to get him back to the house now.”

“What about the animals?” Nolan asked. “They’re alright for now, but if it gets any colder…”

“They’ll be okay,” Johan said. “Dawid took care of that before he got hurt. Their stalls are filled with hay, and if we close the barn door, they should be warm enough to last out the storm.”

“Are you sure?” Nolan asked.

“Look at this place, Nolan,” his father said with a note of exasperation. “If they can’t survive here, there’s not much we can do about it.”

Nolan looked around, taking note of his surroundings. The barn was solidly built and made from brick and mortar. There were only a few small windows, and no chinks, or drafts. The only problem was the open door, swinging wide and allowing the frigid wind to slice through the air. Once closed, the animals would be warm, especially huddled together in their stalls with plenty of hay, water, and blankets.

“For once, you can’t let your soft heart override your better judgment, son,” his father added. “This man needs help, and he needs it now.”

“Sorry, Dad. Let’s go,” Nolan said.

Together, they hauled Dawid to his feet. He moaned, his eyes fluttering open briefly before closing again. His body was a dead weight, and they struggled to support him between them.

They staggered towards the door, dragging Dawid’s unresponsive form. Nolan shut the barn door behind them and dropped the deadbolt. It effectively shut out the storm, and he hoped the animals would survive the night.

The journey back to the house was a nightmare. The wind tore at them from all sides, threatening to rip Dawid from their grasp. Snow filled

Nolan’s boots, soaking his socks and numbing his feet. His face burned with cold, and his lungs ached with each frozen breath.

Time lost all meaning in the white void. It could have been minutes or hours; Nolan couldn’t tell. The only certainty was the burning in his muscles as they struggled through the deep snow, bearing Dawid’s weight between them.

At one point, Dawid’s foot caught on something hidden beneath the snow, and all three men went down. Nolan felt the icy cold seep through his clothes, chilling him to the bone. For a moment, he lay there, exhaustion tempting him to remain still.

“Get up!” Johan shouted, already struggling to his feet. “We can’t stop now!”

With a tremendous effort, Nolan pushed himself upright. Together, they hauled Dawid back to his feet and continued their painful trek.

The farmhouse appeared through the curtain of snow like a mirage, its windows glowing warmly. Anja must have turned on every lamp in the house, creating a beacon for their return.

“We’re almost there,” Nolan gasped, his voice barely audible.

As they approached the porch, the front door flew open. Anja stood framed in the doorway, her face pale with worry. When she saw them, she rushed forward, heedless of the storm.

“Dawid!” she cried, reaching for her husband.

“Get back inside!” Johan ordered. “We’ve got him!”

She reluctantly obeyed, holding the door open as they staggered up the steps and into the blessed warmth of the house.

“Put him by the fire,” Anja directed, grabbing several blankets.

They lowered Dawid onto the couch closest to the fireplace, where the flames crackled merrily, oblivious to the drama unfolding before them. His skin was gray, and his breathing was shallow and irregular.

“How long was he unconscious?” Anja asked, removing Dawid’s frozen outerwear.

“I’m not sure,” Johan replied. “He was already out when I found him.”

“He’s hypothermic,” Nolan said, recognizing the symptoms from his first aid training. “We need to warm him up slowly. Too fast could shock his system.”

Anja nodded. “You’re right. Help me get these wet clothes off him.”

They worked together, peeling away Dawid’s frozen garments. His skin felt like ice beneath their fingers, and Nolan winced at the blue tinge to his lips and fingertips.

“I’ll get hot water bottles,” Anja said, hurrying to the kitchen.

Johan threw more logs onto the fire, stoking it higher. The flames leaped and danced, casting long shadows across the room. He also checked the gas heater and ensured all the doors, windows, and curtains were closed.

“Will he be okay?” Nolan asked.

His father didn’t answer immediately, and his eyes were fixed on Dawid’s still form. “I don’t know, son. He was out there for a long time.”

Anja returned with hot water bottles wrapped in towels. She placed them under Dawid’s armpits, at his groin, and behind his neck, all locations where major blood vessels ran close to the surface.

“This will help warm his core,” she explained, her voice clinical despite the tremor in her hands. Then she looked at Johan and Nolan. “Oh, my. I almost forgot about you two. You must be freezing in those wet things.”

Nolan didn’t answer, feeling far too cold and miserable to form any words, but Johan nodded. “We could use a couple of towels if you can spare them.”

“I can do better than that,” Anja said, hurrying away. She returned moments later with a stack of Dawid’s clothing, towels, and more blankets. “Here. Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll put the kettle on.”

Nolan grabbed a few things and hurried to the guest bathroom, grateful to get out of his wet clothes. He peeled them off layer by layer and dried his body with brisk movements. Afterward, he got dressed, finding the outfit too big, but it didn’t matter. Rolling up the sleeves of the flannel shirt and the bottom of the jeans, he pulled on two pairs of socks, a thick sweater, and a jacket.

Upon his return to the living room, he was greeted by a steaming mug of coffee from Anja, which he gratefully accepted. The first sip was pure heaven, and he groaned as the hot liquid warmed him from the inside.

“Feeling better?” Anja asked.

“Much better,” he said.

His father returned not long after him, also dressed in clean, dry clothing. Anja turned to him and said, “Johan, why don’t you phone Ella and tell her you’re alright? She must be worried sick.”

“Of course. I almost forgot,” Johan said with a start, and he hurried toward the phone.

“How’s Dawid doing?” Nolan asked once his father was occupied.

“Better, but I need to treat that gash on his head. Could you fetch the first-aid kit from the bathroom, please?”

“Sure thing,” Nolan said, gulping down the last of his coffee. He made his way to the bathroom, where he found the kit, a large plastic container filled with supplies far more comprehensive than those in the average household. When he returned to the living room, he asked, “Where did you get this?”

Anja glanced at him. “I used to be a nurse once, but I quit once Quinn was born to give her my full attention.”

“I never knew that,” Nolan said, impressed.

“There are many things youngsters don’t know about their parents and grandparents,” Anja said with a soft laugh. “Maybe one day, you should ask.”

“Maybe I will,” Nolan agreed.

Anja checked Dawid’s pulse, her fingers pressed against his neck. Her face revealed nothing, but Nolan could see the worry in her eyes. “His pulse is weak but steady.”

She took the kit from Nolan and cleaned the gash on Dawid’s forehead with antiseptic. “He’ll need stitches, but that can wait until he’s stable. For now, we just have to watch and wait.”

Time crawled by. They took turns monitoring Dawid, checking his pulse and breathing, adjusting the blankets, and reheating the water bottles.

Anja coaxed a bowl of soup past his lips, followed by tiny sips of sweet, warm tea while rubbing his feet and hands. Gradually, his color improved, the deathly pallor giving way to a more natural tone. His breathing deepened, and his body began to shiver.

“The shivering is normal,” Anja reassured them. “It’s his body’s way of generating heat.”

Around midnight, Dawid’s eyes fluttered open. He looked around in confusion, his gaze unfocused. “Anja?” he croaked, his voice barely a whisper.

“I’m here,” she said, rushing to his side. She took his hand, her eyes brimming with tears. “You’re safe now.”

“The animals—” he began, trying to sit up.

“They’re fine,” Johan said. “You made sure of that. They’re warm and dry in the barn.”

Dawid relaxed, though concern still lined his face. “What happened?”

“You went to check on the animals and didn’t come back,” Anja explained. “When I went looking for you, I fell in the snow. Johan and Nolan found us both.”

Dawid’s eyes found Nolan, standing quietly at the edge of the room. “Thank you.”

Nolan nodded, uncomfortable with the gratitude. “Anyone would have done the same.”

“Not in this weather,” Dawid said, his gaze drifting to the window where the storm still raged unabated. “Not many would’ve braved that hell.”

An awkward silence fell over the room, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the howling wind outside. Nolan shifted his weight from one foot to the other, unsure of what to say.

“You should rest now,” Anja told her husband, adjusting his blankets. “You’ve had a terrible shock.”

Dawid nodded, his eyelids already drooping. Within moments, he was asleep again, his chest rising and falling steadily.

“He’ll be alright now,” Anja said, her relief evident. “Thanks to you both.”

Johan squeezed her shoulder. “We’re just glad we got here in time.”

“Will you stay the night?” she asked. “I don’t think anyone should be driving in this weather.”

“Of course,” Johan agreed. “We’d be fools to head back now. Besides, the storm is far from over. It’ll get worse before it gets better.”

“You think so?” Anja asked.

“Yes, we need to keep that fire going at all costs, and we’d be better off sleeping in here.”

“I guess we’d better get moving then,” Anja said, and they got to work.

Twenty minutes later, the living room was transformed. Two double mattresses filled the space between the couches and the fireplace, covered with thick blankets and handmade quilts. The windows were covered with extra sheets, the living room was closed off from the rest of the house, and two gas heaters burned in the corners for additional heat.

Before they climbed into bed, they each drank a mug of hot chocolate, and Johan phoned Ella once more to make sure that she was safe and warm.

Satisfied, Johan bid them all goodnight, and his soft snores filled the room, accompanied by Dawid's rhythmic grunts and whistles.

Nolan found it difficult to sleep, his thoughts elsewhere, and Anja noticed. "What's wrong? Are you worried about your mom?"

Nolan shook his head.

"Quinn?"

"How did you know?"

"It's pretty obvious," Anja said, "but I wouldn't worry if it were you."

"Why not?"

"She's a smart girl. If anyone can survive this, it's Quinn," Anja said. "Besides, I'd know if something happened to her."

"How?" Nolan asked, perplexed.

"A mother knows," Anja said, pressing one hand to her chest. "I'd feel it in here."

"Okay, but I can't help worrying," Nolan said, ducking his head.

"Me too," Anja admitted.

"Do you think she'll try to find her way home?"

"I'm sure of it. This is her home. It's in her blood."

"I should be out there looking for her," Nolan said, frustrated.

"And end up like Dawid?" Anja shook her head. "No. The best thing you can do for Quinn is stay alive."

Nolan sighed, knowing she was right. "I just feel so useless."

"You saved my husband's life tonight," Anja reminded him. "That's far from useless."

She reached out and squeezed his hand. "Get some sleep, Nolan. Tomorrow is another day, and who knows what it will bring?"

"Alright," Nolan reluctantly agreed, still not in the mood to sleep. But despite his restlessness, exhaustion soon claimed him. His last conscious thought was of Quinn, somewhere in the frozen world, making her way home.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Quinn woke with a start, her eyes snapping wide open. Something felt off, and she lay dead still, trying to pinpoint the source of her discomfort. Then it hit her. Silence. Complete and utter silence.

The howling wind that had been their constant companion for the past few days was gone. The building no longer creaked and groaned, complaining like an old man. Instead, the atmosphere was calm and peaceful. Weak, watery rays of sunlight filtered through the gaps in the sheets they'd hung over the windows, promising a touch of warmth.

Relief flooded her veins, but not for long. Soon, a new crop of worries appeared. How deep was the snow outside? Would the Range Rover start, or had its fuel lines frozen over? Would they be able to fit the new snow tires and get more fuel, or were they stranded, stuck in the middle of nowhere?

For a brief moment, panic threatened to set in. Then, she heard her father's voice whispering in the back of her head. *We're Le Roux's, Quinn, and we never give up.*

Fortified by the memory, Quinn pushed aside the heavy blankets that covered her form and stretched, feeling her joints pop and her muscles reawaken. There was no point in worrying about any of those things now. She just had to face whatever life threw at her with as much courage as she could muster.

Careful not to wake the others, Quinn eased out of bed, grabbed her backpack, and headed to the bathroom, relishing the chance to be alone. After using the toilet, she flushed and refilled the cistern with water from one of the extra buckets they'd prepared. She also washed her hands and face, brushed her teeth, and combed her hair before getting dressed.

Once she was finished, she headed back but stopped to survey the world outside through one of the windows. The weather had cleared, and she could see for miles, the sky a pale, clear blue.

Quinn’s fingers itched to open the door and step outside, ready to feel the sun on her face and breathe in the crisp, clean air. But she knew better than to venture out alone. They’d agreed to stick together, no matter what, including her.

With a sigh, she let the curtain fall back into place and headed to the kitchen instead. The pizza oven still held some heat from the night before, and Quinn stoked it back to life. While the fire blazed and crackled, she made coffee, the rich aroma tingling her nostrils. She warmed up the leftover pizza from the night before and piled it on a big platter.

With breakfast sorted, she grabbed a plate, selected two slices of pizza, and poured herself a steaming mug of coffee. Carrying her breakfast to the storeroom, she determined to get a head start on the packing.

Empty bags and boxes were scattered around the room, waiting to be filled, and she got to work. The canned and dried goods went into the boxes, each clearly labeled with a permanent marker. The frozen meat, fruit, vegetables, and dairy products that were still good to eat went into cooler bags while she kept the cleaning supplies separate.

While she packed and sorted, Quinn munched on her pizza and sipped her coffee, relishing the quiet. It allowed her to organize her thoughts and plan the trip. Like any mountain, the trick was to take the first step. The rest would take care of itself.

Finally, she set up a box for miscellaneous items: Candles, lanterns, batteries, solar chargers, duct tape, rope, and anything else that might be useful. “One can never be too prepared.”

The sound of shuffling feet and muffled voices told her the others were awake, and she left the storeroom to check up on them.

“Hey, Quinn?” Gwen said, shuffling toward her like a zombie. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“Over there,” Quinn replied, pointing to the counter. “Guess what?”

“What?”

“The storm’s over.”

Gwen’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yup. Clear skies as far as the eye can see.”

Keith appeared behind Gwen, his hair sticking up in all directions. “Did I hear that right?”

Quinn nodded. “See for yourself.”

They hurried to the front of the restaurant, Quinn trailing behind. She watched as Keith and Gwen pushed aside the curtains, gasping at the transformed landscape.

“It’s beautiful,” Gwen breathed.

Stella and Zenelia joined them, rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

“What’s going on?” Stella asked.

“The storm’s over,” Keith replied. “We can leave now.”

Zenelia peered out the window, her expression doubtful. “Is it safe?”

Quinn shrugged. “As safe as it’s ever going to be. We can’t stay here forever.”

“She’s right,” Stella said. “We need to move before someone decides this place looks like a good spot for looting.”

They all fell silent, contemplating the reality of their situation. The world as they knew it was gone, replaced by something unfamiliar and hostile.

“So, what’s the plan?” Stella asked, breaking the silence.

Quinn took a deep breath. “We finish packing, check the Rover, make sure it’s in working order, and get the hell out of here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Keith nodded.

“Me too,” Gwen added.

Zenelia shook her head. “And go where?”

“To my home,” Quinn said. “It’s the best place for us now.”

“Says who?”

“What do you mean? I thought we agreed on this,” Quinn said, taken aback.

“I don’t know. I haven’t had much time to think about it,” Zenelia said. “All I know is that it’s far, and anything could happen along the way.”

“Zee, we talked about this,” Keith said, his voice low.

“No, she talked, and we listened. Who made her the Queen?” Zenelia said, a cutting edge to her voice.

Zenelia stormed off before anyone could say a word, grabbing her stuff and heading to the bathroom. Keith moved to follow, but Quinn stopped him. “I’ll talk to her.”

She found Zenelia in the bathroom, angrily yanking a comb through her unruly hair.

“What’s wrong?” Quinn asked.

Zenelia glared at her. “I don’t want to go to your precious vineyard. It’s safer here in Stellenbosch. There’s food, water, and shelter. Plenty of shops.”

“There are also raiders,” Quinn pointed out. “We lost Jonathan the other night. Isn’t that enough?”

“It doesn’t have to be that way. We’ll just have to be more careful,” Zenelia snapped. “Besides, my parents and brother live in Franschhoek. That’s a lot closer than your home.”

“Maybe, but the vineyard would be safer. We could make a life there. Grow food, pump water from the river, set up a solar system, keep livestock, and live off the land.”

“Oh, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?” Zenelia cut in.

“What on earth do you mean?” Quinn said, truly confused.

“Be honest. You don’t give a crap about me, or Gwen, or Stella. You just want Keith all to yourself.”

“What?” Quinn cried, aghast. “You can’t be serious.”

“As serious as a heart attack. I’ve seen the way you look at him.”

“That’s not true. There’s nothing between us,” Quinn protested.

“Oh, please. I’ve got eyes.”

“Zenelia, please,” Quinn said, feeling helpless.

“Just leave me alone!”

“Can’t we talk about this?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Get out!” Zenelia shouted, pointing at the door. “And leave Keith alone. He’s mine.”

Quinn hesitated. “Zee, please. You know me. I would never try to take Keith from you.”

“I thought I knew you,” Zenelia said, shaking her head. “But ever since this freak weather, you’ve changed. You think you’re so much better than me now because I can’t use a gun, kill bad people, or take charge. You’re the big boss now, and everyone listens to you.”

“It’s not like that, I swear it.”

“Just go, Quinn,” Zenelia said, the anger draining from her expression. She slumped over the washbasin, her head hanging low.

“Zee,” Quinn said, feeling miserable.

“Go.”

Quinn left, praying Zenelia would come around, but she had little hope of that happening. The other girl must have been thinking about these things

for a while, and she was unlikely to change her mind. *Maybe Keith can talk to her, or all of this will have been for nothing.*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Quinn returned to the others, unable to meet their eyes. She had no idea what to say to them. She didn't even know how she felt about any of it herself. Zenelia's outburst had caught her by surprise, even though she knew that not everything the other girl had said was unwarranted. There was a seed of truth there, no matter how small.

With a sigh, she made her way to the booth where Stella, Gwen, and Keith waited, the tray with the coffee and pizza she'd prepared in the middle. She sat down and poured herself a fresh cup, desperately needing the jolt of caffeine it contained.

"Is Zee okay?" Keith asked, his brow creased.

Quinn shook her head. "Not really. Maybe you should go talk to her."

"What about the move? Did she say anything?" Gwen asked.

"Just that she doesn't want to go to my place anymore," Quinn said.

"Why not?"

"She wants to go home to her family," Quinn explained. "They live in Franschhoek."

"Are they even alive?" Stella asked.

"She hasn't heard from them in a while, so there's no way to tell," Keith said, standing up. "Anyway. I'd better go to her."

Quinn didn't reply, staring at the mug between her palms. The altercation with Zee had changed everything, and she had no idea what to do next.

"So, what now?" Stella asked.

Quinn shrugged. "I don't know. Talk things over? Come to a mutual decision?"

"Sounds like a plan," Stella said. "In the meantime, we'll wash and get dressed."

"Yeah. We'll be quick," Gwen said, grabbing her things.

Together, she and Stella headed to the bathroom, leaving Quinn alone.

“I’ll be right here,” Quinn said, leaning back in her chair. It was funny how quickly things changed. One moment, she was a woman on a mission. Now, she didn’t know what the hell she was. Slumped over her coffee, she wondered if Zenelia was right. Did she have feelings for Keith?

Quinn mulled it over and realized the answer was more complex than a simple yes or no. Did she like him? Yes. He’d surprised her countless times since the apocalypse began, revealing a depth of character she’d never expected. Was she attracted to those qualities? Yes, again. Would she try to steal him from Zenelia? Never. She wasn’t that kind of girl.

As for Jonathan, she’d loved him as a friend, a brother, never more. And while she regretted hurting him, she couldn’t force herself to feel something she didn’t. *I’m sorry, Jon. Maybe things could’ve been different if I felt the same, but it’s done now, and nothing will ever change that.*

For the first time, Quinn allowed herself to mourn his loss. He’d been her friend since they first met on campus, both of them a little lost and lonely, far from their homes and families.

She still remembered that day. Walking across the park at the university, she had her eyes glued to the orientation program in her hands. The park was beautiful, with stately oak trees and inviting benches scattered about, but she barely noticed any of it. She was too focused on figuring out where her next event was.

Suddenly, she smacked into something hard and flat. The impact knocked her backward, and she landed on her butt in the grass. Her nose throbbed, and she felt warm liquid trickling down her face.

“Oh, my God, I’m so sorry!” a panicked male voice said.

Quinn looked up to see a tall, lanky guy with curly hair and thick glasses standing over her. In his arms, he held a large square mirror in a gilded frame. It looked expensive, and she was glad it was still intact.

“Are you okay?” he asked, crouching down beside her. “Here, take this.” He pulled out an old-fashioned handkerchief and held it out.

“Thanks,” Quinn mumbled, pressing it to her bleeding nose. “I’m fine, just embarrassed.”

“No, it’s my fault,” the guy insisted. “I should’ve been watching where I was going.”

“It’s okay,” she mumbled through the cloth wedged up her nostrils.

“Is it broken? Should I take you to the emergency room?”

Quinn tested her nose, prodding it with care. It hurt, and her eyes watered, but it seemed to be in one piece. “No, I don’t think it’s broken.”

The stranger uttered a sigh of relief. “ I’m Jonathan, by the way.”

“Quinn,” she replied. “Nice to meet you, I guess.”

Jonathan reached out to help her up. As she grasped it, he pulled too hard, causing her to stumble forward. In his attempt to steady her, he lost his grip on the mirror. It fell to the ground with a crash, shattering into pieces.

Quinn stared at it with a sense of horror and bemusement. “Crap. That’s seven years of bad luck.”

Jonathan blinked. “I guess you’re right. Maybe this is a sign for me to go home.”

“Or… it’s just a superstition.”

“Let’s go with that,” Jonathan said with a laugh. “Honestly, I never liked that mirror anyway. My mom insisted I bring it here to ‘brighten up my room.’

Quinn chuckled. “I know exactly what you mean. I’ve got a quilt, two pot plants, and three recipe books from home, all packed by my mom.”

“That means she must love you a lot.”

“Yes, she does,” Quinn agreed with a fond smile. “Anyway, I’m sorry about the mirror.”

“I know of a way you can make up for it,” Jonathan said.

“How?” Quinn asked, suddenly wary. “If you’re going to ask me out—”

“Nope,” Jonathan said, raising one hand in the air. “That’s not it.”

“What then?”

“You’re new here, and I’m new here, so what do you say about us being friends?”

“Friends?”

“Yeah, friends.”

“Um…”

“Just friends. We can figure things out together, make mistakes, laugh about it, go to parties, and have each other’s backs.”

“Well, when you put it like that, how can I say no?” Quinn said, feeling comfortable around him. He seemed genuine and sincere, and her gut told her she could trust him.

“Excellent. And as my new friend, you can help me clean up this mess,” he said, pointing to the broken mirror.

Quinn burst out laughing. “I knew there was a catch.”

Together, they scooped up the broken pieces and dumped them in a nearby trash can. Afterward, they decided to grab lunch together and headed to a coffee shop.

As they walked, Jonathan asked, “So what were you looking at so intently when you first ran into me?”

“Oh, just trying to figure out where my next orientation event is,” Quinn explained.

“Mind if I take a look? I might be able to help.”

Quinn handed him the schedule, and they spent the short walk to the coffee shop, discussing classes and dorms and sharing their nervousness about starting college. By the time they ordered their food and drinks, Quinn felt like she’d known Jonathan for years.

From that day forward, they were inseparable. Jonathan became her confidant, study buddy, and partner in crime for late-night snack runs. He was always there when she needed him through breakups, exam stress, and homesickness.

Remembering it all, Quinn felt a fresh wave of grief wash over her. She missed him more than words could say and wished she could go back in time to change things. Her worst regret was that their last conversation had ended in an argument.

But she also knew that Jonathan would’ve forgiven her, and she owed him the same in return. He’d turned the tables on their friendship, but he could no more control his feelings than she could. All her anger left her in a rush, leaving nothing behind but loss. *It was an honor to be your friend, Jon, and I’ll never forget you.*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY

Quinn was so lost in her memories that she didn't notice Keith approaching until he cleared his throat. She looked up, and her heart jumped into her throat. "Where's Zee?"

"Still in the bathroom," Keith said.

"Is she okay?"

"She'll be fine, but…"

"But what?"

"She's pretty adamant about going home to Franschhoek," he said. "She believes her family is still alive, even though she hasn't heard from them since the freeze."

"I see," Quinn said, rapid calculations going off in her mind. The group was being torn in two, and while they had plenty of supplies, they only had one working vehicle. Traveling on foot meant death. They did not possess the gear to survive in the outdoors, especially in the event of a blizzard.

"Hey," Keith said softly. What are you thinking?"

"I think we have no choice but to go to Franschhoek," Quinn sighed.

"You'd do that for Zee? Give up on your home?" Keith asked.

"Yes, I would. She might be mad at me, but we're a family, you know? An apocalyptic family and I can't let her risk her life by walking," Quinn said. "And I don't look forward to giving her the truck and walking a hundred-plus kilometers myself either."

"So, that means we're sticking together?"

"Yes, it does," Quinn said, her mind made up.

They sat in silence for a moment before Keith spoke again. "Quinn, I need to ask you something."

Her heart started to race again. "What is it?"

"Is there any truth to what Zee said? About you having feelings for me?"

Quinn froze, unsure how to respond. "Keith, I…"

"Because if there is," he continued, "I need to know. It changes things."

Quinn took a deep breath. “I don’t know, Keith. Honestly. Everything’s so complicated right now. I care about you, but I care about Zee, too, and I’m still processing Jonathan’s death. I just don’t know.”

Keith nodded. “I understand. It’s a lot to deal with.”

“What about you?” Quinn asked. “How do you feel about… me?”

Keith ran a hand through his hair. “I’m confused. I love Zee, but things have changed. We’ve all changed.”

Quinn blew out a breath. “This is such a mess.”

“I know.”

Thinking it over, Quinn came to the only conclusion possible. “Look, right now, we need to stick together. We have only one working vehicle among the lot of us, and it’s the only way we’ll get to where we want to go, so let’s focus on that. We can figure the other stuff out later.”

Keith stared at her for a few seconds. “Nothing’s changed then?”

“No, nothing has changed,” Quinn said with as much resolution as she could muster. But even as she spoke, a tiny spark of dissent sounded in the back of her mind. *Everything has changed, whether you like it or not.*

“Alright,” Keith said, a flicker of disappointment crossing his face. “I’ll fetch Zenelia and give her the good news.”

“Tell her… tell her whatever she needs to hear,” Quinn said. “We must stick together, or we’ll never make it out of this alive.”

“I know.”

Keith left, and Quinn wasted no more time moping around. For better or worse, they’d decided and would have to see it through. “Alright, then. What’s next?”

Her eyes fell on the bag of weapons they’d secured from the invaders, and she picked it up. Unzipping the top, she inspected the contents. It was a good haul. Besides Jonathan’s hunting rifle, there was an extra shotgun and two R5 semi-automatic rifles.

Quinn stared at the R5s. She’d used a rifle before, her dad taught her, and decided to swap one for her shotgun. She kept the Vektor Z88, however. It was a gun she was comfortable with, and its weight on her hip made her feel more secure.

“You can’t sit still for one moment, huh?” Stella asked, emerging from the bathroom in fresh clothes, her short dark hair slicked back against her skull.

“My mom used to say I had ants in my pants,” Quinn said with a grin, checking the load on both of her guns.

“What have we got here?”

“See for yourself,” Quinn said, waving a hand at the guns.

Stella stepped forward and picked up Quinn’s shotgun, admiring the weapon. “It’s great at close range.”

“Yup,” Quinn agreed.

“Might be better to give one to Zee and Gwen each. They won’t need to worry so much about aiming. Just point and shoot.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I’ll take Jonathan’s hunting rifle instead,” Stella said, flashing Quinn a look. “If you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. I’ve got this baby now,” Quinn said, patting the stock of the R5.

“I’ll keep the Glock too.”

“Go ahead. I’ve got the Vector.”

“Good gun. My mom had one.”

While they divided the ammunition, Gwen and Keith emerged from the bathroom. Zenelia, her eyes red and swollen, trailed after them.

Gwen, Keith, and Zenelia approached the booth where Quinn and Stella sorted the weapons. Quinn glanced up, forcing a smile. “Hey guys, come check out our new arsenal.”

Zenelia pointedly avoided Quinn’s gaze, sliding into the booth next to Stella. Keith hesitated momentarily before sitting across from them, looking uncomfortable.

“Coffee?” Gwen asked, heading for the pot.

“Please,” Quinn said. The others nodded.

As Gwen poured coffee for everyone, Stella picked up the shotgun. “We thought it might be good to give this one to you and the other to Zee,” she said to Gwen. “They’re easier to use. Just point and shoot.”

Gwen nodded, setting down the coffee pot. “Makes sense. I’m not much of a marksman.”

“I don’t need a gun,” Zenelia muttered, staring into her coffee.

Quinn bit her lip, resisting the urge to argue. Instead, she focused on checking the R5 magazine.

Keith cleared his throat. “It’s probably best if we all know how to use these, just in case.”

Zenelia’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t respond.

“Right,” Stella said, a little too brightly. “So, Quinn’s got the R5, I’ll take the hunting rifle, Gwen and Zee get the shotguns, and Keith, you want the other R5, or are you sticking with your rifle?”

“I’ll take the R5,” Keith said.

As Quinn handed it to him, their fingers brushed. She quickly pulled her hand back, noticing Zenelia’s eyes narrow. *Damn it!*

“We should practice a bit, Zee,” Gwen suggested, trying to cut through the tension. “Make sure we know how to load and unload these shotguns.”

“Good idea,” Quinn agreed. She gestured to the guns. “Shall we?”

As they began going through the motions, the atmosphere remained thick with unspoken words and hurt feelings. Quinn demonstrated the R5s functions mechanically, hyper-aware of Zenelia’s cold silence and Keith’s careful distance. Stella and Gwen exchanged worried glances, their forced cheerfulness doing little to dispel the cloud hanging over the group.

Finally, Quinn called a halt to the weapons demonstration, ready to move on. Outside, the sun shone brighter than she’d seen in weeks, and she was eager to take advantage of the mild weather. But first, she had to do something about Zenelia, or they weren’t going anywhere.

“Zee, can I talk to you in private, please?” Quinn asked, nervously fidgeting with the edge of her sleeve.

“Okay,” Zenelia said with the utmost reluctance.

Ignoring the worried looks from the others, Quinn led the way to a far corner of the room. She slid into a booth and pointed to the seat opposite her. “Please sit, Zee.”

“Fine, but I don’t know what else there is to say,” Zenelia said, taking a seat.

“Look, I understand your need to go home and check on your family,” Quinn began. “That’s why I agreed to this trip to Franschhoek.”

“Agreed? Who are you to dictate to us?” Zenelia said, her voice rising a notch.

“I’m not trying to dictate,” Quinn said, a surge of anger rushing through her veins.

“It sure seems like it from here,” Zenelia said obstinately.

Taking a deep breath, Quinn reigned in her anger. “Look, whether you like it or not, I’m the one who found the Rover. I’m the one who looked for

the keys. I'm the one who got us out when those people attacked. If anyone gets to say where we're going, it's me."

"Alright, fine. Go ahead. Take the Rover and go home to your precious vineyard. Keith and I will figure something out," Zenelia said, folding her arms across her chest.

"Don't be stupid. You'll die if you try to make it on foot, and you know it," Quinn said, losing patience.

Zenelia didn't reply, but her expression remained mutinous.

Quinn sighed and softened her tone. "Look, Zee. The last thing I want to do is fight. You guys are like family to me, and I could never let anything happen to you. That's why I'll make you a promise right now."

"What promise?" Zenelia asked, a flicker of interest crossing her face.

"I promise I'll do my best to get you home, and I promise nothing is going on between Keith and me," Quinn said. "He's your boyfriend, and I respect that."

"I don't know if I can trust you," Zenelia said. "With everything that's going on, it would be so easy for you to screw me over."

"Screw you over?" Quinn asked. "Zee, I'd never do that."

"Wouldn't you? I've seen the looks between you two. I know there's something there."

"No, you're wrong. I respect Keith, and I rely on him in many ways. I mean, life isn't exactly easy anymore, and having a strong guy around helps a lot. But I don't love him, and he doesn't love me. He loves you, and only you."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, I do. Anyone with eyes can see it."

"I need him, Quinn," Zenelia said, her voice hitching in her throat. "I can't do this without him. It's too hard."

"Where is this coming from?" Quinn asked, a sudden suspicion causing her to prod for answers. "This isn't about jealousy. This is something else."

Zenelia hesitated, chewing her bottom lip. "Maybe."

"What is it?"

"I don't know if I should tell you," Zenelia said, looking uncertain.

"You can tell me, Zee."

"I think I'm pregnant," Zenelia blurted out.

Quinn stared at her, shocked to the core. "Pregnant? How?"

"I think that's pretty obvious."

“I mean, how do you know?”

“I took the test this morning while all of you were still asleep. It was positive.”

“Test? What test?” Quinn asked, her mind scrambling for answers. “Where did you get a test?”

Zenelia shrugged. “I always carry one with me, in case.”

“In case?”

“As a safety precaution.”

“Uh-huh,” Quinn said, unsure what to say next. Her mouth worked. “Um. Congratulations?”

“Thanks,” Zenelia said with a tremulous smile, one hand resting on her stomach.

“Is that why you freaked out? Because you’re scared you’ll lose Keith with a baby on the way?”

Zenelia nodded.

“Well, you can stop worrying. As I said, nothing is going on between us.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart,” Quinn said, drawing an x on her chest.

“And you’ll help me get home? To my mum and dad?” Zenelia added. “I can’t have this baby alone.”

“Yes, I’ll help you. But you’re not alone, Zee. You have us. All of us,” Quinn said, reaching out to take Zenelia’s hand.

“I know, and I’m sorry I was being such a bitch,” Zenelia said.

“So, we’re good?”

“We’re good.”

“Great. Now let’s spread the news,” Quinn said with a huge smile. She stood up and reached out her hand. “You’re going to have a baby!”

Zenelia took her hand, and they walked together to the front of the restaurant, where the others waited.

“What’s up?” Keith asked, stepping forward.

“Zee has news for you. For all of you,” Quinn said, nudging Zenelia forward. “Go on.”

An expectant hush fell over the room, all eyes on Zenelia. She cleared her throat and wrung her hands. “Uh, guys. I’m going to have a baby.”

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Zenelia's announcement was met with shocked silence. Everyone stood frozen, processing the unexpected news. Keith was the first to react, his eyes wide with disbelief. "I'm going to be a father?"

Zenelia nodded, tears welling in her eyes. Keith let out a whoop of joy and rushed forward to scoop her into his arms. He spun her around, laughing and crying at the same time.

"We're having a baby!" he shouted, his face beaming.

Stella and Gwen snapped out of their wonder and hurried to join the celebration. They surrounded Zenelia with happy cries and congratulations, hugging her tightly.

They had a new destination now, and while Franschhoek was closer than the vineyard, they had no idea what awaited them there. With Zenelia pregnant, they would need to be extra careful. While she'd anticipated a difficult journey, it would be much more complicated now.

After a few moments, Quinn cleared her throat. "Alright, everyone. That's enough. We need to get moving."

Stella rolled her eyes. "Spoilsport."

"No, she has a point," Zenelia said. "The sooner I get home, the better."

"Alright, what do we do?" Gwen asked.

Quinn thought it over. "Zee, you're in charge of coffee and snacks. No heavy lifting."

"I'm not an invalid," Zenelia protested.

"It doesn't matter. We're not taking any chances," Quinn said. "Keith, I need you to clear a path through the snow to the Rover. The rest of us will finish packing our personal belongings, blankets, and supplies. We'll pile everything by the entrance."

Everyone nodded, accepting their assignments without complaint. As they dispersed, Quinn caught Zenelia's eye and smiled reassuringly. It felt good to be on the same side again, their earlier animosity forgotten.

Quinn stacked the last of their supplies next to the door, double-checking that they hadn't forgotten anything crucial. Satisfied, she grabbed a shovel and headed outside to join Keith.

The cold air bit at her face as she stepped into the snow, but it was surprisingly warm. Though weak, the sun was the strongest it had been in weeks, and she enjoyed the sensation of sunshine on her face.

Keith was hard at work, his breath coming out in white puffs as he shoveled through the snow. He'd cleared the restaurant entrance and was working on a path to the Land Rover.

Quinn pitched in, acutely aware of their new dynamic. Zenelia's pregnancy had changed everything, and whatever feelings she might have had for him were deeply buried. Now, she had only one goal: Getting Zenelia safely to Franschhoek. Hopefully, her parents were still alive, but if not, they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

"So you're going to be a father, huh?" Quinn asked despite her resolution not to pry.

"Yeah, can you believe it?"

"I'm happy for you."

"Are you?"

Quinn straightened up, staring at Keith. "Of course I am."

Keith's eyes searched her face for a moment before he nodded, seemingly satisfied with what he saw.

"Are you scared?" she asked.

"Terrified," Keith admitted.

"I don't blame you, but everything will be okay. I'm sure of it."

"Thanks, Quinn. I appreciate it."

They returned to their work, the only sound the scrape of their shovels against the ground. Soon, Gwen and Stella joined them, and the work progressed even faster. Quinn's arms ached from the effort, but she pushed through, determined to reach the Land Rover.

Finally, they uncovered the vehicle, and she climbed inside to try the ignition. The engine sputtered and coughed, turning repeatedly but refusing to start.

"Damn it," she muttered, climbing out again. "Do you think the fuel froze during the storm?"

"Maybe," Keith said.

"Crap. That's all we need," Quinn said, kicking a tire.

Keith frowned, considering the problem. “Maybe we should push it into the sun. Let the heat warm it up a bit.”

Quinn nodded. “It’s worth a shot. Alright, everyone, gather around.”

They positioned themselves around the Rover, ready to push. Quinn counted down, and on three, they all heaved against the vehicle. Slowly, it began to move, inching through the snow until it sat in a patch of sunlight.

“Now, we wait,” Quinn said, leaning against the Rover’s side. She looked back at the restaurant, thinking of Zenelia inside, pregnant and desperate for her home and family. “Let’s hope this works.”

While they waited for the Rover to heat in the sun, Quinn suggested they fit the snow tires, gather fuel, and check out the tuck shop next to the fuel station.

“Good idea,” Keith said, grabbing the toolbox from the back of the truck. He followed up with the tires, leaving only the spares behind, and they got to work.

While they changed the tires, Quinn kept glancing at the Rover, hoping that the sun’s warmth was doing its job. Finally, she couldn’t take it anymore and said, “I’m trying the engine again. This bucket of rust has to start.”

“Go ahead,” Keith said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “We’re almost done here anyway.”

Quinn jumped into the driver’s seat of the Land Rover, praying that their plan had worked. She took a deep breath, crossed her fingers, and turned the key. The engine sputtered and coughed but didn’t start, and she almost cried with disappointment.

“Please start,” she pleaded, trying again while giving it more gas. After more chugging, the engine caught, roaring to life with a satisfying rumble.

“Yes!” Quinn shouted, pumping her fist in the air. She leaped out of the vehicle and ran toward her friends, high-fiving each of them in turn. “We did it!”

“Thank God,” Stella said, patting the Rover’s hood. “I was starting to think we’d be stuck here forever.”

Keith finished tightening the last bolt on the snow tires and stood up, wiping his hands on his pants. “Perfect timing. We’re all set.”

“Great work, everyone,” Quinn said. ‘Now, we just need gas and some more supplies.”

“I’ll get the fuel,” Keith offered.

“Thanks,” Quinn said, looking at the girls. “Stella, you and I can go to the shop. Gwen, why don’t you check on Zee? Make sure she’s okay.”

“Sure thing,” Gwen said. “It’s time for lunch anyway. Anyone hungry?”

“I could eat,” Keith said.

“Me too,” Stella added.

Quinn’s stomach rumbled loudly, and the group burst out laughing. She patted her middle with a rueful smile and said, “There’s your answer.”

“I’ll whip something up,” Gwen promised, heading back.

Together, Quinn, Stella, and Keith explored the rest of the premises before heading to the tuck shop.

Keith loaded a trolley with empty jerry cans, a pump, and a length of hose. “I’m going to try siphoning from the underground tank. Without power, we can’t use the pumps.”

“Have fun,” Quinn said, glad it wasn’t her. She hated the smell and taste of fuel and was happy to leave the unpleasant job to him.

While Keith was busy, Quinn and Stella walked down the aisles of the tuck shop, selecting any items they might need for the journey.

“So, a baby, huh?” Stella said. “What do you think about that?”

“I’m happy for her,” Quinn replied, tossing several tubes of lip balm and moisturizer into her trolley. With the constant cold weather, her skin tended to dry out, leaving it chapped and raw.

“I’m happy for her too, but a baby? Now?” Stella said, voicing the very sentiments Quinn had been afraid to mention.

“I know. I could never do it. It’s too dangerous,” Quinn agreed.

“Yeah, I mean. No doctors, hospitals, or clinics. What if something goes wrong?”

“That’s probably why she’s so desperate to go home. She wants her mother.”

“Well, there will be no babies for me. Not in this apocalypse,” Stella said with a shudder.

“I can’t imagine it was on purpose, though. Nobody plans for an apocalyptic baby,” Quinn reasoned.

“Maybe not, but it’s too late now,” Stella said.

“Yes, it is. All she can do is make the best of it now,” Quinn said, reaching for a can of sardines. “Think this place might have some baby stuff?”

“I saw some formula and diapers over there,” Stella said, hurrying that way. She reached the aisle in question and loaded as much as she could fit, focusing on newborn stuff.

Quinn grabbed the rest, but when she spotted a Whinny the Poo pacifier, she tucked it into her pocket. Suddenly, a distant rumble caught her attention. It was coming from far away, but growing louder by the second, and she froze, listening intently.

Stella turned to her, eyes wide with alarm. “Do you hear that?”

Quinn nodded, her heart racing. She rushed to the nearest window, Stella close behind. As she peered out, her blood ran cold. A small cavalcade of vehicles was heading their way: Two sedans, a truck, and a motorcycle.

“Shit,” Quinn muttered. It was clear they were headed straight for the gas station. She turned to Stella, her voice urgent. “We need to hide. Now.”

There was no time to warn Keith or to make it back to the restaurant. All they could do was get under cover and hope for the best.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Quinn watched as the strangers pulled into the gas station, keeping in tight formation. They revved their engines as they parked, the sound amplified by the enclosed space until it vibrated through the concrete and up her spine. Acrid black smoke rose from the back tires, filling the air with smog.

“Red flag number one,” Quinn muttered, one hand moving to the gun on her hip.

A group of rough-looking men peeled out of the vehicles, their clothes dirty and their faces unshaven. They were all armed, and more than one sported stains on their shirts that looked suspiciously like dried blood. “Red flag number two.”

Stella glanced at her. “What?”

“There aren’t any women or children with them either. Red flag number three,” Quinn said. “These men are trouble. We can’t let them see us.”

“You’ll get no argument from me,” Stella replied, clutching her rifle.

Quinn grabbed Stella’s arm and pulled her towards the back of the shop. “Quick, behind the counter.”

They crouched behind the checkout counter, trying to make themselves as small as possible. Car doors slammed, and voices carried on the wind. “Check the pumps and search the buildings. There could be supplies inside.”

Heavy footsteps crunched in the snow, getting closer to the shop. Quinn held her breath as the bell above the door jingled. Someone was inside.

“Hello?” a man’s voice called out. “Anyone there?”

Quinn and Stella remained perfectly still, not daring to make a sound. The footsteps moved through the aisles, accompanied by the rustle of items being picked up and tossed aside.

“Jackpot,” the man crowed.

Just then, another set of footsteps entered the shop. “Find anything good?” a second male voice asked.

“There’s plenty,” the first man replied. “We should grab what we can.”

Quinn’s mind was racing. Where was Keith? Had they found him at the fuel pumps? And what about Gwen and Zenelia back at the restaurant? She desperately wanted to peek over the counter to see what was happening but couldn’t risk being spotted.

The men continued to rummage through the shop, their voices and footsteps moving closer to Quinn and Stella’s hiding spot. Quinn’s legs were starting to cramp from crouching for so long, and she shifted slightly, trying to ease the discomfort.

She bumped the counter, and a small box of mints perched on the edge clattered to the floor. It landed right next to Quinn’s foot, and she knew the gig was up.

The shop went silent.

“Did you hear that?” one of the men asked.

“Yeah,” the other man replied. “Sounded like it came from behind the counter.”

Quinn’s heart almost stopped as she heard footsteps approaching. She locked eyes with Stella, seeing her fear reflected back at her. “Get ready,” she mouthed, her hand gripping her Z88.

Stella nodded and grabbed her Glock, ready for action.

A man leaned over the counter, his face coming into view. His eyes widened when he spotted Quinn and Stella, and a slow, predatory grin spread across his face. He turned his head and yelled, “Hey, boys! I found a couple of girls!”

Whoops and hollers filled the air, sending chills down Quinn’s spine. She didn’t hesitate. In one fluid motion, her gun left its holster, and she snapped off several shots. The thin wood of the counter proved to be no barrier, and he stumbled backward with a cry of pain.

“Follow me!” Quinn shouted, trusting Stella would listen. It was all or nothing now, and there could be no mercy on either side.

She rolled out from behind the counter and jumped to her feet. Spotting the second man in the shop, she fired, catching him in the shoulder. He yelped and dove through the doorway, escaping outside.

“Shit!” Quinn yelled, giving chase. She burst out of the shop with Stella on her heels, only to find them caught in a crossfire. The bad guys were huddled behind their vehicles at the pumps, using the truck for cover while firing at the girls. Bullets whizzed past their heads as they dove for cover behind a nearby dumpster used for empty oil canisters.

“What now?” Stella cried, looking to Quinn for guidance.

“I don’t know. Shoot the bad guys and try not to get shot yourself?” Quinn said.

“You’re not very good at this,” Stella said.

“Well, I’m not a soldier,” Quinn replied. She peeked around the dumpster’s edge and squeezed off a few shots, wondering where Keith had gotten to. She hoped he was somewhere safe because there was no way she could help him.

They traded fire with the group, the sound of gunshots echoing across the snowy landscape. Quinn’s mind raced, trying to formulate a plan to get them out of their mess, but came up empty.

“Where’s Keith?” Stella yelled over the noise.

“I don’t know,” Quinn replied, her voice tight with worry.

A bullet pinged off the metal dumpster inches from Quinn’s head. She ducked, her heart pounding. “We can’t stay here. We’re sitting ducks!”

“What do we do?” Stella asked, fear evident in her eyes.

Quinn took a deep breath, steeling herself. “We make a run for the restaurant.”

Stella nodded, gripping her gun.

“Okay,” Quinn said. “On my mark. One, two, three!”

Quinn and Stella burst from behind the dumpster and sprinted toward the far side of the building, aiming for the corner. The restaurant stood behind it, and if they were fast enough, they could seek cover inside.

But luck was not on their side. The icy paving made it hard to run at speed. Bullets whizzed past them, their feet sliding across the slick surface, and Quinn knew they wouldn’t make it.

Suddenly, Keith jumped up from behind a low concrete wall and laid down cover fire with his R5. “Over here!”

Quinn and Stella swerved toward him, diving behind the barrier as more bullets ricocheted off the ground and concrete. They hunkered down with their heads between their knees, trying not to present a target.

The alcove they found themselves in was used to store bags of charcoal, wood, and a chest freezer full of ice, and the space was cramped.

Keith looked them over with concern. “Are you two okay?”

“We’re fine,” Quinn gasped. “What about you?”

“I’m alright,” Keith said. “I was siphoning fuel when they showed up. Managed to hide before they saw me.”

A barrage of gunfire peppered the barrier, causing them to flinch.

“We need to get to the restaurant,” Quinn said. “Gwen and Zenelia are still in there.”

Keith nodded grimly. “I counted at least six of them. We’re outnumbered and outgunned.”

“Eight, but I shot one and winged another,” Quinn said.

“Any ideas?” Stella asked.

Quinn thought quickly. “Keith, did you manage to get any fuel?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I filled two jerry cans before they showed up.”

A plan began to form in Quinn’s mind. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do…” She quickly outlined her idea. “Got it?”

Keith and Stella listened intently, nodding in agreement.

“It’s risky,” Keith said, “but it might work.”

“On my signal,” Quinn said, gripping her rifle tightly.

They waited for a lull in the gunfire. When it came, Quinn shouted, “Now!”

Keith grabbed one of the jerry cans and hurled it toward the attackers. As it arced through the air, Quinn aimed and fired, the R5 set to fully automatic. A burst of bullets left the barrel, and one struck the metal can. It sparked, igniting the liquid inside. The can exploded in a brilliant fireball, showering the area with burning gasoline.

Screams of pain and shock filled the air as several of the attackers got caught in the blast, and they ran for cover. The jerry can fell to the ground where it lay sizzling in the snow, the flames quickly extinguished.

“Now!” Quinn yelled.

Quinn, Keith, and Stella rose, opening fire on the remaining attackers. Keith’s aim was true, and he took another with a clean shot to the chest. Stella managed to wound a man in the leg, dropping him to the ground with a howl of pain. With three dead, two injured, and several sporting painful burns from the exploding fuel can, the raiders seemed to lose their nerve.

Quinn saw the moment their resolve broke, their eyes darting between their fallen comrades and the determined defenders.

“Let’s get out of here!” one of the men shouted, limping towards one of the remaining vehicles.

The others didn’t need to be told twice. They scrambled to their feet, half-dragging their wounded companions as they piled into the truck and the remaining sedan. Engines roared to life, tires spinning in the snow as the

vehicles tore out of the gas station in a cloud of exhaust smoke and white powder.

Quinn, Keith, and Stella held their position, guns trained on the retreating raiders until the sound of their engines faded into the distance. Only then did Quinn allow herself to relax, lowering her weapon with shaking hands.

She stood up slowly, surveying the aftermath of the battle. Three bodies lay motionless in the snow, dark stains spreading beneath them. The abandoned trucks stood where they'd been parked, a couple of bullet holes peppering their sides and backs.

As the realization of their victory sank in, Quinn felt a surge of triumph course through her. "We did it!" she shouted, turning to Keith and Stella with a wide grin. "We actually did it!"

Keith laughed, the tension draining from his face. "That was some quick thinking with the fuel can, Quinn. You saved our asses."

Stella nodded in agreement, her eyes wide with adrenaline. "I can't believe that worked. I thought we were goners for sure."

Quinn was about to reply when she remembered Gwen and Zenelia. "Oh God, the others. We need to check on them!"

They sprinted toward the restaurant, calling out for their friends. As they approached, the door burst open, and Gwen ran out, her face pale with worry.

"Are you guys okay?" she cried, throwing her arms around Stella and Quinn. "We heard the gunshots and explosions. What happened?"

"We're fine," Quinn assured her, glancing past Gwen to see Zenelia emerging from the restaurant with diffident steps. "Are you two alright?"

Zenelia nodded, her eyes wide. "We're okay. We hid in the walk-in freezer when we heard the commotion. What happened?"

Quinn told them the story in simple terms, glossing over the worst parts. "Anyway, long story short. The raiders are gone, and we should leave as soon as possible. The rest might decide to come back, and I'd rather not be here if it happens."

"I agree with Quinn. We should leave as soon as possible," Zenelia said, her voice quivering.

Quinn noted the fear in the new mom-to-be's eyes and realized Zenelia was on the verge of a panic attack. In a bid to calm her down, she got the

ball rolling. “Okay, let’s get this show on the road. Keith, can you fetch the fuel we need for the trip while we pack the Rover?”

“I’m on it,” Keith said.

“I’ll go with him,” Zenelia said, hurrying to his side. She clung to his arm as they exited the building, her head leaning against his shoulder.

Quinn watched them leave with a sinking feeling. Her gut told her it wasn’t over yet, but there was nothing she could do about it. Instead, she turned her attention to the work at hand, aware that time was of the essence.

They were about halfway loading the Land Rover when Keith and Zenelia returned, pushing a trolley filled with full jerry cans.

Though Quinn was happy to see them, she quickly noted the odd expression on their faces and paused. “Is something wrong?”

Keith cleared his throat. “Zee and I were talking, and we think it might be best if we take the raiders’ sedan and some supplies and head to Fischhoek on our own.”

Quinn’s heart sank into her boots, and she turned to Zenelia. “You still don’t trust me?”

Zenelia shook her head, her eyes glistening. “No, it’s not that. I do trust you, Quinn. I just… I feel terrible for taking you away from your family, and I think it would be better for everyone if we went our separate ways.”

“Are you sure about this?” Quinn asked. “There’s safety in numbers; you’ve seen how dangerous it is out here.”

“I know, but I think it’s for the best,” Zenelia said. “I can go home to my family, and you can go home to yours.”

Quinn stared at Zenelia, sensing that there was more. *She still sees me as a threat, and that will never change.*

Saddened by the knowledge, Quinn backed down.”Okay, if that’s what you want.”

“Um. I’m sorry, but if Zee’s going to Franschhoek, I’m going too,” Gwen said. “We’ve been friends forever, and Quinn, your home is just too far for me.”

Quinn nodded, trying to hide her disappointment. She turned to Stella, expecting her to leave too, but to her surprise, Stella said, “I’m staying with you, Quinn.”

Grateful for Stella’s loyalty, Quinn managed a small smile. “Thank you.”

“I guess this is it then,” Keith said.

“I guess so,” Quinn replied, waving a hand at the supplies. “Take as much as you want.”

“We only want half,” Keith said.

An awful silence descended over the group as they divided the supplies and fuel, the atmosphere thick with unspoken words and emotions.

Quinn kept her R5, Vector Z88, and a Beretta 9mm she picked off the corpse of the motorcycle rider. She also took his hunting knife and sheath and slid it onto her belt. Stella kept Jonathan’s hunting rifle, the Glock, and half of the available ammunition.

Keith filled the Rover’s fuel tank and gave them four extra jerry cans. With their personal belongings, half of the restaurant’s food and water supplies, two of the bugout bags, two spare snow tires, a couple of bedrolls, and an armful of blankets, the truck was almost full.

They ran to the convenience store and packed a few extra bags with cold drinks, fruit juices, energy drinks, chocolate bars, dried fruits and nuts, biltong, and salami sticks.

Stella tossed in extra canned goods, a can opener, eating utensils, a camping kettle, a pot, matches, and a few other odds and ends.

Finally, both parties were ready to go. The only thing that remained was the inevitable awkward goodbyes.

Quinn reached out to hug Zenelia. Despite their differences, they’d been friends and apocalypse buddies, and that would never change. “Take care of yourself and the baby.”

Zenelia nodded, her eyes watery. “You too, Quinn. I’m sorry it had to be this way.”

“Me too.” Quinn removed the pacifier from her pocket and handed it over. “Here. A present for the baby.”

Zenelia stared at the gift, her eyes glittering. “Thank you. It means so much to me.”

Gwen and Keith came next, and they exchanged awkward hugs and handshakes, the weight of their shared experiences and the uncertainty of their futures hanging between them.

“Take care of yourself,” Quinn said to Gwen, squeezing her hand. “And keep practicing with that gun.”

“I will, and thanks for everything,” Gwen said.

“You’re one of the strongest people I know, Quinn,” Keith said. “Don’t ever let that change.”

“I won’t, and good luck,” Quinn said, waving him off.

Keith, Zenelia, and Gwen climbed into the sedan, and they pulled away, the exhaust puffing smoke as the snow tires fought for grip. It was sad to see them go, and Quinn watched them disappear into the distance with a mixture of conflicting emotions.

As the sedan pulled away, Quinn watched it disappear down the road, a mix of emotions churning inside her. At last, it was time to go, and she turned to Stella. “This sucks.”

“Yes, it does,” Stella agreed. “Ready to go?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Quinn said.

With a heavy heart, she climbed into the Rover and twisted the key in the ignition. It started without a hitch for once, and she pulled onto the road with a smooth turn of the wheel. Moments later, they were on their way, the gas station fading into the distance.

Quinn glanced at Stella, glad for her presence. At least she wasn’t alone. “I guess it’s just you and me now.”

“Uh-huh. Road trip?” Stella asked, handing her a can of energy drink.

“Road trip,” Quinn agreed.

“To new beginnings,” Stella added.

“New beginnings,” Quinn said, and they toasted to it. There could be no turning back now. Stellenbosch, the University, Jonathan, Keith, Zenelia, and Gwen were behind them, and there was no telling what the future might hold.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

NOLAN

They weathered the storm in Anja and Dawid's home, settling into an uneasy routine as the days passed. The wind howled outside, rattling the windows and moaning through the eaves like a wounded animal.

Inside, they created a world of their own. Nolan and Johan took turns stoking the fire and checking the generator, ensuring the lights remained on and they didn't freeze to death.

Anja rarely left Dawid's side, monitoring his vitals and changing his dressing with practiced efficiency. Bit by bit, he grew stronger, becoming his old self again: proud, unapologetic, but fair.

Once a day, Johan and Nolan ventured to the barn, bundled up and connected by a rope to prevent them from getting separated. They'd wait for a lull in the storm, but the ordeal left them exhausted and cold to the bone each time. But the animals needed water and feed, so they had little choice. Thankfully, the barn remained warm enough for the creatures, a shelter from the merciless wind.

At night, they played cards, shared stories, and gathered around the fire with mugs of hot chocolate laced with brandy. At first, conversation revolved around their immediate concerns: food supplies, generator fuel, the condition of the house, and the barn. However, as the hours stretched into days, their discussions shifted to more pressing matters.

"What happens when the food runs out?" Johan asked on the second evening, voicing what they'd all been thinking. "Not just here, but everywhere?"

Dawid shook his head. "Most people don't realize how dependent they've become on global supply chains. Even us farmers."

"We'll need to relearn the old ways," Johan said. "My grandfather used to talk about growing up without electricity and running water. They preserved meat by salting and drying it, made their clothes, crafted their tools, and worked their lands by hand."

"It won't be easy," Dawid said.

“And what happens if someone who wants what we have comes along?” Nolan asked.

Johan shot him a sharp look. “We’ll have to defend what’s ours.”

“Can we?” Nolan said. “Spread out and isolated as we are, we’re sitting ducks for anyone with enough firepower.”

“What are you suggesting?” Dawid asked, his body weak but his mind as sharp as ever.

“That we consolidate our resources,” Nolan said. “The more spread out we are, the harder it will be to survive.”

“Nolan is right,” Johan said. “We have to stick together.”

“You want us to leave the farm,” Dawid said.

It wasn’t a question, but Johan answered anyway. “Yes. At least temporarily.”

“This has been our home for forty years,” Dawid protested, his hand tightening around Anja’s. “We built it from the ground up.”

“I understand,” Johan said. “But your house wasn’t made for these conditions. It’s older and more exposed to the elements. You don’t have a solar system, and you’re alone.”

“He’s right, Dawid,” Anja said, surprising everyone. “We’ve been lucky so far, but what happens when the generator runs out of fuel? Or if someone attacks the house? What if you break a leg, or one of us falls ill?”

Dawid looked stricken, but he didn’t argue.

“Sweet Meadow Valley has everything we need,” Nolan added. “Solar power, a greenhouse, a borehole, a windmill, and weapons.”

“Guns?” Dawid asked. “How many?”

“I’m an avid hunter and collector,” Johan said. “You know that. Trust me when I say, there’s enough for all of us.”

“I see, but what about the animals?” Dawid asked. “We can’t just abandon them.”

“We’ll take as many as we can,” Johan promised. “The rest… we can freeze the meat. It won’t go to waste.”

Dawid was silent for a long time, staring at the flames dancing in the fireplace. The room waited, tension thick in the air. Finally, he sighed, his shoulders slumping in resignation.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “I don’t like it, but you’re right. This house wasn’t built for an ice age, and we’re too isolated here.”

Anja squeezed his hand. “We’ll come back when things improve.”

“If they improve,” Dawid muttered. “Alright. When do we leave?”

“As soon as the storm breaks,” Johan said. “We’ll need clear weather.”

For the next hour, they mapped out their strategy. They would take the cows, goats, and chickens. Those animals that provided milk, meat, and eggs. They decided which supplies to prioritize: feed, medicines, tools, seeds, and any preserves from Anja’s pantry.

“It will take at least two trips,” Johan calculated. “Maybe three, depending on how much we can fit into each vehicle.”

“I can drive the tractor,” Dawid offered. “We can attach the flatbed trailer.”

“Are you sure you’re up for it?” Anja asked.

Dawid nodded. “I’ll manage.”

Nolan listened to their planning with a mixture of relief and anxiety. They had a plan, a path forward, but his thoughts kept returning to Quinn. Where was she? Was she safe? These questions haunted him as he drifted into an uneasy sleep later that night.

The next morning, he awoke to an eerie silence. The constant howl of the wind had ceased, replaced by a stillness so profound it felt almost unnatural.

Nolan jumped out of bed and rushed to the window. Outside, a transformed world greeted him. The storm had passed, leaving behind a pristine landscape of unbroken white. The sky was a pale, washed-out blue, and the sun, weak but unmistakable, was brighter than anything he’d seen in days.

“Dad,” Nolan called, excitement bubbling in his voice. “The storm’s over!”

Johan appeared in the doorway, already dressed with a cup of coffee in one hand. “I know. Perfect timing.”

“What’s it like outside? The temperature?”

“Minus eight.”

“Eight?” Nolan echoed. That was practically balmy compared to the brutal cold of the previous days.

Within the hour, everyone was up and preparing for the move. Anja packed their personal belongings, food, water, and medical supplies while Dawid sorted his tools and equipment. Johan and Nolan headed to the barn to prepare the animals.

As they worked, Nolan's mind kept wandering. With the storm a thing of the past, he could finally search for Quinn. The urge to drop everything and go was almost overwhelming.

"Dad," he said as they loaded feed bags onto a sled, "I need to look for Quinn. Giselle, too, but Quinn's the closest."

Johan paused, wiping sweat from his brow despite the cold. "I know you do, son. But we need to get these people to safety first."

"But Dad—"

"Nolan. I understand your worry. Believe me, I do. But rushing off half-cocked isn't going to help anyone. We need to be smart about this."

"But—"

"Listen to me," Johan cut him off. "Dawid nearly died out there, and he's a man who's lived his whole life in these mountains. The roads will be treacherous, visibility poor, and who knows what or who we might encounter along the way."

Nolan felt his jaw clench with frustration. "What are you saying? That I should forget about Quinn?"

"No," Johan said firmly. "I'm saying we get Anja and Dawid settled first. Then you and I will look for Quinn and Giselle. Together."

Nolan wanted to argue, but knew his father was right. Two people stood a better chance than one, and they couldn't abandon the Le Roux's now. "Okay, but I'm not waiting any longer than that."

"Agreed," Johan said, a hint of a smile crossing his face. "Now, let's finish up here. We've got a long day ahead of us."

They returned to work with renewed purpose, loading feed, water, and bedding onto the sled. Once finished, they led the animals out one by one, securing them to the trailer attached to Dawid's tractor.

The goats came first, protesting at being forced from their warm stalls. Then the chickens, nestled inside straw-lined crates. Finally, the cows, their breath forming great clouds in the frigid air.

By midday, they were ready to depart, and Anja stood on the porch, taking one last look at the home she and Dawid had built together. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, but her face remained resolute. Dawid joined her, leaning on a cane, his body still weak from his ordeal.

"Ready?" Johan asked, approaching the couple.

Dawid nodded. "As ready as we'll ever be."

“It’s just a house,” Anja said softly, squeezing her husband’s hand. “Our home is wherever we are together.”

Dawid managed a small smile and kissed her forehead. “Always has been.”

Nolan watched the exchange with a heavy heart. The couple’s love was plain to see, making him even more determined to find Quinn. *I’m going to find you, Quinn. No matter how long it takes.*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Quinn and Stella spent the morning navigating the road to Hex River Valley using an old map they'd found in the restaurant owner's office. It was roughly a hundred and ten kilometers, barely an hour's drive under normal conditions, but the going was slow.

"Turn left here," Stella said, squinting at the map. "I think."

Quinn chuckled. "You think? That's reassuring."

"Hey, I'm doing the best I can."

Quinn smiled, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. The sunshine melted the snow, turning the asphalt into a slick, icy mess. They crawled along at a snail's pace, her knuckles white on the steering wheel.

"Maybe we should take another break," Stella suggested after another nerve-wracking skid.

"Good idea. My bladder's about to burst anyway," Quinn said, pulling over.

Quinn stepped out of the cab, shivering in the cold air. After the warmth inside, it felt like stepping into a freezer. Rubbing her arms, she hurried toward the nearest cluster of bushes, unbuttoned her pants, and squatted in the snow.

"Damn, it's cold," she muttered, wishing not for the first time that she had the same equipment as a man. Nature called, however, and there was no avoiding it.

With her business finished, she straightened up and pulled her pants back up, hurrying toward the Rover, where Stella waited with a can of iced coffee.

"Too bad it's not hot," Stella said apologetically, handing over the drink.

Quinn shrugged. "Yeah, a thermos of coffee would've been nice, but this is better than nothing."

"It's got caffeine, at least."

They leaned against the side of the vehicle, sipping their drinks in companionable silence. Stella fished out a couple of salami sticks from their

supplies, and they munched on them, the salty meat complementing the sweetened coffee.

Once finished, Quinn tossed their trash into a plastic bag in the back seat, and they climbed back into the Rover.

As they resumed their journey, Stella remarked, “You’re a stickler for the rules, huh?”

“Quinn glanced at her. “What do you mean?”

“No littering, even though it’s the end of the world?”

“Well, no. I don’t want some poor innocent animal to choke on my plastic.”

“Fair point,” Stella conceded. “I wonder what the Earth will look like without us around to make a mess.”

“Probably a lot greener,” Quinn said. “No more pollution, factories shutting down. Plants would start growing over abandoned buildings.”

“Animals would roam the streets,” Stella added. “I read once that wildlife started appearing in cities during the lockdowns. Imagine what would happen if humans disappeared completely.”

Quinn nodded, picturing it. “It’d be like those documentaries about Chernobyl with nature taking over. Just without the two-headed frogs.”

They continued speculating as they drove, imagining a world slowly returning to the wilderness. It was comforting to know that the Earth would go on even if humanity didn’t make it.

As they rounded a bend, Quinn suddenly slammed on the brakes. “Oh, shit!”

The road ahead was blocked entirely. A massive tree had fallen across the asphalt, its branches sprawling in every direction.

“Now what?” Stella asked, peering at the obstruction.

Quinn sighed, rolling to a stop. “I guess we find another way around.”

They climbed out of the Rover and surveyed the fallen tree that blocked their path.

“Maybe we can move some of the smaller branches?” Stella suggested.

Quinn shook her head. “That trunk is way too big. Even if we cleared the branches, we’d never get the Rover past it.”

They walked closer to inspect the obstacle. The tree was massive, at least a meter in diameter. Its roots had torn up a section of asphalt where it had toppled.

“It must have come down during that big storm,” Quinn mused. “The ground was probably too soft to hold it.”

Stella nodded. “So what now? Turn back?”

“No, we’ve come too far,” Quinn said. “There has to be another way around.”

They pulled out their map again, studying it intently.

“Look,” Quinn pointed. “There’s a dirt road that branches off about a kilometer back. It loops around and reconnects with the main road on the other side of this section.”

“Are you sure the Rover can handle a dirt road in this weather?”

“We don’t have much choice. It’s either that or backtrack all the way to find another route.”

“Alright,” Stella agreed reluctantly. “Let’s give it a try.”

They returned to the Rover and carefully reversed down the road until they found the turnoff. Quinn eased the vehicle onto the narrow dirt track, grimacing as branches scraped against the sides.

“I hope this thing has four-wheel drive,” Stella muttered.

“It does,” Quinn assured her.

The going was slow and treacherous. The dirt road was little more than a muddy trail, rutted and uneven. Every few meters, she had to navigate around fallen branches or deep puddles.

“This was a bad idea,” Stella said after a particularly violent jolt nearly threw her into the dashboard.

“We’re making progress,” Quinn insisted, though her shrill voice betrayed her tension.

They’d been crawling along for nearly an hour when disaster struck. As they rounded a bend, the Rover’s wheels suddenly lost traction, spinning uselessly. Mud flew in all directions, but the truck remained in place.

“Shit,” Quinn muttered, putting the vehicle in reverse. She jammed her foot on the gas, and the truck rocked back and forth but remained stuck.

“Now what?” Stella asked, a note of fear in her voice.

Quinn took a deep breath, forcing herself to stay calm. “Okay, don’t panic. We can figure this out.”

She climbed out of the Rover to assess the situation. The rear wheels were sunk deep into the mud, caught in the slushy mixture. “We need something to give us traction. See if you can find some branches or brush we can wedge under the wheels.”

Stella searched the area for suitable materials while Quinn examined the Rover. The tires were caked with mud, offering no grip whatsoever. “This is awesome. Just freaking awesome.”

“Hey, I’m back,” Stella interrupted, huffing and puffing as she dragged an armful of sticks and brush over to the truck.

“Perfect,” Quinn said. “Let’s wedge them in. Hopefully, that’ll give us enough grip to get out.” Once they’d done what they could, she climbed back into the driver’s seat and started the engine. “Okay, here goes nothing.”

Quinn stepped on the gas, and the wheels spun, looking for traction. Mud flew in all directions, but the Rover didn’t budge. Gritting her teeth, she stepped on the accelerator, and the engine whined in protest. Suddenly, there was a loud crack as one of the branches snapped, and the Rover lurched forward before sinking back into the mud. “Damn it!”

“Try again?” Stella asked.

“It’s worth a try,” Quinn said, anger and impatience warring within her chest.

While Stella looked for more packing material, she got down on her hands and knees, using a stick to dig the wheels out of the mud. After wedging a second load of sticks and leaves underneath, she tossed in some gravel for good measure. “If that doesn’t do it, nothing will.”

With a grunt, Quinn climbed back into the driver’s seat. Her hands shook as she gripped the wheel, pleading with the heavens above. “Please, get us out of this mess.”

She twisted the key, and the engine roared to life. Putting her foot on the gas, she closed her eyes and hoped for the best. For a moment, nothing happened, and her heart sank. Then, the wheels caught, and the Rover lurched forward with a jarring jolt.

“Yes!” Quinn shouted, pumping her fist in triumph.

“We did it!” Stella cheered, grinning from ear to ear. She jumped into the cab and slammed the door shut. The heat from the vents whirred into the space, chasing the cold from their bones, and they continued the journey, climbing back onto the main road not long after that.

Quinn breathed a sigh of relief as the tires hit smooth asphalt, and she leaned back in her seat. “Thank God, that’s over.”

“Uh-huh,” Stella agreed. “That was rough.”

“Close too,” Quinn added. “One small mistake, and boom!”

“Game over,” Stella agreed.

Silence fell as they each retreated into their thoughts. Thinking back over the past weeks, Quinn realized how lucky they’d been… and dumb. It was time they stopped blundering around like idiots and used their brains because their next mistake could be their last.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

An hour later, the sun hung low on the horizon. Its light shone through the treeline, winking at them in between the snow-laden branches. The wind picked up, growing chillier by the second.

“It’s getting late,” Stella observed. “We should find somewhere to stop for the night.”

Quinn nodded in agreement, though she was saddened by the knowledge that they wouldn’t reach her home that night. “Keep an eye out for shelter, would you?”

They drove on slowly, scanning their surroundings. After a few kilometers, Stella pointed to a large wooden structure by the side of the road. “Look, an old barn.”

Quinn peered through the windshield. “Good job. Let’s check it out.” She turned off the highway and climbed onto a rough track. As they got closer, she saw it was old and dilapidated but still standing.

She parked near the entrance, and they both got out to investigate. The large wooden doors were shut tight, but they managed to drag them open. Inside, the structure was bare and drafty, with gaps in the walls letting in the cold air. But it was better than nothing, and they decided to make do.

“Look,” Stella said. “There’s wood we can burn inside that old metal trash can.”

They dragged the metal trash can to the center of the barn and filled it with wood. Soon, a blazing fire lit the gloomy interior, providing warmth and light.

Quinn pulled the Rover inside, parking next to the fire before they closed the barn doors, sliding the bolt across to lock it from within. With their temporary refuge secured for the night, they settled in.

Stella rummaged through their supplies and pulled out a couple of cans of spaghetti and meatballs. She heated them over the fire and made coffee, providing a quick, hot meal.

Quinn found two wooden stumps they could use for seats and an old tarp she strung up around the fire and truck, blocking the worst drafts. She also removed anything flammable from the vicinity. The last thing they needed was to set themselves on fire.

Finally, she sat on her makeshift seat and accepted a bowl of food. “Thanks, Stella.”

“It’s not gourmet, but it’ll do.”

“It’s fine,” Quinn said. “I used to love this stuff as a kid.”

She took her first bite, grimacing at the taste of soy meat and artificial tomato sauce. It was hard to believe she once liked the stuff, but it was better than trail mix and dried fruit. At least it was warm, and she washed it down with the coffee.

“All done?” Stella asked, standing up.

“Yup, thanks a bunch,” Quinn said, rubbing her full belly.

“Don’t mention it.”

After dinner, they cleared away the dirty dishes, refilled their cups, and sat down again, ready for a few minutes of relaxation before bedtime.

“Do you think they made it to Franschhoek?” Stella asked.

“I sure hope so,” Quinn said, her mind returning to that morning. Her mood turned somber, and she shook her head. “I’m just sorry I couldn’t convince Zee to stick together.”

“It’s not your fault. Zee isn’t thinking straight. She has a baby on the brain, and to her, you’re a threat.”

“But why? I’d never take Keith away from her,” Quinn burst out.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re everything she’s not. Strong, resourceful, brave, and smart.”

“You make me sound like a superhero,” Quinn said, flustered.

“Maybe not a hero, but the kind of woman that can survive the apocalypse,” Stella said. “With a little luck, of course.”

“A lot of luck,” Quinn said. “I wouldn’t be here without you guys.”

“And we wouldn’t be here without you either,” Stella said. “All I’m saying is that it wouldn’t take much for Keith to fall for you. Hell, I think he already has. He just won’t admit it to himself. Especially with a baby on the way.”

Quinn stared into the fire, mulling over Stella’s words. “I never thought of it that way,” she admitted softly. “I guess I can see why Zee might feel threatened.”

Stella nodded. “It’s not rational, but emotions rarely are, especially with pregnancy hormones in the mix.”

Quinn considered the question. “Well, we’re still heading for my parents’ place. It’s about another seventy kilometers or so. We could make it by tomorrow evening if the roads are clear.”

“And if they’re not?” Stella asked.

Quinn shrugged. “Then we take it day by day. Find shelter where we can, scavenge for supplies. If we’re careful, we’ve got enough food and water to last a while.”

Stella nodded. “Sounds good, but what about after we get to your parents’?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure,” Quinn admitted. “I guess we hunker down and try to survive. See if we can contact other survivors and start rebuilding somehow.”

“Do you think that’s possible?” Stella asked skeptically. “Rebuilding, I mean.”

Quinn was quiet for a moment, considering. “I don’t know,” she said finally. “But we have to try. What else is there?”

Stella nodded slowly. “I suppose you’re right. It’s just… hard to imagine sometimes. The world we knew is gone.”

“Yeah,” Quinn agreed softly. “But maybe we can build something new. Something better, even.”

They fell silent again, each lost in their thoughts about the future. The fire burned lower, and Quinn added more wood to keep it going.

“We should probably get some sleep,” she said eventually. “Long day tomorrow.”

Stella agreed, and they set about preparing for bed. They flattened the Rover’s front seats and made one big bed with their sleeping bags and blankets. They left the doors on the side of the fire open, positioning the trash can so that the heat wafted into the vehicle.

After checking to ensure their weapons were within easy reach, Quin settled in for the night with a bottle of water, a chocolate bar for dessert, and an empty bucket outside for a toilet.

Stella banked the fire and joined her, a rustle of paper sounding as she opened a bag of wine gums, her favorite snack.

“Want some?” Stella offered.

“No thanks. I’ve got chocolate.”

Stella loudly chewed and swallowed a wine gum before saying, “Too sweet for me. I like gummies and licorice.”

“Ugh, I hate licorice,” Quinn said, shuddering.

“Each to his own and more for me,” Stella replied, unbothered.

“I suppose.”

A deep silence fell over the cab, broken only by the crackle and pop of the fire and the creak of timber overhead. Despite her exhaustion, sleep eluded her, and her mind raced with thoughts of what lay ahead. One thing was for sure. The journey home would not be easy.

Quinn woke before dawn, her body stiff and uncomfortable from sleeping in the cramped Rover. Stella was still snoring softly beside her. Unable to stand another moment in bed, Quinn carefully extricated herself and climbed out of the vehicle.

The fire in the metal drum had burned down to a bed of coals. She added some kindling and wood, stoking it to a proper blaze. Next, she filled a pot and a kettle with water and placed both on the makeshift grid over the fire to boil.

While that heated, Quinned grabbed her bag and stripped off her clothes. Using the rest of the bottled water, a cloth, and some soap, she gave herself a quick wipe down. It wasn’t a proper bath; halfway through, she was freezing, but it was better than nothing.

Her teeth chattered as she pulled on clean underwear, glad she had extra undies in her bag. Jumping up and down to keep warm, she dressed in the rest of her gear, adding each layer until she felt like a stuffed sausage.

Halfway through, Stella woke up and watched her from the truck, laughing at her antics. “You look so funny, dancing around in your undies while chattering like a squirrel.”

“It’s not funny,” Quinn said, red-faced and heaving for breath.

“It kind of is,” Stella said, “though I feel your pain. Gone are the days of shorts and strappy tops.”

“Bikinis, too,” Quinn said, grunting as she pulled on her heavy boots. Tying her hair into a knot, she jammed her beanie onto her head and stomped to the fire. “What I wouldn’t give for some real sunshine.”

“Me too,” Stella said. “I never loved summer. Too hot for me. But this never-ending cold is enough to kill a person.”

“Literally,” Quinn agreed, stirring oats into the pot of boiling water.

“Oats, again?”

“It’s good for you.”

“But it tastes like sadness.”

“It’s warm.”

“Still tastes like sadness.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you make yourself useful?”

“Fine, I can catch a hint,” Stella said, grabbing her backpack.

She washed and dressed while Quinn finished the oats and coffee, adding liberal amounts of sugar to each. Afterward, they sat around the fire to eat, basking in the warmth of the flames.

“So, what’s the plan for today?” Stella asked between bites.

Quinn sipped her coffee. “Well, we’ve got about seventy kilometers to go. If the roads are clear, we could make it to my parents’ place by evening.”

“And if they’re not clear?”

“Then we take it slow, find shelter if we need to. If we’re careful, we’ve got enough supplies to last a while.”

Stella nodded. “Sounds good. Any idea what we might find when we get there?”

Quinn paused, her spoon halfway to her mouth. “Honestly? I don’t know. I’m hoping my parents are okay, but…” She trailed off, not wanting to voice her fears.

“We’ll deal with whatever we find,” Stella said firmly. “Together.”

Quinn gave her a grateful smile. “You’re right. No use worrying about it now.”

They finished their breakfast in companionable silence, then packed up their makeshift camp. As the sun began to peek over the horizon, they were ready to hit the road, hoping the day would bring them closer to safety and answers.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

They left the barn behind, the lone structure quickly receding into the background. Quinn headed to the main road, carefully avoiding any ditches along the way. Within minutes, they were back on solid ground, but her heart sank when she realized that conditions had worsened overnight.

Angry gray clouds hid the sun, casting a gloomy pall over the landscape. The temperatures had plummeted, turning the melted snow from the previous day into ice and making the asphalt slick and slippery.

"This is going to slow us down," Quinn said.

"Just take it easy," Stella said. "We've come too far to crash now."

"Uh-huh," Quinn agreed, her muscles tense.

Reduced to a crawl, she had to swallow her impatience as they inched along the icy road. Every slight incline became a challenge, and the tires spun uselessly before she found traction.

After hours of careful maneuvering, they approached a bridge spanning a wide river, and she stared at the concrete structure with horror. "That looks…"

"Scary," Stella finished. "Very scary."

"Is there a way around?"

Stella consulted the map, then shook her head. "Not that I can see."

"Crap," Quinn muttered.

"You can say that again," Stella said. Sliding down in her seat, she braced herself against the dashboard.

Quinn checked her seatbelt and took a deep breath. "Here goes nothing."

Easing her foot onto the gas, she drove onto the bridge. As soon as the tires touched the concrete surface, Quinn felt the Rover begin to slide. She tried to steer into the skid, but the vehicle had a mind of its own, and they careened across the structure.

"Hold on!" Quinn yelled.

"To what?" Stella screamed as they spun wildly.

The world outside became a blur, and the truck slammed into the right guardrail, the impact jarring them in their seats. Before she could react, they were sliding back to the left. Another bone-rattling crash, and they were spinning again. Her heart pounded in her chest as she fought the wheel for control, but it was useless.

“We’re going to die!” Stella shrieked as they hurtled towards the edge of the bridge.

Just when Quinn thought they were about to plunge into the icy river below, the truck hit a patch of gravel, slowing its momentum. With one last lazy spin, it stopped, facing the road ahead.

For a long moment, neither of them moved or spoke. The only sound was their ragged breathing.

Finally, Quinn unclenched her hands from the steering wheel, flexing her fingers. “Are you okay?”

Stella nodded, her face pale. “I think so. You?”

“Yeah. I can’t believe we made it across.”

They looked at the bridge behind them, realizing how close they’d come to disaster.

“Let’s never do that again,” Stella said, her voice trembling.

Quinn nodded in agreement and took a deep breath to steady her nerves.

“Maybe we should take a quick break? I think I peed in my pants,” Stella said.

“I don’t blame you, and a break sounds good,” Quinn agreed.

Pulling onto the side of the road, she got out and stretched her arms and legs, stomping her feet to restore blood circulation.

Stella did the same, jumping up and down before disappearing into the bushes with a roll of toilet paper.

“Have fun,” Quinn yelled.

“Gee, thanks,” came the dry reply.

While Stella attended to her business, Quinn sorted through their snacks and found a piece of biltong. The dried meat was seasoned to perfection, still pink in the middle, with a juicy trim of yellow fat on the side. Her mouth watered while she cut it into strips and divided it in two, adding a bottle of cranberry juice to each pile.

Satisfied, she leaned against the Rover while she ate, surveying their surroundings with interest. Like everywhere else, the land was covered in snow. Icicles hung from the branches and rocky overhangs, and only the

hardiest bushes and plants survived, their green leaves the only touch of color. The wind was cold, the sky dark, and a storm brewed on the horizon. *We'd better hurry.* "Stella, have you finished yet?"

Silence.

Frowning, Quinn popped another piece of biltong into her mouth while she waited. Soon, her food and drink were finished, and Stella was still missing. Straightening, she frowned at the tree line. "Stella?"

Silence.

"Stella, are you okay? Answer me, please!"

A muffled cry pierced the air, alerting Quinn to trouble. Two gunshots followed in quick succession. Her heart racing, she reached for her rifle, dropping her juice on the ground.

Suddenly, Stella burst out of the tree line, running full tilt toward the Rover. She held her Glock in one hand and was stumbling, looking over her shoulder as she snapped off more shots.

When she spotted Quinn, she yelled, "Get the truck going. We need to get out of here. Now!"

Gunshots rang out from the trees, and Quinn saw several shadowy figures moving toward them, barely visible in the woods. Bullets whizzed through the air. One clipped her ear before hitting the Rover's roof rack and ricocheting into the distance. Her ear stung, and hot blood ran down her neck, but she hardly felt it as she sprinted for the driver's side door.

Quinn jumped into the cab, landing with a jarring thump. She twisted the key in the ignition, instinctively ducking with every shot that got too close for comfort. The engine roared to life just as Stella reached the passenger door, her eyes wide and panicked.

"Go, go, go!" Stella screamed, barely inside, before Quinn floored the accelerator.

The Rover's tires spun on the icy road before finding purchase. They fishtailed wildly as Quinn fought to keep control, bullets pinging off the metal frame. She gritted her teeth, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel as they careened down the treacherous road.

"Who are they?" Quinn shouted as she struggled to keep control of the truck.

"I don't know," Stella panted, twisting in her seat to look behind them. "These three guys with guns came out of nowhere. They told me to put up my hands, but I ran for it. I think I winged one of them."

A bullet shattered the rear window, and both women ducked. The wind howled inside the truck, its ice fingers clawing at their skin.

“Shit,” Quinn swore. “We can’t outrun them on these icy roads!”

“We have to try,” Stella said, reloading her Glock. “Just keep driving.”

Quinn gritted her teeth and swerved onto the shoulder. The brush and gravel provided more traction than the slippery tar. Behind them, she could hear the roar of engines as their pursuers gave chase, and she knew they were in a world of trouble.

“They’re getting closer!” Stella shouted, twisting in her seat to look back.

“I know,” Quinn said. “Can you see how many there are?”

Stella squinted through the shattered rear window. “I count three trucks.”

“Three? Crap,” Quinn muttered.

A bullet pinged off the side mirror, causing both women to flinch. Another hit Stella’s door, and she cried out in pain. “I’m hit.”

“Damn it, not now,” Quinn cried. Her eyes darted from the road ahead to Stella and back. “How bad is it?”

“I don’t know,” Stella said, clawing at her side. “I can’t see. My jacket’s in the way.”

Quinn’s foot eased on the gas, and she reached to the back, looking for the med kit. “Let me grab—”

“No, keep going. It doesn’t hurt, so it can’t be that bad.”

“Stella. You’re hurt.”

“Just keep driving. We have to get rid of these assholes before we can stop,” Stella insisted.

“Okay,” Quinn said. Her eyes scanned the landscape, searching for an opportunity to escape. Up ahead, a dirt track led from the road up a steep hillside. She honed in on it, hoping the earth would grant the 4×4 more control. “Hold on tight!”

She yanked the wheel, swerving onto the narrow trail. The Rover bounced, and she fought to keep them in a straight line.

As they sped up the hill, Quinn glanced in the rearview mirror. Two of the pursuing trucks had made the turn, but the third overshot the turn and crashed into a tree. “One down.”

They crested the hill, and Quinn’s eyes widened when she saw what lay ahead. The trail wound along a cliff face before disappearing around a sharp

bend. There was no way to tell what lay beyond it, but there was no going back either. They were hemmed in on all sides. “Like my dad always said, the only way out is through.”

“What?” Stella asked, one hand pressed to her side.

“We’re about to find out how good my driving skills really are,” Quinn replied, accelerating down the narrow path.

“Oh, shit,” Stella said, leaning back in her seat.

Luckily, there wasn’t much snow on the path. The wind was fierce, sweeping the slush into the void below. Rough, scraggly grass lined the track, and the ground was packed hard, offering grip for the tires.

The Rover hugged the cliff wall as Quinn navigated the treacherous route. Loose rocks skittered under the wheels, tumbling over the edge into the ravine below. As they swerved around the bend, the side mirror clipped the wall, and it broke off with an earsplitting screech.

Behind them, one of the pursuing trucks took the curve too fast. With a screech of metal and a spray of dirt, it spun out and teetered on the edge before toppling over. The sound of the crash echoed up from below.

“Another one bites the dust!” Stella whooped.

Quinn allowed herself a grim smile, but it faded when she saw what lay ahead. The path ended abruptly, a deep ravine cutting across its length like a jagged scar in the earth.

Her stomach hit the floor, and panic fizzed through her veins, but she had no choice. It was make or break. “Hang on.”

“Hang on to what?” Stella cried.

Quinn floored the accelerator, aiming for a pile of debris that formed a makeshift ramp. The Rover hit it at full speed and launched into the air.

For a heart-stopping moment, they were airborne, and the truck soared above the earth like a bird. The ravine yawned beneath them, ready to consume them whole. Then, they hit the far side with a bone-jarring thud, the Rover’s suspension groaning in protest. The back wheels spun in empty air until the tires found something to grip. With a spray of dirt, mud, and grass, they lurched onto solid ground.

“Holy shit,” Stella gasped. “I can’t believe we made it!”

Quinn swallowed, the knowledge of how close they’d come to death making her ill. “Neither can I. Let’s hope our friends back there weren’t as lucky.”

“I don’t hear or see them anymore,” Stella said, craning her neck to look behind them. “I think we lost them.”

Quinn nodded, still too keyed up to feel relief. “What about you? How bad is it?”

“I’m okay. It hurts, but it’s not bad. I’m sure it’s just a graze,” Stella said.

“Okay, but we need to look,” Quinn insisted.

“Not now. Let’s put some distance behind us first,” Stella said. “Just to be safe.”

“Are you sure?” Quinn asked, concern for her friend uppermost in her mind.

“I’m sure. Promise.”

“Alright, but see if you can take a look so long,” Quinn said, reaching into the backseat for their med kit. “Stop any bleeding. That kind of thing.”

“Yes, Mom,” Stella said, rolling her eyes. “It really can’t be that bad. I honestly don’t feel much.”

“Just humor me.”

“Fine,” Stella grumbled, unzipping her jacket and prodding her side with searching fingers. A hiss escaped her lips,, followed by a sharp intake of breath.

“Is it bad?” Quinn asked, leaning over to take a look. She couldn’t see much, however, with Stella blocking her view.

“It’s nothing. Just tender,” Stella said. Opening the med kit, she removed a wad of gauze and pressed it to her side. “There, that should hold me.”

They continued along the winding mountain trail for another twenty minutes before Quinn felt secure enough to slow down. As soon as they rolled to a stop, she sagged in her seat. “That was too close.”

Stella nodded, her face pale. “Yeah, but we made it.”

“Who the hell were those guys?” Quinn asked, opening her door.

“No idea, but they weren’t friendly.”

Running to her friend’s side, she said, “Now, let’s look at that wound of yours.”

Quinn helped Stella out of the Rover, supporting her weight as they moved to the back. She opened the tailgate, and Stella grimaced as she sat down.

“Okay, let’s see what we’re dealing with,” Quinn said, her hands shaking as she opened Stella’s jacket.

Stella lifted her shirt, revealing an angry, red wound on her side, just above her hip. Blood oozed steadily from the jagged hole, soaking into her clothes.

Quinn stared at it, feeling helpless. “What do I do?”

Stella’s face was pale, but she remained calm. “We need to clean it and stop the bleeding. There should be antiseptic wipes in the kit.”

Quinn fumbled through the med kit, finding the wipes. She carefully cleaned the wound, trying not to cause even more pain. “What now?”

“Is there an exit wound?”

“A what?”

“Did the bullet go through?”

Quinn inspected Stella’s side and back, then shook her head. “No exit wound. The bullet must still be in there.”

“Damn it,” Stella said through gritted teeth. “We can’t take it out here. Just bandage it up. Stop the bleeding.”

Quinn nodded, grabbing gauze and medical tape. She pressed the gauze against the wound, causing Stella to hiss in pain.

“Sorry, sorry,” Quinn said. “I’m trying to be gentle.”

“It’s okay,” Stella said. “You’re doing fine. Just wrap it up tight.”

Quinn secured the gauze with a bandage and strips of tape, hoping the dressing would stay in place. As she worked, Stella’s breathing became increasingly labored.

“Are you alright?” Quinn asked worriedly.

Stella shook her head, her face contorted in pain. “The adrenaline’s wearing off. It hurts. A lot.”

Quinn rummaged through the kit and handed Stella a bottle of painkillers and water. “That’s all there is.”

Stella popped several of the pills. “Thanks, but this won’t cut it. We need antibiotics. Stronger pain meds. A tweezer. Sutures.”

“The only place we’ll find that is a clinic or…”

“A pharmacy,” Stella gasped. “We need to find a pharmacy.”

Quinn nodded, her mind racing. “Okay, I’ll check the map. There’s got to be a town nearby. Just hang in there, okay?”

Stella nodded, her eyes squeezed shut against the pain. “Hurry.”

“I’ll try,” Quinn promised, but she’d never felt more helpless.

She helped Stella into the front seat and got behind the wheel. Scanning the map, she spotted a small dot labeled “Rawsonville” about thirty kilometers away. “I found something. It’s a farming community, and they should have a pharmacy.”

Stella nodded, her face pale and sweaty. “Let’s go.”

Quinn started the engine and eased back onto the road. As the hours dragged on, Stella’s condition deteriorated, and she slipped in and out of consciousness.

“Stay with me,” Quinn pleaded, squeezing Stella’s hand.

“I’ll be okay,” Stella whispered, but Quinn found that hard to believe.

As the sun hit the horizon, they reached the outskirts of Rawsonville, and she drove down the main street, searching desperately for a pharmacy. Finally, she saw one and parked in front.

“We’re here,” she told Stella, but got no response.

Quinn ran around and half-carried, half-dragged her friend inside. After fetching their supplies and blankets, she barricaded the door and lit a solar lantern. Working quickly, she gathered the necessary supplies and administered antibiotics and the strongest painkillers she could find to Stella. Wielding the tweezers, she peeled away the blood-soaked gauze and eyed the wound. “This is going to hurt.”

“Just do it,” Stella whispered, biting down on a wad of gauze.

Stella screamed as Quinn dug for the bullet, and she had to force herself to keep going. She was about to give up when she hit metal and probed deeper for the object. The misshapen bullet came out seconds later, shining dully in the light, and she tossed it aside. “Thank God.”

Flushing the wound with antiseptic, she stitched it closed and rebandaged it. By then, Stella had mercifully passed out.

Exhausted, Quinn settled her friend as comfortably as possible for the night, then sank to the floor beside her, utterly drained. She knew they weren’t out of danger yet, but for now, all they could do was wait and hope.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Quinn settled in for a long night, keeping watch over Stella. She wrapped her friend in blankets and propped her up with cushions to make her as comfortable as possible.

Throughout the night, Stella drifted in and out of consciousness. When she was awake, she was often delirious, mumbling incoherently. Quinn did her best to soothe her, wiping her brow with a damp cloth and feeding her sips of water and apple juice.

“You’re going to be okay,” Quinn whispered, squeezing Stella’s hand. “Just hang in there.”

During one of Stella’s more lucid moments, she turned to Quinn with glassy eyes. “Tell me about your home. The vineyard. Your parents. Everything.”

Quinn smiled, grateful for the distraction. “It’s beautiful there. The rolling hills are covered in neat rows of grapevines, with big, fat bunches of grapes ripening on the vine. Everything is green and full of life in summer, and the sky is the bluest I’ve ever seen.”

As she spoke, Quinn found herself getting lost in the memories. She described the old stone farmhouse where she grew up, the view of the mountains from her bedroom window, and the smell of her mother’s freshly baked bread.

“Dad would take me out to the vineyards,” Quinn continued, her voice growing wistful. “He taught me everything about growing grapes, the soil, and the weather. Mom would join us sometimes with a picnic basket. We’d sit under the big old oak tree and eat sandwiches.”

“It sounds perfect. I can’t wait to see it,” Stella said.

“You will. I promise,” Quinn said. “And wait until I introduce you to my friends.”

“Friends? You had friends?” Stella asked with a twinkle in her eyes.

Quinn faked a gasp. “I’ll have you know, I was very popular. The twins next door adored me. I was their queen.”

Stella grinned. “Queen, huh?”

Quinn chuckled. “Well, maybe not queen exactly. But Nolan and Giselle, the twins next door, were my best friends growing up.”

“We’d spend hours down at the river, fishing and swimming. Their dad taught us kids how to shoot and hunt. He’d set up tin cans on fence posts, and we’d practice with his old .22 rifle. Their mom showed us how to weave fishing nets from twine.”

“Sounds nice,” Stella murmured.

Quinn nodded. “It was. One year, we decided to raise piglets for the county fair. We thought we’d win, but Nolan overfed his piglet, and it got too fat. The judge said it looked like a pink beach ball.”

Stella let out a weak laugh, then winced.

“Easy there,” Quinn said, adjusting Stella’s blankets. “Anyway, Nolan and I went to his Matric Farewell Dance together, and we danced the whole night long.”

“Just friends, huh?” Stella teased.

Quinn felt her cheeks flush. “Well, there at the end, we were more than friends. He was my first love, actually.”

“What happened to him? And Giselle?”

“I don’t know,” Quinn said, ashamed to admit it. “After school, I went to Stellenbosch, Nolan went to some agricultural college, and Giselle studied architecture.”

Quinn trailed off, suddenly sad. What had become of Nolan and Giselle? Had they survived the freeze? She had no way of knowing.

“You’ll see them again. I’m sure of it,” Stella said.

“Thanks,” Quinn said, wishing she had as much faith as Stella did. Pushing the thought aside, she focused on her friend. “Get some rest. You need it.”

Stella nodded, her eyes already drifting shut. “Goodnight.”

Quinn leaned back against the wall with her rifle across her lap. She must have dozed off at some point because the next thing she knew, pale morning light streamed through the pharmacy windows.

She immediately checked on Stella, and her heart sank when she felt the heat radiating off her friend’s skin. Stella’s face was flushed, her breathing labored.

“Stella?” Quinn called, shaking her shoulder.

Stella’s eyes fluttered open, unfocused and glassy. “It hurts.”

Quinn cursed under her breath. The fever was raging, and Stella was clearly in a lot of pain. There was no way they could continue their journey. “We’ll stay here today.”

With her decision made, she set about exploring the pharmacy. Behind the counter, she discovered a door leading to a small office, a tiny kitchenette, and a bathroom.

There was also a side door that led to an alley next to the shop, and Quinn decided to move the Rover into the narrow space, dragging a dumpster behind it. While she hadn’t heard or seen anyone, it paid to be careful, and she didn’t want the truck to be seen from the road. Afterward, she barricaded the front entrance once again and closed the blinds. “There. That should do it.”

With their safety taken care of, Quinn focused on their comfort. Abandoning the front of the pharmacy, she moved them into the office, using cushions from the couch to form a bed. She carefully moved Stella onto it, covering her with blankets.

“There,” Quinn said. “That’s a little better, right?”

Stella nodded, her eyes already closing again. Quinn smoothed the hair back from her forehead, hoping the fever would break soon.

Quinn let Stella sleep while she busied herself in the kitchen. She found a small gas stove and lit the burner, setting a pot of water to boil. While waiting, she used the bathroom, stripped off her dirty clothes, and washed with a damp cloth. It felt good to put on clean clothes again, and she quickly rinsed her dirty socks and underwear.

In the kitchen, she discovered bread that was still good despite being frozen by the frigid temperatures. There was also butter and a jar of apricot jam. Toasting a few slices in a pan, she slathered them with butter and jam, made coffee, and headed toward the office.

“Hey, Stella. Wake, wakey,” Quinn said softly. “I’ve got breakfast.”

Stella blinked. “Smells good.”

They ate in silence, savoring the simple meal. Stella even cracked a joke or two, but her humor faded as pain crept back into her expression.

After eating, Quinn cleaned and disinfected Stella’s wound, dismayed to find it infected. Angry red streaks radiated outward from the wound, and she knew sepsis was a real threat. *She needs a real doctor.*

But there were none to be found. They were on their own. Worried for her friend’s life, she pumped Stella full of antibiotics and pain medication,

praying the meds would kick in soon.

With nothing else to do, Quinn settled down beside Stella with her worn copy of White Fang. She'd salvaged it from her dorm room and the fire at Keith's, and it was one of her favorite books. "Want me to read to you?"

Stella nodded. "What book is it?"

"White Fang by Jack London, and I got it from my grandmother. Look. It's inscribed. 'To my dearest Quinn. May you find as many hours of joy between these pages as I did. Love. Gran.'"

"That's nice," Stella said, a small smile on her lips.

Quinn began reading, her voice soft and soothing.

"He had no conscious knowledge of death, but like every animal of the Wild, he possessed the instinct of death. To him it stood as the greatest of hurts. It was the very essence of the unknown; it was the sum of the terrors of the unknown, the one culminating and unthinkable catastrophe that could happen to him, about which he knew nothing and about which he feared everything."

"I like that," Stella said, her eyelids drooping. "Keep going."

Quinn kept reading until she drifted to sleep, the book slipping from her hands, only to awaken hours later to Stella's cries of pain. "Stella? What's wrong?"

Stella writhed in agony, her face contorted. "It hurts."

Quinn reached for their strongest pain medication bottle and propped Stella upright. Like a baby bird, she fed Stella the maximum dose of pills, washing them down with water.

Afterward, she grabbed the med kit and cut off the bandages covering Stella's midriff. She'd thought she was ready, but not even her worst nightmares could've prepared her for sight. Pus oozed from the wound, and a foul odor filled the air.

"That bad, huh?" Stella said, watching her with glittering eyes.

"It's pretty bad," Quinn admitted, her stomach revolting. Bile rushed up her throat, and she had to swallow hard to prevent herself from vomiting on the spot.

Stella sucked in a deep breath. "Flush it with saline. Then put on ointment and wrap it up again."

Quinn nodded and gathered the supplies. After redressing the wound, she helped Stella take more antibiotics, though it was clear the stuff wasn't working.

“Quinn,” Stella said weakly. “Take me home.”

“Home? To your mom?”

“No. We’ll never make it. Besides, I don’t want her to see me like this,” Stella said. “I meant your home.”

“What? No, you’re in no condition to travel. You need to rest and gather your strength.”

Stella shook her head. “There’s no time. Your home… your life… it sounds so beautiful. I want to see it, just once, before…” She didn’t finish the sentence.

“Don’t talk like that. You’re not going to die,” Quinn insisted.

“Please,” Stella begged. “We have to go now before it’s too late.”

Quinn hesitated, torn between her friend’s wishes and what she thought was best. Finally, she nodded, persuaded by the tears in Stella’s eyes. “Okay. We’ll go.”

Moving fast, Quinn packed their belongings and loaded the Rover. She gathered more medicine and supplies from the pharmacy, then carefully helped Stella into the front of the truck. While she worked, snow began to fall. The fine powdery flakes settled on every surface like angel dust, but she knew the dangers they hid and hoped a full-blown storm wasn’t on the way. That was the last thing they needed.

With a final look up and down the main road, Quinn moved the dumpster blocking the alley and climbed into the driver’s seat. She started the engine and pulled out onto the empty street. As the farming community of Rawsonville disappeared from view, she could only hope she wasn’t making a huge mistake.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Land Rover growled as it crawled along the curving road, its tires crunching over the packed powder and ice. Inside, Quinn peered through the falling snow illuminated by the headlights. The wind whistled eerily through the roof rack above, a ghostly whisper that set her nerves on edge.

Beside her, Stella shifted restlessly on the reclined passenger seat, several thick blankets draped over her shivering body. Whenever the Rover hit a pothole or ditch hidden under the snow, she cried out in pain. “Mom… no… please…” she mumbled, lost in some fever dream.

Quinn reached over to feel Stella’s forehead. It was burning up. “Just hang on, Stella. We’ll be there soon,” she murmured, more to reassure herself than her unconscious friend. The rough first aid treatment she’d provided did not seem to be helping at all. If anything, Stella was getting worse by the hour.

Blinking back tears, she tried to focus on the road. One wrong move, and they could both end up dead. She had to get Stella someplace warm and safe. Somewhere she could rest and heal in peace, not in the front seat of a truck jostling and bouncing over rough terrain.

With grim determination, Quinn forged ahead. As she drove, the scenery flashed by her window, a monochrome landscape of black and white. The sun hung low on the horizon, painting the snowy landscape in shades of orange and pink. Beautiful, but dangerous.

“Don’t worry. When you wake up, we’ll be home. My mom will know how to treat your wound, and my dad will have a roaring blaze in the fireplace. I’ll make hot chocolate, and we can finally get a good night’s sleep. It’ll be great, you’ll see.”

She glanced over at Stella, hoping for some flicker of recognition, but her friend remained unresponsive, her breathing shallow and labored.

Quinn swallowed hard. Deep down, she knew she was grasping at straws. Even if her home was still there, it didn’t mean her parents were

alive. Or that they'd be able to care for either of them. *No. It can't be. They have to be alive.*

She shoved the doubts aside. She couldn't afford to lose hope, not when they were so close. Stella's life depended on it.

The minutes passed, and still, the Land Rover wound through the curved road, a lonely spectator in a frozen wasteland. A fog of exhaustion crept over her mind, and she blinked at the road ahead. She was tired. More tired than she'd ever been before in her life. Even cramming overnight for tests hadn't left her this drained.

In a desperate bid to stay awake, Quinn cranked the window down, letting the frigid air burn her cheeks, but it provided only a moment's relief. Her eyelids grew heavier with each passing minute, and the desire to rest was overwhelming.

She reached for the can of Red Bull wedged in the cup holder and took a big swig, grimacing as the sickly sweet liquid coated her tongue. The caffeine buzzed through her nervous system, but its effects were short-lived, no match for the bone-deep fatigue weighing her down.

She smacked her cheeks, pinched her thighs, and belted out off-key renditions of her favorite songs, anything to keep sleep at bay. But it was a losing battle. Her head lolled onto her chest, and she jerked upright with a gasp, swerving to correct the Rover's drift. "Come on, Quinn, get it together."

Another five miles crawled by, the dashboard clock ticking to four in the afternoon. They were so close to safety that she could almost taste it. Just a few more kilometers. "Hold on, Stella. It'll be okay."

But as the shadows lengthened and the cold seeped into her bones, Quinn felt sleep rising to claim her once more. She fought it with all her might, biting her lip until coppery blood filled her mouth, but it wasn't enough.

Her eyes fluttered shut, and the seconds stretched into a minute. The wheel slipped from her numb fingers. She spiraled down into a well of darkness. Then there was nothing.

The Land Rover veered off track, its tires crunching over gravel and frozen grass. Suddenly, it lurched into a ditch, and Quinn came awake with a jolt. Her stomach lurched, and her mouth opened, but before she could scream, the truck crashed into a ditch, sending her hurtling forward. Her

seat belt stopped her from flying through the windshield, but her head hit the wheel with a blinding crack.

Pain. Searing, blinding pain was the first thing Quinn registered as consciousness returned. She groaned, the sound tearing at her raw throat. The icy wind stung her face and tugged at her hair, shocking her system into awareness.

Blinking hard, she raised her head from the steering wheel, gasping as her skull threatened to split in two. Gingerly, she explored her forehead, hissing when her fingers found a bump the size of an egg, but a quick exam revealed no other injuries.

“Stella?” Quinn said, twisting to check on her friend. Panic clawed up her throat when she saw Stella slumped motionless in the passenger seat, her face chalk-white beneath her hood. “No, no, no…”

With shaking hands, she groped for a pulse, relieved when she felt it throb beneath her fingertips. Stella was alive, but for how long? They had to get out of this ditch and back onto the road. Frantic plans spun through her mind as she tried to force her sluggish brain into action. The truck. She had to check the damage.

Gritting her teeth against the pounding in her head, Quinn fumbled with her seat belt and shoved the door open. The cold hit her like a sledgehammer, stealing her breath, but she pushed onward.

Shuffling through the knee-deep snow, Quinn made her way to the front of the Land Rover. Her heart sank as she took in the shattered windshield, a spiderweb of cracks obscuring her view of the interior.

Climbing back into the driver’s seat, Quinn shifted the Land Rover into 4x4 mode, her fingers stiff and clumsy with cold. She twisted the key in the ignition and eased down on the accelerator. The engine sputtered and coughed, the sound as weak and thready as Stella’s pulse. “Come on, come on…”

After an eternity, the engine finally caught, settling into a rough, uneven idle, and she slumped over the wheel. They had a chance. It was slim, but there.

Gripping the wheel, she stepped on the gas, attempting to maneuver the truck out of the ditch. The engine revved, high and angry, but the car refused to move, its wheels spinning uselessly in the snow.

“No, no, no,” Quinn chanted under her breath, panic clawing at her throat. She tried again, rocking the vehicle repeatedly, but it was no use.

They were well and truly stuck. Despair filled her veins, and she knew she'd failed. They were going to die out there, frozen and alone, and it was all her fault. *Why did I fall asleep?*

A soft moan from the passenger seat snapped her back to reality. Twisting in her seat, she touched Stella's hand. "Stella? Can you hear me?"

But Stella remained motionless, her head lolling against the seat belt. A trickle of blood stained the corner of her mouth, and Quinn knew she had to do something fast. Stella needed help, or she'd die. *I can't give up on her. I just can't.*

With her mind racing, she scanned the interior of the Land Rover, searching for anything that might aid in their escape. Her gaze landed on the winch control box, and hope ignited in her chest. If she could anchor the cable to something solid, she could pull them free.

Quinn threw open the driver's side door, the icy wind biting at her exposed skin as she climbed out of the wrecked vehicle. Her boots crunched through the snow, each step a herculean effort as she fought her way to the front of the Rover.

Reaching the winch, she fumbled with numb fingers to uncoil the heavy cable. Her gaze darted across the landscape, searching for something sturdy enough to serve as an anchor point. Then she spotted a cluster of trees just off the road, their trunks thick and gnarled. The ditch was at its shallowest there, and she knew it might be possible.

Quinn trudged through the trees, dragging the cable behind her. Each breath burned in her lungs, exhaustion and desperation warring for dominance. She refused to give in to either.

"Just hold on, Stella," she muttered through chattering teeth. "I'm going to get us out of here. I promise."

Reaching the trees, Quinn looped the cable around the sturdiest trunk she could find, securing it with trembling hands. She gave it a hard yank, testing its strength. It held fast. Hope surged through her veins, chasing away the icy tendrils of fear, and she hurried back to the Rover.

"Okay, we can do this," she whispered, getting back behind the wheel. Gripping the steering wheel tight, she shifted into gear and guided the Land Rover forward, deeper into the ditch, instead of trying to climb back out. At the same time, she edged the nose to the side, aiming for the cluster of trees, and engaged the winch.

The cable tightened with a twang, and the truck lurched forward and to the side. For a few terrifying moments, Quin fought with the wheel. Then the Rover was up and out of the ditch, standing in the middle of the road.

Quinn stared at the path ahead, unable to believe she'd done it. Then it hit her, and she screamed with joy. "I did it. I can't believe it. I got us out, Stella!"

Stella groaned, and her eyelids fluttered open. "Never doubted you for a second."

"Liar," Quinn joked, but her joy faded as she took in Stella's pale and clammy complexion. "Hold on. I'm coming."

She grabbed the medical kit from the back seat and placed it on the dashboard. Next, she peeled away the many blankets covering her friend's fragile form. She unzipped Stella's coat and eased it open, shocked to find her clothes soaked with blood. It pooled onto the seat below her, and the smell of copper was strong enough to turn her stomach. "Oh, my God, Stella. Where did all this blood come from?"

"I guess I don't need it anymore," Stella said, mustering a weak smile.

"Don't joke. Not like that."

"Too soon?" Stella joked.

"Way too soon," Quinn said.

Her hands trembled as she ripped open the med kit, her heart pounding in her chest. She pulled out gauze pads, antiseptic wipes, and a roll of medical tape. With gentle hands, she peeled away the dressing and examined the wound. It was far worse than she'd thought.

While the seat belt prevented Stella from going through the window during the crash, it also tore open her wound, and the flesh gaped open. Blood welled up from within like a crimson fountain.

Quinn swallowed hard, fighting back the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. She had to stay calm and focus on the task at hand. Cleaning the wound as best she could, she wiped away the blood with the antiseptic wipes.

Stella moaned softly, her eyelids fluttering, but she didn't wake up again. And maybe it was better that way. At least she couldn't feel any pain while she was unconscious.

Once the injury was clean and disinfected, Quinn pressed a thick pad of gauze against the jagged opening. She taped it in place, then wrapped a layer of gauze around Stella's midsection, securing it tightly with a bandage

and more tape. Sitting back, she surveyed her handiwork. While it wasn't perfect, it would have to do.

Next, Quinn turned her attention to the blankets, tucking them around Stella's shivering form. She knew she had to keep her friend warm and prevent hypothermia from setting in.

"Stella," she whispered, gently shaking her shoulder. "Stella, wake up. You need to drink something."

Stella's eyes fluttered open, glassy and unfocused. Quinn held a water bottle to her lips, tilting it carefully.

Stella drank, then coughed.

"That's it," Quinn murmured, offering her the most potent painkillers she had available. "Just a little more."

Stella swallowed the pills, then sank back against the seat, her eyes drifting shut once more.

Quinn sat back, her heart heavy. She knew Stella needed more than just first aid. She needed a hospital, a doctor, and proper medical care, but for now, this was the best she could do.

With Stella taken care of, she turned her attention to the windshield. Rummaging through the glove compartment, she found a roll of duct tape. Quickly and efficiently, she tore off strips of tape and pressed them over the cracks, preventing the wind from blasting inside.

Afterward, she climbed back into the driver's seat, glancing over at Stella's still form. Her friend's face was pale, her breathing shallow, but she was alive. That was all that mattered.

Quinn started the engine, the Land Rover rumbling to life beneath her. She gripped the steering wheel tightly, her jaw set with determination. She wouldn't fall asleep again. She couldn't. Stella's life depended on it.

With a deep breath, she put the truck in gear and pulled back onto the road, the tires crunching over the icy asphalt. Her home was still miles away, but she would get there. Failure was not an option.

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

NOLAN

The days after the storm passed in a blur of activity. What had seemed like a straightforward move revealed itself to be a massive undertaking. Each morning, Nolan rose before dawn, his muscles aching from the previous day's labor, only to throw himself back into the work with renewed determination.

The first challenge was transporting everything between the farms. The roads were buried in snow and had to be cleared with the tractor's front loader. Even then, a journey that once took thirty minutes now stretched to nearly two hours each way. They made several trips over the next few days, the vehicles groaning beneath their heavy loads.

"Easy there," Johan called as Nolan backed the truck toward the barn during their final haul. "You're going to hit that post!"

Nolan adjusted his course, fatigue slowing his movements. "Sorry."

"Look alive, son. We can't afford any accidents," Johan said.

"Okay, Dad," Nolan said, resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

The animals proved the most difficult to relocate. The cows bellowed in protest at their new surroundings, while the goats took every opportunity to escape, darting through any gap they could find. Twice, Nolan had to chase a particularly stubborn billy goat through knee-deep snow, cursing under his breath.

"Reminds me of you as a child," Johan remarked with a smirk after Nolan returned, panting and red-faced, with the wayward goat tucked under his arm. "Your mother ran herself ragged after you."

"Very funny," Nolan muttered, but he couldn't help smiling.

Anja and Dawid were settling in, though not without some challenges. Sweet Meadow Valley was spacious by most standards, but accommodating two households meant rearranging furniture, combining pantries, and establishing new routines.

"No, no, the preserves go on this shelf," Anja insisted. "The canned vegetables belong over there."

Ella caught Nolan’s eye and gave him a weary smile. “Anja is very particular about kitchen organization. Too particular.”

“I heard that,” Anja called from the pantry.

“I wanted you to hear that,” Ella replied, and more bickering ensued.

Nolan quickly excused himself, unwilling to get drawn into their arguments.

The barn required the most work. Unused for years except as storage, it needed cleaning, repairs, and preparation for the animals. Nolan and Johan spent an entire day clearing out old equipment, sweeping up dust and cobwebs, and patching holes in the roof.

“When was the last time anyone used this place?” Nolan asked, wiping sweat from his brow despite the cold.

“Don’t ask,” Johan said with a dour look.

Finding space for the vehicles proved challenging. The tractor, trailer, and Dawid’s truck needed shelter from the elements. In the end, they cleared an old shed, reinforced the roof, and patched the walls with corrugated iron.

Throughout it all, Nolan kept his impatience in check, though it gnawed at him constantly. Every sunset marked another day without knowing if Quinn was still alive.

He was just as worried about his sister, but he knew his chances of finding Quinn were higher, so he focused his energy on that. Dividing his attention would deliver nothing but failure. *The sooner I find Quinn, the sooner I can look for Giselle.*

With that thought in mind, Nolan poured over maps of the Western Cape each night, plotting the best route to Stellenbosch.

Finally, the day arrived when there was nothing left to do. They’d renovated and expanded the greenhouse, and pallets filled with rich soil budded with seeds and shoots. The old windmill was back in operation, and they’d replaced the burst water pipes, insulating them this time. The animals had settled in, grazing in the paddocks during the day and spending their nights in the barn, while the old smokehouse was back in operation.

There was still plenty more to be done, and they had many plans for the future, but none of it was urgent. As Nolan stared at the snow-covered landscape, he knew it was time. He could wait no longer.

That afternoon, after lunch, he approached his father, who was sitting on the porch, cleaning his rifle.

“Dad, I’m leaving tomorrow morning,” Nolan announced, his voice firm. “With or without you.”

Johan looked up from his work, studying his son’s face. After a moment, he nodded. “I know. I’ve been expecting it.”

“You have?”

“Of course. You’ve been champing at the bit for days now.” Johan set the rifle aside. “We’ll leave at first light.”

Relief washed over Nolan. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Johan warned. “This won’t be easy. The roads will be treacherous, if they’re passable at all, and we have no idea what’s waiting for us out there.”

“I understand the risks,” Nolan said. “But I have to try.”

“I know you do, son.” Johan picked up his rifle again, checking the action. “We’ll take my truck. It’s got the best chance on those roads. Pack light, but pack smart. Food, water, medical supplies, extra fuel, tools, and weapons.”

“I’ve already made a list,” Nolan said.

Johan smiled. “Of course you have.”

Later that day, Nolan sat on his bed, double-checking his gear. He’d packed everything essential: warm clothes, a first aid kit, food rations, water purification tablets, a compass, maps, a flashlight, batteries, and a hunting knife. His rifle stood propped against the wall, cleaned and oiled, and his handgun lay on his bedside table, tucked inside its holster. He also carried extra ammunition and a flask of brandy, just in case.

As he worked, his thoughts drifted to Quinn. Where was she now? Was she even alive? But he pushed the idea away. Quinn was resourceful and tough. If anyone could survive this catastrophe, it was her.

A soft knock on his door pulled him from his reverie. Ella stood in the doorway, a steaming mug in her hands. “I thought you might like some tea.”

“Thanks.” Nolan took it gratefully, the warmth seeping into his cold fingers.

Ella surveyed his preparations. “All set for tomorrow?”

“I think so,” Nolan replied, zipping up his backpack. “We’re leaving at first light.”

Ella sat on the edge of his bed. “I wish you wouldn’t go.”

“I have to.”

“I know, but I worry. The world out there might not be the same anymore.”

“I’ll be careful,” Nolan promised. “Besides, Dad will be with me, and he’s no slouch with a gun.”

“That scares me even more.”

“Don’t worry, Mom. We’ll be fine, and we will find Quinn.”

“And if you don’t?” Ella asked softly.

Nolan looked away, unwilling to consider that possibility.

Ella reached out and squeezed his hand. “Just promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“If it becomes too dangerous, come back. Quinn wouldn’t want you to risk your life.”

“I promise,” Nolan said, though they both knew it was a lie. He wouldn’t return without Quinn, not if there was even the slightest chance she was still alive.

Ella seemed to understand this. She stood, straightening her sweater as she headed toward the door. There, she paused. “Nolan?”

“Yes?”

“Come home to me.” The words were simple, but the emotions behind them were complex. Hope and fear intertwined.

“I will.”

After his mother left, Nolan finished his preparations, but he remained restless, unable to relax. Then a thought occurred to him. What if Quinn showed up at her old home, only to find it abandoned? What would she think? How would she feel believing her parents were dead or missing?

Jumping to his feet, he headed to the kitchen and grabbed the old Ford’s keys. On his way out, he spotted his mom and Anja on the porch, mending torn clothing and bedding. “Mom, Aunt Anja. “I’m going to the Cork and Berry.”

What for?” Ella asked.

“I’m going to leave a note for Quinn in case she makes it home while we’re out looking for her. She needs to know that we’re all here, safe and sound.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ella said, nodding.

“I should have thought of it myself,” Anja said, setting aside her mending. “I’ll write something for her too.” She scribbled a quick note and

handed it over. “There, that should do it. As long as she knows we’re here, waiting for her with open arms.”

“Thanks,” Nolan said, taking the note. “I’ll be back before dark.”

The drive to the Cork and Berry was uneventful, and Nolan arrived without any mishaps. As usual, the gates were closed, the chain he’d cut looped through the wire. He opened it, drove through, and closed it again, jumping back behind the wheel. As he approached the house, something nagged at him, something he should’ve noticed before. Then it hit him. Tracks!

A pair of tire tracks stretched before him, marring the pristine snow that covered the gravel road. It had to be new tracks, because it had snowed during the night, and none of them had gone near the place after the storm.

Excitement and caution warred inside him. Someone was here, but who? Friend or foe? His first instinct was to rush forward, hoping against hope that it was Quinn, but caution prevailed. Slowing to a crawl, he took care not to rev the engine and soon spotted a strange vehicle parked in front of the house.

Nolan edged closer and parked behind the truck, climbing out of the cab without making a sound. He closed the door with a soft click and pocketed the keys. Taking a deep breath, he circled the mud-splattered Land Rover. A blanket-covered lump filled the driver’s seat, and he stared at it for a few seconds, but moved on when nothing happened.

The house loomed ahead, almost buried under a thick blanket of snow. Icicles hung from the eaves like crystal daggers, and frost decorated the windows. It looked like something from a fairy tale, but he ignored it. His entire focus lay on the front door, which stood ajar, and he knew someone was inside.

With one hand resting on his sidearm, Nolan climbed the steps and entered the house. His senses were on high alert as he explored the rooms, the silence thick and oppressive.

“Hello? Anyone there?” he called, his voice low.

No answer came, and Nolan moved deeper into the house. The living room lay ahead, and muffled sounds reached his ears. It almost sounded like… sobbing? He slowed, trying not to make a sound, but as he turned the corner, the floor underneath his boot creaked. The sounds in the other room stopped, and he froze, his cover blown. *Shit!*

OceanofPDF.com

CHAPTER FORTY

The road stretched endlessly into the gathering dusk as Quinn gripped the steering wheel. Darkness crept in from the edges of her vision, and her eyelids grew heavy. She blinked hard, trying to will herself awake, but the crash had taken its toll, and her energy reserves were drained. Still, she pressed on, determined to reach her home. *It can't be that far now. Right?*

But her brain couldn't function properly, and her thoughts were covered in a fog. She wasn't sure how far they still had to go, or how far they'd come. Cursing herself for her stupidity, she wished she'd done things differently. *Maybe we should've gone with the others to Franschhoek.*

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

The word was meaningless now.

What was done was done.

Either way, they weren't going to reach her house that night. Not without her falling asleep again, and this time, it could mean their death.

With a sigh of defeat, Quinn guided the truck to the shoulder and parked underneath a tree. The sudden absence of the engine's rumble was jarring. All around them, the frozen landscape was cloaked in shadows, still and lifeless. At least the snow had stopped, and the howling wind had calmed to a whisper.

Rummaging in the backseat, Quinn grabbed all the blankets and extra clothes she could find. Nestled together, she clutched Stella's cold hand in her own. "Don't give up on me, okay? I can't do this alone."

Stella squeezed her hand, but her hold was weak. "It's okay, Quinn. You'll be okay. You're stronger than you know."

"Not without you," Quinn replied, wishing there was something she could do. Anything.

As her eyes slid closed, she prayed the meager warmth trapped inside the truck would sustain them. Drawing in a shuddering breath, she allowed herself to drift off.

What felt like minutes later, Quinn jerked awake with a gasp, her heart pounding. Disoriented, she blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the remnants of a nightmare that was already fading. Stella stirred beside her but didn't wake. Outside the windows, the night still reigned, silent and absolute.

Fumbling for her phone, she checked the time. Two hours had passed since she'd drifted off, longer than she'd intended. Gently, she extracted herself from the blankets, careful not to disturb Stella. The chill air bit at her exposed skin as she shifted the truck into drive, but the heat from the engine soon warmed the cab.

Mile after mile disappeared beneath the tires, the monotonous drone broken only by Stella's soft breathing and the occasional crunch of ice. Despite the two hours of sleep she'd gotten, she soon felt her eyelids growing heavy again. Catching herself nodding off, she hastily pulled over, resting her forehead against the steering wheel. "I can't keep this up."

Quinn parked and cut the engine, once more cocooning them in blankets. Exhaustion dragged at her limbs like lead weights, and she quickly dozed off.

She repeated this cycle throughout the long, dark hours, catching brief cat naps interspersed with driving. Tired and confused, her grasp on time blurred, and her world narrowed to the confines of the cab and the road ahead. It was brutal, and only the knowledge that they were getting closer to home kept her going.

Finally, as if in a dream, the eastern sky began to lighten, the stars fading one by one. Quinn straightened, blinking at it through gritty eyes. The first golden rays of dawn crested the horizon, illuminating a distant sign. Straining to read it, she felt her heart skip a beat. "Stella. Stella, wake up. Look!"

But Stella didn't stir, didn't make a sound.

Quinn tried again. "It's a road sign. De Doorns is only eight kilometers away. We're almost there, Stella."

She turned to her friend, a weary grin splitting her face. "Can you believe it? Just a little further and…"

The words died on her lips as she caught sight of Stella's face. Her friend's eyes were open, but they looked at nothing. They were glassy and unfocused, the lifeless eyes of a corpse.

Quinn's blood turned to ice. "Stella?" She grabbed Stella's shoulder, shaking her harder. "Stella, what's wrong?"

There was no response. Stella's head lolled limply to the side, her body utterly still and unmoving.

Panic clawed at her throat, and Quinn wrenched the truck to the shoulder and threw it into park. "No, no, no," she chanted under her breath, searching for a pulse.

But there was nothing.

Nothing but cold, dead flesh.

"Stella, wake up!" Quinn cried, seizing her friend by both shoulders and shaking her violently. Stella's head snapped back and forth like a rag doll's, but her eyes remained fixed and empty.

A wail tore from Quinn's throat, raw and primal. She gathered Stella into her arms, cradling her against her chest as if she could somehow anchor her to life through sheer force of will. "Please, you can't leave me. Not like this."

But even as she begged and pleaded, the awful truth settled over her like a shroud. Stella was gone. No matter how fiercely she clung to her friend's body, no matter how loudly she screamed her grief to the uncaring sky, nothing would bring her back. She was alone.

A numbness crept over Quinn, her anguished sobs fading into stifled whimpers as the cruel reality sank in. Despair enveloped her like a suffocating fog, thick and poisonous. First Jonathan, then Keith, Gwen, Zenelia, and finally, Stella. One by one, the people she loved had been ripped away, leaving gaping, raw wounds that would never heal.

Quinn's gaze drifted to the horizon, where the first tentative fingers of dawn were creeping over the landscape. The beauty of it, the sheer audacity of the sun to rise on a world so broken and empty, filled her with a sudden, searing rage. She wanted to scream, to curse the heavens for their cruelty, to rail against the unfairness of it all.

But even as the fury surged through her veins, a small, stubborn spark kindled in her chest. She was a Le Roux, damn it. Her family had weathered storms and survived tragedies for generations. She couldn't let this break her. Not now, not when there was still a chance, however slim, that her parents were still alive.

With a shaky breath, Quinn gently lowered Stella's body back onto the seat and covered her face. If there was one thing she could still do for her friend, it was to ensure she got a proper burial.

Putting the truck back into gear, she pulled back onto the road, her movements mechanical, almost robotic. The familiar landmarks of her hometown blurred past the windows, but she barely registered them. All she could think about was getting home and seeing her family again. “Please, let there be someone left. I can’t do this alone.”

The road stretched out before her, an endless ribbon of asphalt pointing towards an uncertain future, but she kept going. The turn-off to her home loomed ahead, the sign her mom designed still vivid and bright against the monotonous backdrop: the Cork and Berry Estate.

Quinn’s heart hammered in her chest as she turned onto the driveway. The tires crunched in the gravel pathway, and twin rows of trees flashed past her windows. Everything was achingly familiar, and hot tears pricked her eyelids when she spotted the old farmhouse, its whitewashed walls gleaming in the early morning light.

She half-expected to see her mother come out to greet her, wiping her hands on her apron and smiling that warm, comforting smile that always made everything right in the world. But the door remained closed, the windows dark and lifeless.

Quinn sat in the truck for a long moment, her hands still gripping the wheel, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps. She couldn’t bring herself to move, to take that final step. “Come on, Quinn,” she whispered, forcing her fingers to uncurl from the wheel. “You can do this. You have to do this.”

She climbed out of the truck, her legs feeling like rubber beneath her. The air was crisp and cool, carrying the faint scent of wood smoke and damp earth. It smelled like home, like safety, love, and everything she had ever known. But it was all a lie.

Quinn made her way up the porch steps, each footfall echoing like a gunshot in the still atmosphere. She reached for the door handle, her hand trembling so badly she could barely grasp it. “Please be here. Please be alive.”

She turned the handle and stepped inside, the old hinges creaking in protest. The house was dark and silent, the air heavy with the stale odor of abandonment. She moved through the rooms like a ghost, her footsteps muffled by the thick layer of dust on the hardwood floors.

There was no sign of life, no hint that anyone had been here in weeks or even months. The realization hit her like a physical blow, driving the air

from her lungs and bringing hot, stinging tears to her eyes. They were gone. They were all gone.

Sinking to her knees, Quinn stared at her hands. Stella's dried blood marred her fingernails, and her clothes were stained with blood. She rubbed at a spot, but that only made it worse.

A creak of wood kicked her numb senses into gear, and her head whipped around. One hand flew to the gun on her hip, and she jumped to her feet. No matter how she despaired, she was not about to give up her life without a fight.

The creak gave way to footsteps, dull and heavy. A shadow fell across the entrance, filling the entire doorway, and she backed up a step. Her hand tightened on her weapon, and she was about to pull out her gun when a familiar voice spoke her name. A voice straight from her childhood. "Quinn? Is that you?"

A tall figure stepped into view, broad-shouldered and intimidating. But the eyes, dark-brown and liquid, bored into her soul, and recognition flooded her veins. Frozen to the spot, she couldn't believe her eyes. "Nolan?"

"Who were you expecting? Prince Charming?" Nolan asked, his cheeks dimpling in that manner she remembered so well.

Quinn ran toward him, her arms outstretched. "Nolan!"

He caught her midstep and swung her into the air, his laughter loud and fierce. Its genuine warmth chased away the demons of the road and filled her heart to bursting. As he swung her round and round, her laughter joined his, and in that moment, she knew everything would be okay.

ARCTIC APOCALYPSE WILL CONTINUE IN BOOK TWO:
Icebound

Be the first to discover groundbreaking new releases, incredible deals, and thrilling giveaways

by subscribing to our exclusive Thriller Newsletter.

https://aethonbooks.com/thriller-newsletter/

OceanofPDF.com

THANK YOU FOR READING SNOWBOUND

We hope you enjoyed it as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you. We just wanted to take a moment to encourage you to review the book. Follow this link: *Snowbound* to be directed to the book's Amazon product page to leave your review.

Every review helps further the author's reach and, ultimately, helps them continue writing fantastic books for us all to enjoy.

ALSO BY:

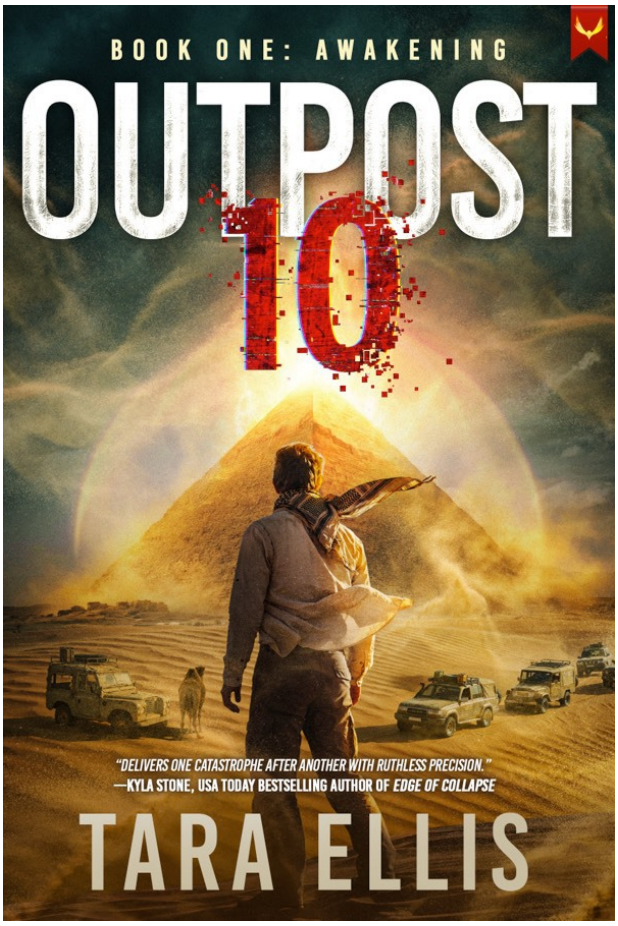
ARTIC APOCALYPSE
Snowbound
Icebound

Calling all thriller fans: be the first to discover groundbreaking new releases, access incredible deals, and participate in thrilling giveaways by subscribing to our exclusive Thriller Newsletter.
https://aethonbooks.com/thriller-newsletter/

Want to discuss our books with other readers and even the authors?

JOIN THE AETHON DISCORD!

Looking for more great Thrillers?



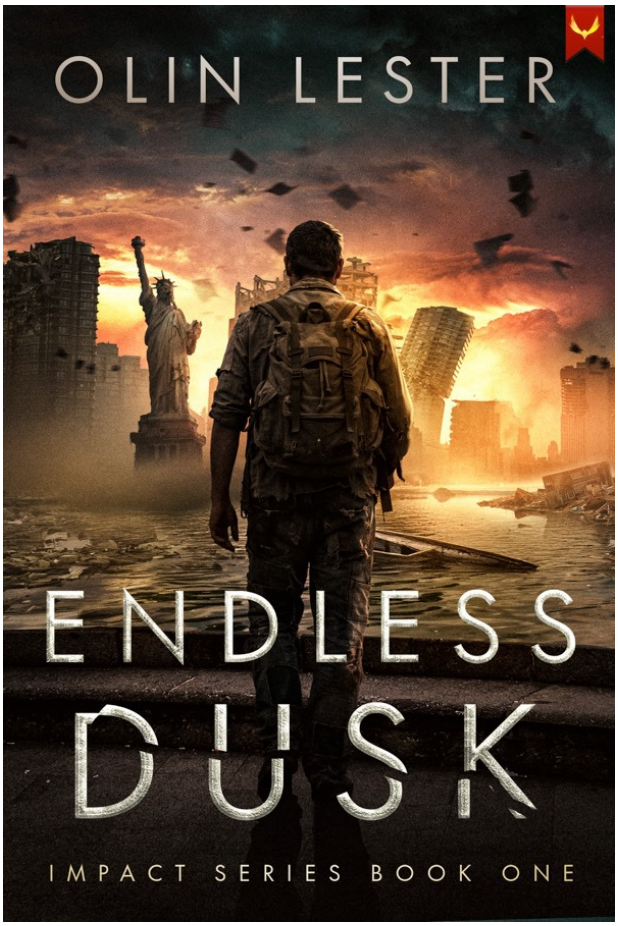
"Delivers one catastophe after another with ruthless precision!" **— Kyla Stone, Bestselling author of Edge of Collapse** ***Something ancient has awakened.*** *Five levels below the Great Pyramid of Giza, Egyptologist Archer Long leads an expedition to locate the elusive Tomb of Osiris. Meant to offer a glimpse into the past, they instead open a door that can't be closed... ...And they bring back more than artifacts. Thousands of miles away in Colorado, Archer's friend and colleague, Cultural Anthropologist Travis Mato, must navigate the fallout after an unexplainable pulse of energy is unleashed. In a tech-dependent world where societies have come to revolve around integrated systems, the eradication of power and the quantum computers that drive it plunges Earth into a darkness both literal and figurative. When the horrors multiply and families are torn apart, those left behind mourn their loss. Others do whatever is necessary to fight back, as the definition of what it means to be alive is redefined and the history of mankind is rewritten. It is only the beginning.* ***A new EMP Post-Apocalyptic series from besteller Tara Ellis with an archeological spin! It's perfect for fans of Kyla Stone, AG Riddle, and Matthew Mather!***

Get Outpost 10 Now!



The world is days from chaos. The truth could kill her first. *When Dr. Tessa Courtland is called in on a top-secret government project, she knows it's something big. But the truth is far more terrifying than she ever could've imagined. A massive asteroid is on course to skim past Earth, close enough to throw the world off balance and change life forever. And the government plans to keep it a secret, no matter the cost. Tessa wants to protect her family, but her conscience won't let her stand by while millions remain in danger. When she pushes back, she becomes the next target. And she's not the only one. Erin, once loyal to the coverup, is now expendable—and running for her life. As the asteroid hurtles closer and society edges toward collapse, their only chance of survival lies in the unthinkable: hoping the world-ending disaster will destroy the forces out to silence them. Can they survive long enough to save the people they love? Or will their choices destroy them all?* ***From the bestselling author of Havoc in Wyoming comes a new post-apocalyptic survival adventure. Find out how far people will go to survive in a series perfect for fans of Kyla Stone, Bobby Akart, Jack Hunt, and Ryan Schow.***

[Get Countdown Now!]



72 hours. Three impacts. One chance to survive. *A swarm of asteroids tear through the skies on a direct path for Earth. The first strikes slam the East Coast, unleashing fire, panic, and death. Cities fall. Coastlines vanish. But worse is coming: extinction-level impacts aimed at Manhattan, Michigan, and Maryland. Amid the chaos, one man — Glenn Asher — joins forces with six unlikely strangers. Bound by fate, driven by love, loyalty, vengeance, and the will to survive, they embark on a perilous journey through armageddon. But in a world where a winning ticket is the only thing between life and death, people will kill to take your place. Glenn doesn't care. As the sky turns to fire and the Earth begins to shake, he's made a final vow: he will find his daughters, or he will die trying.* ***ENDLESS DUSK is the gripping first book in the IMPACT series, a high-octane post-apocalyptic survival thriller where the only thing more dangerous than the falling sky is the desperation of the people beneath it.***

Get Endless Dusk Now!

For all our Thriller books, visit our website.



OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

South African writer and coffee addict Baileigh Higgins lives in the Free State with her hubby and best friend, Brendan. She loves nothing more than lazing on the couch with pizza and a bad horror movie. Her unhealthy obsession with the end of the world has led to numerous books on the subject and a secret bunker, only she knows the location of.

If you'd like to learn more about her books, upcoming projects, new releases, cover reveals, and promotions, simply join her mailing list and receive your free ebook today!

Yes, please. Sign me up!
https://www.subscribepage.com/i0d7r8

Or check out her Website at:
https://baileighhiggins.com/

OceanofPDF.com